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How the romantic institution props-up a racialized dating landscape

In 2020, a Pew Research Center report found that nearly 50% of U.S. adults said that dating had gotten harder in recent years, with participants noting dissatisfaction with their relationship history as well as their prospects for the future. So what's happening? Is it the end of romantic "love"?

As it turns out, yep, it sure is. That's according to UC Santa Barbara Professor of Black studies Sabrina Strings, whose new book "The End of Love: Racism, Sexism, and the Death of Romance" (Beacon Press, 2024) addresses the growing trend of "situationships" and why it hurts Black women and other non-elite and non-white women most.

"Romance had a beginning," said Strings. "Romance is an old white cultural institution that began in the Middle Ages." One of the very first examples of a romantic story is Lancelot and Guinevere, she pointed out, which is about the trials of a man from a lower station who sets out to prove he is worthy of a higher class European Christian woman. "Love is very much about generosity but romance is very much about what you can get from somebody, especially if you're a man who is social climbing," Strings said.

In "The End of Love," Strings blends historical research, personal anecdotes and cultural criticism to consider the demise of romantic partnerships, emphasizing how racism and anti-feminist ideology have been the driving forces behind it. By

interrogating how ideas about contemporary love came about, *Strings* shows how the romance narrative served as a blueprint for a racialized dating landscape.

From romance's origins to its contemporary impact on women — especially Black and “insufficiently white” women — *Strings*, the North Hall Chair of Black Studies, traces its evolution from slavery to pornography. “Romance is white supremacist,” she asserted. “The promise of romance is that women who are not peak white or are 'insufficiently white' are subject deservedly to deceit, manipulation, assault and rape.”

Offering a wide-spanning cultural critique, *Strings* covers questions from how colonization and slavery conspired to prevent Black women from being considered viable long term romantic partners to how changes brought forward during the Civil Rights era resulted in Black men distancing themselves from Black and “insufficiently white” women and aligning themselves with white men in order to pursue a rise in personal status. From the rise and fall of the Black is Beautiful movement to how Black music, including hip hop, abandoned its message about Black beauty and love once it took on a more white, more male fanbase.

In the book, *Strings* also examines the rise of coded negative language for Black women, including terms like “ho's” and “Golddiggers;” the invention of the “Fuckboy” and the whorification of Black women, which, she notes, grew in part out of the backlash against the growing feminist movement in the mid-to-late 20th century; how men's media counseled its audience to be wary of women's intentions, narrowly selective in their choice of partners or to avoid marriage all together; the influence of white male media creators on Black male artists, from *Playboy* to Jay Z; the problematic portrayal of Black women in popular culture; and how the widespread availability of porn online has influenced sexual relationships and men's expectations for partners.

In addition to her intellectual exploration of these issues, *Strings* also brings her personal experiences into play, sharing difficult stories of her own challenges, abuses and disappointments in romance. “I am only one of the millions of Gen X-to-Gen Z women who have endured a seemingly endless array of miserable relationships with men,” she writes in her book, challenging readers to accept the end of love as they know it and to embrace more queer and feminist ideas of love,

equity and partnership.

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