

## Love and legacy

The nature of slavery broke families apart, and instilled great emotional yearnings. **Darlene Clark Hine** connects the importance of today's African American romances to the cultural legacy of slavery and Reconstruction.

**How do romances connect to African American history?**

**Darlene Clark Hine, professor of history, Northwestern University**

**Darlene Clark Hine:** I don't think there's any black novel that affected me more than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And that is one of the love stories that brings together the past and the present, that carries the generations from slavery all the way up to the 1930s. Because you see through flashback, through remembrances, through these soliloquies of these older women telling about, talking about, their love lives, but also talking about the sexual violence, the abuse, the vulnerability that these women often endured.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** When you go through and you read the slave narratives and you read the new history that's coming along, one of the things that I marvel at is the extent to which people tried to be together, even if it was just for a moment. And so much danger and so much threat. That was the slave experience.

Then you get into the Reconstruction era.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** There's an obsession of family reconstitution, of finding people who were sold away or scattered. This went on decade after decade after decade. Ex-slaves would organize conventions, and for a long time we didn't understand what those conventions were about; but they were about trying to find people who had been sold away, and that went on until the turn of the century.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** So after freedom one of the highest priorities among many slaves and formerly enslaved people was to legalize these marriages. And of course there was a great deal of heartbreak when families or men and women were brought back together again and found that different wives or different husbands had taken their place.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** I think part of the sorrow songs and the heartbreak that surrounds black love a [great] deal came out of the realization that these unions were not preserved. People moved on.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** In the 1990s, into the new century, I give a lot of credit to Beverly Jenkins and Brenda Jackson for just understanding that there is still this deep yearning and desire for these classic kinds of love stories, which also in a way celebrate the class progression, the development and evolution of black women in their rise from being the eternal domestic to an agricultural worker to being teachers and nurses; jobs and professions that lend a degree of dignity and undergird the grit of these young, beautiful black women heroines.

**Darlene Clark Hine:** It's an ideal world in a way, but it captures and conveys a deeper yearning for love, for acceptance, for opportunity, accomplishment.

Do the romances you read connect to your genealogy in any way? Do you prefer ancestral settings? Do you feel that romances have the ability to heal or to address deep historical pain, be it in women's rights, African American history, or any other field?

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