

Affecting Genre:  
Women's Participation with Popular Romance Fiction

by

Stephanie Lee Moody

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(English and Education)  
in the University of Michigan  
2013

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Anne Ruggles Gere, Co-Chair  
Associate Professor Megan Sweeney, Co-Chair  
Professor June Howard  
Professor Elizabeth Birr Moje

© Stephanie Lee Moody

---

2013

## Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the collaboration and encouragement of many teachers, friends, colleagues, and family members. Thank you first to my dissertation committee: Anne Ruggles Gere, Megan Sweeney, Elizabeth Birr Moje, and June Howard. Your thoughtful questions and constructive feedback have profoundly shaped my research. Your mentorship and support have profoundly shaped me and the kind of scholar and teacher I hope to become.

Thank you to the incredible friends and colleagues I have met during my time at Michigan: Doug Bessette, Bonnie Campbell, Lisa Curtis, Beth Davila, Hannah Dickinson, Steve Engel, Tim Green, Danielle Lillge, Rob MacLean, Melody Pugh, and Staci Shultz. You have enriched this project with your kindness, intellect, humor, and love.

My deepest gratitude to the study participants who made this research possible. I am grateful for your willingness to share with me your enthusiasm for and knowledge about the popular romance genre. You have taught me to think expansively about the possibilities of engaging with popular culture broadly and romance fiction specifically.

Thank you to my wonderful family for your constant love and support; they are what gave me the confidence to try this crazy thing called grad school. Special thanks to Belle: you are literally the best dog a person could ask for and you've probably heard more about my dissertation than anyone else. Finally, thank you to my true love and best friend, Nate, for your unwavering belief in me. At times, this dissertation felt like *The One Ring*. Thanks for being my Samwise.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
List of Appendices	vi
Abstract	vii
Chapter One	1
Critical Literacy, Composition Studies, and Popular Romance Fiction	
Chapter Two	33
Theoretical Framework, Research Design, and Methods	
Chapter Three	61
“Jo Was My Hero and I Loved Her”: Affective, Embodied, and Identificatory Reading	
Chapter Four	94
“Carriers of Relationships”: The Relational Dimensions of Romance Genre Participation	
Chapter Five	116
Reading, Writing, and Researching Romance in the Digital Age	
Conclusion	145
Learning in Relation to What We Already Know: Implications and Future Directions	
Appendices	153
References	160

## List of Tables

Table		
2.1	Demographic Data of Study Participants	42
2.2	List of Study Participants' Chosen Books for Book Discussion Interview	49

## List of Figures

### Figure

5.1	Original Idea for Crusie Cover	121
5.2	Revised Crusie Cover	121
5.3	Crusie Blog Post 8/18/2010	121
5.4	Cruise Blog Post 1/30/2011	138

## List of Appendices

### Appendix

A	Participant Survey	153
B	Romance Reader Interview Protocol	154
C	Romance Reader Book Discussion Protocol	156
D	Romance Author Interview Protocol	157
E	Cartoon Images of Romance Readers	159

## Abstract

This study examines women's engagements with popular romance fiction. Framing genres as sites of participation, it explores the digital, social, and literate practices women enact as they participate with and actively shape the popular romance genre. Popular romance reading is a common literacy practice for adolescent girls and adult women in North America. Thus far, the appeal of romance reading has been largely understood through a model of mass production and consumption, and largely explained as a solitary literacy practice whereby women use romance novels to escape to a fantasy love story. Drawing from interviews and book discussions with romance readers, interviews with romance authors, and analyses of four genre-sponsored websites, this study suggests instead that some women engage with popular romance fiction in order to connect to, as well as escape from, their social worlds. It demonstrates that women's talk and writing about popular romance allow them to co-construct the genre, demonstrate readerly and writerly expertise, and engage in collective and civic action. It also illustrates that women's affective and escapist reading practices produce a range of transformative, critical, and genre-specific knowledges. Drawing from rhetorical genre theory, feminist theory, and ethnographic methods, this study shifts the focus away from romance reading as a solitary and single literacy practice to romance genre *participation* as comprised of varied digital, social, and literate practices. By examining a specific genre in this way, this study aims to help composition scholars draw connections between academic and everyday literacies and encourage students to explore their own subjectivities and expertise within familiar genres as they learn to participate in new ones.



## Chapter One

### Critical Literacy, Composition Studies, and Popular Romance Fiction

#### Introduction

As a college writing instructor, I have offered a course that asks students to examine everyday arguments: that is, to use rhetorical and critical theory to construct academic essays about the arguments that we daily encounter in the news, in popular culture, and online. For one assignment, students select a current news story of interest and consider how it is presented across multiple – and often competing – contexts. For instance, in my last class one student examined the conversations surrounding immigration reform in television and party-affiliated websites; another student compared editorials on the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy across multiple digital news sources. In another assignment, students define a current “buzz word” and consider how definitions of key terms can radically shape the meaning, stakes, or appeal of an argument. For this essay, students have examined words like “Obamacare,” “bromance,” “truthiness,” and “netiquette.” These assignments prompt students to attend to the discourses that shape public debate and popular culture, considering the terms, metaphors, and logics that are at work within and across texts. Throughout this course, students use rhetorical and critical theory to both examine and create argumentative texts, and they construct a classroom space in which to engage the topics that are meaningful to them.

When I taught this course in the winter of 2011, I encountered a problem. For their third formal essay of the semester, students wrote a critical analysis of a television show of their choice; not surprisingly, most students picked programs that they regularly watched and enjoyed. This was by far students’ favorite assignment, and in fact these essays were the strongest and most sophisticated of the semester. One by one, however, students turned in written drafts that eviscerated the shows they spoke so animatedly and lovingly about in class. The student who had seen every syndicated episode of *Friends* scrutinized the show’s lack of socioeconomic and racial diversity. The student who routinely watched *The Bachelor* each week with her friends interrogated its portrayal of romantic love and marriage. And on the day when the final draft was

due, Maria<sup>1</sup> – who wrote a beautiful analysis of how the show *Entourage* perpetuates hegemonic masculinity – asked me, “Does this mean I can’t watch *Entourage* anymore?”

This question has stuck with me as I’ve developed my research and teaching, especially as I’ve worked with pre-service teachers and graduate student instructors and asked them to think about ways of bridging students’ extracurricular and curricular literacy practices. Over the last thirty years, the sociocultural turn has led scholars across a range of fields to consider how students’ literacies traverse academic, everyday, and digital spaces, and to examine literacy as imbricated in the reproduction of power and ideology. Not surprisingly, when instructors connect students’ popular culture interests with school contexts, what often results is a focus on the development of critical literacy skills. Critical thinking, reading, and writing – staples of English and composition course syllabi – ask students to interrogate received knowledges and power dynamics. Assuming skeptical stances towards texts and media, students examine how discourses recreate the world and consider their own subject positions within this reproduction. Ideally, critical literacy pedagogies help to create democratic agents and thinkers who use their knowledges to promote social justice and transformation.

At the same time, the foci on critical literacy in the classroom, and on the explicit connections between extracurricular and curricular literacies, also raise questions that I have had difficulty answering: If Maria’s *Entourage* essay gave the show a critical viewing, how was she watching it before? Was she viewing it uncritically? If so, how does this characterization of her viewing practices position Maria’s expertise about the show in the classroom? What knowledges, practices, or subjectivities actually comprise Maria’s expertise, and how do they compare to academic ways of thinking? Is there another way to understand Maria’s pleasure from watching *Entourage* besides saying it is uncritical? What kind of affect is pleasure, and where does it fit in the writing classroom? What happens when texts that students use primarily for purposes of pleasure and entertainment are brought into the classroom for critical analysis? What happens to students in such situations? And finally, how should I respond to Maria’s question? In other words, after students demonstrate critical literacy skills and dispositions towards popular media, what happens next? In many ways, this dissertation is an attempt to address these questions.

Specifically, this project examines women’s engagements with popular romance fiction as a site in which questions about critical literacy, popular culture, and writing pedagogies

---

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym

abound. Through interviews and book discussions with eleven romance readers, interviews with three romance fiction authors, and analyses of four digital spaces that romance readers and authors traverse, I demonstrate the affordances and limits of critical literacy pedagogies as a means of engaging students' reading of, and writing about, popular culture. I argue that while critical literacy should be an essential component of students' repertoires of academic skills, current scholarship would benefit from further analyses of how such pedagogies position students, what they leave out, and how they might better address changes in popular culture brought about by digital technologies.

Although this project is primarily concerned with the relationships among popular culture, composition studies, and student writing, I chose to study adult romance readers and writers outside of classroom contexts for three reasons. First, I chose romance fiction specifically because it represents a quintessential example of the questions and anxieties raised by individuals' participation with popular culture. Romance novels are the most widely sold books on the market, generating over \$1 billion in sales annually and reaching over 75 million readers – primarily women and adolescent girls.<sup>2</sup> While romance novels can be traced back to Richardson's *Pamela* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1970s witnessed an explosion in the mass production of romance novels through publishing companies like Avon Books and Harlequin. Since then, discourses of addiction, escape, low-brow "genre fiction," mass production, and ideology (especially concerning gender and sexuality) have infused both popular and academic considerations of romance fiction<sup>1</sup>. For these reasons, popular romance fiction offers rich possibilities for thinking about popular culture, critical literacy, and genre.

Second, I chose to study individuals' uses of romance fiction outside of classroom contexts rather than in school because I draw from rhetorical understandings of genres as context-specific, socially situated, and participatory. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, incorporating popular culture genres into composition classrooms removes them from the contexts and purposes for which they are most frequently used by students and can limit our examinations of them to the kinds of questions prompted by critical literacy pedagogies and academic ways of thinking. I do not want to suggest that students should not read and write about popular culture in school; rather, I am arguing that instructors who incorporate popular culture

---

<sup>2</sup> These statistics are compiled by the Romance Writers of America, the most prominent trade association for authors in the romance industry. For more information, visit [www.rwa.org](http://www.rwa.org).

into writing curricula would benefit from explicit considerations of how academic contexts shape our understandings of students' engagements with, and analyses of, popular culture. In order to consider the myriad ways that individuals engage with the popular romance genre – a genre generally used in non-academic contexts and for non-academic purposes – I decided to interview adult readers and writers who do not use romance novels in school.

Finally, I decided to interview adults rather than students in order to contribute to, and push against, existing scholarship on the uses of popular culture to promote critical literacy as well as scholarship on adolescents' uses of romance fiction in and out of school. The impetus for incorporating popular culture into composition curricula has frequently been driven by the belief that popular culture texts deserve attention because: 1) they engage students' interests and expertise;<sup>3</sup> 2) they offer rhetorically subversive content or represent marginalized groups;<sup>4</sup> or 3) students need academic ways of examining them. Historically, popular romance fiction has fallen squarely within the third category. In her analysis of adolescent book clubs in Australian schools, Dianne Cooper argues that romance novels offer “uncritical and ideologically disempowering” subject positions for consumers and that the more adolescent girls read these novels, the less likely they will be to question the gendered discourses within them (11). Likewise, in “Constituting and Reconstituting Desire: Fiction, Fantasy, and Femininity,” Linda Christian-Smith argues that romances channel girls towards futures of marriage, children, and low-paying careers, and they “reconcile readers to subordinate places in the world” (5). This scholarship does *not* suggest that adolescents passively consume romance novels without question or wholly

---

<sup>3</sup> Popular culture has been simultaneously praised for its potential to hook students' interests (Kortner) and criticized for its capacity to “anti-intellectual[ize]” the academy (Aronowitz). As I will illustrate throughout this dissertation (and especially in Chapter Four), my concern with the use of popular culture in writing classrooms is that, while it may invite students to share the media content of interest to them, it marginalizes or misrecognizes the expertise they have developed around such content by asking them to take up academic subjectivities and practices without acknowledging the subjectivities and practices they have developed around their interests.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the frequency with which rap and hip-hop are represented in presentations at CCCCs. In “Never Mind the Sex Pistols, Where's 2Pac?” Geoffrey Sirc writes, “Gangsta, like punk, like Malcolm X, is all about using a kind of plainspeak grammar and lexicon, charged with as much poetry as one can muster, to fashion a desperate politics of decency in an indecent world” (104). In her analysis of the use of popular culture in composition studies, Jennifer Riley Campbell notes, “I find Sirc's remarks about these resistant rap texts interesting and rather poetic, but it is problematic that when Sirc discusses the dominant culture that disgusts him, he is talking about the very culture that most of our students identify with and enjoy...[W]hen academics do discuss highly popular, totally un-artsy texts, they do so only to deconstruct them and show how misguided our students are for buying into it at all” (97). Both Sirc's and Campbell's comments focus on academics' close readings and deconstructions of popular texts (not surprising, given the focus within composition studies on language, discourse, and style). I would add that we might complicate what texts count as hegemonic or subversive by paying more attention to what individuals do with texts, including how individuals ascribe meaning to texts in addition to reading and interpreting them.

adopt the textual constructions of gender they find within them. Nonetheless, it *does* suggest a pedagogical imperative to “assist students/consumers to explore, interpret, and shape texts – to adopt critical reading positions and subjectivities in opposition to the desire that is generated...by a regular diet of gendered reading materials” (Cooper 24).

While I support the aims of critical literacy pedagogies to empower students as they navigate the complex and competing ideologies reproduced through popular culture texts, I also think it behooves us to assay the claims made on behalf of adolescent girl readers by incorporating the experiences of adult women readers into our research on popular culture. As Bronwyn Williams argues, “It is hard to make a serious claim about how pedagogy affects student writing in the brief hours they are in the classrooms” if we ignore “the literary practices in which students engage outside of the classroom or before they reach college or practices in which they may engage after college” (134). While I do not have data about the school experiences of the adults in this study, I do believe that the literacy practices of adult, long-term romance readers can help us to nuance our analyses and expectations of adolescent practices. For instance, the findings from this project suggest that we would do well to examine the assumption that sustained engagements with popular culture texts – without the intervention of academic guidance – will necessarily lead to compliance and “uncritical acceptance” (Cooper 11). As genre theorists within composition have argued, and as my own research demonstrates, familiarity with genres can promote readers’ and writers’ critical discernment and analysis of discursive patterns, tropes, and ideologies. Therefore, my hope is that a study of adults’ long-term engagements with contemporary romance fiction can contribute to our development of best practices for reading and writing about popular culture genres within composition classrooms.

### A Brief History of Critical Literacy and Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom

While it is beyond the scope of this project to provide a complete account of the extensive scholarship on critical literacy pedagogies in writing classrooms, here I present what I perceive as the most significant contributions and challenges that such scholarship raises, especially as it relates to the pedagogical use of popular culture to achieve critical literacy. I begin first by specifying my terminology. Although a composition pedagogy that focuses on the

use of popular culture is most often referred to as a cultural studies approach,<sup>5</sup> I wish instead to use the term “critical literacy” for several reasons. First, as I will demonstrate below, composition instruction and textbooks that focus on popular culture are often simultaneously informed by cultural studies, popular culture studies, K-12 literacy studies, and new media/digital literacy studies,<sup>6</sup> all of which have overlapping yet distinct epistemologies, methods, and political aims. To collapse these fields into cultural studies would be to dismiss the rich scholarly histories they represent as well as the complex resources and challenges they offer to writing instructors. Second, the term “critical literacy” signals not a particular field of study but rather a significant pedagogical goal that runs through each of these fields of study: the development of students’ critical literacies especially as they pertain to popular and digital media and culture. I will develop the term “critical” throughout this section, but in general it refers to those skills and dispositions necessary to examine issues of power, ideology, hegemony, and race/class/gender/sexuality/nationality – especially as they are constituted through discourse and literate practice – for the purposes of self-empowerment and social transformation. Scholars across K-12 and higher education contexts have frequently used the term “critical literacy” or “critical pedagogy” interchangeably with related terms like “radical pedagogy,” “liberatory pedagogy,” and “empowering pedagogy.” However, I choose the term “critical literacy” to foreground my concern with the literacy practices that are fostered through these pedagogies; more specifically, I am interested in the composition pedagogies in which popular culture plays a significant role in the development of critical literacy. In order to define the term “popular culture,” I borrow from Elizabeth Birr Moje and Casper van Helden who argue that “popular culture is made as people live in the everyday world, and it is made by *both* people living out their lives *and* industries trying to sell people goods” (219, emphasis in original).

Jennifer Riley Campbell’s *A Long Strange Trip: Mapping Popular Culture in Composition* presents a comprehensive overview of the influence of cultural studies and popular culture studies on the field of composition and on the use of popular culture in writing curricula.

---

<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that a “cultural studies approach” focuses solely on popular culture. Cultural studies approaches to composition incorporate poststructuralist and postmodernist theories that destabilize the self from an autonomous and cohesive individual to fragmented, contradictory, and culturally constructed subjectivities. Within such pedagogies, issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. are examined as rhetorically constituted through not only popular media but also public and civic discourse as well as everyday life.

<sup>6</sup> In this section I will consider cultural studies, popular culture studies, and K-12 literacy studies. In Chapter Five, where I specifically consider the role of digital spaces in shaping romance readers’ experiences, I will draw from the work of digital literacy studies (particularly Henry Jenkins) to promote critical literacy.

Here, I draw briefly from Campbell's work to historicize the use of popular culture in composition and to delimit the key similarities and differences between cultural studies and popular culture studies. I then examine the development of students' critical literacy as a primary purpose for using popular culture, and the challenges and possibilities this focus has presented for writing instructors. Finally, I briefly consider the contributions of K-12 literacy studies on composition conversations around popular culture. In presenting this overview, my aim is threefold: to illustrate the divergent fields of study – and thus the divergent scholarly agendas – that have contributed to critical literacy pedagogies in writing classrooms; to consider how cultural studies approaches have come to dominate such pedagogies; and to map out the affordances and challenges of these pedagogies.

The use of popular culture within composition is neither new nor exceptional. In "The History of Rhetoric and Composition as Cultural Studies," Pauline Uchmanowicz notes that as early as 1952, composition scholars were arguing for the study of mass media and the use of audio-visual aids in writing classrooms (Campbell). By 1959, Ken Macrorie's *The Perceptive Writer, Reader, and Speaker* had introduced popular culture to the textbook market, and by the late 1960s, popular music, television, books, film, and magazines were firmly entrenched in writing curricula. As Geoffrey Sirc notes, "Comp 68 found it difficult to form its expressivist pedagogy exclusive of pop... The popular was perceived as useful compositional material because it altered the established scene of academic writing" (qtd. in Campbell 51). By 1977, both *English Journal* and *College English* had devoted special issues to the use of popular culture in composition. In their 1976 article "Using Popular Culture to Teach Composition," Marjorie Smelstor and Carol Weiher note, "The popular culture revolution is upon us. In the last few years anthologies, journals, and college classes about popular culture have sprung up at epidemic rates" (qtd. in Campbell 52). The articles that appeared in *English Journal* and *College English* range from enthusiastic to reproofing and, as Campbell notes, this variety is due in part to the overlapping and competing voices of cultural studies and popular culture studies scholars.

Cultural studies stems from the 1930s work in critical communication studies, the Frankfurt School, and scholars' examinations of the ideological power of mass media, especially in a historical moment steeped in concerns over the spread of Nazism and fascism. In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno and Horkheimer contend that popular culture and the pleasures of consumption are meant to keep the masses passive, content,

and dependent on the needs both created and satisfied by capitalism. Thus, “[t]he culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises” (111). Concerns over the ability of mass media to deliver ideology, distinctions between “serious” and “mechanically reproduced” art, and the potential for fascism to aestheticize politics by giving the masses a “chance to express themselves” rather than the opportunity to “change their property relations” led to particularly pessimistic cultural readings of the relationship between consumption and popular culture (Benjamin). Today, cultural studies is more closely associated with the Birmingham School, 1960s British politics, and as Lawrence Grossberg notes, “the appearance of a ‘mass culture’ made possible through the nationalization, capitalization, and technologization of the mass media” (qtd. in Campbell 20). The field of cultural studies in this vein has consistently sought to promote not only consciousness raising but also political activism, and to make explicit connections between academic and public life. British cultural studies scholarship reached American communication studies by the 1970s but did not gain widespread recognition until the 1980s when it extended to English and Anthropology departments (Grossberg 277-280). While scholarship by Antonio Gramsci, Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams offers less negative articulations of the influences of popular culture, such scholarship remains more skeptical of popular culture’s potential to effect collective change in hegemonic relations than the research put forth by popular culture studies.

Campbell suggests that this fact can be explained by the geographical and historical moment in which popular culture studies arose and the political aims it espoused. The establishment in the U.S. of the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1967, the Popular Culture Association in 1970, and the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University<sup>7</sup> in 1973 by Ray B. Browne were premised on an inclusive approach to education in which everyday culture was not only worthy of academic study but had something to teach the academy. As Browne notes in *Pioneers of Popular Culture Studies*, such a notion was anathema at the time:

---

<sup>7</sup> In “Ray and Pat Browne: Scholars of Everyday Culture,” Gary Hoppenstand notes that Browne, who was hired at BGSU to develop the folklore program, “viewed popular culture studies as precisely that, an updating of folklore studies. But the English Department did not agree with this interpretation. . . . They accused him of 1) wasting students’ time by teaching them worthless material; 2) wasting the taxpayer’s money; and 3) embarrassing the department by teaching non-canonical subjects” (45-46). The administration finally allowed Browne to establish the Department of Popular Culture as a way of addressing his critics and removing him from the English Department.



Even the word *popular* was insulting to all ‘serious’ educators. The feeling was that all knowledge should percolate down from the top, that academics should be properly interested only in what they had learned and that everyday life – the near total culture of America and increasingly of the world – should perhaps be tolerated but certainly despised. (2)

Browne was particularly critical of the elitist theory and jargon promoted in academia, the scholarly treatment of popular culture “as being manipulated by an all-powerful capitalism,” and the propensity to limit the study of popular culture to “those elements of culture disseminated by the mass media” (59-61). For Browne – as well as subsequent popular culture studies scholars like Russell Nye, Marshall Fishwick, and John Cawelti – the study of popular culture meant the study of everyday life and the pleasures, potentialities, and richness to be found therein. As Campbell notes, “[p]opular culture studies is informed by a liberal, populist politics that seeks to empower citizens by emphasizing the egalitarian aspects of popular culture and the common people’s ability to shape culture as consumers” (137). Not surprisingly, some popular culture studies scholarship has been criticized for being uncritically celebratory and overly optimistic about the transformative power of popular culture. In teasing apart the differences between cultural studies and popular culture studies, Campbell does not draw a hard and fast line between these two fields and in fact notes that they draw on many of the same theoretical frameworks (including Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism). Rather, Campbell suggests that while both popular culture studies and cultural studies are concerned with relations of production, distribution, and reception, the former has been primarily interested in “describ[ing] these contexts and relations and how people experience them” while the latter has tended to be “committed to interventions that improve material and ideological conditions” (131).

Perhaps because cultural studies approaches have offered composition instructors – whose work and worth within academia have been historically devalued – ways of incorporating popular culture texts as theoretically sophisticated objects of study, popular culture studies approaches to writing curricula have been less visible in recent decades. At the same time, the profound influence of cultural studies in composition has prompted numerous debates about the value of critical literacy, the “politicizing” of writing classrooms, and the relationship between writing instruction and media consumption. These debates can perhaps be best illustrated by an examination of Maxine Hairston’s 1992 article, “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” and the subsequent responses it elicited. I consider this article in depth as it represents a pivotal moment in the field of composition studies.

In the years just prior to Hairston's critique of cultural studies pedagogies, the field of composition had produced such scholarship as Valeda Boyd and Marilyn Robitaille's 1987 "Composition and Popular Culture: From Mindless Consumers to Critical Writers," James Berlin's 1988 "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," and Roslyn Weedman's 1988 "Mass Appeal: Pop Culture in the Composition Classroom," all of which suggest that writing about popular culture can promote students' "critical consumption," help students reject their "preoccupation with consumerism," and encourage students to "come to terms with their own authority and experience" (Boyd and Robitaille 51; Berlin 490; Weedman 97). While Hairston critiques a cultural studies approach to composition writ large – which takes as its primary focus students' examinations of power, ideology, and hegemony as produced through discourse – it is clear that this approach was and continues to be imbricated with the study of popular culture.

In her seminal article, Hairston examines the cultural studies turn in composition and describes why such a turn is problematic, especially for first-year writing students. First, Hairston blames the adoption of cultural studies pedagogies on the location of composition programs within English departments: "[C]ritical literary theories of deconstruction, post-structuralism...and Marxist critical theory have trickled down to the lower floors of English departments where Freshman English dwells" (183). Responding to Ronald Strickland's Marxist critique of English departments, the "significant numbers" of cultural critics that have "permeated the Modern Language Association," and the University of Texas-Austin<sup>8</sup> declaration that the "mission of English Departments is always to oppose the dominant culture," Hairston laments what she perceives as a "natural" turn to freshman writing courses to carry out such opposition: "With a huge captive enrollment of largely unsophisticated students, what a fertile field to cultivate and bring about political and social change. Rhetoric scholars who go along will also get new respect now that they have joined the ideological fray and formed alliances with literature faculty who have been transforming their own courses" (185). For Hairston, the problem of location leads writing teachers to bully students into taking up their own leftist agendas and to substitute writing instruction for a politically and theoretically charged

---

<sup>8</sup> Part of the exigency for Hairston's article was UT professor Linda Brodkey's 1990 proposal of English 306: "Writing about Difference" and the national attention it received. In her proposed composition course Brodkey's students would read and write about issues of sexism and racism. In a 1990 news article about the course, Pulitzer-prize winner and conservative columnist George Will argued, "The attempt to pump E306 full of politics is a manifestation of a notion common on campuses: Every academic activity must have an ameliorative dimension, reforming society and assuaging this or that group's grievance. From that idea, it is but a short step down the slippery slope to this idea: All education, all culture, is political, so it should be explicitly so" (B7).

classroom. Writing instructors, who may be hoping to gain prestige or are simply influenced by the theoretical critiques dominating conversations among English faculty, risk positioning first-year composition classrooms as arenas for promoting social change rather than spaces for “low risk” writing instruction (180).

Related to the problem of the location of composition programs within English departments is the frequency with which writing classes are taught by graduate students, individuals “who are already steeped in post-structuralism and deconstruction theory, in the works of Foucault, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Stanley Fish, and feminist theory” and who have not been trained in the teaching of writing (185). Graduate student instructors who do not know how to teach writing or what to do with their students focus instead on the (often newly learned) theoretical conversations of interest to them. In Hairston’s view, political, cultural, and social issues become the focus of such writing classrooms rather than the craft of writing itself.

And finally, Hairston attributes the development of cultural studies pedagogies to the increasingly diverse populations of college classrooms:

The code words for our attempts to build the kind of inclusive curriculum that we need have become ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘cultural diversity.’ They’re good terms, of course... The crucial question, however, is how one finds concrete ways to put them into practice... and also how one guards against their becoming [terms]... that can be twisted to mean anything an ideologue wants them to mean. (186)

While Hairston advocates the need to create “culturally inclusive classrooms,” given the tendency for writing classes to be taught by novice graduate student instructors, she also argues that “multicultural issues are too complex and diverse to be dealt with fully and responsibly in any English course, much less a course in which the focus should be on writing, not reading” (190). Thus, central to Hairston’s critique of cultural studies approaches are the concerns that such approaches limit students’ freedom of expression and bully them into a leftist political stance; substitute cultural questions of power and ideology for rhetorical questions of writing craft; and attempt to include multicultural issues and topics that are too complex for English classrooms. Ultimately, Hairston argues instead for writing instruction that is driven by students’ interests and for diversity that stems – not from content – but rather “from students themselves... flourish[ing] in a collaborative classroom” (191).

Frustration with my own attempts to bring critical literacy pedagogies to the writing classroom have left me keenly sensitive to Hairston's critiques. In my desire to foster students' critical analyses of popular culture texts, I too have wondered if my assignments render leftist political stances the only viable or intelligible subject positions for students to take up. Another concern I have that Hairston gestures toward but does not address specifically is the way in which cultural studies pedagogies can leave the instructor holding all the cards while students scramble to learn new material and academic ways of thinking and writing. In other words, cultural studies pedagogies can re-inscribe power relations between writing instructors and students by requiring students to adopt a theoretically complex and jargon-heavy framework to examine their engagements with popular culture while leaving intact and unquestioned instructors' allegiance to this critical framework or their uses of it outside of teaching contexts.

Hairston's article received a number of heated responses both against and in favor of her critique. The most notable critiques came from James Berlin and John Trimbur who, even today, represent the most vocal – although distinct – proponents of critical literacy and the use of popular culture. In his 1992 response to Hairston, Berlin presents ideology as inseparable from rhetoric and thus the natural topic of writing classrooms: "Our business must be to instruct students in signifying practices broadly conceived – to see not only the rhetoric of the college essay but the rhetoric of the institution of schooling, of the work place, and of the media" ("Poststructuralism" 24). Berlin's subsequent development of cultural studies composition and social-epistemic rhetoric, approaches represented in countless composition textbooks, have helped to firmly establish critical pedagogies concerned with developing students' abilities to analyze discourses and languages as "never disinterested, always bringing with them strictures on the existent, the good, the possible, and regimes of power" (24). Thus, the goal of this approach to composition instruction is to "make students aware of the cultural codes – the various competing discourses – that attempt to influence who they are" ("Composition and Cultural Studies" 50).

For John Trimbur, the cultural codes that most influence students are those found within popular culture texts. However, rather than analyze those codes, the writing classroom can help students "poach" on popular culture and "create popular spaces of resistance" (130-131). In his analysis of how Berlin's approach to cultural studies differs from Trimbur's, David Leight writes, "Although Berlin emphasizes the description of ideologies so that they can be questioned

and ultimately challenged, Trimbur does not accept that questioning will come naturally... Instead, he advocates the use of the very cultural forms that would otherwise restrict the student's power" (9). While their approaches and pedagogical goals differ slightly, both Berlin and Trimbur advocate the study of, and writing about, popular media to help students challenge the cultural codes and discourses that produce them as particular kinds of subjects. Berlin and Trimbur suggest that, far from indoctrinating students into left-wing ideologies, critical literacy pedagogies empower students, and they see the writing classroom – with its focus on language and discourse – as the obvious place for such empowerment.<sup>9</sup>

I argue that critical literacy pedagogies can actually *disempower* students when such pedagogies invite popular culture texts into the writing classroom but position such texts primarily as ideological artifacts that require critical, academic “tools” to excavate their hidden meanings. This kind of pedagogy, common to composition courses that focus on the rhetorical and ideological effects of texts, can promote an understanding of meaning as inherent to text and can promote critical literacy practices as tools for revealing – rather than co-producing – textual meaning. Moreover, by focusing on the critical skills necessary to understand popular culture, such pedagogies can fail to acknowledge the affective connections, subjective identifications, and literacy practices that students have already developed around this content. Or, worse, they can position these engagements as simply “uncritical.” Drawing from scholarship in rhetorical genre studies, I suggest that critical literacy pedagogies can be bolstered by incorporating an understanding of genres as participatory constructs that organize and are constituted through a variety of social, digital, and literate practices. By focusing on how individuals participate with popular romance fiction, my aim is to promote critical literacy pedagogies that more fully

---

<sup>9</sup> There have been a number of responses to Hairston in addition to Berlin and Trimbur. Particularly notable is Richard Marback's 1996 analysis of open-handed and closed-fist rhetoric and his assertion that “composition studies reproduces *and* reiterates, at the same time that it transforms *and* critiques, the larger struggles of contemporary American life” (197, emphasis added). K. Hyoejin Yoon's 2005 “Affecting the Transformative Intellectual: Questioning ‘Noble’ Sentiments in Critical Pedagogy and Composition” offers a crucial and careful analysis of the affects produced by critical pedagogy discourses that discipline the teacher “by calling on him or her to promote and uphold Western culture's highest and noblest ideals, with the idealized subjectivity to which both teachers and students should aspire, imagined as that of the ‘citizen’ in a critically participatory democracy” (718). See also Russell Durst's 2006 “Can We Be Critical of Critical Pedagogy?” in which he argues that the political analysis required in cultural pedagogy courses runs counter to students' “career-oriented pragmat[ism]” (111). Finally, consider Jeff Pruchnic's 2010 “Ironic Encounters, Ethics, Aesthetics, and the ‘Liberal Bias’ in Composition Pedagogy,” in which he argues that the “traditional tools of critical theory... that were previously configured as bulwarks against capitalist exploitation and systems of social control have apparently transformed into the very mechanisms by which these forces function” (55).

account for students' engagements with popular genres and that position such engagements as productive of, not just responsive to, these genres.

Let me unpack these claims by considering how popular texts and examinations of them are framed within three contemporary composition textbooks, all of which I have used in my own classroom. While each textbook offers students ways of rhetorically and critically engaging with popular culture, they also position popular texts as dangerous unless their hidden meanings are revealed. As such, the only position available to students is "savvy consumer" or, as one textbook notes, "meaning detective" (Brummett 99). These positions are reactive. They reify the fluidity of textual meaning and downplay the roles of individuals in shaping what texts mean, how they are used, how they circulate, and how they change. For instance, consider Deanna Sellnow's *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*. Sellnow begins her first chapter by explaining to students how this book will benefit them:

The purpose of this book, then, is to equip you with tools to analyze the underlying messages offered in [popular texts] about how we 'ought to' and 'ought not to' believe and behave. By the time you finish this book, you will be a more critical consumer of the messages being sent through popular culture. Ultimately, you will be able to make educated choices about whether to embrace such messages as being valid in your own life. (1)

The "tools to analyze the underlying messages" of popular culture to which Sellnow refers are a series of eight rhetorical perspectives students can employ in their essays: Neo-Aristotelian, Narrative, Dramatistic, Marxist, Feminist, Illusion of Life, Visual Pleasure Theory, and Media Centered. Each perspective, or lens, "helps bring to the forefront the messages you are trying to understand to answer your particular question" (Sellnow 8). By focusing on these perspectives, however, Sellnow positions meaning as inherent to the text; in turn, she encourages students to employ a rhetorical perspective and thereby reveal, or "bring to the forefront," the text's hidden meanings. By casting rhetorical perspectives as tools that simply bring into focus the ideology of a particular artifact, Sellnow's textbook positions students' deployment of these perspectives as their only recourse for affecting popular texts. In other words, students can reveal but not shape textual meaning. As Linda Langstraat argues, this text-as-ideological-artifact approach not only "undermines the reader's active participation in constructing textual meaning," but may also "engender cynicism by helping students understand how texts reproduce the worst of late-capitalist values, yet leaving those students without a sense of agency – other than the power to

be active consumers, despite their knowledge of the sometimes nasty implications of that consumption” (311). As this study illustrates, romance readers take part in shaping how textual conventions are understood, what texts mean beyond their narrative function, and how they circulate. Moreover, some women use popular romance fiction to maintain intimate connections to friends and family members, reflect on and transform their personal lives, and demonstrate collective and civic engagement online. These experiences may remain invisible in classrooms that focus primarily on the role of popular culture texts in reproducing hegemonic ideologies.

In my “Academic Argumentation” course, I used Sellnow’s textbook and assigned either a Marxist or feminist analysis of a popular text. My students seemed to thoroughly enjoy this essay. They found that Sellnow’s perspectives offered a roadmap for how to set up their own rhetorical analyses (Introduction, Rhetorical Perspective, Analysis, Conclusion). And they appreciated the sample published essays and sample student essays featured in the textbook; several students commented that these examples helped them to see the relevance of doing this kind of analysis and to feel capable of offering valid critiques of their chosen texts. As I have already described, these essays were sophisticated and nuanced, and they allowed me to feel like what K. Hyoejin Yoon calls a “transformative intellectual,” one who “challenges students with dialogue, pushes them to become active citizens, and infuses meaning into what we might assume would be otherwise meaningless to them or oppressive in ways they couldn’t discern or resist alone” (724). However, this feeling didn’t last long. When Maria asked me about whether or not to continue watching *Entourage*, I was left wondering how to respond. We had just spent several weeks uncovering the ideologies in students’ favorite TV shows but had spent very little time discussing why we loved these shows, the contexts in which we watched them, or the varied ways in which we engaged with them. In short, I had set up the curriculum to dissuade students from watching popular TV shows once they demonstrated in writing how hegemonic these shows were. This move felt both unsatisfying and unrealistic.

Moreover, my curriculum left little room for students to demonstrate their expertise about popular culture except as a launching point to learn critical literacy practices. In such a formation, students’ knowledges serve as a site of entry but not a site of academic value. Consider the sixth edition of Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon’s *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture*, an anthology of readings that introduces students to semiotic analysis and offers examples of these analyses from professional writers, academics, and

members of media-related organizations. As with the previous textbook, the authors here address students directly: “Your own expertise in popular culture means not only that you may know more about a given topic than your instructor but that you may use that knowledge as a basis for learning the critical thinking and writing skills that your composition class is charged to teach you” (8). While Maasik and Solomon invoke students’ expertise, they do not explicitly define what this expertise entails or where it stems from. They do, however, ask students to put aside their opinions in order to write about popular culture critically:

Because most of us identify closely with our favorite popular culture phenomena and have strong opinions about them, it can be more difficult to adopt the same sort of analytic perspective toward popular culture that we do toward, say, texts assigned in a literature class. Still, that is what you should do in a semiotic interpretation: You need to set your opinions aside in order to pursue an interpretive argument with evidence to support it. (17)

I would like to posit that students’ close identifications with popular culture, and the opinions that form as a result, are a powerful site of expertise that may go unacknowledged in writing classrooms when they are cast primarily as a hindrance to analytical thinking. It seems clear that in asking students to set aside their opinions, Maasik and Solomon do not intend to dismiss students’ expertise but rather to honor their beliefs: “This does not mean that you must abandon your own beliefs when conducting a semiotic analysis, only that you cannot take them for granted and must be prepared to argue for them” (20). Nevertheless, in setting up identification and opinion in opposition to critical analysis, *Signs of Life* positions students’ expertise with popular culture as dissimilar to – and even detrimental to – critical literacy.

This dilemma is in fact a central concern of my project. Throughout the following chapters, I explore what typically does and does not count as “critical” and examine how individuals’ engagements with popular culture are positioned in relation to this term. I argue that “critical literacy” as it is deployed in some composition scholarship and in many composition textbooks relies on a set of narrowly defined practices and textual stances. In turn, any practices that do not meet this definition are cast – implicitly or explicitly – as “uncritical” and undesirable. Barry Brummett’s textbook, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, further illustrates this claim. In comparison to *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture* and *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, Brummett’s textbook is careful to reiterate that texts hold multiple and competing meanings when considered within different rhetorical and cultural contexts. This textbook also clearly



articulates how and why a “meaning detective” might go about a critical analysis. According to Brummett, the critic’s job is to adopt an attitude of “suspicion” and a refusal to “accept easy answers to the question of what texts mean” (96, 134). Furthermore, Brummett suggests:

Because meaning is complex, difficult to articulate, and often beyond awareness, the specially trained critic is in the best position to say what texts mean. In explaining meaning, the critic shows people new ways to experience life and helps people to expand the ways they have to find meaning. (135)

The implicit argument here is that only those individuals equipped with academic, critical tools can fully understand what texts mean and must therefore share these meanings and “new ways to experience life” with those people (presumably not specially trained) who heretofore have been experiencing life in less expansive ways. There is also a sense, in all three of the textbooks I have examined, that the student who employs critical tools and sets aside her opinions will be able to make “educated choices” about which messages to “embrace” and which to disregard (Sellnow 14). As Michael Warner suggests, this configuration of the critically educated student problematically resembles a Kantian notion of the fully rational and fully conscious subject, a “criticizing self [who] can be separated from everything that a person contingently is” (Williams, qtd. in Warner 36). The critical modes of thinking that Sellnow, Maasik and Solomon, and Brummett advocate for, and that I have attempted to foster in my own classroom, have thus challenged me to consider the ways in which they might disregard students’ knowledges and experiences around popular culture and offer limited definitions of what (and who) counts as critical.

In other words, critical literacy pedagogies risk re-producing a reductive binary in which academic practices surrounding popular culture are considered critical and non-academic practices are considered uncritical. I will unpack these claims in depth throughout the dissertation, but let me briefly expand this point by considering Ira Shor’s definition of critical literacy:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking *which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdoms, and mere opinions*, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (*Empowering Education* 129, emphasis added)

In setting up what critical literacy is, Shor suggests what it is *not*; in doing so, he positions the literacy practices students bring to the classroom as necessarily uncritical and problematic. Shor assumes here that students' reading practices, prior to exposure to critical pedagogies, can be summed up as *not* going "beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdoms, and mere opinions." Shor offers no sense here of what students *do* bring to the critical literacy table – other than the mistakes of uncritical reading and writing practices.

In critiquing critical literacy pedagogies in these ways, my aim is not to dismantle but rather bolster their potential in writing classrooms. As a scholar and writing instructor, I remain committed to the use of popular culture and critical literacy pedagogies in the composition classroom; I believe examining and writing about popular discourses, ideologies, and power dynamics can enhance students' understandings about the everyday and academic literacies they regularly use and about how these literacies constitute the world around us. I want to be clear that I am also not advocating for the wholesale dismissal of the text-as-ideological-artifact approach. The textual analysis of how hegemonic discourses are reproduced through popular culture is an approach I continue to employ in both my teaching and in this project.

However, I also believe a major obstacle of critical literacy pedagogies is the potential to dismiss students' attitudes about, connections with, and knowledges of popular culture in exchange for a particular kind of academic and critical subjectivity, "one oriented toward freedom and autonomous agency against the background of a modern social imaginary" (Warner 19). How should instructors respond when students engage with literacy practices that foster a different kind of subjectivity, one oriented toward surrender and collective experience against a background of received cultural narratives? By offering a nuanced account of the varied ways women participate with the popular romance genre, and the kinds of experiences and knowledges produced through this engagement, I hope to foster composition pedagogies that promote critical literacy while more fully theorizing the range of ways individuals' everyday experiences with popular culture texts can contribute to and even transform academic and critical knowledges.

I suggest that scholarship in rhetorical genre studies (RGS) can help foster this kind of theorization. Although genre itself is a transdisciplinary concept, genre scholars in the fields of rhetoric and composition specifically consider how genres serve as sites of social action and subject formation, and how individuals' uses of genres "perform social actions and relations,

enact social roles, and frame social realities” (Bawarshi and Reiff 59). Key to a rhetorical approach to genre is the notion that genres both respond to and reproduce rhetorical situations and contexts. Given their interest in how everyday genres – the medical history form, the course syllabus, the trial jury instructions – are enacted in particular contexts, by identifiable discourse communities, and for specific purposes, rhetorical genre theorists have often intentionally moved away from focusing on literary or fictional genres, texts that, as Amy Devitt notes, “are read by multiple audiences at different times and places, apart from [their] initial situation and community” (“Integrating” 709). Nevertheless, I believe that an understanding of genres as shaped by individuals’ uses of them, and as shaping the contexts in which they are used, can offer critical literacy pedagogues and students new ways of thinking about popular culture in the writing classroom.

Specifically, in this project I examine how women’s social, literate, and digital practices constitute the popular romance genre and, in turn, how these engagements mediate certain kinds of subjectivities, social relationships, and civic engagement. In other words, I consider how romance readers routinely shape and are shaped by participation with the romance genre. Because the deployment of genre as a participatory construct is a central theoretical concept in this dissertation, in Chapter Two I further elaborate how I use the term “genre participation.” Here, I briefly preview how focusing on the practices that constitute students’ participation with popular culture can enhance critical literacy pedagogies. The approach I am advocating for moves away from a text-as-ideological-artifact pedagogy towards a focus on how individuals’ varied practices – both in and out of school – shape popular culture genres. Within critical literacy pedagogies, students are often positioned in limited ways as consumers or responders to popular media. Instead, I suggest that we encourage students to attend closely to the multiple in-school and out-of-school contexts in which they enact popular genres, and to the ways these enactments make possible varied social actions. A focus on how individuals participate with popular culture genres in specific contexts also highlights popular culture as a significant site of literacy development and meaning-making rather than a site to undo the mistakes of uncritical literacy. Finally, as I illustrate throughout this project, this notion of genre participation also expands the sites where critical engagement might be located, not just through the process of textual analysis but also through the varied contexts in which individuals engage with popular texts and other users of them.

Without doubt, a conceptualization of popular culture genres as participatory constructs is informed by the contemporary digital landscape that instructors and students regularly traverse as well as recent scholarship in digital literacy studies. Henry Jenkins argues that the collision between old and new media and the increase in web 2.0 technologies have created an increasingly participatory culture, one that “make[s] it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges*, “Enabling Participation,” ¶ 7). In Chapter Five, I take up Jenkins’s notion of convergence culture to explore how digital spaces are shaping women’s engagements with popular romance fiction. I demonstrate that digital technologies make possible new kinds of relationships and genre knowledges among romance readers, authors, and critics, and that we should consider the impact of digital changes as we examine popular culture in composition classrooms. However, while digital tools certainly increase the ways in which consumers can shape popular culture, I am careful not to describe all of the ways women participate with romance fiction in digital terms.

As one example, consider romance author Beverly Jenkins’s genre-sponsored activity both online and offline. Jenkins is particularly active on Facebook, promoting a web space for her readers that features monthly book discussions, African-American historical facts, opportunities to participate in book drives and local events, and occasions for women to support each other in a variety of ways. Before Facebook, however, Jenkins and many of her readers routinely participated in these same activities offline. For the last twelve years, Jenkins and her fan club have been hosting biennial pajama party weekends. At these events, romance readers from around the country meet in or around Detroit, Michigan to engage in what Jenkins calls a “weekend of sistership.” In my interview with her, Jenkins described pajama party weekends in the following way<sup>10</sup>:

You know, Friday night we get together and find out who’s there and have dinner. Then on Saturday is history day. So we’ve had Buffalo Soldier re-enactors. We’ve had African American traditional quilters in. The last few times we’ve gotten on a bus and gone to downtown Detroit to visit the Charles H. Wright Museum which is the largest, in my opinion, the most beautiful African American museum in the world...So we spend a day there, come back Saturday night...and in between all

---

<sup>10</sup> For a another account of a Jenkins pajama party weekend, see the following video clip: <http://popularrromanceproject.org/behind-scenes/2637/>

this we're reading books. Friday night we're up till 2:00 in the morning talking books. Saturday night, same thing. . . . You know, we have a checkout thing for evaluation. And we find out we've got CEOs there. We've got CFOs. We have women who clean buildings for a living. And everybody is there strictly for the books and the sistership, and it's a very, very unique experience.

Although Jenkins's current Facebook page might allow greater numbers of romance readers access to book-related discussions and opportunities for sistership, her pajama party weekends help to illustrate the participatory nature of genres outside of digital contexts. Especially visible in this interview segment is the ways in which women's engagements with romance fiction help make possible particular social contexts with which to enact gendered, raced, and classed identities, to co-create the rhetorical situations and political exigencies to which Jenkins's romance novels respond. Thus, throughout this project, I illuminate how romance readers' uses of romance fiction make possible a variety of personal, collective, and civic engagements both online and offline.

Within K-12 literacy studies, significant work exists on critical literacy pedagogies that have similar aims to promote transformative classrooms and bridge extracurricular and curricular literacy practices. I want to conclude this section with a very brief synopsis of some of this scholarship, in part because an understanding of critical literacy in the field of composition would be incomplete without a consideration of its use in English language arts settings, but also because I believe some of the most promising research addressing the concerns around critical literacy pedagogies can be found in this field of scholarship. Just as cultural studies and popular culture studies scholarship has arisen out of particular geographical, cultural, and historical moments, so too has the work on critical literacy in K-12 settings. While a complete account of this work is outside the scope of this project, I want to highlight the research on third space theory – especially the work done by Kris Gutiérrez and Moje et al – which offers a way of thinking about the uncritical/critical binaries often produced through critical literacy pedagogies.

Critical literacy pedagogies located in K-12 education research stem from the sociocultural turn in literacy studies (aka New Literacy Studies) – which shifted the study of literacy from a neutral set of skills to the study of literacy as socially situated – and the subsequent attention on the part of scholars and instructors to the bridging of students' extracurricular and curricular interests. Scholars like Shirley Brice Heath, Brian Street, and James Gee – founders of New Literacy Studies – have each argued for the consideration of how

students' home, community, youth, and popular literacy practices inform their engagements with academic discourses, literacies, and ways of knowing and doing in the disciplines. Some of the work done in K-12 critical literacy studies has been far more attentive than composition studies to students' critical uses of popular culture outside of school contexts (Kendall; Moje "Re-Framing") and to the notion that students may articulate different critical and affective responses to popular texts than those desired by their instructors: "Teachers must realize that critical literacy practices recognize both students' pleasures and their critiques of the texts, but these practices also remain bound to a pedagogy of responsibility whereby teachers must negotiate these malleable and influential spaces so that no voice is privileged over any other" (Alvermann & Hagood 444). Like the work done in composition classrooms, critical literacy pedagogies in K-12 settings aim to help students "critically interrogate the mass media that play such a central role in their identity development and worldview" (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade).

At the same time, the use of third space theory by some K-12 literacy scholars offers a way of addressing concerns about the dismissal of students' connections to popular culture in favor of their indoctrination into leftist political stances towards popular culture. Kris Gutiérrez refers to a third space in which "teacher and student scripts – the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment – intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (152). In this conceptualization, third space theory examines and articulates moments in which teacher and student knowledges transect and become equally open to transformation. In a related but slightly different use of the term, Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, and Collazo suggest that third space refers to the:

integration of knowledges and Discourses drawn from different spaces...that *merges* the 'first space' of people's home, community, and peer networks with the 'second space' of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church...What is critical to our position is the sense that these spaces can be reconstructed to form a third, different or alternative, space of knowledges and Discourses. (41)

Central to the construction of a third space put forth by Moje et al is an attention to the "out-of-school funds of knowledge" that shape students' engagements with academic texts and an attention to the ways in which competing knowledges and Discourses can be "brought into 'conversation' to challenge and reshape both academic content literacy practices and knowledges

and Discourses of youths' everyday lives" (44-45). What these two versions of third space theory share is both a validation of students' knowledges and a pedagogical openness to the ways students' knowledges might change and reshape academic knowledges.

While Gutiérrez has taken up third space theory as a way of building connections between marginalized and conventional knowledges, and Moje et al have used it to consider how students' funds of knowledge can help them learn and change content-area literacies, I see third space theory as potentially useful for critical literacy pedagogies because it positions students' knowledges about literacy practices around popular culture as not merely uncritical but potentially complementary with, or transformative of, academic and critical knowledges. I highlight third space theory here because, while it is not directly connected to the history of popular culture and critical literacy in composition studies, and while it is not a theoretical framework I take up in this project, I do believe it offers some ways of thinking about the possibilities and challenges of critical literacy pedagogies. In future research, I hope to engage more fully with third space theory as a way to think about the intersection between students' and instructors' knowledges and experiences in the writing classroom.

### Understanding the Popularity of Popular Romance Fiction

In many ways, the scholarship on popular romance fiction over the last thirty years is as much influenced by cultural studies and popular culture studies as the field of composition is. Of central interest to my project is a prevailing thread within romance fiction scholarship concerned with the allegedly hegemonic or subversive status of popular romance novels and – relatedly – the allegedly addicted or agentive status of romance readers. Without doubt, this concern within romance scholarship echoes critical literacy pedagogies that are designed to empower students with the skills necessary to analyze and resist the ideologies reproduced through popular culture. Likewise, it echoes scholarship within popular culture studies that suggests popular culture as a site of possibility and empowerment. Consider, for instance, the introduction to Sally Goade's 2007 edited collection of essays, *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty-first Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*:

This book's title comes from the central question evident in popular romance criticism for at least the past thirty years: Are women readers (and writers) oppressed by their commitment to a narrative with an essentially patriarchal, heterosexual relationship at its center, or are they

somehow empowered by their ability to create, escape to, and transform the romance narrative into a vehicle for reimagining women's freedom within relationships? (1)

While this question is indeed central, it is framed in such a way that offers only two possible answers, and it reproduces a critical/uncritical way of thinking about individuals' engagements with popular culture.

Scholarship produced in the 1980s – most notably by Tania Modleski, Janice Radway, and Kay Mussell – presents an account of romance novels as symptoms of patriarchal ideologies and readers as dependent on the formulaic narratives that reaffirm and reproduce heteronormative relationships. While Modleski<sup>11</sup> and Mussell<sup>12</sup> draw from psychoanalytic theory and textual analysis to examine popular romance, Radway uses psychoanalytic theory and textual analysis as well as interviews and focus groups with romance readers who live in the same town and who share similar demographic markers. Based on her analysis, Radway deftly differentiates between the meanings produced by texts and the meanings produced by the act of reading itself, suggesting that while romance novels may endorse heteronormativity, women read romances as a means of coping with heteronormativity. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Romance* is a landmark study that has both contributed to the ethnographic turn in cultural studies as well as shaped interdisciplinary approaches to literacy, production, and reception. Radway's study of romance *reading* as well as romance novels demonstrates the social activities reproduced by textual engagement. My own research is deeply indebted to Radway's work; from her study of romance readers, I have gained insight into the ways in which literate practices are embedded within and in part reproduce our everyday social and material conditions. Her approach to the romance genre and its readers exemplifies the value of interdisciplinary work: Radway makes use of literary analysis, anthropological methods, and feminist theory, presenting a rich and thorough analysis of the popular romance genre through

---

<sup>11</sup> In *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Modleski argues that romances are actually repressed fantasies of revenge whereby women exercise a variety of strategies to cope with and adapt to their circumscribed lives in a sexist society. Accordingly, romances sales continue to rise because readers return to these novels the way addicts return to drugs: "certain tranquilizers taken to relieve anxiety are, though temporarily helpful, ultimately anxiety-producing. The user must constantly increase the dosage of the drug in order to alleviate problems aggravated by the drug itself" (48).

<sup>12</sup> In *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*, Mussell examines the textual conventions of over one hundred romance novels in a variety of subgenres. She concludes, "The adventure aspect of some romances, providing an exciting fantasy of women in active, competent, and instrumental roles, represents an *escape from* powerlessness, *from* meaninglessness, and *from* lack of self-esteem and identity, giving temporary relief from the exigencies of women's dilemmas" (164, italics in original).



multiple vantage points. While I believe her deployment of psychoanalytic theory oversimplifies and collapses the differences among women's reading experiences and favors an imagining of romance readers as a collective identity, Radway's attention to popular culture as it is taken up in the contexts of women's lives is what first persuaded me to develop a research project that foregrounds individuals' relationships with texts.

Not surprisingly, some of the notable scholarship of the 1990s offered more celebratory and defensive evaluations of popular romance fiction. For instance, in 1992, a group of best-selling romance novelists responded to the critical and academic evaluations of romance fiction with an edited collection of essays, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*. Claiming that romance novels are feminist and subversive texts, authors like Jayne Ann Krentz, Laura Kinsale, and Linda Barlow suggest that critics have misunderstood textual conventions such as the hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized characters and happily-ever-after endings, and they have thus misunderstood such characters' appeal for women readers.<sup>13</sup> In 1999, Anne Kaler (at the time an area chair of Romance Writers and Writing panels for the national Popular Culture Association) and Rosemary Johnson-Kurek published an edited collection of essays, *Romantic Conventions*, written by both romance authors and scholars. In the vein of popular culture studies, Kaler and Johnson-Kurek use little academic

---

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the extreme polarization of hero and heroine, Barlow and Krentz argue, is simply one of many plot devices employed to evoke a sense of the impossible: that the book will resolve in reconciliation and integration. Romance novels celebrate the "integration of male and female, both within the psyche and in society" (Barlow and Krentz 18). As such, they are written with paradoxical language, dialogue, and plot structures that act as potential barriers to the final ending. Hence, we find novels about "marriages that are simultaneously real and false (the marriage of convenience); heroes who also function as villains; victories that are acts of surrender; seductions in which one is both seducer and seduced; acts of vengeance that conflict with acts of love" (18). For Barlow and Krentz, the heroine and hero work throughout the novel to finally come to terms with each other, to commit to an equal partnership, to reconcile their differences. For these authors, romances are not about feminine masochism but about the optimism that men and women can co-exist on equal ground.

Likewise, in claiming that romance novels enforce patriarchal ideologies, feminist critics have asserted that such novels offer no critical distance between readers and heroines; hence readers' lives and values are validated by the lives and values of the heroines. In "*The Androgynous Reader*," Laura Kinsale contends that reader identification is significantly different than the practice of placeholding, and that romance readers are much more likely to practice the latter and instead identify with romantic heroes. Kinsale defines placeholding as an "objective involvement; the reader rides along with the character, having the same experiences but accepting or rejecting the character's actions, words, and emotions on the basis of her personal yardstick" (32). This is considerably different than the subjective role of character identification, in which the reader actually becomes the character, feeling how the heroine feels. Therefore, what Modleski refers to as a "hysteria" that results from the reader's inability to become the virginal heroine, Kinsale argues is a "healthy maintenance of separate self-identity" (38). Like Krentz and Barlow, Kinsale also believes that these are stories of integration, but not of actual men and women. Rather, Kinsale argues that these stories are entirely about internal integration, about a female "experiencing herself as hero, and as heroine, completely within her own personality" (38). If so, Kinsale insists, "The oft-derided happy ending is no infantile regressive daydream; it is a dramatization of the integration of the inner self" (39).

jargon or theory and explain that their research is intended to “make the enjoyment of reading the romance greater” (back cover). Thus, *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* and *Romantic Conventions* offer markedly different approaches and responses to popular romance fiction than the cultural studies approaches of the 1980s.

In the 2012 release of *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, editors Sarah S.G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger suggest that romance scholarship is currently experiencing a third wave, one in which a recognizable academic field – created through organizational and financial support, the establishment of an annual conference and a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, and the use of digital technologies to bring scholars, readers, writers, and industry members together in unprecedented ways – can contribute new insights about the appeal of romance fiction. Much of this scholarship continues to be concerned with the hegemonic/subversive status of romance and the addicted/agentive status of readers, and the essays presented in this anthology are attentive to and build from the scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, the section on conventions and originality complements a section on readers, authors, and communities, and thus offers a range of methodologies and theoretical approaches to romance fiction.

Although *New Approaches* also offers multiple close readings of particular texts, Frantz and Selinger urge scholars to resist framing their discussion of popular romance “in terms of [the] genre as a whole.” As they note, textual analyses of romances have frequently tended to make large claims about the appeal of all romance fiction based on small samples of particular kinds of texts – most often Harlequin categoricals or historical fiction. Moreover, popular romance is a type of “genre fiction,” a category that gets positioned within everyday and academic discourse as the “other” of “modern literary writing” (3). While I appreciate Frantz and Selinger’s wariness of the term “genre” or “genre analysis,” I believe my study – and the use of rhetorical genre theory – can provide a means of retaining and complicating the notion of genre as it relates to popular romance. In examining how genre is enacted through a variety of literacy practices and for varied purposes, my aim is precisely to employ a different method for understanding the appeal of popular romance fiction than has been previously offered.

Some of the most notable academic and public discourses surrounding popular romance fiction rest on dichotomous arguments: romance readers are either addicts or agents, either dependent consumers or autonomous readers. Likewise, the romance genre is understood as

hegemonic or subversive, as enslaving or freeing. While this discourse of addiction and enslavement is by no means the only one available, it is dominant and long-standing. Scholars who wrestle with - as Goade puts it - the empowerment/oppression question have contributed meaningful and valuable analyses of the romance genre's appeal for women. But this very question, and the ways it inevitably positions romance readers in dichotomous terms, has limited how we might understand how those who participate with the genre use and make meaning of the texts they read.

Critical literacy pedagogues within composition studies, like romance genre scholars, face a long-standing dilemma of how to think about the hegemonic and subversive possibilities of popular cultural production and consumption and how to think about the ways individuals use and are used by popular culture. Bringing critical literacy pedagogies into the classroom is fraught with questions about the politics, purposes, and methods of doing so. At its worst, such pedagogies – which ask students to consider the power of sign systems to affect every aspect of lived experience – can imagine students as victims of the ideological force of cultural texts, can leave unexamined students' myriad emotional and subjective relationships to such texts, and can offer “savvy consumer” as the only available subject position from which to read and write about these texts. Throughout this dissertation, I examine the multiple literacy practices and subjectivities women enact as they engage with the popular romance genre, engagements that are not always visible by the terms “reader” or “consumer.” As such, this project offers new possibilities for scholars interested in developing curricula that ask students to consider their own positionalities within the everyday and popular genres with which they participate.

### Moving Forward

I began this chapter with an anecdote from my experiences teaching undergraduate students to critically analyze popular texts. Before outlining the chapters that follow, I want to offer one more story that situates my research interests more specifically in the popular romance genre. My mother gifted me my first romance novel when I was fourteen years old. She herself was not a romance reader, and I cannot definitively say why she chose to give one to me. What I can say is that I was an awkward, fat, and boyish teenager, and my mom was determined to raise a “ladylike” daughter; gifting me a romance novel was perhaps an attempt at this effort. Ironically, the novel, *You Belong To Me*, features a tomboyish heroine who has no interest in

marriage but who learns that her parents have betrothed her to the hero. In her attempt to persuade the hero to cry off and break the engagement, the heroine plays up her tomboyish qualities through a series of increasingly crude, stubborn, and stereotypically masculine antics. Alas, the hero finds her behaviors charming and the heroine eventually comes to see that marriage to the hero does not mean she has to give up who she is. Naturally, they live happily ever after.

Of course, the synopsis I have provided is not just a plot summary but also an interpretation. What I definitively took away from this romance novel had much to do with my relationship to my mother and to my lived experiences in a body that had been regularly ridiculed by others. I am sure that this interpretation also stemmed from a desire to, as Eve Sedgwick suggests, rework the novel to my “own specifications,” so that “the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer nourishment and comfort in turn” (8). Johanna Lindsey’s *You Belong To Me* offered great nourishment and comfort to my fourteen-year-old self, and since then I have actively sought out romantic heroines whose experiences, desires, and bodies fall outside the boundaries of conventional femininity. This is probably not what my mother had in mind.

My experiences as a romance reader, and my experiences reading scholarship about romance readers, have without doubt fostered a desire to hear stories like mine, to hear other women describe the interpretive possibilities of romance novels that are never quite held in check by their inevitable and often heteronormative conclusions. Certainly, I interviewed romance readers hoping to understand their experiences as well as my own. Instead, I found far more varied accounts of romance reading and romance genre participation than I could have ever imagined. To that end, this project is especially attentive to the common experiences of romance readers as well as the alternative, surprising, and discrepant accounts.

In the following chapters, I demonstrate the range of ways women participate with the popular romance genre, and I situate this participation within conversations about the uses of popular culture and critical literacy pedagogies within composition studies. Chapter Two describes the theoretical framework and research design of this study. I also articulate my research questions and describe my process of data collection and data analysis, including the use of grounded theory and discourse analysis to examine interview and book discussion

transcripts with romance readers and writers. I also introduce the fourteen study participants and provide background on the romance-related digital spaces these participants traverse.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five are data chapters. In Chapter Three, I consider the affective, embodied, and identificatory practices that constitute women's romance reading, and I illustrate the varied knowledges and experiences produced through such engagements. Drawing from one-on-one book discussions with each participant, I argue that while romance readers' affective reading practices do not resemble what typically get called critical reading practices, they nevertheless are productive of critical knowledges and should be examined as an alternative and productive framework for approaching texts. In Chapter Four, I draw from interviews with romance readers to examine the relational dimensions of romance genre participation. By considering how women use romance novels – in addition to buying and reading them – I demonstrate the various roles, literate practices, and subjectivities women take up as they participate with popular romance. I suggest that the appeal of romance fiction cannot be explained solely through a consideration of text and reader but instead must be understood through an examination of multiple and relational ways women use romance novels to connect with others. In Chapter Five, I draw from interviews with three romance authors and analyses of multiple romance-sponsored websites to consider how digital spaces are shaping readers' experiences with popular romance fiction. I suggest that Web 2.0 technologies have produced increasingly complex relations between production and consumption even as they have increased the means by which individuals can participate with romance fiction.

Throughout the dissertation, I draw connections between my findings and critical literacy pedagogies for composition studies. However, in my conclusion, I synthesize the implications of this study and offer pedagogical recommendations for using popular culture in the writing classroom and for using rhetorical genre theory to promote and complicate critical literacy pedagogies. I also situate the findings from this study within the larger frameworks of students' engagements with university discourses and of practices related to critical theories and pedagogies. I conclude by sharing the questions that this project has left unanswered and my plans for future work.

---

<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that while the 1970s production of romance novels marked a historical moment of anxiety around the influence of mass media on consumers, anxieties around the influence of romantic narratives on women readers have existed for centuries. In many respects, the cultural discourses that shape popular imaginings of romance readers as addicted to romance novels can be traced generally to Anglo-European ideologies of women as the fairer sex (i.e. intellectually inferior, emotionally vulnerable, and dangerously impressionable), and specifically to 18<sup>th</sup> century notions of reading and readers. In *A History of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*, Karen Littau argues that it is during the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the division of work and free time and the division of labor between men and women were clearly demarcated for the bourgeoisie, that the novel emerged as one of the most popular forms of entertainment and escape and that the reading of fiction became predominantly associated with female audiences. Because women were considered to be the primary readers of fiction, and the novel as a genre fosters strong reader/character identification, women's leisure reading of fiction became a point of concern from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Littau 20-21). In *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, Kate Flint suggests that from this period arose a question that I would argue is still prevalent in today's scholarship on women and reading: "what moral, sexual, religious, ideological dangers may lie in a woman's being absorbed by so preoccupying a pursuit?" (4).

By 1860 this question of danger and absorption became increasingly significant as the surge in book production, made possible by the invention of pulp, led to the mass production of novels "not as artefacts to be preserved but as affordable products to be consumed and then discarded" (Littau 21). Littau notes that the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization and the mass-production of forms of entertainment such as novels "marked the beginnings of a kind of a mass society whose 'Philistine' tastes would later be deplored by critics" because these tastes were "geared towards pleasure-seeking or thrills rather than moral edification" (21). For women, these pleasure-seeking pursuits incited fear about the physical side effects of reading fiction. Such side effects of sustained, private, pleasure reading varied from lethargy to congestion, from eye injury to nervous disorders and hysteria; but they were all inscribed by gendered ideologies and biological assumptions of women's physical and mental susceptibility to sensation (39).

This is not to say that, up until this point, the physical aspects of reading had not been considered – far from it. In fact, as Robert Darnton illustrates, reading as a form of bodily and spiritual sustenance had long been accepted:

No one challenged the notion that there was a physical element in reading, because no one drew a clear distinction between the physical and the moral world. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, readers attempted to 'digest' books, to absorb them in their whole being, body and soul. A few extremists took to reading-as-digestion literally: thus the case of a woman in Hampshire, England, who 'ate a New Testament, day by day and leaf by leaf, between two sides of bread and butter, as a remedy for fits.' More often the devouring of books took the form of a spiritual exercise, whose physicality shows on the surviving pages. (172)

However, the consumption of tasteless, pulp fiction was depicted as an all-together different diet from the digestion of wholesome, non-secular texts. And, as Littau argues, "this suggests that *the material sphere of consumption* is a

---

consumption through the body, whereas the *more spiritual sphere of reception* is the reception through the critical faculties” (40). Thus, women’s bodily consumption of novels became associated with affective, emotional, sensual, sympathetic responses to fiction, in contrast to the critical discernment and intellectual distance of men’s primarily non-fiction reading practices. Further, it was feared that such consumption would inevitably lead to addiction, a reading habit as dangerous as any other vice. Thus, fears of women’s over-absorption with reading fiction were multiple: such reading might lead not only to physical and psychological ailments but also to the addictive preference of fantasy and self-indulgence over the reality of domestic responsibility and feminine propriety. It should also be noted that women writers were no less constrained by these fears of fiction’s impact on women and were themselves often the object of ridicule and derision. Woman might be a great artist’s muse but she could never be a great artist herself. Nathaniel Hawthorne famously summed up this sentiment in a letter to his then publisher:

America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash--and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter*<sup>1</sup> and other books neither better nor worse? Worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the hundred thousand.

Additionally, women’s reading itself was often a literary topos employed by male and female novelists alike in order to illustrate the dangers of excessive reading (especially of romantic fiction) to foster delusion, corrupt the innocent, or discourage independent thinking. Hence the cultural suspicions surrounding the popularity of fiction reading among women cast production as the purview of men and consumption as the purview – and peril – of women.

Eventually, in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization, the “consumption” of mass-produced novels took up a dual but imbricated meaning: as the biological process of absorption and as the conceptual opposite of production. Where the former connotation signaled an unhealthy diet of harmful material, the latter signaled a passive purchasing of the ideas of others. It is during this time as well that the notion of mass culture as inauthentic and feminine (and high culture as real and masculine) became firmly entrenched. In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen argues that what especially marks the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a “certain chain effect of signification: from the obsessively argued inferiority of woman as artist to the association of woman with mass culture to the identification of woman with the masses as a political threat” (50). As Huyssen articulates, the feminization of mass culture pointed to a fear of the female/body devouring the male/mind, a fear of fantasy and delusion ruling over reason and reality. Hence, “[t]he fear of the masses...is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass” (Huyssen 52).

As Huyssen points out, a number of critics have replaced “mass culture” – which suggests a culture that emerges from the masses themselves – with theorizations that more clearly articulate mass culture as imposed from above and thus a threat *to* the masses. Here we see Adorno and Horkheimer’s term “culture industry” for instance (48). Members of the Frankfurt School during the 1930s and 1940s theorized mass culture and consumption as responsible for the rise of fascism in Germany. In this conceptualization, “real art” challenged readers to think in different and new ways, while mass culture tranquilized its users to passively accept the ideologies of others. While

---

this theorization of mass culture in some ways lost the previous feminizing of mass culture, what resurfaced was the discourse of addiction – an almost inevitable next point in the consumption trajectory. Consider the move from consumption to addiction below as Bernard Rosenberg predicts the dangerous future of mass culture:

As kitsch<sup>1</sup> is institutionalized and we are robbed of our spontaneity, the likelihood of satisfaction, of tension followed by distension, gets to be more and more remote. Culturally, we become hungrier than ever – and our diet, though habit-forming, contains less nourishment than ever. (qtd. in Radway “Reading is Not Eating” 10)

While Rosenberg’s comments here reflect notions of mass culture in general, they also echo earlier concerns of the dangers of reading and make visible the relationships among discourses of reading and mass consumption.



## Chapter Two

### Theoretical Framework, Research Design, and Methods

#### Introduction

Scholarship within literacy studies, feminist theory, rhetorical genre studies, and qualitative research has shaped the conceptual framework and methodological design of this dissertation. I begin this chapter by highlighting some of this significant work and describing how it has influenced my research design, implementation, and analysis.

Sociocultural conceptions of literacy situate literate practice at the intersection of text, context, and reader and suggest that meaning-making processes are mediated by, and constituted in, social systems and cultural practices. In other words, literacy cannot be understood as the acquiring of a neutral and universal skill-set but rather as a value-laden form of language use developed through particular historical and cultural configurations and social collaborations. My interest in popular romance fiction began, in part, as an interest in thinking about the kinds of literacies and subjectivities that are sanctioned and sustained in classrooms and the kinds that are stigmatized or marginalized. Thus, part of my decision to interview adult romance readers rather than adolescents was driven by my desire to understand how and why individuals take up and repeatedly return to unsanctioned, stigmatized literacy practices, as well as my desire to nuance the English teacher mantra of fostering life-long reading by illustrating the specific kinds of reading, readers, and texts this mantra overlooks.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Teachers of reading, from elementary through post-secondary schools, face the challenge of not only teaching students how to read but also instilling within students the desire to be life-long readers. “Learning to read is a rather fruitless activity,” writes H. Alan Robinson, “if it is not utilized beyond school assignments” (qtd. in Lesesne 61). At the same time, elementary and secondary reading material, driven largely by state, district, or school-mandated curricula, offers a narrow selection of texts deemed “appropriate” for instilling this life-long reading desire, often regulating student-driven text choices to (at worst) out-of-school contexts and (at best) silent, sustained reading time. There is abundant research correlating students’ attitudes about reading with students’ interest in what they’re reading (Gambrell 1996; Ivey & Broaddus 2001; Schraw, Flowerday & Stevens 2004). Moreover, literacy scholars like Hidi (1990) and Hunt (1996) have reported that reading interest correlates to reading comprehension and reading skill comprehension. This research suggests the need to interrogate teachers’ desires to foster life-long reading and the pedagogical and curricular choices that can undermine this desire.

Conceptualizing literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon has prompted scholars to attend to the ways that literate practices reproduce raced, classed, and gendered discourses; this approach, in turn, has prompted scholars to consider how “people’s identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about” (Moje and Luke 416). Gendered identity is socially constructed, in part, through literate practice. Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stabilized identity but one that is “tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (519). In order to “do gender,” individuals draw from discursive, cultural, and contextual resources - including literacy practices - to navigate varied gendered subjectivities and participate in different social networks. Because romance novels are primarily read by and written by women, and because romance novels often amplify gendered relationships, I consider the romance genre a rich site for understanding literate practice as both gendered and gendering. Therefore, both my research questions and interview protocols specifically address how individuals do gender and make sense of gender as they participate with the romance genre.

I use the term “participate” deliberately as this study is primarily driven by an interest in the roles that individuals play in co-creating genres. In using the word “participate,” I mean to signal the intentional and unintentional ways individuals enact, reproduce, shape, and navigate genres, and to consider how genres organize multiple and competing literate practices, subjectivities, affects, and ways of being and acting in the world. This notion of genre participation is heavily informed by scholarship within rhetorical genre studies that does not negate common-sense notions of genre based on form or category (the horror film, the romance novel, the sitcom, for instance) but rather expands these notions by shifting the focus from conventions and patterns to use-value and context. Genres are thus reflected in, but are not defined by, formal patterns; they classify but are not reduced to classification. Hence the difficulty in analyzing genres outside of their typical contexts of use – popular culture genres in composition classrooms, for instance: doing so risks limiting our analysis to a focus on a genre’s textual conventions without a nuanced understanding of how those conventions might be understood in particular contexts by particular users. As Amy Devitt notes: “the forms in genres take their meaning from those who use them, in what ways, with what motives and expectations” (“Re-fusing Form” 35). By framing genres as sites of action and participation, we can see that people use genres in particular ways to do things in the world. We can also see that genre

conventions are driven by their purposes and participants and thus these conventions change as purposes and participants do.

Some genres are more participatory than others and offer individuals ways of moving fluidly among various roles and positions of power; other genres position individuals to take up and maintain a single or limited role within a genre. In describing genre sets within a classroom, for instance, Bawarshi and Reiff note that “students and teacher do not have equal access to all the genres [of a classroom genre system], and the different genre sets within which they participate position them in various relations of power” (97). The positions within popular culture genres are often conceived in terms of production and consumption where producers have greater power than consumers, and critics (academic or otherwise) are located outside of genres. As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, however, the women in this study who engage with popular romance fiction are not only readers/consumers but also writers and critics; they actively produce knowledge about the genre for other romance readers.

Of course, genres are not only participatory but also ideological constructs. In other words, genres reproduce particular discourses, worldviews, and social actions. By foregrounding genres as participatory, I hope to add to scholarship interested in the relationship between genre and ideology. As one example, I hope to challenge the assumption that genre critique is outside of genre and illustrate, instead, that it is a form of genre participation. We can see this assumption even in RGS scholarship that positions students’ critique of genres as outside of or not fully participating within genres. As Bazerman argues, for instance, “Criticism, however, is only the beginning of action. Action is a participation, not a disengagement” (qtd. in Devitt “Teaching” 338). I argue, instead, that genre critiques are part of the genre’s discursive production. If genres are driven by their participants in particular rhetorical situations, it makes sense to conceive of the academic analysis of a genre – by student or scholar – as a particular instantiation of genre. In other words, part of the *use value* of genre may be its critique. This notion has implications for how we conceive of a genre’s ideologies; if we include not only the discourses produced by texts but also the discourses and social actions produced by those who engage with such texts, a genre’s ideological thrust becomes far more dependent on its context of use. Bawarshi and Reiff suggest that genre critique can erroneously “universaliz[e] the ideological character of genres rather than seeing genres as emerging from and responding to socio-historically situated exigencies” (*Genre: An Introduction* 16). In attending to romance

readers' uses of romance novels in particular situations as well as the discourses they produce in response to romance novels, I hope to illustrate the ways in which a notion of genres as participatory complicates how we might understand the ideologies produced through genres.

The romance genre itself is located within a broader network of popular culture texts – everyday texts that I would argue make up a significant portion of the extracurriculum and serve as meaningful sites of knowledge production and identity enactment. Nadine Dolby suggests that educators must examine the popular culture texts in which students engage because such sites are “where our taken-for-granted interpretations of the world are made: what we ‘know’ about the world is largely formed through our interactions with popular culture” (263). I agree with and extend Dolby’s claim to suggest that popular culture texts are sites of knowledge production in part because they are also sites of play and pleasure. Accordingly, while our interactions with popular culture shape what we “know” about the world, these interactions also make possible and pleasurable the potential to reshape what we know, and thus reshape the world. By attending to the various sites in which study participants enact genre, as well as the multiplicitous practices and purposes they bring to the activity of romance reading, my research is especially attuned to the creative, dynamic, and surprising dimensions of this process.

Finally, this project is shaped by disciplinary and epistemological debates on how best to study readers. The “textual” reader of the humanities and the “empirical” reader of the social sciences are often shorthand for characterizing psychoanalytic approaches within literary and film studies and ethnographic approaches within cultural and literacy studies. In large part, these debates are driven by disagreement on the locus of media effects: the conscious self or the unconscious desires that remain unavailable to the conscious self? While both approaches hold merit – and indeed, numerous studies of reading draw from both or neither – my project purposefully shifts the object of study away from readers and reading to a focus on genre participation. By doing so, I hope to retain some of the best elements of these methods while also contributing to new understandings of literacy practices and subjectivities. In previous romance scholarship, psychoanalytic theory has been used predominantly to suture the woman reader to the subject position of romantic heroine, and to argue that romance reading is motivated by unmet needs for emotional nurturance. This claim depends on one subject position (heroine) and one kind of reading practice (compensatory) available to genre participants. Undoubtedly, the romance genre mediates both conscious and unconscious desires, but it also fosters multiple and

fluid subjectivities and literate practices. And although I use discourse analysis to situate interviewees' responses within larger cultural discourses, I also hold with Miriam Hanson who suggests that "we need to grant the 'ordinary' female viewer a certain interpretive capability, a reflective distance in relation to the roles she is expected to assume" (qtd. in Davis 172). Genres are enacted by individuals for certain purposes and in particular ways, and this project situates routine participants of the romance genre as knowledgeable sources of its enactment.

The theoretical concepts outlined above helped me to develop the epistemological, methodological, and initial analytical approaches to this study. However, the dynamic nature of qualitative research means that the theoretical framework one brings to a study may not be sufficient to fully mine the findings it yields. In these instances, researchers must take on the role of bricoleur, someone who pieces together various theoretical tools to make sense of emerging data and revise initial assumptions. In my case, as the data analysis and writing progressed, theories on affect, identificatory reading, and digital convergence allowed me to further interpret my findings and to put them in conversation with composition studies. Where appropriate, I incorporate these theories throughout the dissertation.

### Design and Method

With few exceptions, previous scholarship on romance fiction has tended to use textual, psychoanalytic analysis and categorical definitions of genre to study romance's appeal. In order to situate the romance genre as a dynamic site of interaction among its users, texts, and contexts, and to locate its formulaic conventions as driven by the participants who use them, this study focuses on the range of literate practices, purposes, and meanings individuals enact as they participate in the romance genre. I have analyzed eleven interviews and book discussions with romance readers, as well as three interviews with romance authors. Where appropriate, I have also included textual analysis of romance novels, romance websites, and individuals' writing about the genre. This study does not offer statistically verifiable conclusions that apply to all romance genre participants. Nor does it propose a comprehensive account of featured participants' lives or their overall reading and writing practices. Instead, by taking an ethnographic approach and by considering fourteen women's insights and experiences, this study presents a detailed investigation of these women's generic and gendered participation, and it examines how a popular culture genre like romance fiction functions for particular individuals.

I began this project with the following research questions:

1. *How do individuals narrate their histories of participation with the romance genre?*
2. *What do these narratives suggest about how individuals understand the genre to be working for them, and why they continue to participate with it?*
3. *What do these narratives suggest about the relationships among genre, gender, and literacy?*

Although the process of conducting interviews and analyzing data has shifted and expanded the study's focus in particular ways, I remain committed to foregrounding the roles of individuals in generic production.

### Research Site and Subjects

In order to capture a range of literacy practices that romance genre participants take up, I recruited study participants by posting fliers across a local, Midwestern university town (including campus and non-campus buildings) as well as through a website devoted to the romance genre: All About Romance (AAR). In both cases, the advertisement invited adult individuals to complete an online survey<sup>15</sup> if they were interested in participating in a study that examined the reading practices of romance readers.<sup>16</sup> There were several benefits and drawbacks to recruiting locally and through the AAR website. By recruiting locally, I was able to conduct interviews and book discussions in person. In general, it felt easier to establish rapport quickly with these participants because we sat together at a table in a quiet room and often chatted briefly about local events, establishments, or schools in the area. Likewise, I was able to go over the study consent form before the interview began and answer any questions the interviewees had. On the other hand, with online participants, I conducted interviews and book talks via phone or Skype and emailed them the consent form ahead of time. The drawbacks to this approach were twofold, and both concerned the use of technology: 1) Interviews conducted via phone (four

---

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>16</sup> Deciding how to refer to the individuals within the study has been somewhat challenging. While I recruited "romance readers" and interviewed "romance authors," my use of genre theory reminds me that individuals participate with a genre in a variety of ways, taking up different and shifting roles and practices. My inclination, therefore, is to refer to the study's members as "genre participants" whenever possible. However, because the data collection and analysis differed between women who primarily read romances and women whose profession is romance author, I make necessary shifts between "participant," and "author" or "reader."

total) meant that I could not jot down notes about facial cues or body language after we talked, and I often had to raise my voice into the speaker phone so I could be heard by both the participant and the digital recorder; and 2) Interviews conducted via Skype (two total) sometimes resulted in disconnection or a frozen screen, rendering the conversation more stilted and awkward. Overall, both the phone and Skype software at times seemed to add a layer of distance between the participant and me.

That said, I believe it was imperative that I recruit participants through the AAR website for several reasons. First, research on romance readers – my own included – has established that romance reading is a highly stigmatized practice and that romance readers often hide their reading from others. It is no coincidence, then, that online communities have become popular for many romance readers, offering what James Gee calls an “affinity space” where readers can participate in book reviews, writing contests, reader polls, member forums, author interviews, blogs, and podcasts. These online spaces encourage participants to actively share knowledge with a diverse community of people and engage in multiple literacy practices in addition to reading. Most of the online participants in this study cited a desire to share their enjoyment of romance reading anonymously as a major reason for joining the AAR website, and while all six use the website to read reviews and other members’ comments, three participants routinely post messages to the site. As I discuss further in Chapters Four and Five, digital spaces are changing the ways we read print fiction; interviews with members of the AAR site elucidate these changes. And, finally, recruiting online illustrates how genre sets function together and inform each other. For example, one participant – Beth – did not begin reading romances until she stumbled onto the AAR site looking for suggestions for new books to read. Her account illustrates how individuals do not use genres in isolation but rather within networks of related genres.

At the time of recruitment, I was particularly interested in considering if and how the romance genre sustains individuals’ changing purposes for, and practices of, reading over time. Previous research suggests that many women begin reading romances during adolescence and that their unmet needs for emotional nurturance place them on a life-long romance reading trajectory that may result in compliant reading practices (Christian-Smith; Cooper; Miner). At first, I was interested in interviewing only long-term romance readers in order to engage with these conversations. It occurred to me, however, that interviewing women who had been reading for a range of years might better address questions of trajectory and compliant reading as well as

illuminate the relationships among genre familiarity, expertise, and investment. Thus, the initial recruitment survey included questions primarily concerned with the frequency and longevity of participants' reading, and the romance subgenres they read. The only demographic information individuals provided was an answer indicating they were over 18 years of age. Fifty-two individuals – all women – completed the survey, and from here I selected five local individuals and six online individuals who represented a range of the aforementioned categories.

In retrospect, I believe my initial recruitment survey was flawed in that it marginalized African American romance fiction. As noted in Appendix A, I listed up to twenty-one common subgenres that individuals could mark as having read. I included “Urban Romance” as a subgenre but I did not include “African American Contemporary Romance” or “African American Historical Romance.” I believe my reasoning at the time for including “Urban Romance” as its own category was that there is notable controversy around urban romance novels,<sup>17</sup> and because their textual conventions (including more realistic / less utopian social conditions and resolutions) differ in significant ways from other subgenres of popular romance. I also believe my reasoning for not including “African American Contemporary Romance” or “African American Historical Romance” as separate subgenres was that I did not want to perpetuate the already complicated distinctions between these categories and “contemporary” or “historical” romance fiction. I recall, for instance, a lengthy conversation at a romance genre conference in 2009 in which readers, authors, and representatives from publishing companies debated the willingness/unwillingness of romance readers to read about characters whose racial identification differed from their own, and further debated the implications of publishing houses and marketing campaigns that target romance novels towards specific demographics.

It has been over three years since I created and distributed this survey and I now consider my line of reasoning utterly problematic. By not including the aforementioned categories, I believe this study further marginalizes African American romance authors and readers from a genre that historically has been dominated by white authors and readers and by white fictional characters (especially white heroines). It also ignores the materiality of African American

---

<sup>17</sup> See Sweeney's discussion of the public criticism of urban fiction, including an oft-cited 2006 *New York Times* op-ed, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut” (Sweeney 142). See also Bridget M. Davis's 2008 article, “Break the ‘Street Lit’ Habit: Can Black Literature Be Saved?” published by *The Root*, and Eisa Ulen's 2008 article, “The Naked Truth: ‘Street Lit’ Sells Like Hotcakes. But at What Cost?” published by *The Naked Truth*. As Sweeney notes, central to the controversy surrounding these narratives are the concerns that urban fiction “glorifies crime, reinforces stereotypical images of African Americans, and crowds out far better literature by African American writers” (142).



romance novels that are published as discreet lines and that are often housed in bookstores in the African American literature section rather than with the rest of the romance genre. Moreover, the inclusion of “Urban Romance” alongside the absence of these other sub-genres offers a limited representation of how African American characters have been portrayed in romance fiction and invites a stereotype that readily links African American experiences solely with the narratives depicted in urban romance novels, which often feature African American characters involved in drug trafficking, prostitution, and murder. I have no way of knowing how the subgenres I did and did not list affected who actually filled out the online survey. Nevertheless, this decision marked a moment where my positioning as a white romance reader and researcher significantly impacted the study design.

I have also come to see that in listing these twenty-one subgenres, I imposed a particular kind of categorization on romance novels to which potential study participants could respond. The subgenres I listed on my survey are governed by location, time period and/or a sense of reality (a contemporary paranormal romance or a Regency historical romance, for instance). But romance-sponsored forums like those found on the AAR site suggest that readers have other ways of referring to common romance narratives and that these references illuminate the complicated ways such texts and their categorizations can reproduce raced, classed, and gendered discourses. For instance, “captivity narratives” signal stories of white heroines kidnapped by “savage” Indians while, relatedly, “Stockholm syndrome” stories refer to romance narratives in which heroines fall in love with their kidnappers. Some romance readers use the term “forced seduction” to refer to romances with scenes in which the heroine is raped by the hero. As I describe in Chapter Three, study participants’ and my use of the term “dark hero” simultaneously signals a troubled male character redeemed by an innocent heroine and reproduces racially inflected imagery and white privilege. Moreover, the categories I used in the survey do not explicitly indicate the sexual orientations of romance characters, but, given that the romance industry predominantly publishes novels featuring white, heterosexual monogamous couples, I believe *not* including these markers might reproduce heteronormativity as the default thread that most frequently runs through popular romances.

If I were to conduct this kind of study again, I would eliminate the survey question asking readers to check the sub-genres they read. Instead, in better keeping with a definition of genre as driven by its users, I might ask individuals to describe their favorite kinds of narrative plots or

ask them to self-identify favorite sub-genres. The survey did ask individuals to list favorite authors and novels, but this data was used in conjunction with the question about sub-genres. As I have stated, my aim was to include a sample size that would represent a range of reading longevity, frequency, and sub-genres. Yet, even while all twenty-one subgenres listed in the survey were marked by at least one of the eleven study participants, only five of these sub-genres are represented by the novels that participants actually chose to discuss with me during our book talk (see Table 2). As one example, six of the eleven study participants cited that they read urban romance novels but none of these participants selected an urban romance novel for our one-on-one book discussion. One possible explanation for this finding is that the study participants and I held differing definitions of what counts as “urban romance.” Another possibility is that, for whatever reason, participants felt uncomfortable, dissuaded, or simply disinclined to discuss an urban romance novel with me. In any event, my attempt to represent a range of romance sub-genres for this study was unsuccessful. At the end of this chapter, I discuss further changes I plan to make as I pursue publication that will help to expand the diversity of study participants, romance novels, and practices surrounding romance fiction.

The following table presents each study participant, along with the number of years she has been reading romances, the frequency with which she reads, and the demographic questions I asked during the interviews. This table is meant to provide a snapshot of this study’s scope, not to invite assumptions about the relationships between these various data points.

Name <sup>18</sup>	Beth	Olivia	Shelly	Candace	Maddie	Kim	Amanda	Amy	Lisa	Camilla	Rachel
<b>Years as Romance Reader</b>	18 mo.	20-24	20-24	25+	25+	15-19	10-14	5-9	15-19	5-9	20-24
<b>Romances read per month</b>	15-19	25+	10-14	10-14	25+	10-14	15-19	5-9	5-9	20-24	5-9
<b>Age</b>	33	45	38	52	51	37	26	20	29	45	43
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	White	Jewish	White	White	White	Asian	White	White	White	White	White
<b>Working Inside or Outside Home</b>	Outside	Inside	Inside	Outside	Outside	Outside	Outside	Outside	Outside	Inside	Outside
<b>Relationship Status</b>	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Single	Engaged	Involved	Married	Married	Married
<b>Children</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Highest Level of Education Completed</b>	High School	Masters	Bachelors	PhD	JD	4 yrs college	Associates	Associates	Masters	Masters	Bachelors
<b>Recruited Online (O) or Locally (L)</b>	O	O	O	O	O	O	L	L	L	L	L

Table 2.1 Demographic Data of Study Participants

While these eleven study participants are not intended to represent all romance readers, I wish to put their racial and education demographic information as well as their online activity in

<sup>18</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

context with romance industry data offered by the Romance Writers of America (RWA). Most study participants self-identified as white. Although, as I've stated, individuals were not asked any demographic questions until after they had been selected for the study, this pool of readers seems fairly aligned with known norms about the racial identifications of romance readers. The most recent statistics available from RWA<sup>19</sup> suggest that seventy five percent of romance readers are white; eleven percent are African American; eleven percent are Hispanic; and three percent are Asian (Burley, *Hearts of Darkness* 10-11). RWA does not offer data about the education levels of romance readers, but a 2011 survey does offer information about the socioeconomic status of romance readers, stating that "the greatest percentage of book buyers (39 percent) have an income between \$50,000 and \$99,000." Public discourses surrounding the romance genre have often depicted romance readers in limited ways, most notably as unhappy housewives or uneducated consumers addicted to low-brow fiction.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to these stereotypes, the women in this study comprise a sample that exceeds the average education levels for women living in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Although I have no way of knowing how these women's education levels compare to the average U.S. romance reader, I do hope that foregrounding how these particular women engage with romance fiction can help complicate commonly-held stereotypes about who reads romance novels.

In order to qualify for the study, participants must have been eighteen or older and willing to participate in a one-on-one interview and a one-on-one book discussion on a romance novel of their choosing. Individuals recruited from the AAR website also consented to their web posts being included in the dissertation study. Individuals could withdraw from the study at any time, and their participation remained completely anonymous. I recruited study participants

---

<sup>19</sup> These statistics are taken from a 2003 survey. I emailed RWA asking for more recent statistics but they responded that they do not collect demographic information about race or education.

<sup>20</sup> As one example, Harlequin marketing techniques have both targeted and discursively produced "housewives" as a collective group of consumers most likely to purchase romance novels. Since the 1970s, Harlequin's marketing efforts have been based on a "predict and provide" approach whereby books are advertised by their brand name and packaged alongside domestic and feminine products. Early gimmicks and giveaways included stuffing romance novels in Bio-Ad detergent boxes, offering coupons for books at the bottom of Ajax cans, and giving free books away at McDonalds on Mother's Day (Jensen 39). By promoting brand loyalty and a packaged-goods marketing technique, Harlequin has promoted romance novels as predictable products rather than individual titles. In turn, this move not only specifically targets housewives as a primary buying market but also constitutes a reading community of dependent consumers rather than discerning readers. For cartoon images of romance novels and romance readers, see Appendix E.

<sup>21</sup> The 2011 U.S. census data suggests that roughly twenty eight percent of women over the age of 25 have a high school degree only; fourteen percent have a Bachelors degree; eight percent have a Masters degree, and one percent have a doctoral degree.

during the spring of 2010 and conducted subsequent interviews and book discussions throughout the summer of 2010. Each session lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour.

### Reader Interviews

Each participant agreed to a one-on-one interview and a one-on-one book discussion of a romance novel of her choice. For the interviews, I prepared semi-structured questions focused primarily on how, why, and under what circumstances individuals read romance novels.<sup>22</sup> Over ninety percent of romance readers are women, and the romance genre has been commonly described as “books for women, by women, about women.” Although the genre has changed in recent years, it continues to feature predominantly heterosexual relationships. Thus, one of my primary interests was considering the role of gender and sexuality in study participants’ genre participation. I tried to ask questions that prompted participants to narrate their experiences with the romance genre and, in asking follow-up questions, I tried to attend to the themes that participants themselves introduced during the course of the interview. This approach yielded varying results. Some participants offered lengthy and detailed accounts of themselves as romance readers, weaving together personal stories from varying points in their lives and reflecting on their reading preferences with little prompting from me. Others answered direct questions briefly or with minimal references to experiences outside the immediate context of the questions, or they responded frequently with statements such as “I don’t know” or “I’ve never thought about it before.” While participants responded to my questions with varying degrees of reflexivity and disclosure, all reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to think and talk about their interests in romance reading; likewise, all participants were generous with their time and more than willing to respond via email to any additional questions I had. Several hoped I would make a list of other participants’ recommended authors and novels and pass this list along. Thus, the interview context seemed to act as a generative space for participants to engage with questions about their preferences, practices, and experiences.

Undoubtedly, my role as a researcher shaped the nature of our conversations. I became aware of this fact especially after the first two interviews in which participants asked me whether I myself was a romance reader. I had anticipated that this question might come up and was unsurprised that when I answered in the affirmative, further questions arose about my favorite

---

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix B.

authors and books. My answers seemed to reposition me as a fellow romance enthusiast and thus a source for receiving and giving book recommendations. In subsequent interviews, I made a point of sharing that I am a long-time, avid romance reader; however, I suspect that most participants might have guessed this anyway as I found myself frequently sharing “insider” laughs, nods, and the like during our conversations. When Olivia expressed humorous embarrassment at her Barbara Cartland reading phase, I laughed along with her because of my knowledge of Cartland’s eccentric reputation and excessively flowery writing style. When Kim stated that she had several “auto-buy authors,” I did not have to ask her to explain that this meant that there are certain authors whose books she will automatically buy without knowing anything about the story. I am certain, in fact, that my knowledge of the romance genre from a reader’s perspective and my disclosure that I am a romance reader significantly shaped the interview context.

I am equally certain that my positioning as a white, privileged, female researcher shaped the interviews and book discussions in a number of ways. For instance, when I asked participants to describe their preferences for heroes and heroines, most participants stated that they didn’t pay much attention to physical descriptions because, as Maddie articulated, “you have to describe them because people have to form a mental image, but then you’re not really writing about what they look like, you’re writing about what kind of people they are, what kind of things they go through.” The assumption that there is little relationship between individuals’ physical appearances and the kinds of things they go through is a marker of white privilege, and I suspect that Maddie’s comment is made possible in part by an interview context in which she assumes that we share a racial position. In another interview, when Camilla was responding to a similar question about heroines, I found myself making a physical gesture in solidarity with Camilla’s exasperation with generic descriptions of their beauty:

Sometimes there is some cookie cutter-ness in the description of the protagonist if she’s made out to be very voluptuous, very big chested, narrow-waisted, blah, blah, blah, because I’m not. I’m just not that (*points to herself*). I look around me and (*we both point at me*) you’re not and I look around at women I know and think, ‘None of us look like that, four inch stilettos, pencil skirt, massive bosoms heaving in whatever shirt we barely buttoned up.’ It’s not real, so I don’t have an awful lot of tolerance for that.

In this moment, Camilla indexed a white standard of feminine beauty (Jackson & McGill), and I positioned myself as a fellow white woman sharing in her frustration at the unreality of some

romantic character descriptions. However, despite the differences between Maddie's comment and Camilla's comment, both participants and I share an unstated expectation that we should and will find "ourselves" in the texts. This is a privilege that, as Karla F.C. Holloway notes, is not shared by all readers: "[T]he search in a book for someone who looks like oneself or the dismay at not finding such an image are part of a set of culturally explicit recollections from black readers" (68). Thus, throughout the course of the interviews and book discussions, I found myself increasingly aware of how study participants' romantic texts – as well as the interview contexts in which we discussed them – at times reproduced shared raced, classed, and gendered ways of knowing and thinking.

Throughout the analysis, I tried to attend to specific moments when my positioning appeared especially relevant. At the same time, I take up a social-constructivist perspective that any interview is a co-construction of meaning, a "discursive process in which the research encounter is structured by the researcher and the researched" (qtd. in Crang 494). I also echo Deborah Brandt who suggests that interviewees may shape their responses to accommodate what they believe the interviewer is looking for. Both the dialogic process and the power dynamics at work in these interviews mean that I do not view them as representations of the "Truth" about individuals' experiences but rather as opportunities for considering individuals' self-constructions as romance readers within the interview context, and for examining which subjectivities and discursive resources they draw on within these constructions. Likewise, the book discussions I present are not literal representations of how participants read in the moment, but rather accounts of how they made sense of certain textual passages, features, and discourses in the context of our discussions. In analyzing these accounts, I try to attend to the ways study participants and I co-construct particular meanings about the romance genre.

### Readers' Book Discussions

The purpose of the one-on-one book discussions was to provide an opportunity for the participants and me to focus discussions of gender, sexuality, genre, and literacy around specific books. Accordingly, at the end of each initial interview, I asked study participants to select a romance novel for our upcoming book talk that was particularly meaningful for them: it could be a favorite or least favorite book; a book that particularly resonated with them for some reason; a book they had read recently or had read years ago. Some participants knew right away which

novel they wanted to talk about and others emailed me a few days after the interview. I asked participants to re-read the novel in preparation for our book talk and, as they re-read, to think about why they had selected it and why they wanted to talk about it with me. I also bought, read, and annotated each novel, paying special attention to passages that foregrounded gendered and sexual relations through dialogue, narration, or description. Here, I include two examples that typify the kinds of passages I marked:

He probably already knew what she slowly accepted while she held him. A woman cannot do that with a man and remain aloof. She cannot sleep naked like this afterward, holding him all night, and pretend that nothing binds them in the morning...It would take all of her strength to refuse him now, whatever it was that he wanted from her. (Madeline Hunter, *By Possession* 128)

And for the first time in her life Ronnie felt sexy and it was okay. For the first time in years she stopped worrying about burying her sexuality where it could interfere with her career plans. (Kimberly Raye, *In the Midnight Hour* 94).

I chose these passages, and others like them, because they reflect central concerns of the novels' characters and demonstrate the social construction of gender through narrative and discourse. For instance, the example from *By Possession* foregrounds the question of whether the relationship between sex and emotion is different for women than for men, while the example from *In the Midnight Hour* foregrounds the question of whether women can be both sexual and ambitious with their careers.

Because their plots always concentrate on the development of a romantic relationship between two or more characters, romance novels amplify gendered and sexual performances and often draw from existing and familiar discourses of masculinity and femininity. These performances and discourses are multiple, contradictory, and always contingent on readers' understandings of them. In other words, romance readers bring to their reading practices their own gendered experiences, and these experiences shape and are shaped by the gendered norms they encounter in the texts. At the same time, romance readers also bring their own investments in, understandings of, and preferences within the romance genre. Thus, the process of making meaning of the gendered performances within romance novels is both complex and dynamic. By asking study participants to talk through a romance novel with me, I hoped to better understand how they made sense of gendered and sexual constructions in their reading practices.

Although book discussion questions were driven specifically by my interest in the

relationship between gender and literacy, I was also interested in understanding how readers talked about and used particular romance novels, and how and if uses of romance novels changed across texts, contexts, and users. For instance, as an example of how individuals use genre fiction in varied and dynamic ways, consider Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*. This study examines incarcerated women's literacy practices, especially as they engage with narratives of victimization, urban fiction, and Christian self-help books. Through interviews and book discussions, Sweeney describes the shifting roles that realism plays in participants' reading practices: while some women read urban fiction to "escape" their everyday circumstances, others read these texts because they depict realistic situations and characters. Still for others, urban fiction novels serve as surrogates, allowing a participant "to experience things that she does not want to experience in her actual life" (262). The varied purposes these readers have for reading frame what the texts mean for them as well as what worlds are produced in the interaction between text and reader. By identifying and disidentifying with characters, embedding personal experience within the texts, and layering levels of complexity onto the narratives, the women in Sweeney's study work "on, with, and against the books in order to suit their own needs" (299). Sweeney's study suggests the value of incorporating both interviews and book discussions around particular novels, and it illustrates that even as texts offer certain subject positions for readers to assume, readers actively position texts to fulfill their own interests and purposes; furthermore, these interests, purposes, and subject positions change through repeated generic engagement.

I began each book discussion by asking participants if there was anything they had been thinking about from our previous interview that they wanted to share; some commented that our interview had made them think differently about why and how they read romances. Others wanted to add to, or nuance, something they had said during the interview. A few acknowledged that their re-reading experience of their book choice felt different because they knew they would be discussing it with me. Then, drawing from James Spradley's grand-tour and mini-tour approach, I asked readers to talk generally about each book, including what they liked and disliked about it, why they chose it and what meaning it held for them, and how they would describe the major characters, story line, and romantic relationship. I used participants' broader statements to identify issues of importance and develop follow-up questions that addressed these issues. I asked readers to specify passages from the text that helped illustrate why they chose this



text or passages that they especially wanted to discuss. I also developed book-specific questions, selected excerpts (like the ones above) for discussion, and asked participants to situate their experiences of reading the novel in relation to some of the larger themes that were discussed in our first interview.<sup>23</sup> The table below lists each participant and the book she chose:

	<b>Book Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Subgenre</b>
<b>Beth</b>	<i>Bet Me</i>	Jennifer Crusie	Contemporary
<b>Olivia</b>	<i>The Bride and the Beast</i>	Theresa Medeiros	(Scottish) Historical
<b>Shelly</b>	<i>If You Deceive</i>	Kresley Cole	(Scottish) Historical
<b>Candace</b>	<i>Ravished</i>	Amanda Quick	(Regency) Historical
<b>Maddie</b>	<i>By Possession</i>	Madeline Hunter	(Medieval) Historical
<b>Kim</b>	<i>Lady Be Good</i>	Susan Elizabeth Philips	Contemporary
<b>Amanda</b>	<i>For the Roses</i>	Julie Garwood	(American West) Historical
<b>Amy</b>	<i>Remembrance</i>	Jude Deveraux	(Paranormal) Historical
<b>Lisa</b>	<i>In the Midnight Hour</i>	Kimberly Raye	(Paranormal) Contemporary
<b>Camilla</b>	<i>Whitney My Love</i>	Judith McNaught	(Regency) Historical
<b>Rachel</b>	<i>The Time Traveler's Wife</i>	Audrey Niffenegger	(Sci-Fi) Contemporary

Table 2.2 List of Study Participants' Chosen Books for Book Discussion Interview

The book discussions offered distinct additions to my study. First, they helped provide sufficient time for participants to both discuss and demonstrate their romance literacy practices. By participating in an initial interview and one book discussion, individuals had several opportunities to talk about and through their favorite texts. Likewise, I had opportunities to modify discussion questions, ask clarifying questions, and draw from the previous session to focus on salient issues specific to individual participants. Second, by focusing on participant-selected novels, these book discussions specifically addressed the ways individuals made sense of textual conventions and discourses in their preferred reading. Many of my questions asked participants to talk through how they read and understood particular passages, if and how they related to characters, what they thought about the constructions of men and women in the texts, and what connections (if any) they saw between these constructions and their own experiences. Thus, the book discussion data helped elucidate participants' narratives of their practices of, and purposes for, romance reading, and it illustrated how the romance genre is enacted through

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix C.

interaction between text, reader, and context – in this case, the context of our book discussion.

### Author Interviews

Across interviews with both local and online participants, two patterns emerged that persuaded me to contact and interview several romance authors as well. First, study participants indicated that they were especially likely to follow their favorite authors, to automatically buy an author's next installment, to find and purchase their backlists, and to develop "To Be Read" piles for future readings. All of these purchasing and reading practices require being up to date on an author's current projects as well as internet-savvy about how and where to find older novels no longer available in stores or libraries. As such, in addition to using online forums and websites like Amazon.com, participants often check their favorite authors' websites for news on upcoming releases and re-releases. Second, study participants discussed their writing as well as their reading practices during our sessions. Several women expressed interest in writing their own romance novel, and many participate in one or more digital forums in which they not only read but also write comments, suggestions, and questions. For instance, Olivia, Maddie, and Kim are particularly active posters on the AAR site.

These findings led me to consider digital spaces as more relevant to the romance genre than I had initially imagined, and so I began examining the author websites of study participants' novel choices as well as several other best-selling romance authors who had particularly developed websites, including Beverly Jenkins, Gwyneth Bolton, Anne Stuart, and Eloisa James. By "developed" I mean that they extended beyond including the author's biography, book list, press releases, and contact information. I contacted most of these authors and ultimately interviewed Beverly Jenkins, Jennifer Crusie, Madeline Hunter, Amanda Quick, and Eloisa James. This study includes only interview data or website analyses from Crusie, Jenkins, and James because this material was most illuminating about how digital spaces are shaping the romance genre.

In speaking with romance authors, I was consistently encouraged by their generosity, openness, and enthusiasm toward this project. I spoke with each author via telephone and usually for an hour or more. Like the initial interviews with romance readers, these interviews were semi-structured, with questions relating to their histories of participation with the romance genre

and their digital presence.<sup>24</sup> As with the interviews with romance readers, I tried to be attentive to the themes that seemed important to these participants and developed follow-up questions accordingly. However, because these authors remain identified throughout the study, I did not fully mine these transcripts in the same ways that I analyzed the readers' interviews. While I coded each transcript in the same ways as reader transcripts, I made an ethical choice to include only material that addresses my research questions and that includes minimal risk of further implications for the authors.

That said, the romance author interviews and website analyses greatly enriched this study in a number of ways. First, by interviewing women who hold various positions within the genre, I increasingly realized that genre participants' roles are shifting, multiple, and infused with particular power dynamics; I am convinced I would not have seen these dynamics in the same ways if I had only interviewed women who predominantly read romances. By talking with authors and readers alike, and by examining how digital spaces foster shifting subjectivities between authors and readers, I contribute to genre studies by illuminating how individuals navigate various roles within and among genre sets. Second, examining author-sponsored digital sites reveals the range of ways these spaces are shaping the way we read and write fiction and even shaping, as Eloisa James suggests, "what a book is." Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook have made romance reading and writing experiences more elastic, personal, and participatory; examining romance authors' websites, as well as what these authors have to say about them, illustrates how 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy practices are changing along with digital technologies.

### Analysis

Interviews and book discussions were audiotaped and transcribed by a third-party service so that I could analyze data in written form. The transcripts are verbatim, but, because this study does not focus on grammatical structures, pronunciation, or dialect, they do not include markers for these features. However, they do include repetition, sentence fragments, and pauses (indicated by a dash), as well as moments of laughter or significant physical gestures (noted in parentheses). Including these markers helped me attend to moments when respondents were hesitant, joking, had difficulty articulating an idea, and so forth.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix D.

### *Thematic Analysis*

I began my analysis by thematically coding the reader transcripts using the qualitative research software program, Dedoose.<sup>25</sup> Because questions about their digital practices varied slightly between the local and online participants, I coded all of the local participants' transcripts first, followed by all of the online participants' transcripts. For each participant, I coded her interview first and then her book discussion before moving on to the next participant. With each of these transcripts, I used "open coding," a process in which the researcher attempts to "open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them" (Corbin and Strauss 160). In other words, rather than reading the transcripts with an eye toward answering my research questions in particular ways, I read transcripts multiple times and, for each chunk of talk, tried to answer the question, "What is this about?" During the open-coding phase, numerous codes emerged about why and how women participate in the romance genre, some of which include: sharing books, Happily Ever After, identifying, hiding books, re-reading, fat heroine, danger, virginity, point-of-view, To Be Read piles, sex, empathizing, heroes, heroines, writing, moods, and dialogue. I also tried to make initial connections between codes and revised codes as I went. For instance, participants frequently cited that good romances include "funny dialogue" and so this was an initial code; however, as I continued to code, I separated these codes into "humor" and "dialogue" because some participants also reported that their favorite authors included funny descriptions or scenes, and because dialogue seemed to serve several other functions besides adding humor to the story. For the most part, code labels arose from participants' own language, but some codes (such as "purpose") arose because they best described the topic of participants' talk.

In the next phase of analysis, I looked for connections among codes and began building concepts from these connections. For instance, I noted that several codes arose from sensory words participants used as they described why they read: Beth described wanting to experience "heat," or a "thrill," while Olivia described enjoying the sense of "danger." While these codes were not the same, they both indicated a connection between reading and feeling. In order to develop these codes further, I returned to the transcripts in which they were most salient and expanded them into the following concepts: "One purpose for romance reading is to experience physical arousal" and "One purpose for romance reading is to safely experience danger." I then

---

<sup>25</sup> [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)

considered what these concepts shared and developed the larger concept that “One purpose for romance reading is to physically or emotionally feel a certain way.” I then returned to the interviews and recoded using this concept, looking for confirming examples in each transcript and revising the concept as necessary.

After developing these codes into expanded concepts, I then organized them into three broad categories: generic beliefs/knowledges, generic purposes and preferences, and literate practices. Once organized this way, I examined the codes and concepts again, checking for overlap and revising or replacing them as necessary. This process helped me to determine if the code should become a larger category, be subsumed into another code, or be further delineated into two or more codes. In some instances, a concept seemed to fit equally within two categories. For instance, the fact that participants read romances in order to experience a particular physical or emotional response speaks to their genre-related purposes as well as their literate practices: they read to experience an embodied response, and their embodied reading is a specific kind of literate practice. Having developed these broad categories with the reader transcripts, I turned to the author transcripts and went through the coding process again. There was much less material here (three interviews total), so the coding process went much faster. The broad categories that emerged from this data were generic beliefs/knowledges and digital practices.

### *Discourse Analysis*

Discourse analysis was also a primary means of analyzing the data. While the coding process foregrounded the topical patterns across participants’ interviews and book discussions, discourse analysis illuminated the particular and shared discursive resources from which participants drew as they talked. Thus, in my analysis I consider participants’ accounts as evidence of their experiences, but I also consider them as narratives that draw from, resonate with, or diverge from culturally familiar discourses as well as discourses surrounding the romance genre. Especially useful in this process were the concepts of positioning and variability. In examining participants’ talk throughout the interviews and book discussions, I considered how particular discursive resources, tropes, or patterns helped individuals narrate their experiences; reflected or diverged from available and familiar cultural discourses for talking about reading, romance, and the romance genre; and offered both compatible and competing ways of thinking. The concept of positioning helped me to describe how study participants positioned themselves

in relation to particular discourses and in relation to me in the context of the interview. It also helped me consider the kinds of subject positions available to them as readers and participants of the genre and the ways in which these positions are produced through discourse. In “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves,” Davies and Harré define positioning as the “discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations” either through interactive positions (in which what one says positions another) or reflexive positioning (in which one positions oneself) (48). For the purposes of this project, I consider positioning both in relation to the actual and textual conversations in which romance readers participate.

As an example, early on in our initial interview, Candace stated that she believed romances had become very popular. When I asked her why she thought this was, she explained, “Well, it makes you perhaps dream. It’s definitely, like I said, escapism like most fiction.” After referencing the happy ending that romances guarantee, Candace then elaborated her explanation:

I certainly don’t believe it’s porn for women or all these very, very nasty opinions that you hear. And it is definitely written, I think, from a female point of view or to attract, I think, the female audience because, although it’s not, as we say in French, rosewater prose where it’s all sweet and fluffy, it’s still – even guys are written – unfortunately I don’t know any guys that act like a guy in a romance novel. So I don’t think they’re very realistic. But I think it makes you – I don’t like to say dream because I certainly do not imagine myself in the position of the heroine, but I think, still, it caters or it targets perhaps the romantic side that women are supposed to have more than men generally speaking.

In her explanation, Candace both carefully draws on and distances herself from several culturally familiar discursive tropes about romance reading: that it is escapist, that it is porn for women, and that it allows women to imagine themselves in the heroine’s position. At the age of 52, Candace has been reading romances for almost forty years, and her response indicates that she is very much aware of commonplace notions (and perhaps even academic debates) about the popularity of romance reading. Yet even as she cites these notions, she qualifies them or assumes a reluctant position in relation to them. She states that romance reading makes “you perhaps dream” and her use of “you” rather than “I” allows her to gesture towards other readers (or me) rather than her own reason for reading. The use of “perhaps” suggests that she is not certain that this is why romances are popular or at least not certain that she is comfortable with this explanation if it implies that it allows her to “imagine [herself] in the position of the heroine.” In an earlier piece of talk, Candace suggests that romances are very popular, and here she suggests

that this might be because they are “escapism.” Yet she quickly acknowledges that most fiction is also “escapism” and thus weakens the premise that romances are popular because they are escapist: they are “definitely escapism” but this is true of “most fiction.”

While she seems slightly hesitant to take up the refrain that romance reading is popular because it is escapist, Candace “certainly doesn’t believe” that romances are “porn for women” and in fact strongly condemns this trope as “very, very nasty opinions.” Likewise, while Candace thinks romances are “definitely written” in order to target a “female audience,” she also acknowledges that this supposed female audience is at least in part produced by being targeted as such: “but I think, still, it caters or it targets perhaps the romantic side that women are supposed to have more than men generally speaking.” In this last moment, Candace seems to reluctantly accept (“still”) that romances are popular because they cater to the “romantic side” of a female audience (certainly a genre-specific as well as a more general cultural trope) while suggesting that “perhaps” this romantic side is “supposed” rather than actual. By examining the competing ways of thinking about the appeal of romance novels that are at work in Candace’s talk, as well as Candace’s self-positionings in relation to these ideas, I consider the discursive resources Candace has for explaining her beliefs as well as the tropes and commonplace notions that shape them. A focus on participants’ talk thus reveals “the ideological thrust of discourse” by illuminating the “contradiction[s], dilemma[s] and complex multi-faceted positionings of self and other which can be mobilized in multiple rhetorical directions with varying consequences for social relations” (Edley and Wetherell 441). My analysis of these discursive resources and positionings situates the romance genre as a site of discursive production and situates Candace’s experiences as both shaping and shaped by this production.

Wetherell argues that individuals often hold contradictory or competing ways of thinking about a single topic and that such variability can be both tactical and unintentional. Variability refers to “the emergence of different and often contradictory or inconsistent versions of people, their characters, motives, states of mind and events in the world” – and suggests that researchers must ask themselves, “why this (different) formulation at this point in the strip of talk?” (Wetherell 395). For instance, while Candace here seems uncomfortable with ascribing “escapism” to romances or to her reason for reading them, when she narrates how she began reading romances at a young age she seems less hesitant, stating, “I was escaping for two hours, and that’s it.” It’s possible that this variability is due to my asking her here to *explain* the

popularity of romances versus my asking her earlier to *describe* how she began reading romances. In keeping with a poststructuralist conception of subjectivity as shaped by interdiscursivity and within social relations, the analytic concepts of positioning and variability helped me to consider if, how, and why participants' accounts shifted and changed in context-specific instances. As Wetherell argues, variability illustrates the highly "indexical nature of subject positions or the importance of exact circumstances of the invoking for understanding what is invoked" (396). Thus, attending to participants' various self-positionings in relation to culturally familiar or genre-specific discourses not only situates these accounts as narrative constructions, but also locates these constructions as part of the romance genre's discursive production.

### *Textual Analysis*

In addition to the interviews and book discussions, I have also analyzed portions of readers' novel selections, portions of three readers' AAR posts, and portions of the websites of Jennifer Crusie and Beverly Jenkins. Romance scholarship thus far has relied heavily on textual analysis to determine its appeal for readers. By contrast, this study attempts to foreground individuals' roles in enacting the romance genre by using textual analysis in the service of furthering an understanding of individuals' purposes and practices within the genre. At the same time, genres are sites of interaction among individuals, texts, and contexts. Thus, I felt compelled to examine multiple contexts in which participants enact genre, and multiple texts through which they enact genre. In order to accommodate this theory of genre and to respond to a gap in romance scholarship, I chose to code and analyze interview transcripts and book discussion transcripts before I decided which portions of the novels and AAR posts to include. With the case of author websites, however, I examined them closely before interviewing the authors and developed my interview questions based on my examination. Thus, Chapter Five foregrounds digital contexts over authors' talk about them.

The process of analysis varied across texts. In the case of participants' novel choices, I was most interested in including passages that elucidate participants' reading practices and methods of interpretation, as well as illustrating how romance novels foster these practices and methods. I therefore focused on particular passages that I or the participant brought up during our book talk, as well as passages that seem to reproduce or challenge raced, classed, and gendered



discourses. With the AAR posts, however, I was interested in showing how participants use the message board of an online community to bolster, challenge, and shape their romance reading experiences. Thus, I include posts that feature a range of ways these processes occur. Finally, in examining author-sponsored websites, I was interested in showing how Web 2.0 features shape the ways readers and authors interact, read, and write within the romance genre. To this end, I describe the particular web feature and then elaborate the kinds of power dynamics and literate practices it allows or constrains.

### Ethics and Validity

In my attempts to ensure that this was both an ethical and valid study, I tried to continuously reflect on my own positionality as a researcher and a romance reader, and I took a number of methodological steps to promote respectful and trusting relationships with the study participants:

- 1) *Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.* Study participants had to take proactive steps to respond to my advertisement about the study. They also understood that in order to participate in the study, they had to be prepared to discuss their romance literacy practices, as well as the reading of specific books. Even after this initial step, participants also signed a confidentiality agreement and a consent form before participating; this gave participants another opportunity to decide if they were prepared to participate. The consent form made clear that participants could withdraw from the study at any point. Throughout the interviews and book discussions, participants were also reminded that they could skip any question I asked. Finally, all identifying markers were removed from the study.
- 2) *Analysis of author interviews was selective.* My main purposes for interviewing romance authors Jennifer Crusie, Eloisa James, and Beverly Jenkins was to learn more about their participation with online technologies, to learn more about their perspectives of how digital and print genres are informing each other, and to learn more about their histories as participants with the romance genre. However, our conversations at times extended beyond these topics and at times included sensitive material. Given that the authors remain identified throughout the study, I was differently selective of what kinds of material to include than I was with participants whose identities remain anonymous.

- 3) *Research data was triangulated.* This study triangulated data from several sources: participant-selected texts, participant interviews, and book discussions. Facilitating two sessions with each participant allowed me to gather more evidence in response to evolving research questions and tailor questions that built on findings from previous sessions.
- 4) *I maintained “researcher” notes.* My identity as an avid romance reader meant that I came to this research project with particular generic knowledges, investments, and experiences that undoubtedly shaped my analyses of research data. Furthermore, my own position as a white, female researcher also affected the ways participants talked and what they chose to talk about. While I brought these resources and positionings to the study, as well as several hypotheses about what I would learn, I was committed to an exploratory study in which participants’ voices spoke through the data. Thus, I frequently kept “researcher” notes, in which I cited and tried to make sense of the ways in which I was shaping the meaning-making process.

### Reflection on Study Design

I conclude this chapter by reflecting on three design features that warrant further discussion and that will shape future iterations of this project: the small sample size, the use of ethnographic methods for the field of composition, and the focus on the intersections among gender and literacy.

In challenging a definition of “culture” as having the power to either free or oppress, Lora Romero argues: “the politics of culture reside in local formulations...rather than in some essential and ineluctable political tendency inhering within them” (qtd. in Howard 217). In interviewing a small number of women, I take seriously the call for local investigations of the relationships between cultural texts and their users. Given the perception of romance novels as highly formulaic and interchangeable, it seems especially important to limit my claims about the appeals and practices of romance reading to the particular individuals and texts included in this study. North American bookstores, libraries, and supermarkets are most likely to feature a small selection of mainstream authors and subgenres (most notably historical, contemporary, or paranormal settings featuring white, heterosexual, monogamous couples) and indeed the book choices of this study’s participants reflect this trend. Yet, in part due to changes in digital

publishing and self-publishing technologies, significant and increasing numbers of romance authors and publishers produce texts that feature a much wider range of characters, racial and sexual identities, and non-normative lifestyles.<sup>26</sup> I point out this fact not to deny or diminish the hegemonic potential of mainstream romances but rather to make visible the ways booksellers, libraries, and even this study reproduce this hegemony by foregrounding popular but normative texts.

In order to account for the ways in which digital publishing is rapidly changing popular romance fiction, and to better theorize how genres are locally situated, driven by their users, and characterized by competing ideologies, I would like to revise my dissertation for publication as a book by including one or more comparative research sites. While I intended this study to be comparative (by recruiting locally as well as digitally through the *All About Romance* website), I was primarily interested in comparing the literacy practices of women recruited locally with the practices of women recruited online. As my research progressed, however, I started examining how digital spaces might shape not just literacy but publishing practices and genre trends. My current comparative study features women who read romances dispersed primarily by mainstream publishers. For future publication, I would like to recruit romance readers and writers from an online web publisher like ReneeRomance Books, which specializes in “interracial romantic fiction for black women” or Siren Bookstrand, which publishes narratives featuring non-normative relationships. The qualitative data I have already collected will continue to be valuable as I work to extend and further nuance my analysis. However, the addition of one or more research sites would allow me to retain my commitment to local enactments of genre while simultaneously expanding the diversity of study participants, romance novels, and practices surrounding romance fiction. In doing so, this future book would offer audiences interested in literacy studies, book history, and women’s studies a much needed and much fuller ethnographic account of the current landscape of popular romance fiction.

The choice to employ ethnographic methods to study women’s engagements with popular romance fiction is without doubt a product of my position within an interdisciplinary doctoral program as well as my decision to pursue a Women’s Studies Certificate. This empirical study was designed using social science methods for qualitative research, but the findings from this study are very much informed by humanist theories of gender and genre and intended for an

---

<sup>26</sup> I discuss these trends in more depth in Chapter Five.

imagined audience of composition scholars and instructors. My coursework in qualitative research, feminist theory, and composition scholarship provided a rich starting point from which to conduct this research, and it allowed me to listen to women's accounts of their social, literate, and digital practices surrounding romance fiction. However, had I known how central romance-related digital practices and spaces would be to this project, I would have included a more robust theoretical and methodological framework with which to deliberately address these findings. At the start of this project, I envisioned the *AAR* website as a space for women to engage anonymously with other romance readers around a shared, stigmatized practice. I did not anticipate including two additional author-sponsored websites; examining the recent surge in digital publishing; investigating the effect of social networking in connecting romance readers, writers, publishers, and scholars; and considering the ways in which digital spaces that emerge from a shared affinity for romance fiction can foster and sustain shared desire for collective and civic engagement. To account for these findings, I have drawn primarily on digital literacy scholar Henry Jenkins. However, I am interested in learning more and hopefully contributing to digital research methodologies especially as they intersect with qualitative and ethnographic methods.

Finally, both the aforementioned design flaws and my attention to gendered literacies means that this study does not fully attend to the ways in which race intersects with gender, literacy, and romance fiction. I have done my best to account for moments in interview transcripts, in romantic texts, or on romance-sponsored websites when race seems especially salient; but I also recognize that I have not fully developed a lens for seeing whiteness and white privilege in the same ways that I have developed a lens for seeing the social and literate construction of gender. Catherine Prendergast argues that race functions as an "absent presence" in the field of composition (36). For this project specifically, I worry that in my attempts to foreground romance genre participation as a set of marginalized but meaningful practices, I have not fully accounted for the ways in which popular romance fiction also serves as a site of white privilege. I anticipate returning to this project with a sharper eye toward race and with a specific focus on the construction of privileged feminine whiteness.

### Chapter Three

#### “Jo Was My Hero and I Loved Her”: Affective, Embodied, and Identificatory Reading

##### Introduction

During our book talk, one study participant – Camilla – described to me the central importance of emotional investment to the act of romance reading: “What is the point of a book who doesn’t attack your emotions and fling you about as a reader? What would be the point of that? You need to be moved. You have to care deeply.” Camilla’s attribution of the personal pronoun “who” to the object of a book might be a slip of the tongue, but it also personifies and animates the book, endowing it with the ability to “attack,” “fling,” and “move” a reader. Moreover, it reflects her desire to be open to a text’s influence, to be stirred by, and responsive to, the fantasy of a romantic narrative. Throughout our interview and book discussion of her favorite romance novel, Camilla repeatedly attributed the pleasure of romance reading to emotional investment, response, and absorption.

In this chapter, I examine the embodied and affective<sup>27</sup> reading practices that in large part constitute these women’s participation with the romance genre. Study participants repeatedly described a desire to feel their way through popular romance novels, to empathize, to identify, to be emotionally invested in and carried away by texts. This finding is unsurprising given the narrative content of romance novels and their cultural status as pleasure reading: romances foreground romantic relationships, position readers to experience these relationships intimately, and are generally read for purposes of relaxation, leisure, and escape. What *is* notable, however, are the varied and shifting means by which readers experience romantic narratives as well as the divergent kinds of meaning-making made possible through these experiences. This finding is especially important not only because of long-standing debates about the hegemonic or

---

<sup>27</sup> Theories and definitions of affect differ widely across disciplinary fields. For instance, while some scholars use “emotion” and “affect” interchangeably, others make a clear distinction between the two terms. For the purposes of this study, I use affect to signal “the way in which feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body” (Gorton 334). That said, I understand that emotions require subjects whereas affects do not. In other words, “bodies” may be human or non-human.

subversive status of popular culture more broadly and romance novels specifically, but also because of cultural tendencies to dichotomize and gender critical and uncritical reading practices, reason and emotion, and resistant or duped readers. These binary ways of thinking limit the process of romance reading to a static and uniform activity and under-theorize its popularity and possibilities. Interviews and book discussions with study participants suggest instead that their romance reading practices are far more varied and expansive than can be easily categorized as hegemonic or subversive.

For the field of composition, the findings from this chapter contribute to critical literacy pedagogies by providing a detailed account of what is often misleadingly referred to as “uncritical” reading. As I argue in Chapter One, critical literacy pedagogies rely on a particular kind of distanced and skeptical stance towards texts for the purposes of producing a particular kind of academic and autonomous subjectivity. Given the status of critical literacy pedagogies across English and composition courses, anything that does not look critical risks being dismissed as problematic:

We are here, we like to tell our students, to save you from habits of uncritical reading that are naïve, immature, unexamined – or worse. Don’t read like children, like vacation readers on the beach, like escapists, like fundamentalists, like nationalists, like antiquarians, like consumers, like ideologues, like sexists, like tourists, like yourselves. (Warner 15)

The women in this study do not read through the kind of framework that most often gets called “critical.” They are not resistant but rather open to the influence of romance novels, and in fact, they desire to be “captivated,” “moved,” and “swept away” by narrative. These women do not approach romance novels with suspicion but rather love. And yet their reading practices make possible textual engagements through which women can experience heterosexual love stories in multiplicitous and surprising ways, and can experience both the symbolic and extra-symbolic elements of romance reading. Moreover, readers’ affective and shifting attachments – to romantic characters, narrative, language – make possible moments of self-recognition, same-sex desire, cross-gender identification, parody, language play, and even critique. As K. Hyoejin Yoon suggests, within critical pedagogies, “[a]ffect is seen as something of a blight, an exemplification of false consciousness, something that...only afflicts students and others who have not achieved the raised, political consciousness assumed of transformative intellectuals” (721-22). I argue that the kinds of affective, identificatory, embodied, and escapist reading

practices described in this chapter – practices often explicitly linked with popular culture and implicitly positioned as “uncritical” – are constitutive of an alternative and equally productive framework for approaching texts, can be rich resources for critical literacy pedagogies, and can offer ways of thinking about the kinds of knowledges produced through such engagements.

Relatedly, the findings from this chapter illuminate the role that reading practices play in producing a genre’s conventions and ideologies. In other words, reading practices constitute genres simultaneously and alongside writing practices. As I demonstrate, women’s varied and shifting responses to popular romance novels in part shape how generic conventions function, how they reproduce and transgress heteronormativity, and how they sustain competing and contradictory meanings. This finding suggests that critical literacy pedagogues might attend to the ways in which students’ deployment of particular reading practices do not simply reveal but rather co-construct a genre’s ideological characteristics; or, at least, that these practices may produce certain ideological characteristics of a text while foreclosing others.

To suggest that women read mass-market romance novels in affective and embodied ways is to invite a number of psychoanalytic, Marxist, and cultural critiques of the culture industry’s role in reproducing ideology and the consumer’s role within this reproduction. For example, because they foster similar reading practices and are thus subject to similar critiques, let me briefly outline the affinity between sentimental and romantic fiction. In doing so, I situate popular romance fiction within broader historical and literary contexts, and I map a critical landscape from which to consider romance reading practices.

In *Publishing the Family*, June Howard characterizes sentimental stories as “offering highly conventionalized invitations to emotional response and being deeply concerned with human connectedness” (251). Her conceptualization of sentimental fiction and subsequent analysis of its pervasiveness and stigma illuminate three qualities of sentimentality that are equally productive for thinking about romantic fiction. First, Howard suggests that the cultural disdain for sentimentality is due in part to the ways that “recognizably ‘packaged’ feelings remind us of the socially structured nature of emotion; evidence that emotion is not only conventionalized but circulates through the commodity system on a vast scale can be downright distasteful” (238-239). Life insurance commercials, Hallmark cards, and “tear-jerker” movies all remind us that seemingly personal and intimate emotions are in fact publicly constituted and marketed. In the case of romance novels, the never-ending reproducibility and supermarket

accessibility of romantic texts belie a discourse of love that demands spontaneity, rarity, and significance. As such, romance reading illustrates that love is both intimate and social; it situates love as individually personal and socially constructed and thus reveals the ideological work of love and the artificial divide between private and public spheres.

In her analysis of sentimentality, Howard illuminates a second insight that pertains to the romance genre: the artificial divide between emotion and reason. Both sentimentality and romance foster emotional investments in their readers, investments grounded in sympathetic and empathetic responses to another's circumstances. At the same time, cultural understandings of emotion as physical, feminine, reactive, and irrational situate emotional reading practices as uncritical and unproductive. Within such a framework, to experience a love story through laughter, tears, physical arousal, or identification is to relinquish one's abilities to reason, critique, evaluate, or question. Challenging the binary that sutures emotion to the body and locates reason and thought as somehow separate from the corporeal, Howard redefines emotion as "embodied thought" and suggests that physical bodies are "not obstacles to knowledge and agency but their very grounds" (241). By elevating emotion as "embodied thought that animates cognition with the recognition of the self's engagement," Howard's analysis of sentimentality makes space for considering how the emotional investments of romance reading might produce particular kinds of knowledges and agency for romance readers (245).

Finally, in characterizing sentimental reading as simultaneously an emotional and relational activity, Howard suggests that such a practice "at once locates us in our embodied and particular selves, and takes us out of them" (245). Embodied reading that is also shifting, sympathetic, and identificatory seemingly renders fluid the boundaries between self and other; however, the political possibilities of such reading remain contested. Sentimental fiction has been lamented as an imperial, appropriative project that fosters feeling over action, and it has simultaneously been defended as a subversive endeavor to reimagine familial and gendered relations. Romance reading has been examined by scholars through a similar lens: "Are women readers (and writers) oppressed by their commitment to a narrative with an essentially patriarchal, heterosexual relationship at its center, or are they somehow empowered by their ability to create, escape to, and transform the romance narrative into a vehicle for reimagining women's freedom within relationships?" (Goade 1). In other words, do women, as Radway argues, use romance novels to escape from rather than actually change patriarchal conditions



(84)? Or do romance novels allow women to re-envision social relations between men and women, and through this re-visioning “thicken[] the present, opening it up to the way stumbling delays any moment’s closure” (Berlant 272)? In referencing the scholarly debates on sentimental fiction, most notably between Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* and Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs*, Howard does not choose sides on whether sentimentality is “complicit with or subversive of a dominant ideology.” She suggests, instead, that to categorize an entire genre or even a single novel as wholly hegemonic or wholly subversive is reductive and oversimplifies the work done between reader and text.

In what follows, I draw from interviews and book discussions to examine the work done between reader and text as women describe their romance reading practices to me. I want to make clear that in examining women’s accounts of romance reading, I do not claim to capture exactly what happens during their reading activities but rather how they describe these activities in the contexts of our discussions. The claims from this chapter are drawn from interview questions about how and why women read romances; why they chose a particular romance novel for our book discussion; how they made sense of specific scenes, passages, characters, and other generic conventions of their selected texts; and their past and current experiences as romance readers. Participants’ responses to these questions not only revealed significant differences among women’s reading practices and re-reading experiences but also among individuals’ experiences with different authors and texts. I also do not claim to capture all of the myriad ways in which romance readers (or even the women in this study) read romance novels. Rather, I try to illuminate some of the similar, divergent, and shifting means by which these women engage with romance novels.

In addition to examining readers’ interview and book discussion transcripts, I incorporate textual analysis to support my exploration of romance reading. Specifically, I examine the ways in which particular genre conventions foster the kinds of reading practices and meaning making that readers describe. The women in this study report that their reading is driven by a desire to “care,” to “empathize,” to “identify,” to “escape,” to be “emotionally invested,” to “laugh,” to “cry,” to be “aroused,” to “be moved,” to “feel.” These various responses occur through complex identifications with, and as, romantic characters, and through diverse connections to para-textual, rhetorical, visual, and narrative features. Readers’ identifications and connections are not static or rigid, but rather shifting and multiple, and they are contingent on specific contexts, authors,

and texts. Most importantly, these women's romance reading experiences make possible a wide range of knowledges about gender, genre, language, and language play. With these ideas in mind, I turn to an analysis of women's romance reading with the goal of foregrounding the multiple attachments and knowledges readers develop through their reading experiences as well as the imaginative possibilities that romance genre conventions offer.

### Character-Driven Engagements with Romantic Texts

When I asked study participants what made a for a good love story, or if they looked for particular kinds of plots or characters when selecting romance novels, virtually all readers foregrounded a desire to feel invested in romantic narratives and characters. At the same time, the means by which this investment occurs, the feelings it produces, and the kinds of meaning-making and reading experiences it makes possible varied significantly across participants' responses. In this section, I examine these variations through the processes by which readers connect with or identify as fictional characters, and I demonstrate the multiple and shifting identifications made possible through romance reading. In doing so, I illustrate how these women's reading practices make space for experiencing heterosexual love stories in a variety of ways.

For instance, Beth's account at first seems to reflect a reader-as-heroine experience typically associated with romance reading. For 33-year old Beth, who has been reading romance novels for the last eighteen months, an enjoyable romance reading experience seems to depend not only on feeling invested in a character's story but also on physically experiencing the heroine's emotions as the story unfolds. However, in this formation, identifying as the romantic heroine does not suggest a loss of self-awareness in order to live vicariously through the heroine's tale. Rather, Beth's comments reveal a process of identification that produces a self-recognition and self-knowledge. During our conversations, Beth reported that what made a romance novel worth reading was the text's ability to "really bring you into the book, and make you feel it, make you feel empathy for a character." Notable in her response is the way in which a successful reading experience depends on the author's ability to provoke a response in Beth by "mak[ing]" her feel a particular way; Beth's comment portrays a reading practice that is not resistant to but open to a text's influence. Also notable, however, is Beth's insistence that

successful authors must “really bring you into the book,” a comment that simultaneously signals a reader who is both transported by, and essential to, the narrative.

This dual experience, in which a romance novel both acts on and is acted on by a reader, makes space for Beth to shift between being provoked to care about romantic characters and extracting self-knowledge from them. When I asked Beth why it was important to empathize with romantic characters, she responded, “If I care about them, if I empathize with someone, I cry when they are hurt, or sad, or mad or whatever, then that to me is a lot more reason to keep reading it because I care about this person. I want to make sure they get through it.” Beth’s comment suggests that her understanding of empathy here means feeling invested in and caring about the fate of fictional characters, and that this kind of empathy is a precondition for wanting to read their stories all the way through. In this way, a good romance novel elicits from Beth emotional responses to its characters, so that she feels inclined to find out what happens to them and be assured that they “get through” the narrative successfully.

At the same time, Beth’s empathy for romantic characters seems very much linked to particular kinds of romantic heroines and extends beyond the desire to care about them to the desire to physically experience their emotions. In turn, by sharing the heroine’s emotional responses, Beth reflects on her own past experiences and articulates a desire to change future ones. For instance, Beth expressed a strong connection with the heroine of the book she chose for our book talk, Jennifer Crusie’s contemporary romance *Bet Me*, and she expressed the importance of being able to connect with particular kinds of heroines in other romance novels. In describing what she looks for in romance heroines, she said:

Some are strong, some are – have insecurities, I think makes me feel a common connection with them. You know, you have your own insecurities so when they are insecure, I tend to feel a stronger connection to them. Some of them are really strong, bold or forthcoming, they’re less like me. You don’t necessarily feel a strong connection to them. I still like them as characters but I don’t feel the strongest connection to them.

Beth spoke repeatedly here – and throughout our initial interview – of the insecurities of heroines and of the ways these insecurities help bridge connections between her and them. In her descriptions, Beth used comparative and feeling words, often describing how she can “feel a strong connection” to insecure heroines as well as feel the emotions these heroines experience. Beth’s comments here suggest that her desire to feel connected to a heroine encompasses a

longing to recognize herself within the text, to have her experiences with insecurities acknowledged. For example, the novel *Bet Me* features Minerva, a woman who wrestles with body image throughout her relationship with the hero Calvin. As she talked about a scene in which Minerva's ex-boyfriend belittles her because of her weight, Beth articulated her reaction:

I thought that it almost makes me feel self-conscious too because I'm overweight so it does make me think, you know – oh my God – putting myself in that position. I would be mortified. I don't know if I could ever go back out with the guy...but that would be like a barb, I think, and I totally feel that. I think that's a really great way to humanize Min, too. I mean you really feel her discomfort with that.

Beth's affinity for romantic heroines with insecurities, and her suggestion that this scene is a "really great way to humanize Min" because it allows Beth to experience a similar discomfort, suggest that this is a pleasurable reading experience, that there is something enjoyable about this shared humiliation and identification. In this instance, Minerva's fictional experience provides a space for Beth to articulate how she might react in a similar circumstance. In "totally feel[ing]" Min's discomfort and humiliation through an experiential and embodied connection with the heroine ("because I'm overweight"), Beth explores her own "mortified" and "self-conscious" response and conjectures whether she would be able to date a man who critiqued her in the same way Minerva has been critiqued. Beth's identification with Minerva, as Rita Felski puts it, "points back to the reader's consciousness rather than away from it, engendering a phenomenology of self-scrutiny rather than self-loss. A fictional persona serves as a prism that refracts a revised or altered understanding of a reader's sense of who she is" (35). As a prism, Minerva provokes for Beth an opportunity to share an affiliation and to examine where this affiliation might diverge.

Even as Beth expressed a strong affinity with Minerva, this expression was also repeatedly marked by a desire *for* Minerva. By this I mean two things. First, I mean that even as Beth shared similar insecurities with Minerva, she also expressed a wish to be more like her, specifically to have her courage to stand up to other people. Consider Beth's description of Minerva, as she expresses a connection to the heroine and a longing to be *like* her, to have her strength:

I like the caustic wit, her lines and stuff. I loved them; I wish I had the sass to say them, to say half of the things she would say or whatever and react that way. I like her a lot...And I like her interactions. I really liked Min's caustic tongue. Her wit

was just sharp. I like how she stood up to her mom, and her mom would be really mean, but yet, I mean, I wish I could stand up to the people in my life like that.

In this segment, Beth both admires Min's "caustic tongue," "sass," and courage and wishes they were her own. She not only shares Min's insecurities but also wishes she might come to share her strengths. In this way, Beth's identificatory practices foster both acknowledgement and knowledge: Minerva's embodied experiences affirm Beth's own experiences and offer Beth new things she might "say" and new ways she might "react."

However, in pointing to Beth's desire *for* Minerva, I also mean to suggest that a desire for the heroine's strengths carries with it a potentially homoerotic desire for the heroine. Stephanie Burley argues that the tension between identification with, and longing for, romantic heroines is fostered by romantic textual conventions that position readers to live through the heroine while simultaneously gazing at her. In the article, "What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Book Like This?" Burley explores the homoerotic potential of the romance genre by taking up Eve Sedgwick's observations of character doubling and what Sedgwick refers to as the "slipperiness of identity." Echoing Sedgwick, Burley suggests, "to identify with one's double, especially out of longing for the double's power, is ultimately to desire the double itself" ("What's" 141). Beth's desire to be like Minerva and her identification with Minerva's experiences and emotions point to the "slipperiness of identity" to which Sedgwick refers and illustrate a longing *with* and a longing *for* the heroine that is in constant play.

Without doubt, romance novels foster a permeable boundary between the heroine and the reader so that the reader might indeed enter a fantasy world in which she is given the attentions and affections of the hero. Burley argues, however, that this effect "allows both a fantasy appropriation of the heroine's powerful attractiveness and a fantasy enjoyment of another woman's body as attractive. Readers can revel in her seduction *and* be seduced by her" ("What's" 142). Romance novels narrate in intimate detail the attraction and longing between heroes and heroines, revealing the process by which characters come to fall in love with one another; however, as readers are positioned to identify as a desirable character, they in turn may experience that character as desirable. Burley, for instance, draws attention to the use of mirrors within romantic narratives that allow the reader to gaze at the heroine; this mirror technique is used in *Bet Me* when the hero Calvin accompanies Minerva on a shopping trip. Minerva has grown more confident in her appearance thanks, in part, to Calvin's acceptance of, and attraction

to, her. The following passage illustrates how readers are encouraged to both identify with and desire the heroine:

She tossed back the rest of her glass of wine and then, with a sigh, pulled the dress over her head and looked in the mirror. There were many things right with the dress. The surplice neck made her look thinner and the way it draped over her breasts was downright sexy as long as she didn't slump. And the drape made her look voluptuous instead of buslike. (Crusie 308)

The homoerotic potential within this passage is manifested by the possibility of continuously shifting positionalities by which readers might simultaneously identify with, as well as voyeuristically gaze at, the heroine as she gazes at herself. Given Beth's own connection to Minerva, their shared embodied experiences regarding weight and body image, and Beth's desire to be more like Minerva, the visual display of a "sexy," "thinner," and "voluptuous" heroine incites an attraction that is both self-directed and outward: a prompting to re-vision oneself and an invitation to desire another. In pointing to the slippery and shifting means by which a reader might attach to Minerva, my aim here is not to suggest that these positionalities are reflective of Beth's sexual or gendered identities; rather, my aim is to illustrate the complexity and fluidity with which a reader might experience a romantic narrative like *Bet Me*, and the potential reflective, transformative, and even homoerotic experiences that might accompany her identificatory reading practice.

Beth's romance reading experiences – and the kinds of meaning-making made possible through these experiences – seem to differ in important ways from those of Maddie. Like Beth, Maddie described good stories as those with "characters you can have some kind of empathy with" and stated that the books she commonly re-reads are the "ones that draw you in." Like Beth's desire to be brought into a book, Maddie's desire to be drawn in can be understood in two ways: being pulled into a narrative and being written into it. However, while her desire to empathize seems similar to Beth's, Maddie maintained a distinctive distance between herself and the characters she discussed as we talked through Madeline Hunter's *By Possession*. Where Beth's talk was marked by frequent references to identifying with or as the romantic heroine, Maddie offered few comparisons between Hunter's main characters and herself, and she repeatedly described her reading experience as an observer "watching" two "friends" through her "own looking glass" as they grapple with an evolving relationship. Maddie's reading experience of looking in on a story was further illustrated through her descriptions of herself as a "visual

person” who usually has a “shadowy vision” of the main characters in her “mind’s eye.” In describing her reading practices, Maddie referred to looking in on main characters, depicting them as friends, and caring about them. Taken together, her accounts of reading and re-reading romance novels suggest that Maddie’s romance reading practices are mediated less by character identification than by the opportunity to experience the romance narrative as a spectator.

For Maddie, the enjoyment that accompanies this spectator role seems to stem in part from the opportunities to come to understand characters that are different from her and to support, oppose, or make sense of their choices. *By Possession*, which Maddie has read “six or seven times,” is one of her favorite historical romances because it “has a romance and sensuality about it that is true and not contrived.” According to Maddie, this believable romance was achieved through a range of elements, including humor, depth of narrative, and complex characters. As she talked about why the novel’s main characters, Moira and Addis, were attracted to each other, her comments were marked by references to an understanding of – rather than a familiarity with – their positions, dispositions, and actions. This distinction is likely fostered in part by the medieval time period and circumstances in which the novel takes place. For instance, in reacting to Moira’s choices to reject a relationship with Addis, Maddie stated, “I wanted to shake her but I understood her position. Growing up with her mother, who was the mistress to the lord...colored her perception for any kind of relations between serf-born and aristocracy.” Likewise, in describing Addis’s rejection of the child who is supposedly his son, Maddie explained, “And I found myself, with each one of those flashbacks, kind of understanding him more.” In both of these moments, Maddie’s enjoyment of the “true” romance between these characters seems due in part to the process by which she comes to understand why they feel and behave toward each other and other characters in the ways that they do, even as their lives and circumstances are significantly different from her own.

Yet even as Maddie situated herself as a spectator of Addis and Moira’s romance, her empathy for, and investment in, these characters also position her as a *specter*, or what Lynne Pearce refers to as a “ghostly reader” who embarks on a “repeated journey through [the characters’] landscape without *ever* being able to make herself seen or heard” (25). In other words, even as the characters’ lives unfold in the same way over and over again, we as readers are free to move about their story from all angles, “desperately looking for ways in which we may make them respond to us and include us in their script” (Pearce 25). During our book

discussion, I was reminded of this quandary as Maddie spoke directly to the character Moira, responding to a particular scene in which Moira considers a marriage offer from another suitor: “No, don’t settle! You’ve shown yourself strong!” Maddie’s plea is both heartfelt and unheard, and it illustrates the ways readers come to care about imaginary characters in real and genuine ways. The reader-as-ghost metaphor also resonated as Maddie explained the enjoyment of re-reading favorite novels like *By Possession*:

It’s kind of like visiting old friends, you know, that you haven’t seen in awhile. And you know your old friend and you know what they like and you know what the friendship entails but you still want to go visit them. And you tell stories of your childhood or whatever, that you both, you know, know the ending to but you like to tell the story anyway.

Maddie’s description of “visiting old friends” certainly points to the ways in which the predictable forms of popular culture can provide pleasure, childlike comfort, and order to an otherwise chaotic world, or what Umberto Eco refers to as the “hunger for redundancy.” However, her likening of romantic characters to “old friends” also speaks to the ways that readers interpret and make sense of characters’ motivations and actions, and experience moments of “know[ing]” fictional characters – not as redundancies – but as knowing subjects. These moments may, as Pearce suggests, foster “insatiable despair [and] unsupportable loss” because they ultimately construct a “quintessentially unresolvable self-other relation” between reader and textual character (25). Nevertheless, such moments also seem to engender, at least for Maddie, empathy, comfort, and new understandings of circumstances and choices different from her own.

In pointing to the differences between Beth’s and Maddie’s reading practices, I do not mean to suggest that they are entirely distinct or static. In fact, when Maddie compared re-reading favorite romance novels to “visiting old friends,” I followed up by asking: “And do you think that that has always been true, or has that shifted over the years or even from book to book or author to author? Or do you feel like that’s pretty consistent?” Maddie responded in the following way:

I’m trying to think back, like some of the books that I re-read and re-read and re-read when I was little, probably like going back to say like, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, and of course Jo was my hero and I loved her. But, and I probably read *Little Women*, 20, 30 times. But I don’t ever remember recalling wanting to be her, you know, or thinking myself her.



Here, even as she distances herself from the idea of “wanting to be” Jo or “thinking [her]self” as Jo, Maddie’s comment that “Jo was my hero and I loved her” echoes an admiration for Jo in a way that is similar to Beth’s admiration for Minerva. In both instances, the narrative heroines seem to foster in their readers emotional investment, empathy, and desire. Nevertheless, in pointing to the subtle but different means by which readers attach to romantic characters, I want to illustrate the kinds of knowledge, pleasure, and sustenance readers might extract from these attachments.

There are a number of textual conventions that help make these varied attachments possible. While the romance novels in this study all feature heterosexual relationships, they also offer a range of contemporary, historical, and paranormal characters, and they incorporate various narrative techniques – like mirroring – by which readers might engage, empathize, identify with, and gaze upon these characters. One particularly notable technique that has been used since the early 1980s is the incorporation of the hero’s perspective through third-person narration. Harlequins and single title romances prior to this time often focused solely on the heroine’s perspective so that readers gained insight into her thoughts but not the thoughts or motivations of the hero. Since then, mainstream romance novels have increasingly provided the hero’s perspective, and romance novels are often described by readers, authors, and editors as heroine-centric or hero-centric depending on whose perspective is primarily accessible. Not surprisingly then, several study participants’ engagements with romance novels include connections to, and identifications with, romantic heroes.

For Shelly, some romance novels are enjoyable because they offer opportunities to engage with the text through the hero’s perspective as he develops connections with other male characters. Her account suggests that the centrality of the romantic love story may be displaced by a reader’s attachment to secondary characters and relationships. A romance reader for over twenty years, Shelly compared J.R. Ward’s *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series to “crack” and admitted, “I’m embarrassed to read it because it’s just so bad, but it’s also just horribly good.” Ward’s paranormal romance series features heterosexual couples while also featuring intense, relational bonds among the brotherhood of vampire heroes (Wrath, Rhage, Zsadist, Phury, Vishous, Tohrment) and their human friend, Butch. As is conventional with paranormal romances, the series features hyper-masculinized heroes, supernatural bonding and mating rituals, and inter-species warfare. Part of what makes Ward’s series so popular, however, is not

only the hero-centric narratives but also the frequent and charged scenes among the series' male characters. Consider this passage from *Lover Eternal*, book two in the series, in which Rhage (aka "Hollywood") is critically injured and cared for by his friends, Vishous and Butch:

"How we doing, Rhage? Too hot?" Butch's voice. Up close.

The cop was in the shower with him. And he smelled Turkish tobacco. V must be in the bathroom, too.

"Hollywood? This too hot for you?"

"No." He reached around for the soap, fumbling. "Can't see."

"Just as well. No reason for you to know what we look like naked together. Frankly, I'm traumatized enough for the both of us."

Rhage smiled a little as a washcloth scrubbed over his face, neck, chest.

God, that felt fantastic. He craned his head back, letting the soap and water wash away the remnants of the beast's doing.

Too soon the shower was off. A towel was wrapped around his hips while another one dried him off.

"There, anything else we can do for you before you get horizontal?" Butch asked. (46-47, *Kindle edition*)

This scene reads as both tender and erotic. As an unclothed and "up close" Butch carefully cleans Rhage, he repeatedly checks to see if "this" (the water? Butch and Rhage showering together?) is "too hot" for him. Temporarily blind and too hurt to care for himself, Rhage feels "fantastic" pleasure as he is washed, toweled off, and helped into bed. Yet even as the erotic possibilities are made clear, they are kept in check, driven back into the homosocial by Rhage's inability to see the scene before him, by Butch's teasing that he is "traumatized enough for the both of us," and by the scene's lack of agents. The use of the passive voice makes it unclear who scrubs Rhage with a washcloth, wraps a towel around him, and dries him off; rhetorically, this move distances the men who pleasure from the man who is pleased. As such, romance readers are invited to experience the intimacy of this scene in a number of ways and to consider these male relationships within an overarching heterosexual narrative.

When I asked Shelly why she likes J.R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* novels so much, she replied:

I think it's the relationships between the male characters. Their relationships, like the bromance I guess you would call it. I like that a lot... Yeah, yeah, and I think I read that more than like the heroines. I've never been as impressed with any of her heroines as they're kind of – I don't know what – kind of shallow... I think I like to know the emotional changes or drama that the hero is going through more than the heroine just because for some reason it's more satisfying to me.

For Shelly, the appeal of the *Brotherhood* series centers on the relationships among heroes and on her ability to feel the “emotional changes or drama” that the heroes experience “more than the heroine.” I think it is significant that Shelly refers to the “relationships” and “bromance” among male characters – rather than referring to them as friendships, for instance – because it speaks to the ways Ward’s novels play with and explore homosociality. Many romance novels offer the hero’s perspective as he engages in a courtship with the heroine; Shelly’s comment suggests that what is particularly “satisfying” about Ward’s series are the ways in which this perspective provides “emotional” access to the hero’s relationships with other men as well. Her comment also points to the variability of romance reading practices and their dependence on particular texts: Shelly’s enjoyment of “bromance[s]” and engagement with male characters is specific to the kinds of relationships offered in the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series. That the participants in this study attach to romantic characters in a variety of ways is clear; Shelly’s experiences with the male relationships of the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series suggest that some romance novels offer readers opportunities to gain pleasure from a variety of erotic and social relationships in addition to the ones experienced between hero and heroine.

While Shelly’s account illustrates how specific texts can foster particular kinds of attachments to secondary characters, conversations with Camilla revealed the fluidity with which readers might identify with multiple characters throughout a single novel. Camilla’s identifications with and as the main characters of Judith McNaught’s historical romance *Whitney, My Love* encompass instances of self-reflection and self-erasure, whereby the text prompts her to compare herself to characters and to momentarily become them. This shifting process makes space for Camilla to experience the love story from multiple subject positions and to move fluidly between hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized characters. For Camilla, this process became evident as she repeatedly took up the perspectives of the hero Clayton and heroine Whitney, two strong-willed characters who continually antagonize one another throughout the lengthy narrative until they come to respect and love each other.

Like the participants I have mentioned thus far, Camilla seemed to express a desire for the heroine of Judith McNaught’s historical romance *Whitney, My Love*: “I fall in love with Whitney every time I read this book...we are primed to fall in love with her and cheer her on at every turn. Her spirit is indomitable. And I think partly why I love it so much is because I recognize so much of myself [in] her.” Camilla’s words here, like the participants before her,

navigate the longing and identification I have already explored: Camilla recognizes herself in Whitney and desires Whitney as part of her reading experience. Throughout our book talk, Camilla shifted seamlessly between “She” and “I” as she described Whitney’s motivations, decisions, and feelings during particular scenes; like Beth, these dual positions make space for Camilla to be Whitney and to be herself. For instance, as she discussed Whitney’s relationship to Clayton, she commented, “And we the reader are seeing clearly that she’s falling in love with him. She hasn’t quite understood why do I feel so bad that I’ve hurt him? Why do I feel so bad that I’m going to miss him? And I remember a moment exactly like that one happening to myself when I was 20 years old.” The ways in which Camilla speaks as Whitney, and draws connections between Whitney’s experiences and her own, intimate a reading experience that is directed both inward and outward and allows Camilla to reflect on her own relationships as she participates in Whitney’s story.

However, Camilla’s discussion of *Whitney, My Love* suggests that this process of identification with and as a character was not restricted to the heroine Whitney but rather encompassed the hero’s experiences as well. Her identification as Clayton suggests that even as romances feature hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized characters, the boundaries between these characters are permeable. As she described her enjoyment of the novel and her interpretations of particular scenes, Camilla frequently spoke to me as Clayton, taking on his perspective and imitating his tone. For instance, when I asked Camilla what she thought of Clayton, she responded:

Oh, *Clayton*. Well he has a lot of traditional, stereotypical masculinity about him, particularly because of his lineage. Because he is a duke, he is, all the way through the book, till right at the very end, proprietorial towards Whitney...And she will fall and she will be beddable. And when I tell her to get herself ready for marriage, meet me next week at the alter, she will do it. (*laughs*)... You know, she will writhe underneath me in total ecstasy. I will bring her to this point.

Camilla’s response was both animated and playful as she simultaneously laughed at Clayton’s behavior and defended it because of his upbringing. Her imitation of Clayton suggests a pleasure derived in part from the opportunity to take on and parody gendered behaviors and attitudes that are perhaps unavailable in her daily life. Throughout our talk, Camilla stated that the novel’s best scenes were the ones in which the hero and heroine were “pit[ted] against each other and trying to outmaneuver the other,” and she frequently referred to the moments in which Clayton

attempted to bring Whitney “to heel.” Speaking as Clayton, Camilla recalled the hero’s desires to seduce Whitney: “I will teach you how to kiss, teach you how to respond to me. I will awaken the sensuality of your body.” And, as with her descriptions of Whitney, Camilla shifted from “I” to “he” seemingly to refer both to herself and to Clayton: “And that is the scene where – that’s where he realizes that she’s not just someone suitable to be my duchess. She’s someone I’m falling in love with. And then at that point you start to – yes, these two have to make it. We have to make it somehow.” In taking up the subject positions of both Whitney and Clayton, Camilla’s talk points to the ways in which a reader might experience a heterosexual love story in a variety of ways, from multiple gendered positions, as seducer and seduced, as both familiar and strange.

As her comments make clear, Camilla’s enjoyment of this novel derives in part from the opportunity to temporarily experience the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of these characters, to become them in particular and intimate ways. However, Camilla’s identification is not limited to the heroine, nor is her pleasure from reading the novel limited to the reproduction of heterosexual relations. Rather, her shifting character attachments make possible moments of self-recognition, same-sex desire, and cross-gender identification. In effect, Camilla experiences this novel as heroine, hero, and herself: “Our experience as readers is exactly the same as theirs. That’s what makes me love this book is because it makes me so frustrated. And against my will, I want these two frustrating characters to get together. So their experience mirrors my own.” Camilla’s desire to be “fl[u]ng about as a reader,” to root for Clayton and Whitney “against [her] will,” and to enter the romantic narrative through their perspectives all speak to a romance reading event that is, as Camilla describes it, a “deep experience” that “send[s] me on a tumultuous, tempestuous ride across a stormy sea.” Her description of a stormy sea is apt, invoking a sense of the passion and fluidity with which Camilla experiences *Whitney, My Love* as heroine, hero, and herself. In turn, Camilla’s process of character identification allows her to derive pleasure from a variety of spaces that are not immediately visible from a focus on the narrative storyline.

That Camilla is able to take on the perspective of Clayton as well as Whitney is not surprising given the overwhelming tendency within the romance genre for third-person narration that provides both the heroine’s and hero’s point of view. Perspectives shift from paragraph to paragraph, and even sentence to sentence, so that readers continuously engage in a process of identification and disidentification with multiple characters. As Burley argues, these constant and

shifting points of view make possible a range of homoerotic and cross-gender identifications.

Consider the subject positions readers might take up in the following passage from *Whitney, My Love* in which Clayton thinks about Whitney over a game of chess:

Each time she reached across the board, she unwittingly afforded Clayton glimpses of the thrusting fullness of her breasts above the scalloped bodice of her dress, until it required every ounce of his self-control to concentrate on the game. Long ago, she'd abandoned her slippers and now sat curled up in her chair with her legs tucked beneath her. With her luxuriant hair tumbling over her shoulders and her green eyes glowing with devilment, she presented such a captivating picture that Clayton was torn between the urge to shove the chess table aside, draw her into his lap, and let his hands revel in the richness of his prize – and the equally delightful desire simply to lean back in his chair and feast his eyes on her. (McNaught 185)

In this scene, a reader might identify with Whitney; as such she may find pleasure and power in Clayton's attention, in experiencing and even reveling in his appraisal of her. The reader might also identify with Clayton; his descriptive perusal of Whitney encourages the reader to desire her as well, to participate in the male gaze. Or perhaps the reader identifies with neither character, despite reading Clayton's thoughts. In this case, she is free to look not only at the "captivating picture" that Whitney presents, but also at the equally captivating picture of Clayton watching Whitney over the chess game. Here, the reader watches from a distance the sexually-charged moment between the two characters. Readers might even shift among subject positions, experiencing this scene from a variety of perspectives and identifications. In her 1982 work *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Tania Modleski suggests that the romance heroine – and by extension the female reader – cannot be consciously aware of her beauty and desirability without risking the appearance that she is purposely enticing the hero. However, in a 1997 article, "My Life as a Romance Reader," Modleski argues that the increased frequency of the hero's perspective means that contemporary romance novels "easily lend themselves to cross-gender readings" and multiple identifications (qtd. in Burley "What's" 144). In presenting intimate scenes that amplify characters' embodied and affective responses to one another, romance novels invite readers to participate in this intimacy; but that participation can be varied and unpredictable, directed inward and outward.

However, even as readers' engagements with romantic characters take on surprising forms, they at times reproduce gendered, classed, and raced discourses. As one example, readers' dismissal of romance characters' physical descriptions both subvert the limited definitions of

beauty that romance novels offer and reinforce a form of racial, classed, and able-bodied privilege. Romantic heroes are often hyper-masculinized and described with stock vocabulary: tall, dark, patrician features, cruel mouth, enigmatic/sharp/unreadable eyes with hooded lids, slender/powerful hands, tanned/bronze skin, and a powerful build. While descriptions of romantic heroines range from beautiful to ordinary, they almost always depict at least one stereotypically feminized feature that attracts the hero to her – whether it is her hips, hair, mouth, eyes, breasts, etc. Despite and/or because of the prevalence of stereotypical depictions of beauty in romance novels, study participants voiced dismissive and critical complaints of such depictions and described their methods for undercutting them. Amy ridiculed a book she had recently read which described the hero's shoulders as being "wide as a yardstick" and stated that she had "perfected the art of skim reading" precisely as a means of skipping over character descriptions. Olivia criticized authors whose heroes are each "taller than the last one and better hung than the last one" and reported that she looks for romance authors like Mary Balogh and Suzanne Brockmann who have written about short and balding heroes, respectively. These criticisms and strategies that Amy, Olivia, and others articulate suggest that the prevalence of normative standards of beauty within romance novels is not necessarily indicative of their acceptance or their influence on readers.

In explaining their dismissal of, as Camilla put it, "cookie-cutter" descriptions of heroes and heroines, several study participants suggested that "inner" qualities of characters were more important than "outer" descriptions. These comments seemed in part motivated by a desire to feel that the attraction between the hero and heroine was more than "just physical," and in part by a belief that outer appearance is not or should not be primarily important in matters of love. For Maddie, one benefit of reading is that it "give[s] you the glimpse inside the person, and so it almost makes the outer shell superficial." In this sense, one might read participants' downplaying of physical characteristics as an attempt to subvert cultural norms of beauty or appropriate them to suit their own needs. Readers exert agency over this generic convention by explicitly dismissing and skimming over character descriptions.

At the same time, the dismissal of characters' physicality ignores the limited representations of people that are available in romances, homogenizes embodied experiences, and is itself a practice made possible in part by expectations that one will find characters in the texts that are like oneself. Maddie suggested that while romance authors have an obligation to

describe their characters, “you’re not really writing about what they look like, you’re writing about what kind of people they are and what kind of things they go through.” The articulation that there is little relationship between individuals’ physical appearances and the kinds of things they go through is a marker of white, able-bodied, and classed privilege and suggests that both textual features and readers’ responses to them might reproduce this privilege in unintentional ways.

A second pattern notable within interviews and book discussions involves the narrow classed and raced realities depicted in this study’s romance novels as well as the novels’ and readers’ tendencies to foreground individual experiences and familial or intimate relationships over structural systems as the cause of, or solution to, narrative obstacles. Given the focus on intimate, personal relationships between romantic characters, it is not surprising that readers often interpreted specific scenes or passages through a consideration of individual circumstances and experiences. For example, Kim’s novel choice, *Lady Be Good* by Susan Elizabeth Philips, features hero Kenny Traveler, a wealthy and famous golf champion from Wynette, Texas. The text makes repeated and detailed references to Kenny’s privileged circumstances, describing his Ping golf clubs, Cadillac, the “affluent residential area” in which he lives, and his “elegantly furnished” home filled with “exquisite wine goblets,” “china banded in navy and gold,” and “heavy sterling” (18, 45, 41-42). As the narrative unfolds, we learn that Kenny grew up wealthy and was smothered by his mother but ignored by his father; as a result, he was a spoiled bully and the town of Wynette has not fully forgiven him. Part of Kim’s enjoyment of the narrative stems from the myriad vantage points that the text offers from which to understand Kenny’s character: we see Kenny through the eyes of his father, step-mother, sister, friends, and the heroine Emma Wells-Finch. During our book talk, Kim stated that part of Kenny’s appeal is that “despite him being spoiled as a child, he grew up to make something of himself despite the fact that he could have just lived off the fortune from his parents.” The novel’s focus on the familial and intimate relationships between characters, and Kenny’s evolution into someone worthy of true love, in part prompts a reading of Kenny’s wealth as a hindrance to his future success rather than a precondition for it. Kim’s attribution of Kenny’s behaviors to his relationship with his parents is supported not only by the text’s focus on this relationship but also on its homogenized cast of supporting characters (every other major Wynette resident is equally wealthy). In this



way, class privilege functions as a backdrop to the story and is tangential to Kim's interpretation of Kenny rather than being understood as a result of the structural reproduction of inequalities.

Although at moments participants' engagements with romantic texts problematically reproduced gendered, raced, and classed hegemonies, they also afforded multiple opportunities for critique and demonstrated the ways in which readers' identifications with characters can shift, agitate them, and even disappoint them. These findings served as a reminder to me that we do not only read or take pleasure from the texts we endorse or with which we completely agree. For instance, one participant, Amy, became critical of the hero's attitude towards the heroine upon her re-read of *Remembrance*: "Callie gave her whole heart and soul, and all of her being, and dedicated her entire existence to this boy... but his whole life didn't revolve around [the relationship]. He was still outside becoming a knight and doing all these other things, you know?" For Amy, the romantic gestures between the main characters of *Remembrance* came to feel "unbalanced" and problematic, fostering new and critical interpretations of the novel's central love story: "She's gonna do all these terrible things for him, but he's a man, and he has honor and pride, and he wouldn't stoop – it's almost like he wouldn't stoop that low. And that's terrible." Amy's initial attachments to and "awe" of the characters and their love story have shifted considerably and now foster critical reflection of the gendered dynamics between hero and heroine. It is entirely possible that Amy's change in feeling for *Remembrance* was shaped by the context of our book talk: perhaps knowing that she was going to talk to a stranger-researcher about the book meant that she became more critical of it. Amy herself attributed these changes to the age at which she first encountered *Remembrance*, her subsequent growing up to be a "strong headed" woman, and her experiences with romantic relationships both in her personal life and through successive romance novels. While it is impossible to determine exactly what factor(s) led to Amy's radically different experiences of *Remembrance*, I am reminded here of Stuart Hall's argument that "the meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever" (qtd. in Davis 35).

Even as the participants in this study read to care about and identify with romantic characters, these identifications prompt moments of critique and conflict. Another participant, Lisa, voiced frustration at Kimberly Raye's *In the Midnight Hour*, which features a heroine intent on putting her graduate studies and career first only to happily learn on graduation day that she is pregnant. The book concludes with a short epilogue in which the heroine thinks to herself,

“Who said a woman couldn’t have it all?” (289). Despite feeling a strong identification with Veronica’s experiences as a graduate student, Lisa expressed her disappointment in the text for creating a future for Veronica that, in Lisa’s mind, reinforces the idea that “yes, only women can have children, but that’s not the only thing women have to offer to the world, and I think it’s sort of crappy to just say, ‘Oh, but you can do this one good thing. Why don’t you just always do that?’” Like Lisa, Maddie expressed concern over the ways that romances narrowly define appropriate behavior for women who wish to change their physical appearance (heroines can temporarily color their hair but can’t have a “boob job,” for instance). She suggested instead that “if a woman, you know, has something done, that doesn’t necessarily make her a shallow, evil person.” Lisa’s questioning of the novel’s claim that women can “have it all” and Maddie’s assessment of the standards placed on romantic heroines each illustrate the ways in which romance reading acts in a Gramscian sense as a site of struggle in which hegemonic discourses are both reproduced and resisted.

In examining study participants’ accounts of their embodied and affective engagements with romantic characters, I suggest that character identification is dynamic and contingent and makes space for experiencing romantic love stories in a variety of ways. The romance novels that these women read foreground intimate relationships among men and women and foster identifications with and as multiple gendered characters. As a result, women’s romance reading practices – even as (and perhaps *because*) they are driven by pleasure, emotion, identification, and escape – encompass moments of reflection, transformation, critique, and interpretation. Moreover, such reading experiences and character identifications are varied and messy, and rarely as simple as the act of placing oneself firmly within a character’s perspective for the duration of the fictional narrative. This finding suggests that to be captivated by characters, to read in order to be moved, flung about, or affected by them, involves a rich and complex navigation of desires that include and extend beyond the romantic narrative itself.

This finding is also significant, however, because it points to the role of reading practices in the production of a genre’s conventions and ideologies. Let me unpack this claim by considering a final generic convention that is a staple of romance novels: the happily-ever-after (HEA). Throughout the interviews, all study participants consistently cited the HEA as one of their major reasons for reading popular romances: according to readers, the guaranteed happy ending reinforces the love between the hero and heroine and helps insure a positive and uplifting

reading experience. While I do not doubt their claims of the importance of the HEA, readers' in-depth talk and reading practices revealed two related findings: 1) that the HEA is defined in part by the affective and embodied responses it produces; and 2) that the process of reading about the relationship's evolution is far more central than the HEA to romance readers' feelings of enjoyment, investment, and satisfaction.

Study participants' comments suggest that what counts as an HEA is defined less by a particular narrative outcome than by the particular feelings that will (or will not) result from a reading experience. For instance, Beth stated during our initial interview that what she most enjoyed about romance novels was the "happy ever after." As she described the HEA, however, she consistently described her feelings while reading rather than a particular plot line or resolution. According to Beth, "It's not necessarily I know how it's going to end but I'm not probably going to be weeping uncontrollably through the whole book or at the ending I guess." Beth's comment suggests that the HEA does not depend solely on what happens to the *characters* within a particular narrative, but rather what happens to *Beth* as she is reading it. The ways in which affect and embodiment shape generic conventions was made even more clear with Rachel and her discussion of *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Niffenegger's novel would likely be shelved in the literary section of any bookstore rather than with novels labeled "romance," and it features a hero who dies at the end of the story. As I discuss in Chapter Four, Rachel's favorite romance novels include Diana Gabaldon's time travel series, *Outlander*, and so I was not surprised that she chose another time travel romance for our book talk. Nevertheless, her selection illustrates the instability of genre and the myriad lenses – commercial, interpretive, cultural – with which one might approach the relationship between text and genre. When I asked Rachel whether she thought the book had a happy ending, she replied:

You know, they don't live to be 96 together and, you know sitting on the porch swing holding hands, you know, with their great grandchildren at their feet, but at the same time, they do have quite a bit of happiness over the time they're able to be together, and I like the way she ended it in that it's just not so down.

In this segment, Rachel's definition of the HEA is contingent on the emotional outcome it produces for her. While the characters don't actually live "happily ever after" in the sense that they grow old together, their story concludes in a way that for Rachel is "just not so down." For many readers, the HEA functions as a preventative measure from being emotionally drained during the activity of reading or at the conclusion of the reading experience. This finding

suggests that generic conventions and knowledges are defined in part through the affective responses they produce, and these responses shape how individuals understand and participate with genres.

Affective reading practices can also shape the ideological thrust of a genre. For instance, despite – or because of – their knowledge that the hero and heroine will indeed be together and live happily every after, study participants’ answers to why they read romances all referenced the “journey,” “process,” or “evolution” of the relationships, as well as readers’ own participation or investment within these relationships. This finding hardly seems surprising given that the vast majority of romance novels focus on the development of the relationship; heroes and heroines often do not declare their love for one another until the last few pages or chapters of the text.

What I want to suggest here, however, is that the HEA provides another purpose besides the guaranteed happy ending: that is, the HEA functions as a safety net that allows readers to transgress the heteronormative boundaries along the way to the formulaic conclusion. In other words, while the HEA comes last for romantic characters and functions as a culmination of the narrative, the HEA comes first for romance readers and makes space for affective reading engagements that transgress the heteronormative storyline. I offer this claim tentatively because it is difficult to definitively support it with interview transcripts. That said, the myriad subject positions and character identifications study participants take up, and their enthusiastic descriptions of their emotional investments with characters, support my claim. As I have already illustrated, the varied and shifting character attachments readers might take up as they encounter heterosexual narratives means that the erotic potential of romance novels cannot be completely constrained within the heterosexual framework or the heteronormative ending. It also means that readers might experience the romantic narratives in ways other than through the position of the romantic heroine. An examination of these subject positions and character identifications available to romance readers illustrates the possibilities for how affective reading practices intersect with textual conventions to produce both hegemonic and subversive experiences. While the generic convention of the HEA reproduces heteronormativity, it also makes space for embodied and affective engagements with romance novels from a number of subject positions besides that of the heroine.

#### Beyond Character Engagements With Romantic Texts

Study participants engaged with romantic texts in many other ways than identification with or as particular characters. To help me unpack these findings, I turn to scholarship by Eve Sedgwick and Lynne Pearce. In an essay on paranoid and reparative reading, Sedgwick offers the reparative stance as a way of approaching cultural texts with love rather than suspicion, with a consideration of how individuals repair, reshape, integrate, and add to objects or the fragmentary pieces of objects in order to make them into resources for self-making. If paranoid reading is driven by the desire to expose something harmful about a text, reparative reading begins with already well-critiqued cultural objects and examines how they might be made over to nourish rather than harm the self. The reparative stance does not provide the optimistic solution to paranoia's pessimism; rather, it considers the "many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35). Sedgwick's attention to part-objects and their possibilities aligns with what Lynne Pearce refers to as the "textual other," or the aspect of a text with which readers identify or connect; Pearce suggests that a character is only one of many possibilities of the "textual other" (17). According to Pearce:

The textual other, then, is whoever or whatever causes us to engage with a text in a manner that is *beyond the will-to-interpretation*. It is what, in terms of my own metaphorical conceit, causes us to both 'fall in love', and endure the sequel of our falling, in what is often an incredibly intense roller-coaster of emotional experience. (20)

Sedgwick's consideration of part-objects and Pearce's attention to the many forms that a textual other might take have helped me consider the fragmentary and disjointed aspects of romance reading that are belied by the linearity and materiality of romantic texts. For instance, readers spoke of re-reading only certain moments from their favorite novels as a way of re-engaging with a story. Beth reported, "There have been times where I'll get a certain plot or scene or whatever stuck in my head and I'll go back and just read that. I'll skim for that, a particular scene or conversation or whatever." Beth's comment suggests that her engagement with romance novels is not wholly governed by the text-as-complete-narrative but rather by the textual fragments that are especially meaningful to her.

While readers cited the importance of being emotionally invested in romantic narratives, several attributed this investment not to particular plot lines, character interactions, or scenes, but rather to the author's writing "style." For instance, Maddie reported that although stories by

Elizabeth Hoyt can be “clichéd” or “something that somebody’s written before,” the author has a “cadence and a rhythm of her writing” that makes them enjoyable for her. In describing Madeline Hunter, the author of her book selection, Maddie stated, “I’ve read everything that she’s written. She’s got kind of a lyrical quality to her writing that’s very soothing when you read it.” I consider Maddie’s comments here to speculate on the affective qualities of romance reading for study participants, and the bodily responses that do not rely directly on the meanings of words but rather on their “feel.” In other words, Maddie’s comments do not address, or do not address *only*, the socially structured emotional responses produced through textual engagement and subject to ideological effect (the “packaged” feelings of sentiment, empathy, love, and desire to which Howard refers). Rather, her comments address as well the sensual, physical experience of words, the “hear[ing] before comprehension” to which Hélène Cixous refers (qtd. in Littau 143). Cixous considers the musical pulse of writing and reminds us of the ways in which music does not require linguistic symbols to confer meaning or move its listeners; likewise, Maddie notes the affective power of romantic texts that produce “soothing” responses from the feel, sound, and rhythm of words rather than from their meaning per se. As Cixous suggests:

What remains of music in writing, and which exists also in music properly speaking, is indeed that scansion which *also* does its work on the body of the reader. The texts that touch me most strongly, to the point of making me shiver or laugh, are those that have not repressed their musical structure [...]. (qtd. in Littau 143)

What Cixous points out, and what Maddie’s comments suggest, is that a reader’s engagement with a text may rely on both symbolic and extra-symbolic features, on both linguistic meaning and the sounds, rhythms, and feel of words that are not governed by meaning.

While Maddie spoke of the “soothing” cadence and rhythm of an author’s writing style, Rachel described the “comfort” of a particular author’s use of imagery. Throughout our book discussion of Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Rachel repeatedly answered my questions about her reading experience by recalling specific phrases and the images they evoked. She reported that it was Niffenegger’s imagery that most stood out to her about the novel: “What was the one that caught me the other day? Talking about Richard’s hands lying quietly in his lap like a cat, just very particular.” As I asked Rachel to describe her enjoyment of the book or what she thought of certain characters or scenes, she frequently cited almost verbatim a line from the text as a way of answering: “[Clare] says something about all the mementos of our past are, sort

of, like ‘love letters to an illiterate’” and “there was a phrase that was more like ‘just like I do everyday.’” At one point Rachel praised Niffenegger’s writing, saying, “I enjoy reading what she wrote. I find myself, in some ways, comforted by an author’s style, if it’s a style that I enjoy. It’s like a nice warm blanket. It’s a comforting feeling to re-read the book.” Rachel’s engagement with the text and the comfort that this engagement provides seem driven by the fragmentary images and phrases that stuck out for her more than the actual narrative arc or specific characters. Like Maddie, Rachel’s experience with *The Time Traveler’s Wife* points to embodied feelings of comfort that arrive through engagement with language and style as well as characters and story.

Some readers’ engagements with romantic texts were mediated by particular generic conventions, demonstrating their polysemy and the risk of equating a particular convention with a single or static ideological frame. For instance, Olivia described being “hooked” on romances only to “quit them cold turkey” because she thought they were bad for her. When I asked her to explain why she thought so, she drew on her relationship with her “progressive” mother as a way of understanding the “conservative” romance genre:

Well, I was brought up in a very progressive environment. My mom was kind of a hippie. The world of romance was very conservative. And I felt like they were giving me these really conservative ideas that I did not want to believe in, like, you have to be a virgin – oh my God. That was the main thing.

Throughout the interview, Olivia repeatedly positioned herself as resistant to the trope of virginity so often found in romantic texts and attributed this resistance in part to her relationship with her mother. Referring to the trope as “virginity worship,” Olivia articulated a strong dislike for the contrast between the “horrible and evil” hero and the “pure and virginal” heroine, stating that “[s]ome authors, the way they write about it, you have to wonder what’s going to happen when it’s gone? Is he going to still love her? You know? Is he going to still care about her or kick her to the curb?” Yet, despite Olivia’s political aversion to the virginity trope within romance novels, for our book discussion she chose Teresa Medeiros’s *The Bride and the Beast*, a historical novel that revolves around a virgin sacrifice and that Olivia said is “the book that got me really reading romance again.”

Olivia equated part of her enjoyment of *The Bride and the Beast* to the way in which the virginity trope was implemented – not as a conservative value but rather as a metaphorical device. Olivia found the novel’s heroine – who must sacrifice her virginity to a supposed dragon

in order to save her hometown – to be unproblematic because she understood Medeiros to be deploying both virgins and dragons as “mythological creatures.” For Olivia, virginity in this particular book did not function as a state of being but rather as a myth, no more real than the supposed dragon that lives atop a mountain and that is later revealed to be just a lonely and bitter man. As she explains, “It bothers me in some books. It didn’t bother me so much in this one because it kind of went with the beauty and the beast theme. The innocence has to conquer the darkness...[the hero] says they’re both mythological creatures. He’s the dragon and she’s the virgin.” Thus, Olivia’s understanding of this particular deployment of the virginity trope is not inimical to her aversion to generic conservative themes that place strong emphasis on virginity. Rather, Olivia’s characterization of the heroine’s virginity as mythological aligns with her own political beliefs. Like Maddie and Rachel, part of Olivia’s enjoyment of *The Bride and the Beast* stems not from a strict meaning of virginity but rather from an attention to language and language play: as metaphor, the heroine’s virginity becomes pleasurable rather than problematic.

In pointing to Olivia’s attention to metaphor and language play I would be remiss to ignore the ways in which both the “beauty and the beast” and “innocence conquering darkness” tropes are long-standing and pervasive textual conventions of romance novels that invoke racially inflected language and imagery. In her dissertation, *Hearts of Darkness: The Racial Politics of Popular Romance*, Stephanie Burley argues that mass-market paperback romances “use metaphors of darkness to privilege white subjectivity” (18). This privileging plays out in a number of ways. For instance, romantic heroes are persistently described not only as “tall, dark, and handsome” but also as “savage,” “devilish,” and “bestly.” Given that romantic heroes are usually far more sexually experienced than romantic heroines, these descriptions not only exoticize the hero as a mysterious and uncivilized “other” but also reproduce a symbolic link between blackness and sexuality (*Hearts* 34). Moreover, as in the case with Olivia’s book selection, the romantic heroine’s whiteness, purity of heart, and sexual innocence tame the hero’s savagery, repurposing his dark energy to love and protect her: “With her golden hair and pale skin, she was a creature of the light, defying the darkness with her very existence” (Medeiros 285). Throughout Medeiros’s *The Bride and the Beast*, the relationship between the virginal, white heroine and the dark supposed-dragon hero reproduces, as Burley suggests, a nineteenth-century “cult of true womanhood” that places “white women on a pedestal and require[s] a



vigilant chivalrous masculinity to protect them from the menace of racial contamination” (*Hearts* 32).

The privileging of white subjectivity against the threat of racial contamination is further reinforced by romantic heroes who – no matter how seemingly “dark and dangerous” they appear to be – are not actually non-white (*Hearts* 34). One of the most notable examples of this recuperation of the hero appears in E.M. Hull’s 1921 romance novel *The Sheik*, in which a British white woman is captured by an Arab sheik who, while described as “savage” and “dark,” is really a deeply tanned white man who has been living in the desert. Similarly, in *The Bride and the Beast*, Gwendolyn’s townspeople believe the hero to be a dangerous dragon until Gwendolyn proves that he is really a lonely fellow Scottish man. Once the hero, Bernard, is discovered and begins to fall for Gwendolyn, she slowly transforms him into a suitable mate for her: “A strange calm stole over Gwendolyn as she gazed up into the shadows that composed his face. ‘You once told me what I had to do to turn you from beast to man.’ Curling one hand around his nape, she drew him down and gently pressed her mouth to his” (Medeiros 156). Hence, while the “beauty and the beast” and the “innocence conquering the darkness” tropes promote for Olivia a reading experience that subverts rather than reproduces the link between femininity and virginity, these same tropes nevertheless readily invoke racially inflected imagery and reproduce white privilege.

While Burley focuses her analysis on how racial formations and privilege are reproduced through romantic narratives, given the ethnographic nature of this study, I am also interested in how raced ways of knowing were reproduced in interview contexts between romance readers and me. For instance, in my interviews with Olivia, Candace, and Maddie, our shared use of the term “dark hero” seemed to serve as shorthand for a range of white male heroes who were literally or figuratively tortured, who presented an actual threat to the heroine’s life, and/or whose brooding souls resist but eventually succumb to redemption by the right/light woman. Most of my interviews and book discussions featured at least one moment in which the study participant and I exchanged recommendations for romance novels. Below is a portion of this kind of exchange between Maddie and me in which we recommend “dark hero” romances:

*Maddie:* But – well, do you read Linda Howard?

*Stephanie:* I do. And my favorite one by her was – I think it was *Death Angel* or *Angel*.

*Maddie:* That one’s good.

*Stephanie:* I loved that one. And she – Linda Howard – I really like the kind of dark heroes. And she writes a good dark hero.

*Maddie:* She writes the best dark hero. *Son of the Morning*.

*Stephanie:* Yes.

*Maddie:* And *After the Night*.

*Stephanie:* I haven't read that one.

*Maddie:* Oh, you need to go out and buy that one today. I read that one about ten times, *After the Night*. And there's a dark hero in there, but it's just – and some people either they love it or they hate it. But to me it's one of her best ones.

*Stephanie:* Okay. I will go out and get it. Yay! Thank you for the recommendation. Yeah, I also read, if I'm looking for a dark hero, I read Anne Stuart. She's good at tortured.

*Maddie:* Yes! Now, have you read Penelope Williamson's *Once in a Blue Moon*?

*Stephanie:* No.

*Maddie:* Oh, gosh. Go get that one too. That's just – that's a very dark hero. Very dark hero.

With the exception of the hero in *After the Night*, whose “French Creole ancestry was obvious in his dark coloring,” the heroes of the books Maddie and I discuss are physically described in ways that signal whiteness (Howard, *Kindle Edition*, 3). More importantly, regardless of his physical description, each hero enjoys the privilege of hegemonic white masculinity: each is powerful, educated, wealthy, and/or feared. And each hero eventually falls in love with and is redeemed by a light-skinned heroine. For the purposes of this conversation, then, Maddie's and my use of the term “dark hero” signals a shared kind of genre knowledge that perpetuates racialized imagery and language as well as the white heroine's victory over the “dark hero.” Regardless of our intentions in the context of the interview, our talk nevertheless signifies in particular and problematic ways.

To return to the ways in which readers' engagements with romance novels extend beyond romantic characters, I conclude this section by noting that, for some participants, the textual other that seemed to initiate or sustain their engagement with a particular romance novel was in fact a person outside the text. For instance, Amanda's enjoyment of Julie Garwood's *For the Roses* was inscribed by her mother's appreciation of the novel. When I asked Amanda if she could recall the first time she read the book, she explained, “My mom had read it and I just remember her reading it and liking it and really laughing at certain parts...I just remember her really liking this and I tend to really want to read books that actually hold her interest. And I find that I usually end up really liking them as well.” Amanda's desire to read *For the Roses* and even

her subsequent enjoyment of the book is mediated by her relationship to her mother; her memory of her first reading of the book begins with a memory of her mother's laughter while reading it. Later, she explained that she and her mother share an inside joke related to the heroine of the novel who plays the piano when she's upset: "it's a big joke between my mom and I about how whenever she gets upset, she'll play Beethoven's fifth." The aspect of the text that seems to engage Amanda "beyond the will-to-interpretation" seems to be her mother's engagement with the text and the shared experience of reading and participating with the same story.

Women's varied attachments to the symbolic, extra-symbolic, textual, and para-textual pieces of romance novels point to the myriad ways in which the romance readers in this study engage with romantic narratives in addition to empathizing with, or identifying as, romantic characters. In describing their engagements with particular scenes, an author's writing style, an image, a trope, or a fellow reader, these readers demonstrate the multiple possibilities for entering and attaching to romantic texts. These findings are especially compelling given the tendency within romance scholarship to attribute the pleasure – and danger – of romance reading to the reader's ability to live vicariously through the heroine's story, to experience over and over again the attention and nurturance of the hero through repeated engagements with formulaic narratives. This move sutures the reader to the heroine and not only under-theorizes processes by which readers identify as or with characters but also under-examines, as Cixous puts it, the "thousands of possible relations to a text" that include and extend beyond character identification (qtd. in Littau 142).

## Conclusion

In their introduction to an edited collection of essays on affect theory, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth suggest that, on one level, affect theory is an "inventory of shimmers,"<sup>28</sup> a cataloging of the movements, intensities, and potentialities between bodies (both human and non-human), and a registering of the resonances and accumulations of affects that coalesce between bodies in particular formations (11). Defining bodies "not by an outer-skin envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passage of

---

<sup>28</sup> Gregg and Seigworth borrow this term from Roland Barthes, who, in his penultimate lectures collected as *The Neutral*, posits the neutral as a domain that is not constrained by the binaries that structure Western thought but rather found in "only intervals, only the relation between two moments, two spaces or objects" (146-147). In registering the neutral's "shimmer," its "twinkle," Barthes calls for critical practice that is attuned to the "extreme changeability" and "rapid modification" of affective moments (101).

affect,” Gregg and Seigworth suggest that “a body is as much outside itself as in itself – webbed in its relations – until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter” (2-3). This notion of affect theory has prompted me to consider the romance genre as a site of accumulated and particular affects, whereby moments between text and reader elicit myriad possible relations, passions, and pleasures. Romance readers’ identifications with and as romantic characters prompt experiences that are located both “outside and inside” their bodies, providing opportunities to reflect on and re-envision their own lived experiences while simultaneously inhabiting the experiences of another. Their desires to be physically and emotionally moved by texts position readers as open to symbolic and extra-symbolic reading experiences; what results is a range of surprising, relational, and shifting attachments and knowledges.

The findings from this chapter suggest that these romance readers’ affective reading practices are driven by identification and emotional response to character and non-character elements of romance novels. While these practices do not necessarily resemble the detached and suspicious textual stance that often characterizes “academic” and “critical” reading, they nevertheless make possible a range of knowledges and experiences. And while they primarily read for escape and pleasure, the women in this study do experience moments of the kind of critical engagement promoted by critical literacy pedagogies, especially when identifications with romantic characters fall short, disappoint, or change. This finding prompts me to reconsider the multiple ways individuals approach texts – and to consider how students might benefit from explicit examinations of how these approaches compare to one another. Literacy instruction that recognizes and draws connections among the multiple frameworks, protocols, and textual stances with which readers can approach texts can make space for students to consider how everyday literacies compare with academic reading and writing practices. And it can open up how we think about textual engagement and its effects.

For instance, readers’ attachments to romance novels suggest a rethinking of how and under what conditions the romance genre reproduces heteronormativity and how and under what conditions it makes space for transgression. To consider the genre as a site of hegemonic ideology without attending to the ways readers take up, embody, shift between, and disidentify with particular characters, conventions, and extra-symbolic or para-textual features oversimplifies the work done between readers and texts, and under-examines moments of critique, pleasure, and possibility. For instance, romance readers’ various affective attachments

suggest that even as romance novels can foster escape and self-erasure, they can also promote reflection, transformation, relationship, and resistance. Readers' character identifications demonstrate fluid movement between hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized characters, and these attachments provide a variety of pleasures that include and extend beyond romantic love stories between men and women. This finding suggests that even as heteronormativity is often reproduced through romantic narratives, the kinds of reading practices some women take up also offer opportunities to derive pleasure and satisfaction from multiple erotic and gendered subject positions and relationships. This finding also suggests, however, that hyper-masculinized and hyper-feminized characters are reproduced, in part, through racialized language and imagery, and that the pleasures derived from reading about these characters may be inflected with racial politics and anxiety. Thus, attending to the kinds of affects and emotions produced and accumulated through genre participation can give composition scholars a clearer understanding of the relationships among ideology, language, bodies, and genres.

This chapter has considered the affective reading practices that largely constitute women's participation with the romance genre. In Chapter Four, I examine the relational dimensions of romance genre participation. By considering how women use romance novels – including but not limited to how they buy and read them – I demonstrate the various roles, literate practices, and subjectivities women take up as they participate with popular romance. I suggest that the appeal of romance fiction cannot be explained solely through a consideration of text and reader but instead must be understood through an examination of multiple and relational ways women use romance novels to connect with others.

## Chapter Four

### “Carriers of Relationships”: The Relational Dimensions of Romance Genre Participation

#### Introduction

During our initial interview, one of the first things Olivia and I discussed was her earliest memory of reading romance novels. Now 45 years old, Olivia has been “very, very into” romances for the past five years but actually started reading them as an adolescent:

Well, I first got hooked when I was 12. A friend of my sister gave me a Barbara Cartland novel. Oh God. (*laughter*) It’s embarrassing just to say her name. But I absolutely loved it and I got totally hooked on – I think I was mostly reading Barbara Cartland and Harlequin – nothing very elaborate at the time... And I actually gave them up after a couple of years because I felt they were bad for me. I went cold turkey.

In listening to Olivia, I was first struck by and, admittedly, disappointed by the addiction metaphor that ran through her story. Olivia’s descriptions of getting “hooked on” romances only to quit them “cold turkey” as well as her simultaneous embarrassment and enthusiasm suggest ambivalence towards her romance reading interest. In fact, virtually all study participants’ accounts of their histories of and purposes for romance reading in some ways echoed this ambivalence and the “addicted reader” narrative described in Chapter One. This narrative – produced through public, marketing, and academic discourses – imagines romance readers as particularly vulnerable to, or dependent on, a controlled substance: formulaic, mass-produced, and hegemonic romance novels. As a romance reader, I take umbrage with this common imagining of romance readers even as I have described my own reading experiences in similar ways; as a researcher I had hoped that study participants would resist these metaphors or acknowledge similar frustration with them. Instead, in describing their earliest memories of reading romances as well as current proclivities for keeping their reading private, participants in my study repeatedly drew on metaphors of addiction, privacy, and escape.

At the same time, while these metaphors were prevalent, they were also insufficient descriptors of women’s actual reading practices: they framed romance reading as a solitary and

compulsive behavior and did not fully capture the social and purposeful ways in which women engage with the romance genre. Specifically, I found that even while women described their reading in terms of addiction and privacy, they also described the highly interactional contexts in which they began and continue to read; and even as women described reading romance novels to “escape,” they also described reading as a means to connect with family and friends, and critique, reflect, and explore texts with other genre readers. Moreover, my interviews and book discussions with study participants revealed that the activity of romance reading is only one of many literate practices these women take up as they engage with romantic texts. The women in this study not only read romance novels but read, write, and talk *about* romance novels in various contexts and for multiple purposes. They also store and display romance novels in their homes; police their identities as romance readers in public; and use romance novels as gifts, for parenting purposes, and even as common ground for engaging in political debate. These literate practices are largely interactional and make possible multiple and shifting subject positions from which to critique, recommend, and discuss the romance genre – as well as myriad other topics and interests – with other romance readers and non-readers alike. Thus, this chapter illuminates the participatory, relational, and subjective dimensions of the romance genre, features that are crucial for understanding how individuals routinely read, write, and understand it. By focusing on all the ways women *participate* with the popular romance genre – in addition to reading romance novels – I reveal the role of consumers in shaping their experiences with popular culture and the role of readers in shaping genres.

For composition scholars and instructors, these findings suggest that the literate practices individuals take up as they engage with popular culture texts are crucial for understanding their appeal and popularity. Moreover, such practices may complement some of the academic skills we want students to develop. Incorporating popular culture genres in the classroom makes space for connecting students’ extracurricular and academic practices and for further developing critical literacy skills. However, such connections will require that in asking students to engage in critical textual analyses of popular culture genres, instructors also invite students to draw from their expertise and experiences around popular culture, and to situate academic analysis as a particular instantiation of genre rather than an “outside” examination of it.

For instance, the findings in this chapter do not negate the claim that the popular romance genre is a powerful site for the reproduction of ideology. In fact, as I demonstrate, silence around

romance novels can reproduce heteronormativity alongside romance narratives. However, I contend that in order to understand the ideologies and discourses produced through genre, we must take into account the talk and writing produced by readers of genre because these discourses powerfully shape how individuals engage with and make meaning of texts. In other words, romance authors' writing *of* romance novels as well as romance readers' talk and writing *about* romance novels are simultaneous and imbricated sites of discursive production. These findings make a powerful case for considering how readers produce knowledge that complicates, sanctions, and competes with the ideologies of published texts. For composition instructors, I argue that teaching students to critically analyze genres should entail the examination of texts alongside the classroom reading, writing, and talk about texts. This practice makes visible students' multiple roles as genre participants as well as their possibilities for shaping genre.

In what follows, I examine the relational dimensions of women's participation with the romance genre, as well as the constraints and affordances of this relationality. Drawing from interview transcripts as well as an analysis of the *All About Romance* (AAR) website regularly used by several study participants, I situate the popularity of romance novels within their capacity to foster varied connections among romance readers.

### Relational Dimensions of Genre Participation

Across multiple interviews and book discussions, three features of study participants' talk made visible the relational network in which romance genre participation is constituted: their frequent references to friends and family, their virtual conversations within online communities, and their strategies for policing their reading practices in public and around non-readers. In this section, I examine women's references to friends and family members and, by "linking literacy with intimacy," I demonstrate the kinds of interpersonal connections embedded in and central to participation with the romance genre (Gere 53). These connections often depend less on the textuality of, or discussion of, romantic narratives and more on the material display, exchange, storage, and gifting of romance novels; this finding suggests that romance readers' uses of books as physical objects help produce what romance novels "mean" beyond their textual features as well as help produce the situations and contexts to which they respond. I argue that romance reading is a relational as well as textual experience, and that women's connections with other



romance readers and people in their daily lives powerfully shape how romance novels are used, circulated, valued, and discussed.

In citing friends and family members when describing how, why, and when they began reading romances, study participants' comments suggest that genre knowledge and value are learned not only through textual encounters but also in relationship to other readers who demonstrate such knowledge and value – even when this demonstration is implicit or observational. In many cases, interactions with these individuals played a significant role in introducing participants to the genre, shaping their material access to texts, and inscribing romance reading with value. For instance, when I asked Amanda if she could recall her first memory of reading romances, she immediately referenced her mother:

My mom has always been a big reader...and she loves all types of books. And she would love Harlequin romance novels just because – and her reasoning behind it is they're all the same and all she has to do is read the beginning and the end and if she likes the end she'll go back and read the middle. And so there's always books all over the house, and whenever I wasn't able to find something to read or I got tired of my own books I just started picking them up and reading them.

By referencing her mother's "love" of Harlequins, by describing their material availability, ("there's always books all over the house"), and by further citing her mother's practices as the catalysts for her own romance reading ("I just started picking them up"), Amanda suggests that her initiation into the activity of romance reading was relational as much as it was textual, that her interest in romance reading developed in part through watching her mother read at home.

It is clear from Amanda's account that she began reading and enjoying romance novels from watching her mother do so. What is also clear, however, is the extent to which Amanda's participation in the romance genre is driven not only by her enjoyment of romantic texts but also by the ways these texts serve as material and discursive connections to her mother. For instance, in explaining to me why she wanted to read and discuss Julie Garwood's *For the Roses* for our book talk, Amanda recounted that it was a book her mother had read and enjoyed: "I just remember her really liking this and I tend to really want to read books that actually hold her interest. And I find that I usually end up really liking them as well." In explaining her desire to read the books that "hold her [mother's] interest," Amanda describes romance reading not in terms of escape but rather kinship; *For the Roses* is a favorite read for Amanda in part because it is a book that both she and her mother share and enjoy. Amanda's description of re-reading

favorite romances suggests that this practice is both textual and relational, drawing her back to her favorite novels as well as to her mother:

I tend to re-read my books a lot – books that I like, a lot. So those either I or my mom will keep ‘cause usually we tend to end up really liking the same ones. So if I’m getting low on space I’ll send them to her house and she stores them for awhile and we pass them back and forth.

The practice of re-reading – shared by all study participants – means that favorite books must be physically accessible. While it may be conventional to understand romance reading and re-reading as textual and solitary experiences, Amanda’s account reveals the deeply relational aspect of these practices. Romance novels are read, re-read, and shuffled back and forth between Amanda’s house and her mother’s house, acting as shared belongings and points of connection between Amanda and her mother.

My interview with Rachel illustrates that these points of connection among readers are also co-productive of the rhetorical situations and contexts to which romance novels respond and in which they circulate. In other words, it is readers’ uses of romance novels – uses that are highly relational – that help produce the exigencies to which romantic narratives respond. In Rachel’s case, the mutual enjoyment of Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander* by her and her family helps to make possible the very context in which an author promotes and circulates a new book. Like Amanda, Rachel described receiving her first romance novel, *Outlander*, from a loved one and also described how this book connected her to her family:

And I read it; got my mom hooked on it. Got my sister hooked on it. My mom and my sister both were actually lucky enough to – since she just put out a new book this past summer – I’m thinking, both my mom and my sister were lucky enough to actually hear her speak and had books signed by her. So, now I have a book signed by her. That was one of my presents for Christmas.

In this passage, Rachel both invokes and disrupts the addiction metaphor. By drawing her mother and sister into the *Outlander* series, Rachel’s deployment of the word “hooked” signals that it is not the novel but rather Rachel herself who is the powerful agent in her use of the text to connect with her mother and sister. Rachel’s subsequent comments suggest as well that the *Outlander* series not only connects her to her family but also connects her and her family to Diana Gabaldon and that this relationship shapes her enjoyment of the *Outlander* novel. By describing her family’s “lucky” opportunity to “actually hear [Gabaldon] speak,” and by characterizing the “book signed by her” as a “present,” Rachel suggests that her copy of *Outlander* is valuable in

part because it acts as material evidence of a meaningful connection between Gabaldon and her family. Her account further demonstrates the way in which readers' uses of books as a means of forging and reinforcing relationships helps make possible the author's talk and book signing in which romantic texts circulate. Because Rachel and her family use the *Outlander* novel as a means of relating to one another, spending time together, and as a meaningful gift, they in part produce and shape the context of the text's circulation.

Leah Price argues that literary critics erroneously "tend to act as if reading were the only legitimate use of books" (305). Interviews with Amanda and Rachel demonstrate that romance readers also use books as gifts, as the impetus for gatherings among women, and as material expressions of shared memories. These uses all suggest that romance genre participation makes space for women to forge relationships with friends and family members, and that romance readers help determine the cultural value of romance novels beyond their function as narratives to be read. For instance, Rachel's account illustrates that another "legitimate" use of romance novels seems to be as an example for her kids that books are more valuable than other kinds of entertainment: "We always told the kids, 'There is such a thing as too many toys and too many stuffed animals. There is no such thing as too many books. If you want a book, we are happy to make sure you get a book.' Because I do. Everything on my shelf, I will read again." In this segment, Rachel suggests that she has explicitly articulated the value of books over toys to her children. In using household space to keep, shelve, and re-read favorite romance novels, Rachel's romance genre participation also demonstrates and conveys this message. In this instance, Rachel's use of romance novels helps her to construct a parenting subjectivity from which to teach her sons the value of reading for pleasure and "read[ing] again." Acknowledging the pedagogical function of displaying books in one's home destabilizes the role of text and textual interpretation in establishing what romantic narratives "mean." Rachel's account demonstrates that romance novels mean an opportunity to instill in her children particular values about books in general.

As a final example of the ways in which romance genre participation for these women is driven in part by the relationships such participation fosters and reproduces, consider Camilla's account of recommending books to friends and talking about romantic narratives with her daughters. Both examples further illuminate readers' roles in producing the conditions in which texts circulate and are used, as well as the kinds of subjectivities readers construct by engaging

with the genre. Camilla was an outlier in describing how she talks about romance novels in-depth with friends and with her daughters; nearly all participants stated that they exchanged romance novels with friends, family, or co-workers but never or rarely discussed them in-depth. Rather, for most study participants, romance novels seemed to foster interpersonal connections through their display, exchange, or shared value. I examine this finding in the next section, but here I explore Camilla's recommendation and discussion practices so as not to draw a hard and fast line between the kinds of relationality women take up in face-to-face and in anonymous interactions with other romance readers. When I asked Camilla at the end of our interview if there was anything we hadn't discussed that she had hoped we would, Camilla replied:

I recommend books to people all the time, all the time, both online and in my life and I've been told I should keep a blog. I should do a blog because I have strong opinions on what I read. I read so much and I'm able to talk about it in a way that makes people want to read books, or stay well away from certain texts because books matter to me.

Camilla's inclusion of her recommending practice suggests that it is a meaningful aspect of her readerly identity. By describing herself as someone who "read[s] so much" and is "able to talk about it in a way that makes people want to read books," Camilla positions herself as a knowledgeable expert of the romance genre, a reader who also has "strong opinions" that could be useful for other readers. Camilla then uses this expertise as a way of sharing the books that matter to her with the people in her daily life and in online communities. Further, by talking and writing about the books she cares about and the ones she believes people should "stay well away from," Camilla, like Amanda and Rachel, takes part in shaping the contexts through which other readers initially or continually encounter romantic texts.

Camilla also described her preferences for listening to certain romance novels on CD, illustrating that even textual engagement is not always a solitary practice; while she described how reading silently creates a "closed world," Camilla suggested that listening to novels produces a "more open experience...which allows for my family to be in and out of it as well." Camilla stated that she primarily listened to romance novels as a way to "engage [her] mind" while she did household chores; but this listening practice also made space for discussions with her daughters about sex. Like Rachel, Camilla's romance reading practices serve a pedagogical and parenting function, but in Camilla's case, it is the textual narratives themselves rather than

the material display of books that help produce this function. I asked Camilla to tell me about listening to sex scenes being read aloud and we both laughed before she responded:

There are some I kinda think, ‘Oh, those are graphic.’ (*laughter*) I just turn that down because [my daughter] is just outside - . I’m not at hand to – (*laughter*) – But I was never raised to talk about sex behind closed doors and I don’t raise my own kids in the same way. Anything they wanna know, ask... You know, we have discussions in the car about (*whispering*) ‘This one says - .’ Or things we hear on the radio. So I’ve talked to them about sex, about oral sex, about their own bodies, respect for your own body and the fact that any sexual act that goes on between you and some boy at school is gonna be a question of power, not attraction and nothing to do with sexuality. So we have that kind of discussion.

Camilla’s talk emphasizes the ways in which genres and genre participation are always historically and temporally situated and may vary significantly across contexts and users. That Camilla is able to listen to a romance novel as an audiobook – and thus bring her daughters into her reading experience – illuminates a romance reading experience that has only recently been more commonly available. Her willingness to talk openly to her daughters about sex is likely a result of a variety of cultural and social factors, including the ways in which larger discourses about sex, women, and pleasure have shaped and been shaped by popular romance fiction. In this segment, Camilla begins by positioning herself as somewhat cautious about what she’ll listen to within earshot of her daughters before repositioning herself as more comfortable with discussing sex with them. The tension between caution and comfort might also be seen in Camilla’s assertion that she does not raise her kids to talk about sex “behind closed doors” and her change in volume as she mimics such talk. One might read Camilla’s whisper that “This one says” as a way of speaking like one of her daughters or as a way of indicating to me that conversations about sex between her daughters and herself are personal. Taken together, her comments here suggest that the process of listening to romance aloud makes space for discussing issues of sex with her daughters and that this intimate space is a valuable consequence of genre participation for Camilla. These comments also suggest that in listening to and talking about romance novels with her daughters, Camilla enacts a critical stance towards romance novels that might not be immediately visible or available by focusing solely on her romance reading. Given, despite, or because of how romance novels feature romantic and sexual relationships between two characters who ultimately live happily ever after, Camilla’s “kind of discussion” with her daughters is a critical one about “sexual act[s]” as a “question of power.”

Together, interviews with Amanda, Rachel, and Camilla suggest that readers participate with the romance genre in a variety of ways that extend beyond the consumption and textual interpretation of romance novels. Engagement with the romance genre is profoundly relational for these study participants, and romantic texts are valuable in part because they allow romance readers to connect with other readers, friends, and family members. By sharing, gifting, storing, and displaying books; attending book signings; acknowledging a shared interest and value in romances specifically or reading more generally; and recommending books to other readers, participants in this study situate romance reading within a complex and intimate social network. In doing so, these women construct subjectivities from which to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with others. Thus the appeal of romantic texts must be understood in part by the kinds of relationships that are made possible through their circulation. Natalie Zemon Davis suggests that we might better understand the connections between print and people if we do two things: “first, if we supplement thematic analysis of texts with evidence about audiences that can provide context for the meaning and uses of books; second, if we consider a printed book not merely a source for ideas and images, but as a carrier of relationships” (192). Study participants’ accounts repeatedly complicate the image of the lone woman escaping to the fantasy of a romance novel by also describing the myriad ways in which these novels act as “carriers of relationships.” In doing so, they also highlight the multiple and relational practices and subjectivities made possible through participation with the romance genre that help account for its appeal and popularity.

### Constraints and Possibilities of Romance Genre Participation

While relationality is a dynamic and powerful dimension of romance genre participation, it is materially and discursively regulated in particular ways. Specifically, even as these women exchange, display, gift, and recommend romance novels to other romance readers, friends, and family members, they rarely discuss the narrative content of romance novels specifically with these individuals beyond short phrases and interchanges. Interviews with study participants suggest that the sexual content of romance novels and, relatedly, their status as stigmatized reading material, constrain how women talk to other women about romances as well as whether and how they will read romances in public and around non-romance readers. In this section, I examine women’s “facework” strategies: intentional and unintentional techniques for protecting

one's sense of self, for saving face (Goffman 14). I argue that limiting talk in face-to-face interactions; hiding, altering, and covering books; and even deploying the addiction metaphor all constitute facework strategies that enable women to maintain a comfortable distance from other women who read romances and enable them to guard themselves from perceived censure from non-romance readers.

However, I also argue that even as these strategies constrain relationality in particular ways, they also create the exigency for anonymous membership in virtual forums. Six women in this study participate in the *All About Romance* (AAR) website in part because they feel they cannot discuss the romance genre with the women they know and thus desire anonymous communication with other romance readers. As I demonstrate, AAR membership affords women opportunities to read, write, and talk about the romance genre – as well as myriad other topics of interest – in depth and in ways markedly different from face-to-face contexts. Thus, even as the sexual discourses of romance novels might constrain women's face-to-face talk, they also help make possible virtual interactions in which readers construct collaborative, authoritative, and critical subjectivities from which to engage with romantic texts and other romance readers. As I illustrate, women's face-to-face and online interactions make visible readers' roles in shaping their own and others' experiences with romantic texts, reproducing and critiquing heteronormative and gendered relations, and repurposing romance novels as launching points from which to engage in political debate even as these texts foster escape and pleasure.

In examining these romance readers' facework strategies, I found that reticence constitutes relationality as much as talk does. Despite their frequent references to other women who read romance novels, study participants indicated that they rarely talk about romance novels with these women. My interviews suggest that limiting talk in face-to-face interactions can reproduce normative conceptions of gender and sexuality in several ways. In some instances, these interactional moves reproduce heteronormativity by treating the sexual relationships of romance novels as normal or mundane, or by privileging these relationships through silence. For example, when I asked Amanda if she could remember when she began picking up and reading her mother's romances that she found around the house, she replied, "I was probably 11 or 12. But I didn't actually tell her for a year or two because I was worried she'd be upset." When I asked if Amanda finally did tell her mother, Amanda replied that she had and continued, "She didn't care. She just preferred I skip over the sex scenes." Amanda's hesitancy to tell her mother

about her romance reading, and her mother's lack of concern as long as Amanda would "skip over the sex scenes," suggest both openness and unease: romance novels are common household items that do not, or should not, require discussion; moreover, these heterosexual narratives are notable only in that Amanda might have started reading them too early. In this way, Amanda is interpellated into heterosexual discourses not only through reading romance novels but also through the unspoken acceptability and omnipresence of these texts.

Limiting talk around romance novels also enables women to share their reading interest with other women without having to discuss sexually explicit material or feelings; in some ways, this reticence works to discursively regulate the kinds of sexual/textual experiences that can coalesce around romance novels. As I argue in Chapter Three, the romances that these study participants read are centrally concerned with the development of romantic and sexual feelings between men and women, and romance reading itself is comprised of affective, embodied, and identificatory practices. For instance, most study participants responded similarly to Beth who reported that the chance to "feel that zing, that chemistry" between two characters is a significant part of the appeal of romance reading. The romance readers in this study routinely described wanting not only to identify with but also *as* characters, to empathize with them but also to physically experience the characters' emotional, physical, and psychological changes. However, in that romance novels are predominantly written by women, for women, and about women, their homoerotic potential risks exceeding their heterosexual storylines. As Burley argues, in order for a "woman-authored industry [to] produce erotic pleasure reading for women without becoming homoerotic," the genre and its users must participate in particular kinds of discursive moves that help discipline this eroticism ("What's" 128). I contend that limiting face-to-face interactions with fellow romance readers is one such discursive move; it constrains the homoerotic potential of romance reading to the homosocial.

Let me explore this claim by examining a brief but illustrative exchange with Beth during our initial interview. I am mindful here that interview material is always partial, situated, and interpreted; in other words, I do not point to this excerpt in order to make any sort of definitive claims about Beth's intentions or feelings but rather to examine how particular discourses intersect with and constitute romance genre participation. In response to my question of whether she shared her romance reading interest with others, Beth responded: "Not really. I have a good friend that does a lot of reading but she's not a real big romance reader. She'll read some and



then I've turned her on to a few, but the more I read the more I discover what exactly I like." Given the ways that readers describe their purposes of romance reading and their desires to share the experiences of romantic characters, we might read Beth's comment that she has "turned her [friend] on to a few," followed by the qualifier that the more she reads the more she "discover[s] what exactly I like" as reminiscent of sexual discourses of arousal and self-discovery. I am not suggesting here that Beth *means* to call up these discursive resonances; rather, I am highlighting what nevertheless can be *meant* by the particular uses of language from which she draws. Beth's language in this moment gestures towards a desire to maintain a private space for romance reading that precludes a shared experience around sexual arousal. Describing romance reading in solitary and individualistic terms permits Beth to occasionally share romances with her friend while focusing genre participation as primarily a textual rather than relational experience. Her comments suggest the ways in which the romance genre constrains homoeroticism not only through textual narratives that depict heterosexual relations but also through romance readers' talk – and lack of talk – about these textual narratives. Reticence, then, provides an acceptable distance among readers and texts and allows the women in this study to navigate a public and popular genre that takes as its primary focus issues of desire, fantasy, sexuality, and personal relationships.

While I have described the ways in which women's silence around romance novels might constrain the kinds of sexual/textual experiences made possible by romance reading, it is also possible that silence enables some readers to engage in more varied or unsanctioned kinds of reading experiences, or that silence provides readers with a means of exerting a sense of control and ownership over a "mass" and seemingly formulaic form of reading available to millions of readers. It is also possible that silence around romance novels further promotes an escapist reading experience by temporarily severing connections to the real world. As Beth notes, romance reading is about "getting out of your world, your problems, your whatever and enjoying this fictional ride you're on." In this way, silence may help foster the sense of escape Beth describes. In each of these cases, silence can serve as a tool with which to further personalize, purpose, rework, or reimagine a romance novel. Although my conversations with study participants most frequently focused on the use of silence as a method for avoiding stigmatization, I am reminded here of Foucault's claim: "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (27). Although

silence and discourses of privacy can reproduce heteronormativity in particular ways, they can also function as methods for circumventing dominant norms and reading experiences.

Women's facework strategies extend beyond limiting their talk with other romance readers and include policing their readerly identities in public and around non-romance readers. In many cases, these strategies simultaneously permit and prohibit women's interest in sexuality. In her study of romance readers' facework strategies, Kim Pettigrew Brackett found that women use a variety of methods to ward off threats to face from non-readers, including: using book covers, criticizing the romance genre to others, reading only in private, citing the intellectual value of romances, confirming the role of romance reading as equal to any other hobby, indicating that one reads more than "just romances," and distancing oneself from "typical readers" (352-56). Participants in this study demonstrated all of these strategies and several others as they recalled instances of being teased or feeling judged by those around them. Whether intentionally or unintentionally deployed, these strategies help women justify to themselves or others the time and money spent on romance reading; legitimize romance novels as valuable reading material; and authorize women's uses of, and interest in, sexually explicit novels. Several readers suggested that romance novels are empowering to women because, as a participant named Shelly, explained, they make it "okay for a woman to be open about her sexuality and enjoy sex." Women's deployments of facework techniques help make it possible for them to read about heroines who pursue and enjoy sex even while these techniques suggest that readers themselves might not be comfortable openly reading about sex.

At times, facework strategies also work to delegitimize women's interest in, or openness about, sexuality if sexuality is not firmly contextualized in romantic discourses.

Overwhelmingly, readers reported displeasure and embarrassment over the covers of romance novels, and described hiding them, tearing them off, breaking book spines so that books lay face down, and reading only in private. Romance novel covers often depict men and women in sexually suggestive or explicit poses; several readers attributed their displeasure with romance covers to the ways in which they reduce the narrative plot to sex without attention to the romantic development so that, as Beth described, "you feel like you're reading porn." The strategies that study participants employ to prevent romance novels from being "misrecognized" by non-romance readers reinforce a notion that women should not enjoy or be interested in sexuality apart from, or more than, romantic love. As Camilla explained:

My husband and my kids look at me and think, “Oh, she’s reading another one of those again.” They look at the covers and they see bodices and they see men and women draped around each other with gowns half off or naked chests and they’re, “Oh, Mom’s reading another one of those again.” But they’ve given up mentioning anything in that type of comment because it goes on. Because they’re very – they are addictive to a certain extent. I think they are.

Camilla’s description of romance covers and the repeated phrase that her family thinks she is “reading another one of those again” works in several ways. First, it points to the power of paratextual features to reinforce a perception of romance novels as easily categorized and markedly different from other kinds of fiction: repeated images of men and women “draped around each other” stand in for individual story lines and authors. Second, it emphasizes the link between sexuality and the genre’s stigmatized status. In this segment, Camilla sees herself – wife and mother – through the eyes of her family members, who look from the covers to her and presumably find fault in Camilla’s finding pleasure from reading sexual material. Third, it suggests that the addiction metaphor can itself be deployed as a facework strategy. In this instance, it acts as a defense against the perceived judgment from her family. Because she is not fully in control of her addiction, she is not fully answerable to her family.

Given the discomfort study participants feel about romance covers and reading in public, the popularity of e-readers among romance readers is not surprising. This particular facework strategy especially illuminates how readers take part in materially shaping the romance genre and the ways in which romances circulate. Specifically, readers reported using e-readers like the Kindle, Nook, and iPad in order to circumvent industry-driven paratextual features, avoid purchasing romance novels in public bookstores, and feel comfortable reading romances in public places. Sales of romantic and erotic fiction have skyrocketed since the production of e-readers; Beth commented that while she has not been explicitly teased by others for reading romances, “I am conscious. That’s another reason why I like the iPad is no one can know what you’re reading. Some of the covers are just embarrassing. They’re just – I wouldn’t want to take some of the covers out in public.” These digital technologies not only allow for large storage and accessibility of romantic texts, but also provide readers with ways of regulating the relational dimension of romance genre participation by controlling who has knowledge of their readerly identity. At the same time – and as a few participants noted – these e-readers make it difficult to share, display, or own author-signed copies of books.

As these multiple facework strategies illustrate, relationality is a significant aspect of romance genre participation for these women even as it is discursively and materially regulated. The sexual content of romantic narratives, the embodied and identificatory reading practices these narratives foster, and their status as stigmatized texts powerfully delimit how some women interact with other romance readers and non-romance readers in their daily lives. At the same time, this dynamic of relationality provides an exigency for anonymous participation with romance genre websites. In the remainder of this section, I examine how the *All About Romance* (AAR) website mediates genre participation and relationality. I illustrate how virtual engagement promotes an “affinity space” among fellow romance enthusiasts, fosters genre knowledge produced and disseminated by readers, enables women to enact multiple subjectivities with which to engage romantic texts, and makes space for political and social engagement (Gee “Semiotic” 214). I argue that even as romantic narratives can reproduce hegemonic and heteronormative discourses, powerfully constrain readers’ talk in face-to face interaction, and promote readers’ accounts of romance reading as private, addictive, or escapist, these narratives also help to make possible a rich and productive virtual space through which women can reflect on, critique, and explore these narratives with other readers.

The AAR website, established in 1996, is a romance genre e-community that features book reviews, message forums, writing contests, reader polls, blogs, and informational articles. Six participants – Olivia, Maddie, Kim, Shelly, Candace, and Beth – regularly use the website for finding and recommending romance novels and reading forum posts by other readers. Olivia, Maddie, and Kim also frequently post to the message forums. Several participants reported that they participate on the AAR site because it functions as a safe space in which individuals can freely discuss their enthusiasm for the romance genre without fear of being judged. When describing her experiences with being teased for reading romances, Kim noted, “That is probably why I am online a lot. I just like being on the message boards because it is still like around my friends they always tease me about reading my smutty novels.” Like Kim, Candace reported that one motivation for her participation with the AAR website was an opportunity for belonging to a community that similarly enjoys romance reading:

The forum would definitely be an outlet for me to be, let’s say, in agreeable surroundings where we all love the genre. We might not all love the same books, but definitely, we’re not going to trash or think, “That’s (*makes gagging sound*).” That kind of stuff.

AAR participation is motivated by a desire to avoid judgment from non-readers as well as a desire to be able to talk in-depth about books with fellow readers. As Beth explained, “It’s not just getting the reviews but kind of having that discussion about the books on that kind of level.” Thus, the use of the AAR site is a facework strategy: individuals protect their romance reading identities by participating anonymously with a group of people who have similar interests and who may be less likely to judge their reading practices than non-readers. Likewise, online participation enables readers to interact and discuss texts at length and in different ways than face-to-face interaction.

The AAR space is a rich site for the collection and dissemination of genre knowledge produced by romance readers. Several study participants reported that reading other women’s comments provided them with a means for reflecting on their own preferences and practices. This seemed particularly relevant for Beth who has been reading romances for eighteen months and repeatedly positioned herself as new to the genre. Beth explained the appeal of reading the AAR message boards in the following way:

It gives me more thought to things that I like...Oh yeah, I do really like this, don’t like that. You know, it might have been something that bothered me but I never really figured out honestly what it was about it and then somebody would label it or talk about it and it’s like oh yeah, that irritates me too.

As Beth describes, reading other romance readers’ posts provides her with insight into her own interests and practices that romance reading itself might not. In this way, the AAR site both initiates her into the romance genre and helps her to navigate particular textual conventions. Beth’s comment also illustrates readers’ authority and roles in producing genre knowledge: romance readers’ written comments to the message board shape other readers’ understanding of textual narratives. This seemed true even for Shelly who has been reading romance novels for over twenty years and has had a much longer and vaster experience with romantic texts than Beth. Shelly stated that she liked to “see the debates that people have about different topics related to romance” and that reading these debates clarified her own position. According to Shelly, AAR members provide a “lot of insight into the feminist aspect” of romance novels by describing how romances are “empowering to women.” Shelly’s account suggests that reading other women’s comments allows her to reflect on her own beliefs and shape how she reads romances as feminist texts.

Olivia, Maddie, and Kim frequently post to the AAR site, and I argue that their interactional writing practices enable them to construct authoritative, collaborative, political, and critical subjectivities from which to participate with the romance genre. In addition to providing recommendations online, these participants frequently engage in debates around textual conventions, perceptions, and politics. While it would be impossible to thoroughly discuss and analyze all of their combined 1500+ posts, I briefly explore some of the topics they have written about and then examine three ways in which Olivia's and Maddie's writing produces genre knowledge and makes space for enacting multiple subjectivities in relation to romantic texts and other readers. The AAR forum is divided into six, topic-specific message boards with the following descriptions:

1. Announcements – Look for any site-related technical and other issues here.
2. Let's Talk Romance Novels – This is the place to discuss anything and everything romance novel-related.
3. Romance Potpourri - General romance-related topics – including trends you love, covers, rants, pet peeves – are on the table here.
4. Writer's News – For authors to provide book tour, signing, and contest information, and for writers' groups to provide information on contests.
5. General Chat – An off-topic forum devoted to anything else - including movies, television, your hobbies - and only excluding politics and religion.
6. Wild Wild West – a no-holds barred off-topic forum for the discussion of politics, religion, and – well, the generally unspeakable. This forum is not for the faint of heart, and those who are easily offended should steer clear.

Within these forums, Maddie, Kim, and/or Olivia have engaged in discussion with other readers on a range of topics that include the following: reflection on specific generic practices such as re-reading; consideration of materiality such as covers, e-readers, and hardbacks; examination of distinctions between “literary” and “genre” fiction; criticism of sexist language, story lines, and character descriptions; and analysis of the political themes of novels, movies, and news stories.

Posting to the AAR site affords Olivia a means of examining textual conventions and discourses with other readers, illustrating the collaborative and social ways in which some readers interpret romantic texts. Like Beth and Shelly, Olivia reported that she enjoyed reading the opinions of other romance readers but added, “I have a lot of stuff that I like to talk about,

you know, things that occur to me or things that I've observed." By engaging in online discussions with other readers, Olivia writes herself into a position of authority from which to respond to questions about controversial aspects of the genre. For example, discussion posts frequently address textual conventions such as the "forced seduction" or rape of the romantic heroine. When an AAR member posted to the Romance Potpourri forum asking why some readers enjoy "old-fashioned rape romances," Olivia replied:

I wouldn't say I find rapists appealing, but I do find intensity and intense themes appealing. I like the theory over at *Dear Author*<sup>29</sup> that writers can win our consent (or fail to win our consent) for things such as rape scenes. The complexities of how this work[s] and why it sometimes doesn't are beyond me, but I'm aware of it.

By qualifying the question, situating the textual convention of rape within broader themes of narrative "intensity," and drawing from another reader's theory about its deployment, Olivia builds an ethos of authority from which to consider her reading practice and respond to another genre participant. Her comment reveals that textual conventions are contingent on participants' understandings of them and that these understandings are produced through relational as well as textual engagement. Catherine Schryer argues that genres and generic conventions are never really fixed or stable but rather constantly responding to different situations and contexts and therefore should be considered "stabilized-for-now" (200). Olivia's post suggests that readers' writing and discussions online play a significant role in producing the instability and polysemy of romantic conventions.

By participating in online discussions, Olivia not only takes part in shaping the meanings of textual conventions but also enacts a critical subjectivity from which to examine the raced, classed, and gendered discourses reproduced in romance novels. In another post criticizing the *Harlequin Presents* series, Olivia wrote:

In many romances - virtually all of the *Harlequin Presents* variety - the heroine isn't allowed to have had \*any\* sex during the Big Separation. 'Cause it was just never the same after Him. And while on the topic of HPs, it makes me crazy how all HP heroes are obscenely wealthy and successful and ambitious but God forbid the heroine is remotely interested in money for any reason other than the [sic] save her ailing mother or help the world's poor children.

---

<sup>29</sup> Another romance genre website: [www.dearauthor.com](http://www.dearauthor.com)

By posting her evaluations of *Harlequin* conventions to the AAR website, Olivia positions herself as both romance reader and critic. In doing so, she complicates previous romance scholarship on the effects of, and possibilities for, romance reading. For many romance scholars, central to the anxiety of romance reading as a gendered literacy practice is the concern for what adolescents and women learn by reading these texts. Much of the scholarship here is powerfully aligned: romance novels are “closed texts” that offer readers limited and oppressive gendered subject positions. For instance, in “Retailing Gender: Adolescent Book Clubs in Australian Schools,” Diane Cooper (1993) argues that the highly formulaic nature of romances keeps readers in a passive stupor: “Readers, constructed by the text through repeated experiences with the genre, may come to read it as compliant subjects. Such compliance reinforces the ideological messages of the text and its unproblematic ‘naturalness’” (19).

While compliant reading is certainly one possibility of sustained generic engagement, interviews and book discussions with these participants suggest that through repeated encounters with romances and other romance readers, women begin to notice, question, and critique generic patterns and discourses. In other words, the more familiar individuals become with a genre’s conventions, the more critical they might become of them. And websites such as AAR provide concrete evidence for how discussions with other genre enthusiasts foster opportunities for readers to enact a more critical stance towards romance novels. In the above passage, Olivia offers a gendered and classed critique of the ways *Harlequin Presents* novels structure sexual and economic desire. In voicing frustration with the heroine’s monogamy once she has encountered the hero, and frustration with the narrow presentation of classed and gendered realities in which men are “successful” and “ambitious” and women are nurturing and philanthropic, Olivia assumes a critical rather than compliant subject position. Her reading and writing practices thus suggest the ways long-time genre participation, and the interactions with other readers fostered by this participation, allow for individuals to take up and critique hegemonic discourses. Olivia demonstrates that the romantic heroine and compliant reader are not the only subject positions available to her; rather, Olivia is both a critic and expert of the romance genre.

As with Olivia, Maddie’s online writing practices allow her to participate with the romance genre as both a critic and expert; however, Maddie’s engagement with the AAR site makes a strong case for thinking about the political possibilities of genre participation that extend



beyond critical examination of romance novels themselves. While Olivia posts mainly to the romance-specific forums, Maddie frequently posts to the Wild Wild West forum (WWW), a message board devoted to political, religious, and other controversial issues. This active and popular section of AAR provides another way of thinking about romance novels as “carriers of relationships”: the genre-sponsored website creates a virtual space from which individuals who share a common interest can rigorously debate a variety of issues and forge connections and relationships around these debates. Maddie has written multiple, lengthy posts to discussion threads on the overturning of Proposition 8 in California<sup>30</sup>, President Obama’s performance thus far, and definitions of feminism, to name a few. Rather than analyze her thoughtful remarks on a variety of topics, I include here a response from another AAR member to Maddie’s comments on Prop 8:

I have particularly enjoyed what you have said in your [comments] with a somewhat different viewpoint than mine and they truly did make me stop and think (and still thinking). I like that. I'm not adverse to change; but I think you nailed it on the head when you said I prefer the thought process prior to that change, especially if it's a serious and significant one.

This AAR member’s response to Maddie’s comments offers powerful evidence for what a study of genre participation reveals that a study of readers or reading might not. That is, romance genre participation affords multiple opportunities for textual, social, and political engagement and fosters multiple kinds of subjectivities from which this engagement might occur. Understanding romance reading as only one of many practices in which women engage with romance novels makes space for thinking about their practices of writing and interacting with others through romance-related genres like AAR. By considering how a forum like the Wild Wild West is sponsored by AAR and made possible through a common interest in romance reading, we might reconsider the political potential of participation with the romance genre. As Chapter Three demonstrates, romance reading is driven by emotional and empathetic investment; scholars like Lauren Berlant have raised concerns that such affective reading practices may not lead individuals to take public action. I discuss this concern in greater depth in Chapter Five; in this instance, however, Olivia’s and Maddie’s engagements with the AAR site – and members’

---

<sup>30</sup> Prop 8 refers to a ballot proposition and state constitutional amendment passed in the November 2008 elections which provides that “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.”

responses to them – suggest that the activity of romance reading makes space for political action through conversation and debate.

### Conclusion

As with many popular culture forms, the romance genre is constituted in part by metaphors of addiction, privacy, and escape. In examining how women take up these metaphors, my aim is not to dismiss them or to treat them as unique to the romance genre. Rather, my aim is to examine how they function and what they leave out. Undoubtedly, this aim is informed by my desire to complicate common imaginings of romance readers, to push against long-standing discourses that position women readers as romance addicts. This desire has required me to work diligently throughout the research process to move from a defensive to an expansive position, one that seeks to multiply rather than refute the possibilities for thinking about romance readers and reading. As Elizabeth Birr Moje has argued, women and youth are often positioned as particularly vulnerable to popular culture, and this positioning can lead us to overlook or dismiss their engagements with popular texts as trivial or undemanding (“Re-Framing”). Even as women in this study describe romance reading in solitary and addictive ways, their talk also suggests that their genre participation is driven by relational connections to others (and the policing of those connections) as much as through textual encounters with novels. The relational dimensions of romance genre participation make visible a range of subjectivities and literate practices with which readers engage with romance novels, other romance readers, and non-readers. This finding points to the necessity of interrogating the commonplace discourses that circulate around popular culture and its consumers, discourses that can powerfully shape how everyday literacies are valued, recognized, and understood.

This finding also points to the value of critical literacy pedagogies that take into account the ways in which individuals intentionally and unintentionally shape the uses, meanings, and circulation of genres. This approach not only complements textual analyses of popular genres by situating texts in relation to their contexts of use; it also makes space for students to situate themselves as literate participants across academic and popular genres. Let me expand on these points by considering Matthew Brown’s “How is Cultural Studies Anyway? Evidence, Discipline, and the Iconographical Impulse.” Brown argues that textual analysis is a repertoire of cultural studies scholarship that can be used effectively in classrooms and serve as a “relevant

resource for progressive educators” (57). Brown suggests that a focus on objects, artifacts, and texts can serve as a “third term” between instructors and students and can mediate the progressive “values and positions” of the instructor:

[F]or instance, my interest in exposing the homophobic or homoerotic tensions of, say, a beer ad is better advanced by letting the textual details make the argument. A classroom organized around the scrutiny of objects, artifacts, and texts avoids the top-down pronouncements of the teacher...By orienting discussion to the political semiotics of an object, we provide a site through which students and teachers make meaning, while providing concrete examples of how ideology functions. In so doing, we cultivate a critical citizenry, one that is not only informed but dissenting. (63)

The pedagogy Brown describes can promote a democratic classroom whereby instructors and students work together to come to new understandings about the ideological, cultural, and rhetorical effects of particular texts. At the same time, the focus on what *texts* do shifts the focus away from what *students* do and can thus limit the kinds of subject positions and literacy practices students can enact in the classroom. In other words, inviting students to examine what they actually do with popular culture texts – in academic and non-academic settings – can foster deeper awareness of the ways genres operate in rhetorical, material, ideological, and social ways. Women’s engagements with romance fiction suggest that some women use talk and writing as a means of producing new, unsanctioned, and collaborative knowledge about the genre. In her work on women’s engagements with popular gossip magazines, Andrea McDonnell similarly notes that “the consensus-building that [magazine readers] partake in does not simply mirror the ideological messages put forth by the magazines...As readers gossip about celebrities, they vocalize their rejections of the genre’s ‘norms’” (102). Likewise, romance readers’ talk and writing about romance novels suggest that, through interaction with other readers, some women use romance novels to simultaneously take pleasure in, reflect on, and resist dominant norms.

In Chapter Five, I extend my analysis of romance genre participation by examining how Web 2.0 technologies are shaping readers’ engagements with romance fiction. I demonstrate how these technologies produce complex dynamics between producers and consumers while simultaneously offering individuals new ways of collaborating with other genre members, transitioning from reader to author, and participating in the production and circulation of genre knowledge.

## Chapter Five

### Reading, Writing, and Researching Romance in the Digital Age

#### Introduction

In describing how they searched for, purchased, and stored romance novels, several study participants responded similarly to Candace:

I will check the reviews [on the *All About Romance* website], the new reviews that come out...Because since I discovered [them], I have probably 300 books to read, a TBR<sup>31</sup> pile. It's the Himalayas. And then the Kindle came or, whatever, e-reader, 1,500 books in storage. What more do I need? That's it. I'm in business.

Candace's growing pile of reader-recommended books, and the digital capacity to easily store them, speak to the ways in which romance reading experiences and practices are changing as a result of digital technologies. While popular romance novels have circulated primarily through print mediums for the last century, in the last twenty years digital innovations like search engines, online community forums, and e-reader devices have created new avenues for romantic texts to circulate as well as greater accessibility to romantic texts and other users of them. In pointing to these changes, I am not suggesting that the influence of digital technologies on print media has been unidirectional; for instance, that e-reader devices are designed in size, weight, and function to mimic a book is evidence of the ways in which established media routinely shape new technologies. But I am emphasizing the ways in which genres are shaped by particular cultural, material, and – for the purposes of this chapter – digital conditions.

Of course, the collision between digital technologies and print fiction is not unique to the popular romance genre. In his recent book, *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins convincingly argues that the initial theorizing about the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital revolution – which was supposed to produce comprehensive transformations and render all previous forms of media obsolete – has given way to more subtle examinations of the ways in which old and new media collide and coexist. According to Jenkins:

---

<sup>31</sup> To Be Read.

Cinema did not kill theater. Television did not kill radio. Each old medium was forced to co-exist with emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a way of understanding the past several decades of media change than the old digital revolution paradigm. Old media are not being displaced. Rather their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies. (14)

Jenkins argues that media convergence is both a “top-down corporate-driven” and a “bottom-up consumer-driven” process whereby content flows through and across multiple old and new media platforms; this process represents not just a technological shift but also a cultural shift, “as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (18, 3). For Jenkins, the collision between old and new media can most readily be seen in the increasingly participatory culture infusing our current engagements with digital media, engagements “that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges*, “Enabling Participation,” ¶ 7).

In this chapter, I consider how digital spaces are shaping the popular romance genre and readers' experiences with it. I organize the chapter by three digital trends: an increase in Web 2.0 features on romance authors' websites; significant changes in the field of book publishing; and an emergence of digital forums in which readers, authors, and scholars regularly and publicly interact. Although each section examines a particular digital site in which genre participation is enacted, the chapter itself builds towards a larger argument. By considering how particular digital technologies and spaces are shaping the popular romance genre, I extend and build on the claims I make in Chapter Four that the appeal of romance fiction should be understood in part by the varied ways readers can shape the genre and interact with other users of it. By illustrating how readers can collaborate regularly with authors, self-publish their own novels, and participate in academic discourses and research about the genre – practices that were impossible or at least unlikely even fifteen years ago – I contextualize romance genre participation within 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies and technologies. I also argue that critical literacy pedagogies can attend to these kinds of changes by incorporating genre analyses that examine how and to what effect media content and its users move across old and new media platforms. Like Henry Jenkins, I do not suggest that new and innovative digital conditions have revolutionized popular romance fiction; I do suggest, however, that corporate and consumer relations are shifting and that these shifts offer new possibilities for how individuals can participate with the romance genre.

### Intimate Publics Online: Collaboration and Community in Author-Sponsored Websites

This section considers how romance readers' experiences with popular romance fiction are shaped by Web 2.0 technologies within author-sponsored websites. In many ways, the websites of Jennifer Crusie and Beverly Jenkins are quite similar: each enables and supports particular kinds of literacy practices and interactions revolving around romance novels and other topics important to the individuals who use them, and in turn, each site promotes the sale and distribution of the authors' novels for profit. As I demonstrate, interactions between Crusie, Jenkins, and their respective fans – made possible through blogs, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, and the like – are marked by discourses of familiarity, benevolence, and the quotidian. Within these interactions, romance authors are as likely to chat online with romance readers about the personal details of their daily lives as they are about an upcoming release of a new romance novel. Romance authors are encouraged by their publishers to promote themselves online, and Crusie and Jenkins have successfully done so through a variety of interactive features designed to create a loyal fan base and predictable revenue.

Without doubt, the popular romance genre, and users of it, participate in what Lauren Berlant calls an "intimate public," one "constituted by strangers who consume texts and things" (viii). The sense of community that flourishes within these authors' digital spaces, and the commercial dimensions that infuse them, put into sharp focus Berlant's notion of the intimate public, the loosely-organized collectives that form through an orientation towards particular affects, desires, and worldviews. According to Berlant, an intimate public is most often "juxtapolitical" in that it locates itself "in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds" (3). And yet, even as women's intimate and interactive experiences within these romance-related web spaces are mediated by commercial transaction, they also entail complex enactments of literacy and knowledge building. And even as the romance genre constitutes a simultaneously intimate and anonymous public, it also fosters actual communities of readers who collaborate with one another, share lived experiences, and situate their interests in romance fiction within larger cultural and political contexts. As I demonstrate, the digital spaces that romance readers and writers traverse reproduce juxtapolitical forms of engagement *and* make possible political action.

By examining the digital technologies and discursive mechanisms that package consumer relations as personal, and by considering the kinds of literate and social practices made possible by these mechanisms, I therefore consider how an intimate public operates online.

### *Jennifer Crusie*

Prompted by her business partner, Molly, to reinvent her “Internet presence,” best-selling contemporary romance author Jennifer Crusie crafted her first blog post and, in 2005, *Argh, Ink: More Than You Ever Wanted to Hear from Jenny Crusie*<sup>32</sup> went live. In my interview with her, Crusie recalled that she had been running her own website since 1995, but when Mollie became her partner, she insisted that Crusie not only revamp the site but also add a blog component in order to increase reader involvement and regularly change the content of the homepage. Crusie was dubious: “I said, ‘First of all, what’s a blog? And, second, nobody’s going to read this thing. This is ridiculous.’” Within the first month, however, Crusie’s posts received numerous responses from enthusiastic readers, and today, her blog remains the most active component of her official website.<sup>33</sup>

Since its inception, Crusie’s approaches to *Argh, Ink* as well as three of her affiliate sites (*Cherry Forums*,<sup>34</sup> *Popcorn Dialogues*,<sup>35</sup> and the *Writewell Academy*<sup>36</sup>) have been marked by a sense of collaboration that parallels her philosophy as a fiction writer more generally. For Crusie, a good piece of writing does not perfectly meet the needs of all its readers; rather, it leaves room for readers to add in their own voices:

If there’s a certain tone and a certain mood and the story is solid readers will write into the white space the things they need...I think that’s the biggest mistake or one of the biggest mistakes beginning writers do. They try to describe everything and they try to tell you what everybody’s thinking and they try – they’ve got this stranglehold on the story and they don’t leave any place for the reader to collaborate.

In many ways, Crusie’s websites operate as “white space,” whereby individuals regularly collaborate with Crusie on her latest novels but also in the building of a shared knowledge about writing as craft. Within these sites, readers are encouraged to participate as fellow writers and

---

<sup>32</sup> [www.arghink.com](http://www.arghink.com)

<sup>33</sup> [www.jennycrusie.com](http://www.jennycrusie.com)

<sup>34</sup> [www.cherryforums.com](http://www.cherryforums.com)

<sup>35</sup> [www.popcorndialogues.com](http://www.popcorndialogues.com)

<sup>36</sup> [www.writewellacademy.com](http://www.writewellacademy.com)

genre critics, and to offer their perspectives and expertise. The result is a series of active communities that render authorial, readerly, critical, and marketing subjectivities more permeable and the relationships among them more complex. These intentional and successful collaborative efforts make Crusie's sites rich resources for learning about the romance industry and about how to write fiction; at the same time, they promote the sale and distribution of Crusie's novels by commodifying a personalized relationship with Crusie herself. In other words, Crusie's romance novels are marketed through an ever-developing knowledge of, and intimate relationship with, the Crusie persona constructed online.

Crusie's blog entries on *Argh, Ink* regularly invite readers to participate in the development of her latest novels. In turn, this collaboration helps produce an interactive and personalized experience for Crusie fans: individuals who participate on this blog do not just read published Crusie novels but in some ways actively co-construct them. Crusie frequently uses the blog as an informal writing group, posting excerpts from scenes she's working on and asking for readers' input: "If I have a scene I want to workshop I throw it up there and say, 'What do you think?' And they tear it apart and some of them are wrong and some of them are right." In a post from June of 2010 titled "Scene Revision: Liz vs. Aunt ML," Crusie offers tips on drafting and revising and then posts one of her own scenes from the upcoming book *Lavender's Blue*, along with specific "beta reader" questions for individuals to address as they comment on the scene. Readers of this particular post provided detailed feedback of the scene, directing responses to both Crusie and fellow commenters, and addressing questions about conflict, reader expectations, and the relationship between protagonist and antagonist. In addition to workshopping, Crusie also uses the blog to solicit immediate feedback from readers about marketing decisions and ideas. When she disliked the cover her publisher had chosen for a reprint of one of her books, Crusie posted a picture of the cover to her blog and asked readers what they thought: "All the commenters came back in going, 'It's been done a million times' and 'I hate that pink shoe.' And then I sent [the blog post] to my editor and said, 'Yo, look at the comments.'" As a result, the cover to the re-release of *The Cinderella Deal* was revised to reflect Crusie's and her readers' perception of the heroine's sense of style:



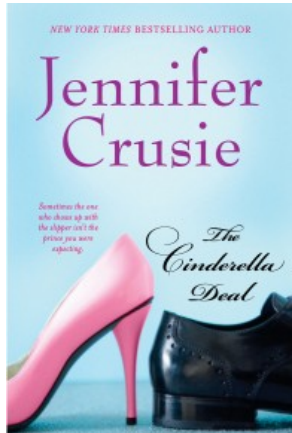


Figure 5.1 Original Idea for Crusie Cover



Figure 5.2 Revised Crusie Cover

In the following entry, she uses the blog to solicit readers' help on a specific plot point. In one of her recent novels, the heroine's car breaks down. Here, Crusie asks readers to provide her with a plausible explanation as to why:

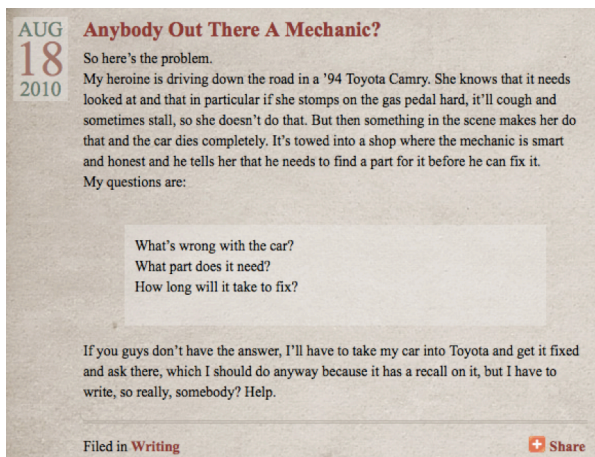


Figure 5.3 Crusie Blog Post 8/18/2010

This consistent and frequent collaboration between author and reader means that the individuals who frequent this site take an active and concrete role in shaping the texts they read before the books ever make it into their hands. In many ways, *Argh, Ink* positions readers as co-constructors of Crusie novels, providing opportunities for individuals to collaborate in the “white space,” not only as readers adding to a published novel to suit their needs, but as beta

readers offering writing advice and feedback to an author's early drafts. As they talk back and forth with Crusie and participate in the development of her novel, individuals' experiences with a mass-market commodity likely seem markedly more personalized, individualized, and intimate than had their first encounter with the novel taken place in a chain bookstore.

At the same time, Crusie's success and expertise in the field of romance fiction, and readers' interests in learning more about the romance industry and techniques for writing romance, make *Argh, Ink* not only a site for fans to have more ways to engage with Crusie and her novels, but also a resource for novice writers who want free instruction from a professional

author. In fact, much of *Argh, Ink* and its sister sites seem dedicated to explicit and – with the exception of the soon-to-be-launched *Writewell Academy* – free instruction and knowledge building around the production of popular romance fiction. In turn, this collaboration helps produce not just a more interactive experience between author and reader but a shared knowledge about writing, publishing, and marketing romance. And because these sites blend blog-led topics with forum-generated discussions, they produce both a sense of apprenticeship (in which Crusie is the clear and established authority) and collective intelligence (in which multiple members of the community have something of value to add). When I asked Crusie why she dedicated much of her time to talking about how to write, publish, and market romance, she responded: “Oh, I really wasn’t born to be a writer. I was born to be a teacher. I love teaching...I can do it very easily on the blog or on the *Cherry Forums*. I just go in and go, ‘Hey, anybody want to talk about head hopping<sup>37</sup>?’ And people show up and we talk about it.”

Frequently, Crusie, who was in fact a public school teacher for fifteen years prior to writing her first novel, posts mini-lessons to *Argh, Ink* in which she teaches her readers something about the craft of romance writing, for instance: point of view, dialogue, head hopping, or drafting a scene. These genre-specific writing lessons focus on topics often generated by the readers themselves and sometimes include guest speakers, as with a January 2012 post that featured a chat between Crusie and two other authors (Anne Stuart<sup>38</sup> and Lucy March<sup>39</sup>) about how to write compelling romance heroines. If readers are *really* interested in pursuing these writing and industry topics, they can click on a link at the top of their screens and be redirected to the *Cherry Forums*, another Crusie-sponsored site. Originally a Yahoo! Crusie Fan Club, the *Cherry Forums* now offers regular book clubs and reviews, a writing support

---

<sup>37</sup> The practice of shifting from one character’s point of view to another’s within a single scene or even a single paragraph. Head hopping is different from multiple POV, a writing technique frequently used in romance fiction, so that readers experience both the hero’s and heroine’s point of view throughout the novel. With multiple POV, the perspective generally shifts at scene breaks or chapter breaks. Head hopping occurs much more frequently and within a single scene, as with the following example from Nora Roberts’s *Born in Fire*:

“What?” he managed in something like a croak. The need for dignity had him clearing his throat and pressing her back. “What’s all this?” (*hero’s perspective*)

“You know...” She punctuated her words by feathering light kisses over his face. He smelled expensive, she realized, all fine soap and starched linen. “I’ve always thought a tie a foolish thing, a sort of punishment for a man simply for being a man. Doesn’t it choke you?” (*heroine’s perspective*)

It didn’t, unless his heart was in his throat. “No.” He shoved her hands away, but the damage was already done. Under her quick fingers, his tie was loose and his collar undone. “What are you about, Maggie?” (*hero’s perspective*) (Kindle Edition).

<sup>38</sup> aka Kristina Douglas.

<sup>39</sup> aka Lani Diane Rich.

group, forums for discussion, and forums about the publishing and marketing of romance novels. While the site is run by a group of dedicated volunteer moderators, Crusie consistently participates in the site's discussions, offering advice from her own writing and career experiences. In describing the discussions around writing craft that take place on the *Cherry Forums*, Crusie noted:

The nice thing there too is there are a lot of very smart people in the forums. So a lot of times they bring up stuff that I haven't seen. The moderators and I have been together for a long, long time. So they are perfectly fine saying, 'You know, I don't agree with that, Jenny,' which is really great because then you can argue it out and in arguing it out you learn so much more.

As Crusie suggests, the *Cherry Forums* serves as a site of collected and contested knowledge, where individuals with a range of experiences and expertise weigh in on a variety of romance writing and reading-related topics. While *Argh, Ink* discussions stem primarily from Crusie's lengthy blog posts and focus explicitly on Crusie's novels and career, anyone can post a new discussion thread to *Cherry Forums*, leading to a much wider range of voices and topics.

In addition to *Argh, Ink* and the *Cherry Forums*, Crusie sponsors two supplementary websites where she and her readers can virtually meet: *Popcorn Dialogues* and *Writewell Academy*. Both sites rely firmly on an apprenticeship model of instruction, whereby Crusie and fellow writer Lucy March are the primary voices of authority and readers can "listen in" on their conversations. Both also rely on downloadable podcasts and multi-modal lectures. On *Popcorn Dialogues*, Crusie and March host weekly movie nights with the express intention of "watching movies to write better novels." Every Sunday night, interested individuals can gather in a chat room and then watch a movie together, posting their comments about story-related issues, including character development, narrative, genre, and audience. Afterwards, Crusie and March record and post a podcast that analyzes how particular narrative features of the movie did or did not succeed, and how an understanding of these features might foster genre-fiction writing. In addition to their collaboration on *Popcorn Dialogues*, Crusie and March have recently developed and are about to launch *Writewell Academy*, a site devoted solely to fiction writing instruction that will feature 100, 200, 300, and 400-level multi-modal lectures on a variety of narrative and writing topics. In order to download and listen to the lectures, individuals will need to pay a \$10 fee per lecture. Interestingly, upon reading about Crusie and March's plan to open the *Writewell*

*Academy*, many readers posted to *Argh, Ink* that the \$10 lecture fee was too low. As one commenter wrote:

You're undervaluing the product. You and Lani have worked years to develop your knowledge and your craft. I understand not wanting to take advantage of your readers and budding authors. I respect the hell out of that. But the level and information you're willing to share is worth more than \$10 a lecture.

Indeed, the ease and accessibility with which individuals can collaborate online through a variety of interactive and multi-modal learning tools can disguise the intellectual energy at work within these spaces while simultaneously leading readers to expect it. For instance, Crusie, as well as the other four romance authors I interviewed, all confirmed that they felt increasing pressure to have an "internet presence" and to render that presence interactive through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and personal websites. While Crusie's online persona is no doubt constructed in part to increase sales of her books, it also makes readily available years of formal writing experience and pedagogy.

The participatory and collaborative work done through *Argh, Ink*, the *Cherry Forums*, *Popcorn Dialogues*, and *Writewell Academy* raises a number of issues about the ways in which these kinds of digital spaces shape how romance readers interact with one another, romantic texts, and romance author Jennifer Crusie. First, these spaces foster movement in the sense that individuals are encouraged to take up and shift among multiple roles: they can participate with romantic texts and other users not only as Crusie fans and readers but also as fellow writers, genre experts, and critics. By fostering collaboration with Crusie on her latest novels, and by contributing to a vast and shared knowledge about how to write, publish, and market romance novels, these sites suggest that the relationship between production and consumption is not fixed or linear but permeable and recursive. Within Crusie-sponsored spaces, genre participation is marked by a blend of apprenticeship and collective knowledge whereby readers are encouraged to interact as novice writers, learn from a successful author in the field, and contribute to the knowledge base of these evolving online resources.

I would also argue that there is a feminist politics at work within Crusie-sponsored sites and through the support of fellow writers of varying expertise and experience. The consistent moves on Crusie's part to collaborate with others, share her knowledge, welcome dissenting opinions, and encourage novice writers who are navigating the romance industry all gesture toward and help support egalitarian social relations among members of these digital

communities. Moreover, even as the online interactions fostered by the Crusie web spaces most frequently revolve around issues related to the romance industry, they also occasionally encourage overt political engagement on the part of her fans. For instance, in an *Argh, Ink* blog post from February 2012, titled “Fund Planned Parenthood,” Crusie writes:

This comes down to one group of people trying to make it difficult for another group, mostly poor women, to not only make their own choices but to get free birth control and breast care...I think Planned Parenthood is always a good place to send your money, but right now, donating is voting, it's a very public and tangible way to say, “I do not agree with what's happening and I want to make sure the work Planned Parenthood does continues.”...If you can't afford to give (and believe me, I sympathize) sign a letter of support so your voice will still be heard...I usually try to keep *Argh* from being political, although it's no secret I'm an independent liberal...*Argh* will return to its usual frivolity tomorrow. Tonight, I feel the need to fight the good fight.

While Crusie characterizes this post as a rare break from the “usual frivolity” of *Argh, Ink*, I suggest that it is not a break from but rather an extension of the routine intellectual and social work done among individuals who frequent this site. In some ways, the explicit call to action that Crusie endorses resembles the implicit moves she makes throughout *Argh, Ink* and its sister sites to promote a sense of community that values collective engagement and shared knowledge building. The fact that her websites do clearly advertise and promote the sales of her novels should not reduce these spaces, or the analyses of them, to their marketing effects.

That said, the capability of web 2.0 features to foster more participatory and personalized experiences with Crusie novels is what also makes possible the marketing of Crusie as both a best-selling author and a best friend. For instance, the *Argh, Ink* blog posts are a rich resource for aspiring writers, offering insider knowledge about the romance industry and the craft of writing romance fiction. But they just as often offer intimate details of Crusie's life and an “all-access” view into her experiences. On the blog, a reader can share in Crusie's grief as she mourns the loss of her beloved dog; she can sympathize with her ongoing financial and medical struggles; she can celebrate with Crusie as she becomes a grandmother. A reader entering Crusie's website can – in one corner – read a moving blog post titled “The Abyss and Me,” in which Crusie chronicles her feelings of defeat and failure as a writer, and – in another corner – click on a button that will link her to Amazon.com where she can purchase Crusie's latest novel. Likewise, On *Popcorn Dialogues*, a reader can hang out every Sunday night with her favorite author and watch movies, and on both *Argh, Ink* and the *Cherry Forums*, she can learn from Crusie's warm

encouragement and advice about issues related not just to the romance industry but to life more generally. Through all these sites, readers can share their own life experiences, insights, triumphs, and failures with Crusie the author and friend. Together, these web 2.0 features – blogs, forums, chat rooms, and the like – promote not only increased participation and personalization with popular culture texts but with the producers of those texts, packaging intimate and real-life relationships alongside fictional ones.

### *Beverly Jenkins*

Beverly Jenkins has received numerous writing awards and recognition over the course of her career for her fictional narratives of 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American life and history. By browsing her official website,<sup>40</sup> one can find a brief biography of Jenkins, learn about upcoming promotional events, and read a summary of each of her thirty-two historical and contemporary romance novels. While her website offers a snapshot of Jenkins's reputation and success as a romance author, her Facebook page provides a much fuller picture of her appeal as a writer, activist, historian, and church and community member, and it provides a Web 2.0 platform from which her fans can regularly interact with her. However, while Crusie's sites foster interaction around writing instruction and industry knowledge, Jenkins's Facebook page promotes interaction around the mundane and ordinary aspects of everyday life. Where Crusie offers lengthy blog posts about her experiences as an author, Jenkins uses Facebook to promote daily and routine conversations among her readers. Although clearly a medium by which she, like many romance authors, endorses herself and her novels, the Beverly Jenkins Facebook page also attends to everyday happenings as a productive site of politics, social justice, and community involvement.

In many ways, Jenkins's Facebook page seamlessly integrates discourses of marketing, intimacy, and cultural awareness, producing a digital space that blurs the lines between self-promotion and communal good. This blurring is accomplished first by the kinds of conversation-starters Jenkins posts and, second, by the discourses of familiarity they employ. For instance, Jenkins posted at least once a day – and often much more – for twenty-eight days in March 2012. Of the more than 150 posts during this month, less than one-fourth promoted her books or career explicitly. These promotional posts took two forms: 1) announcements or reminders about

---

<sup>40</sup> [www.beverlyjenkins.net](http://www.beverlyjenkins.net)

interviews, book releases, tours, and book club sessions or 2) live, virtual book club sessions. Announcements were frequently presented as responses to requests for information from other participants on her Facebook page (whom she frequently refers to as “crew members” or “family”) rather than as unsolicited advertisements, as in: “I was asked about the book release schedule so here goes...” or “Crew member wants to know which BJ audio title is the best, and how long is the runtime?” or “I was asked to post this [interview] again, so here it goes – me and all my fabulousness. LOL.” Discursively, these posts cast self-promotion in communal terms: they start as replies to conversations and in turn foster ongoing discussions about Jenkins’s upcoming books, audio titles, and latest interviews. In doing so, they present the kind of information that could be found in a commercial or magazine as the by-products of informal group discussions rather than the content of stand-alone advertisements.

The second kinds of posts that refer directly to Jenkins’s books or career are the live, virtual book club sessions. One Tuesday of each month at 9:00 PM Eastern Time, Jenkins hosts a book discussion of one of her books on Facebook, posting questions every fifteen minutes to which individuals can respond. In March 2012, over seventy individuals participated in a discussion of Jenkins’s historical romance *Topaz*, debating favorite scenes, character development, and the value of the added chapter in the recently released anniversary edition of the novel. Participants in the discussion directed their comments to “Bev,” other members, or the group as a whole, creating a virtual discussion among multiple individuals even while the Facebook platform only allows them to link their comments to Jenkins’s original question. Jenkins’s reminders about the upcoming book discussion also helped to direct her public posts (which can be read by anyone with a Facebook account) towards a community of fellow readers by describing her Facebook page as her “house” – a metaphor she frequently employs – to create a sense of gathering: “This is going to be a wild night. There are a ton of folks in the house tonight. *Topaz* is a huge BJ favorite, so we may need to bring chairs up out of the basement for this one.” By using a platform like Facebook as a virtual “house” in which her “family” regularly gathers to discuss her novels, Jenkins evokes a sense that these monthly book discussions are intimate events even as they are on public display; in turn, readers’ enthusiastic comments serve as free advertising by creating buzz and excitement around Jenkins’s novels online.

Of course, as with Crusie, to suggest that Jenkins’s Facebook page is a marketing tool does not dismiss the relational and intimate connections maintained through the site or the social

activity produced through these connections. For instance, that her page has over 1,200 “likes” and several hundred users who regularly post to it is likely due not only to the subtlety of the advertisements to be found there but also to the fact that the vast majority of Jenkins’s posts do not mention upcoming sales, promotionals, or her books at all. Rather, most of Jenkins’s posts work to maintain a particular kind of community that extends beyond a shared interest in her novels and includes interactions around church, sports, current events, and African-American history and culture. This sense of community is first accomplished through regular posts in which Jenkins shares a bit about her daily life and inquires about the lives of her readers, as in: “Morning Fam. Spent yesterday running hither thither and yon, but here now and waiting for my coffee pot to do its thing. How’re you this Monday???” or “Locking up. Many thanks for your caring and wisdom...Love y’all. Night.” While Crusie’s blog posts offer lengthy and reflective musings on a range of topics, Jenkins’s posts offer short glimpses into her daily life.

Nevertheless, they position the individuals who frequent her page as family members who are cared for, wished well, and important. Jenkins includes not only the latest news about her career but also the mundane details of her day, and her comments evoke a familial home that is visited and “lock[ed] up” at night rather than a digital site that is commercial and always accessible. Not surprisingly, individuals frequently respond to Jenkins’s posts with intimate details of their own lives, as with one woman who wrote, “Good morning, Ms. B. Unfortunately, I’m going into my third day of hospitalization. On the bright side, God is still good and I’m reading *Midnight* on my Nook. What can I say – I’m a die-hard BJ fan!!!! ;).”

Certainly, “die-hard” fans are made welcome on Jenkins’s Facebook page and can use the site as a source of information and affinity with other fans. While cultural accounts of “fandom” often evoke either the lone individual who has developed an “intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure” or, alternatively, the individual who is a “frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd,” digital spaces like Jenkins’s Facebook page make increasingly possible a different version of fandom, one marked by daily and common interactions with artists rather than imaginary or momentary encounters with them (Jenson 11). These kinds of communications between Beverly Jenkins and her fans differ in distinct ways from Henry Jenkins’s theorization of “participatory culture,” which evokes a sense of agency, creativity, and control as individuals use digital technologies to find ways of reshaping media content as their own. By contrast, the interactions that take place on Beverly Jenkins’s page suggest a form of participation that is less



motivated by creativity and control than by banality and repetition: the daily “Hello,” “How are you?” and “Good night” messages that Jenkins posts, and the responses she receives, reproduce the ordinary regularities of everyday life and seem to serve purposes of reassurance and affirmation rather than offer special or particularly memorable experiences between artist and fan. The relative invisibility of African American romance readers and writers in comparison to the largely white romance industry may also create a particular need for a basic sense of community; indeed, formal and informal demographic data available on Jenkins’s Facebook page suggest that that a significant number of members who frequent her site are African American women between the ages of thirty five and forty four.

At the same time, the interactions on Jenkins’s Facebook page that revolve around the everyday are productive of what Kathleen Stewart refers to as “ordinary affects,” and they act as an integral site of cultural politics (Stewart 15). As Stewart suggests, “A world of shared banalities can be a basis of sociality” that “incites participation and takes on a life of its own” (28-29). On Jenkins’s Facebook page, the shared ordinariness of everyday life promotes a supportive and intimate community, one that is often mobilized for, or made aware of, specific causes related to issues of gender, race, and class. For instance, in my interview with her, Jenkins attributed her activity on Facebook in large part to her own desire to “not only connect with readers, but it’s also a good way for me to – I don’t know – lead people to stuff. Like what we’re doing right now is gathering books for the Women’s Prison Book Project.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Jenkins’s posts often serve to raise awareness of service projects like WPBP or to assist fellow “crew members,” as in a post from March 1, 2012: “One of the members of our crew needs help with workmen’s comp issues and her employer is being so not helpful. If you have any experience in this area, can you let me know. She just needs some advice. Thanks in advance.” While these posts are less frequent than those that simply invite members to share their daily experiences, I believe they are in part dependent on them. The attention to the ordinary makes space for the daily struggles of community and non-community members to be heard. The moves on Jenkins’s part to foster a diverse community of women readers who mobilize for particular causes and reach out to support each other are infused with a cultural politics that emphasizes local action and awareness. As Beverly Jenkins explained it to me, “[I]t’s a lot of social awareness, lots of

---

<sup>41</sup> The Women’s Book Project is a non-profit, grassroots organization that provides women and transgender-identified persons with free reading material. For more information, visit [www.wpbp.org](http://www.wpbp.org).

hugs and understandings for those who are going through, you know, what everybody goes through at least once or twice, three times in their life.”

The social and cultural awareness to which Jenkins referred in our interview is also evident in her deliberate sharing of You Tube videos of African-American singers, songwriters, and public figures; her coverage of political and current events, including the death of Trayvon Martin; and her frequent “Black History Fact” posts, which provide readers with short, historical details that correspond with the day they are posted: “Black History Fact: March 16, 1995. State of Mississippi ratifies 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. 130 yrs after the rest of the US.” In explaining her reasoning for regularly including these posts on Facebook, Jenkins stated:

Because I think somebody says, you know, the old saying, ‘When much is given to one, much is expected.’ So I think it behooves me, since I do have this forum, to not just sit back and say, ‘Oh, yes, yes, I’m great. I’m Beverly Jenkins blah blah blah,’ but to move that blessing forward...So, doing that black history fact every couple days or whatever is my way of, sort of, giving back because it’s a community of women, and it’s a fabulous community.

Like Crusie, Beverly Jenkins promotes her career through discourses of self-disclosure and familiarity, discourses supported by social media technologies that promote daily, virtual conversations among geographically disparate community members. But, as Jenkins suggests, her Facebook page also promotes a politics and activism that is grounded in the everyday and sustained through routine interactions. Her work on Facebook suggests a complicated relationship between popular fiction and politics, between the affects produced through pleasure reading and those necessary for political work. By starting from a shared interest in her novels, Jenkins’s Facebook page can move readers towards a range of political engagements and investments. The posts and interactions I note above suggest that the kind of intimate public produced through participation with Jenkins’s romance novels and Facebook page has not only juxtapolitical but overtly political dimensions as well.

Henry Jenkins argues that convergence culture relies on “ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (254). Certainly, we can see this convergence culture play out in the sponsored communities of Crusie and Jenkins. This complexity, I contend, does not stem only from an increase in the kinds of interaction, movement, and agency readers have through author-sponsored sites, but also from the ways in

which commodities circulate within these spaces as both romance novels and tools for intimate relationships with their authors. Within these participatory spaces, the boundaries of writer/reader, producer/consumer, and fan/friend begin to blur, changing the ways romance readers interact with published texts and other users of them. The possibilities for romance readers to routinely collaborate with one another and with romance authors; to extend, develop, and learn new reading and writing practices; to situate a shared interest in romance novels within larger cultural, social, and political interests; and to navigate marketing and industry tactics in increasingly complex ways all point to the “ever more complex relations” between producers and consumers to which Jenkins refers. The web 2.0 technologies and intimate discourses deployed through these websites simultaneously reproduce a public constituted by consumers *and* create space for individuals to coalesce in particular formations for purposes of collaboration, community, and political engagement.

#### Possibilities of e-Publishing and The Instant Sensation of *50 Shades of Grey*

*50 Shades of Grey*, a BDSM<sup>42</sup> romance novel written by first-time author E.L. James and published as a digital book through a small e-publishing community in Australia, has recently garnered a seven-figure deal from Vintage Books, a movie contract with Universal Studios and Focus Features, and a #1 spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, all without ever having been in print in the United States. Originally a work of fan-fiction based on the *Twilight* characters Edward and Bella, James’s novel spread through word of mouth and social media sites and had readers eagerly awaiting the next two installments, *50 Shades Darker* and *50 Shades Freed*. The success of James’s novel, and the means by which it was written, published, and circulated, serve as a prime example of media convergence and the impact of digital publishing technologies on romance fiction. The publishing world is presently undergoing radical changes; in this section, I examine the current landscape of non-traditional publishing and what it means to write romance fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For the past several years, a research team at the University of Arizona has been examining the increase in non-traditional publishing models and their relationship to mainstream publishing models; the team’s distinction and analysis of the two is particularly useful for

---

<sup>42</sup> Bondage/Discipline, Discipline/Submission, Sadism/Masochism

considering changes in popular romance fiction, and so I begin by laying out some key terms.<sup>43</sup> Mainstream publishing refers to large corporate publishers and smaller independent publishers who “select the books they want to publish [both print and electronic], assume the financial responsibility for publication, and pay the author through royalties” (Bradley, Fulton, Helm & Pittner). Under this model, publishers purchase a manuscript from an author and then work with various editing, marketing, and retailing services to produce and distribute the book, often in consultation with the author. Non-traditional publishing can be divided into two categories: 1) authors who publish their own work and 2) entities that publish content that does not require author royalties (such as public domain and open source material). For the purposes of this project, I am interested only in the first category. I would like to note here the usefulness of the terms “mainstream” and “non-traditional” as opposed to “print” and “digital” because, as Bradley et al. suggest, most modern print technologies use digital printing, which refers to the “xerographic printing processes used by high-speed copying machines and computer-based laser printers.” “Mainstream” and “non-traditional” models refer both to the digital technologies and the industry changes that shape the relationship between publisher and author.

Author publishing (or self-publishing) can take a variety of forms but generally refers to conditions in which an author chooses to publish something she has written and is responsible for the fees associated with the production and distribution of the text. In this scenario, an author can use a fee-based publishing service, an automated publishing website, or a personal website to publish her material (Bradley and Vokac). Fee-based publishing services allow authors to act as their own publisher but subcontract the services they do not wish to handle themselves; Amazon’s CreateSpace is a clear example of this route, a service through which “authors can purchase publishing infrastructure, manufacturing, distribution and marketing services previously provided for free by [mainstream] publishers for their selected authors, shifting both the decision to publish and the financial burden to the author, but giving them opportunities to reach audiences previously dominated by commercial companies” (Bradley and Vokac). Fee-based publishing services frequently publish in both electronic formats (to be read on e-reader devices) and print formats, using Print-on-Demand, or POD. With POD, a book is produced and

---

<sup>43</sup> I am incredibly grateful for the scholarly efforts of this research group affiliated with the School of Information and Library Science at the University of Arizona. Since 2008, they have analyzed 93 self-publishing services and 348 of the 385,173 books available through these services, offering one of the first empirical studies of the rapidly changing book publishing industry. The work done by Bradley et al has served as an invaluable resource for my own thinking about romance fiction publishing specifically.

distributed in small numbers, or even one copy at a time, when an order is placed. A second option for self-publishing is through automated publishing websites which “exist solely to provide mechanics for authors to upload and share their work, free for the author and free for the reader” (Bradley and Vokac). Examples of automated publishing websites include fanfiction sites and [FictionCentral.net](http://FictionCentral.net). Finally, authors can construct a personal website where they make their content (and sometimes the content of other writers) available for free or for a fee.

Self-publishing places the power to produce and distribute books in the hands of the author. Traditionally, publishing houses have had access to printing presses and retail distributors; within the self-publishing model, anyone with word processing software and Internet access can make their writing available. Additionally, self-publishing – combined with the option to distribute a book in electronic format or using POD – is far more cost-effective than the mainstream publishing of print books. Publishing has generally been an industry constrained by scarce resources. It requires making a best guess at the demand a book will generate; keeping backlists of books in stock; and depending on booksellers to find buyers. Once a book is available in digital format, however, it can be infinitely reproduced and digitally shipped as an e-book at almost no cost; or it can be published in print form only to the extent that it is in demand. These cost-effective options are in turn supported by increasingly sophisticated search engines and social networking sites that make it possible for readers to browse through and locate a far greater variety of books than could ever be housed in a brick-and-mortar bookstore. Combined, the increased accessibility, affordability, and searchability of the publishing world have helped to produce what Chris Anderson refers to as the “Long Tail”<sup>44</sup>: an entertainment and publishing industry that thrives on choice, niche markets, and “selling less of more” (10).

For romance fiction, non-traditional publishing has made it increasingly possible for romance readers to become romance authors. In truth, the romance reader-turned-author transition has been a familiar narrative since the 1970s. Best-selling romance authors LaVyrle Spencer, Mary Balogh, Lorraine Heath, and countless others have described their experiences of reading a romance novel and subsequently deciding to become an author (or finally deciding what to write about). This decision is often met by discouragement, as authors detail the difficulty in clinching a book deal despite (or because of) a prolific industry responsible for the

---

<sup>44</sup> The “long tail” refers to the statistical curve of an inventory and distribution model in which businesses accumulate significant profit by selling small volumes of products to many consumers rather than selling large volumes of products to a small number of consumers.

largest share of the U.S. consumer market and generally welcoming of new writers. As Mary Balogh writes, “I pulled a Harlequin romance out of a Corn Flakes box one day, held it over the garbage can, and then decided to read it. I found it wonderfully entertaining. ‘I can do this,’ I thought. I couldn’t. Harlequin returned the two manuscripts I dashed off to them” (24). Of course, the option to self-publish in no way guarantees that struggling or novice writers will make a profit from their books; yet the success stories of writers like E.L. James and Amanda Hocking suggest the benefits of skipping a mainstream publisher. Over the course of nine years, Hocking wrote multiple short stories and novels, all of which were rejected by major publishing houses. In April 2010, Hocking started making her novels available on Amazon through Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP). KDP allows writers to set their own price (from 99 cents to \$9.99), so Hocking decided to sell her first novel for 99 cents (for which she earned 30% of the profits) and her subsequent novels for \$2.99 (for which she earned 70% of the profits). By March 2011, she had sold over a million copies of nine of her books and has subsequently signed a \$2.1 million contract with St. Martin’s Press (Pikington). While her urban fantasy YA romances did not impress the publishing houses to which she submitted them, they found instant success through Amazon’s KDP.

Non-traditional publishing has also made it easier for romance readers to find backlisted and out-of-print novels. Romances have a notoriously short shelf life and are often only available in bookstores for a brief time before they are discontinued to make room for new books. Harlequin categoricals, for instance, are generally only available for one month. For years, the romance selections available in public libraries have varied drastically depending on librarians’ attitudes about the genre. In *The Romance Readers Advisory: a Librarian’s Guide to Love in the Stacks*, Ann Bouricius provides a tongue-in-cheek account of this predicament: “Librarians have traditionally had an uneasy relationship with romances. The romances are willing but the librarians seem unsure” (37). The uneasy relationship to which Bouricius refers can be attributed to a variety of factors. First, the abundance of romances and their quick turnover (especially of categoricals) support the perception that they are sloppily-written stories churned out in quick succession and therefore less worthy of limited library shelf space. In her research on Australian library practices, for instance, Juliet Flesch discusses the tendency for category romances to be shelved together haphazardly (as opposed to alphabetically by author or by line) or to be displayed on the “take one / give one” racks rather than subject to standard borrowing procedures

(“Attitudes”). Second, romances have traditionally been published in paperback form: the first hardcover romance was not available until 1994. As romance author Jayne Ann Krentz notes, “There is no question that hardcovers have a legitimizing effect on a genre...bringing with it a degree of respect that doesn’t occur when a genre appears only in paperback” (Linz, Bouricius, & Byrnes 145). Finally, book reviews are a key component in the selection process of public libraries, but prior to the early 1990s, romance reviews were few and far between, available only in genre-specific journals like *Romantic Times*. It wasn’t until 1995 that *Library Journal* began reviewing romances. That year, chief editor Francine Fialkoff released an editorial titled “Are We Dumbing Down the Book Review?” in which she defended the choice to begin reviewing romance novels: “You can’t just serve one clientele – or a clientele you’d like to create in your own version of the literati or that oft-mentioned ‘intelligent layperson’ – whatever that may be. Neither can we [as reviewers]” (Fialkoff). Given these publishing and distribution patterns, romance readers have traditionally been able to find used out-of-print books by purchasing them from other readers through sites like Amazon and eBay. Recently, however, long-time romance authors have begun re-releasing their out-of-print novels in both electronic format and POD. Likewise, publishing houses like Harlequin have begun offering out-of-prints as e-books. Increasingly, individuals who want to read the entire backlist of favorite or just-discovered authors can now download these novels with one click to their e-reader device. The result is both a greater accessibility of hard-to-find books and new revenue from an old source.

Without doubt, the change brought about by non-traditional publishing that has been the most publicly discussed is the increase in niche marketing, particularly non-mainstream, non-normative romance novels. For the last thirty years, the romance industry has been dominated by white, heteronormative romance narratives. While booksellers may have offered erotica, gay and lesbian romance, or romances featuring people of color, these selections were small in comparison to the vast quantity of heteronormative romance available to consumers. As self-publishing services have proliferated online, so too have niche markets for particular kinds of romantic narratives. For instance, ReneeRomance Books<sup>45</sup> specializes in “interracial romantic fiction for black women.” Siren Bookstrand<sup>46</sup> offers eleven specific imprints, including Siren Polyamour, Siren Menage Amour, and Siren Menage and More. Each imprint offers specific

---

<sup>45</sup> [www.reneeromance.com](http://www.reneeromance.com)

<sup>46</sup> [www.sirenbookstrand.com](http://www.sirenbookstrand.com)

guidelines for the kinds of non-normative relationships that can be featured.<sup>47</sup> One of the most recent trends in romance fiction has been M/M<sup>48</sup> romance written by and for straight women. This is perhaps unsurprising given that, as Josh Lanyon writes, “The antecedents of M/M fiction are fan fiction, and fan fiction is dominated by women.” The increase in self-publishing, combined with the availability of e-reader devices, no doubt accounts for the rapid increase in erotica sales in particular. Ellora’s Cave, a leading publisher of erotica e-books, sold just 40 books per month in 2001; 54,000 books per month in 2005; and today roughly 190,000 books per month (Reagan). Some mainstream publishers have been quick to jump on the trend of erotica e-romance: Harper Collins UK has recently launched a new imprint, Mischief Books, featuring the tagline “Private Pleasures with a Hand-Held Device.” While bookstores and mainstream publishers may continue to sell predominantly white, heteronormative romance novels, non-traditional publishing venues are making available a much wider range of romantic narratives.

Despite these advantages, non-traditional publishing has its obstacles. Even if an author writes and self-publishes her own romance novel, she still has to find a way to market it. Without the support of an agent and publishing house to design a book’s paratextual features, set up book tours and signings, procure book reviews, etc. the burden falls on the author to advertise her novel. Not surprisingly, social networks are a major source of inexpensive marketing. In addition to using social media like Facebook and Twitter, some authors have begun building an infrastructure of support for self-publishers through sites like *Self Publishing News*<sup>49</sup> and *Publishing Basics*.<sup>50</sup> Likewise *Romance University*<sup>51</sup> offers support for writers trying to establish a career and provides advice for writers looking to self-publish. Finding reviews for one’s book can also be difficult: “Self-published books have rarely been eligible for review in venues who review mainstream books, and so reviews of self-published books have been scarce” (Bradley et al). This trend is changing, however. As Bradley et al note, *Publishers Weekly* has launched *PW Select*, which will now review self-published books. Likewise, *Kirkus Reviews* now offers *Kirkus Discoveries*, a fee-based reviewing service for self-published books. Even *Library Journal* has begun reviewing self-published books. Fee-based publishing sites often

---

<sup>47</sup> [www.sirenbookstrand.com/submissions/](http://www.sirenbookstrand.com/submissions/)

<sup>48</sup> Male/Male: forms of fiction that feature erotic and romantic love between men, including slash fanfiction and yaoi.

<sup>49</sup> <http://selfpublishingnews.com>

<sup>50</sup> [www.publishingbasics.com](http://www.publishingbasics.com)

<sup>51</sup> <http://romanceuniversity.org>



provide a variety of pre- and post-production services similar to those provided by mainstream publishers (including editing, book design, and marketing), but authors must pay for and choose from increasingly expensive support packages. Without start-up funds, it can be difficult for authors to make use of the variety of fee-based services that would likely lead to larger profits.

In fact, perhaps the biggest obstacle that self-published authors – especially romance authors – face is the ongoing public debates around quality, gatekeeping, and the “amateur” writer. In his editorial, “Six Reasons That Self-Publishing is the Scourge of the World,” Tom Barlow laments, “Self-publishing kills the drive for writers to improve their craft. The artificial, undeserved success they enjoy will trap them in mediocrity.” For Barlow, self-publishing represents a loss of vetting practices so that “even the most puerile piles of crap” can find their way to readers. While fee-based services offer a range of editing support, authors do not have to use them; but not using these services runs the risk of publishing material that may be viewed by readers and critics as unpolished. As Sarah Fay writes, for instance, “Traditional publishing has its limitations, but good literature still needs editors, agents, proofreaders, designers, and publicists to make a book as flawless as it can be” (“After ‘50 Shades of Grey’”). Amazon and other distribution sites sell mainstream-published and self-published books side by side, making it almost impossible to tell how a book was published or if it has undergone any editing or proofreading before becoming available. The debates around quality and amateur writing map squarely onto a long tradition of public disdain for popular romance fiction; self-published romance authors need to contend with a consumer market already biased towards romance fiction.

The “Institutional Matrix” chapter of Jan Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) continues to be one of the most nuanced and detailed investigations of the Harlequin publishing industry. Likewise, Joseph McAleer’s *Passion’s Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (1999), provides a comprehensive archival history of the British publishing house Mills & Boon.<sup>52</sup> Both Radway’s and McAleer’s texts focus on the publishing and marketing techniques of category (as opposed to single-title) romance fiction and examine a production effort based on supply and demand, brand-name recognition, and large-scale corporate control of a particular commodity:

Harlequin operates on the assumption that a book can be marketed like a can of beans or a box of soap powder. Its extraordinary profit figures convincingly

---

<sup>52</sup> See also Carol Thurston’s (1987) *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*.

demonstrate that books do not necessarily have to be thought of and marketed as unique objects but can be sold regularly and repetitively to a permanent audience on the basis of brand-name identification alone. (Radway 39)

Nearly thirty years later, this publishing and marketing model is still in effect and thriving. But the advancement of new media technologies means that it has also collided with a “long tail” model in which infinite choice, niche markets, and small-scale publishing operations are flourishing. This collision both reproduces and reorganizes power dynamics between producers and consumers. For instance, digital publishing technologies provide new sources of revenue for traditional publishing houses by making it economically feasible and low-risk to re-release out-of-print texts through POD or e-book formats. At the same time, these technologies – and the increase of non-traditional publishing options – also foster increased agency on the part of the individuals who wish to write, self-publish, and circulate their texts for a romance reading audience. Of particular interest to me is the surge in niche markets that have resulted from this production/consumption shift and that feature non-normative romantic narratives, characters, and lifestyles. I argue on the one hand that this increase in niche markets and subgenres shifts the affective attachments and identifications that are possible through romance reading and therefore changes the relationship between popular romance fiction and the intimate public of women’s culture. At the same time, these niche markets and subgenres simultaneously open up new identifications to endlessly codify and commodify.

### Networked Knowledge Building: Romance Scholarship in the Digital Age

During my phone interview with Jennifer Crusie, I asked if she had a sense of why fans might regularly read her blog. Crusie’s response was to ask them herself and, when we hung up, she uploaded the following blog post:

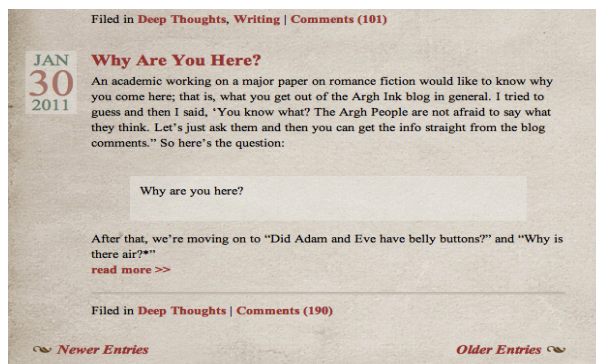


Figure 5.4 Crusie Blog Post 1/30/2011

In reading Crusie's post, and the subsequent responses to it, I was simultaneously struck by the access that I now had to hundreds of readers (many of whom stated they were also academics and authors); concerned by the means of gaining that access (If I had posted this question on a romance forum, would these individuals have talked to me without Crusie's sponsorship?); and reminded that my academic research might be read by individuals outside of academia even as they are represented by it (as one commenter, Thea, wrote, "Do hope there will be a link to the academic paper when it gets written. I know what we said. Want to see what an academic makes of what we said"). In this section, I briefly explore some of the ways in which digital technologies are changing how romance readers participate in the production and circulation of genre knowledge and scholarship.

Throughout my graduate school tenure, I have participated in multiple academic conferences, most frequently the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the National Council of Teachers of English conference (NCTE), and several conferences on popular romance fiction, including Princeton's 2009 *Love as the Practice of Freedom?*; McDaniel College's<sup>53</sup> 2011 *Popular Romance in the New Millennium*; and several conferences hosted by the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR). Each year CCCC and NCTE draw together thousands of academic scholars and instructors in the field to discuss the latest research, pedagogies, and policies around the study of literacy writ large. The romance fiction conferences, on the other hand, gather together far smaller crowds (generally fewer than one hundred), but speakers have included a variety of romance genre participants, including academic scholars, romance authors, readers-turned-bloggers, and Harlequin editors. I am convinced that this range of conference participants – including and beyond academic scholars – is due in part to the emergence of online romance communities.

In *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* (2012), editors Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S.G. Frantz note three waves in popular romance scholarship: the first wave cresting in the 1980s (notably Radway, Modleski, Mussell); the second wave in the 1990s (notably the 1992 *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, an edited collection of essays by romance

---

<sup>53</sup> McDaniel College is home to romance scholar Pamela Regis, whose 2003 *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* offers an historical look at popular romance and attempts to bridge the divide between "popular" "literary" and romance. The Nora Roberts Foundation has recently awarded McDaniel College with a \$100,000 grant to support academic romance scholarship, establish a minor in romance genre fiction, and develop an online creative writing course. This grant, along with the academic research grant supported by Romance Writers of America, are worthy of further exploration of the relationship between the romance industry and academic community.

authors responding to 1980s criticism); and the third wave beginning in the early 2000s due in large part to a growing “infrastructure” for romance scholars. According to Selinger and Frantz, there was first a financial infrastructure: “In 2005, the Romance Writers of America inaugurated a competitive Academic Research Grant program, its grant review committee composed of academically-credentialed authors in the genre, many with doctorate degrees and some of them professors in their own right” (9). Selinger was the second recipient of this grant and used it to establish a listserv network of international romance scholars who eventually collaborated on an online Wiki bibliography of interdisciplinary romance research as well as an academic romance blog, *Teach Me Tonight*.<sup>54</sup> Sarah S.G. Frantz, the fourth RWA grant recipient, used the online network to create the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, which now hosts an annual international conference and an online, peer-reviewed journal, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*.<sup>55</sup> Both Selinger and Frantz acknowledge that the scholarly work supported by RWA emerged in conjunction with a growing number of online romance communities in which “scholars, authors, and fans interact publicly, in real time, more or less as equals” (9). While these communities stemmed from early romance listservs from the 1990s, they soon morphed into review sites, forums, and blogs where genre readers, writers, and scholars could regularly collaborate.

Most recently, the result of these networked connections has been the development of the *Popular Romance Project*<sup>56</sup> (PRP), an endeavor to “bring together disparate groups of scholars, writers, readers, editors, romance fans, and the general public, to launch an entertaining, substantive, lively discussion about how popular romance is created, who consumes it, and how it helps shape private lives and public cultures.” The PRP includes four comprehensive programs:

- 1) “a feature-length documentary...focusing on the global community of romance readers, writers and publishers”
- 2) “an interactive, content-rich website created by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media,<sup>57</sup> allowing the website’s users to see romance novels in a broad context across time and space”

---

<sup>54</sup> <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com/>

<sup>55</sup> <http://jprstudies.org>

<sup>56</sup> [www.popularromanceproject.org](http://www.popularromanceproject.org)

<sup>57</sup> <http://chnm.gmu.edu>

- 3) “an academic symposium on the past and future of the romance novel hosted by the Library of Congress Center for the Book”<sup>58</sup>
- 4) a nationwide series of library programs dealing with the past, present, and future of the romance novel, plus a traveling exhibit, organized by the American Library Association.<sup>59</sup>

Taken together, organizations like IASPR; online romance communities in the form of blogs, author-sponsored websites, and review forums; and *The Popular Romance Scholarship* suggest that digital technologies promote “horizontal” as well as “vertical” communication across genre participants while simultaneously blurring the lines between kinds of genre participation, as individuals frequently navigate multiple and shifting roles of producer, consumer, and critic.

One result of these networked connections is that romance scholarship is often produced by “aca-fans,” academics who are consumers of – and sometimes producers of – popular romance fiction. As Henry Jenkins argues, the increasing ease with which individuals can merge the roles of academics and fans make it possible for aca-fans “to be explicit about the sources of their knowledge and about the passion that drives their research, and to seek collaborations between two groups that both assert some degree of expertise over popular culture” (*Fans* 4). This condition is not necessarily new or unique to the romance genre: qualitative researchers have long debated whether researchers should be inside members of the populations they study. Postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, for instance, have prompted qualitative researchers to consider how situated identities and power dynamics between researcher and researched factor into narrative interpretation, and to acknowledge their membership identity within the groups they study (Adler & Adler; Angrosino). But current romance aca-fans face a more specific concern as they navigate not only how to produce ethical and sound research for academic publication but also how to present this research within non-academic spaces and within spaces where the participants of their research may be positioned or feel compelled to respond.

As an example, at the McDaniel College conference in 2011, I presented my analysis of Eloisa James’s websites to an audience in which Mary Bly (aka Eloisa James) was present and had in fact delivered the keynote address. Before my conference talk, I felt compelled to email Bly and summarize the argument and research I would be presenting, stating: “I’ve never given a

---

<sup>58</sup> <http://read.gov/cfb>

<sup>59</sup> [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)

talk that features the keynote speaker of a conference, and I'm writing to ask if you think this would be a useful / appropriate / engaging kind of presentation?" As a graduate student and future scholar, I wondered if it was bad form to present my analysis. Bly responded to my email:

I think that sounds terrific! I would definitely suggest that you use anything I said that works, because I'll be there and the conversation can be more lively. Plus--I'm working on my keynote too and one of the things I'm talking about is the commodification of charisma through fcbk and websites, which will play beautifully into your work. i can't wait to hear yours.

In my talk, I compared the kinds of literate practices, subjectivities, and power dynamics made possible on Jennifer Crusie's website with those available on Eloisa James's Facebook page. I argued that both sites add a relational dynamic to the act of romance reading that echoes the centrality and significance of intimate relationships within romance novels themselves. I further emphasized that my intention was not to guess at the sincerity or intentions of these authors but rather to examine how these spaces sponsored particular kinds of literacies. Not surprisingly, after I gave my conference talk, audience members directed their questions to both Bly and me. Whether she felt compelled to or not, Bly spoke of her own surprise and uncertainty about her popularity on Facebook and about readers' desires to share their lives with her. Despite my intentions, I felt my talk and her presence in the audience positioned her to defend her activity and sincerity on Facebook, even though she had expressed enthusiasm for my ideas. This instance prompts further consideration of the ways in which power dynamics between researcher and researched circulate in spaces occupied by multiple kinds of genre participants and authorities.

Another and related result of the networked connections supported by digital technologies is the greater accessibility to and public-ness of academic romance scholarship. First-wave and second-wave romance scholarship circulated primarily through academic publishing presses and scholarly journals. In addition to these spaces, romance scholarship today is available through the *Popular Romance Project*; the peer-reviewed, online, and open-access journal, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*; as well as a wide range of blogs and forums. These sites promote scholarly discourse and debate across a range of public spaces and encourage readers to participate in genre knowledge building. At certain moments, however, they also blur the lines between genre promotion and genre criticism. The PRP is an especially clear example of a space that aims to both celebrate and analyze popular romance fiction. My

aim here is not to condemn these kinds of projects and online communities in any way: they are a product of the cultural and digital moment that we inhabit. Rather, my aim is to call attention to the ways in which romance scholarship, and the means by which it is produced and circulated, is changing. I would agree with Berlant that sentimental genres like romance fiction are “juxtapolitical” in that they thrive “in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough” (x). At the same time, the increasing ease with which academic scholars, romance readers, and romance writers can interact and collaborate suggests a shift between ordinary and academic knowledges and perhaps new possibilities for more frequent crossings into the realm of the political to occur.

### Conclusion

In my attempts to illustrate the changes and possibilities of romance genre participation brought about by digital technologies, I am cautious not to cast the digital in revolutionary terms. As I’ve demonstrated, the collision between print fiction and new media technologies both reproduces power dynamics between producers and consumers of mass-market texts even as it fosters new kinds of collaboration, participation, and knowledge building. Given the participatory culture Henry Jenkins describes as a result of media convergence, and the findings outlined in this chapter, I argue that critical literacy pedagogies would benefit from incorporating genre analyses that attend to the ways media content and its users move across media platforms. For instance, asking students to analyze if and how the meanings and uses of a television show change as it appears on TV, is discussed in an online forum, and is edited in a YouTube video helps them to generate a complex account of the agency and constraints of genre users. Asking students to participate in a forum, create their own YouTube video, or otherwise appropriate and recirculate media content allows them to move from critics to creators of popular texts. Mary Jo Reiff has acknowledged that a “critique leveled at an RGS approach to literacy teaching is that it focuses on analysis and critique of genres, stopping short of having writers produce alternative genres or practice using genres to enact change” (215). Incorporating rhetorical genre approaches to the critical study of popular culture genres can foster students’ analyses and production of popular texts.

Relatedly, the findings from this chapter suggest that, as we invite students to participate in academic discourse communities, we would be remiss to ignore the ways these communities operate online. Digital technologies make it increasingly possible for academic discourses and ways of thinking to be publicly accessible and available in non-academic spaces. Scholars across a range of fields – including new media, cultural studies, and literacy, to name a few – have taken to blogging, producing podcasts, writing for popular online magazines, moderating fan forums, contributing to wikis, and participating in a range of digital projects that blend academic and non-academic communities (Santo and Lucas 131). These changes open up possibilities for a range of conversations about the relationships between everyday and academic knowledges, and about the modes of critical and affective engagement that overlap across contexts and practices. Moreover, these changes suggest that if we want to prepare students to participate in academic discourse communities and genres, we will need to help students write in both traditionally recognized academic spaces as well as newer, digital spaces. This means asking students to consider the rhetorical, discursive, and multi-modal features of, for instance, an article written for a peer-reviewed journal compared to a blog post written for a general audience. It may also mean asking students to write in traditionally academic genres and then revise their work for non-traditional academic genres, considering the affordances, drawbacks, audiences, and purposes of each. Digital writing – especially social media and Web 2.0 writing – is often cast as the purview of youth or as an object of academic study; it is increasingly, however, a mode of academic writing and discourse and should therefore be included in composition curricula.



## Conclusion

### Learning In Relation to What We Already Know: Implications and Future Directions

Although the research site and participants of this project are located outside the composition classroom, the impetus for conducting this work is due in large part to my own experiences and frustrations in teaching critical literacy using popular culture in my writing classes. Therefore, I want to conclude by using the insights gained from this research to offer pedagogical recommendations for classroom practice as well as future directions for composition scholarship. In doing so, I am careful not to equate popular culture with the romance genre or to equate college students with romance readers. Nevertheless, the findings from this study of women's engagements with popular romance fiction do offer ways forward for scholars and instructors interested in studying popular culture in the classroom.

When critical literacy becomes the dominant pedagogical mode for analyzing popular culture in composition classrooms, we risk under-theorizing the complex ways students engage with popular culture out of school, subsuming these engagements under the heading "uncritical," or assuming that they conflict with the kinds of academic reading and writing skills we hope to foster. When we invite students to bring their popular culture interests to class – but do not invite the affects, subjectivities, and literate practices that they have developed around these interests – we risk positioning students as victims in need of critical lenses with which to resist the ideological power of, and resulting pleasure from, popular culture. And we risk invalidating students' knowledges and expertise in favor of the particular critical stance we hope they will take up. As Moje and Lewis argue, "a real opportunity to learn requires...that one's subjectivity and the identities one enacts be recognized and accepted as valid and worthwhile, even when they may conflict with those subjectivities and identities typically built in the learning space" (11). This kind of recognition and acceptance requires taking seriously students' engagements with popular culture as sites of identity and literacy enactment, and it requires theorizing these

engagements beyond assumptions that they are necessarily uncritical or oppositional to academic practices.

For composition scholars, this means continued theorization of affect and affective attachments to popular culture. In an analysis of the ways in which critical literacy pedagogy promotes a false dichotomy between critical/rational thought and affective/pleasurable engagement, Yoon claims that critical literacy pedagogies suggest:

Affect is something students bring into the classroom, something static that can be ‘aired,’ unambiguously represented, and objectively analyzed. Affect is seen as something of a blight, an exemplification of false consciousness, something that...only afflicts students and others who have not achieved the raised, political consciousness assumed of transformative intellectuals. Affect constitutes content; it is the object of critique, revision, and, ultimately, purging. (721-22).

Within this formation, affects – especially affects of pleasure – are understood as the side effect of ideology. But the findings from this study suggest that the pleasures derived from engagements with romance fiction are far more varied and complex: romance readers derive pleasure from the opportunities to connect and collaborate with other fellow readers and writers; to perform subjectivities of authority and expertise; to transgress and parody gendered constructions; and to engage in political debate, activism, and community building. These examples situate pleasurable affects not as the accumulations of repeated and compliant exposure to the ideologies of popular romance, but rather as the results of deliberate, sometimes long-term, expert engagements with genre conventions and contexts. Popular culture is frequently a source of pleasure and can therefore be cast as frivolous, dangerous, or addictive; but, as Bronwyn Williams suggests, and as this study demonstrates, the pleasures of popular culture derive from a range of sources, including feelings of competency, control, and expertise (339). By unpacking and interrogating affect as it circulates within popular culture, we might better understand our own and our students’ attachments to such texts in classroom contexts.

We might also make space for considering these attachments in relation to the academic practices we hope students will take up. Linda Langstraat argues that dismissing students’ affective engagements with popular texts ignores a powerful tool that could be used in service of helping students see themselves as agents: “[E]motions are generally understood primarily, if not exclusively, [as] reactive, born of external events and stimuli... Yet, affective identifications are also proactive. They are acts of resistance, acts of accommodation, acts of rhetoric. To

understand them as such is vital in an effort to de-privatize affect...in order to open possibilities for intervention” (312). For Langstraat, the failure to more fully theorize affective attachments contributes “to the many charges that cultural studies compositionists tend to dismiss students’ feelings and values in service of ‘imposing’ a ‘leftist’ viewpoint” (304). I would add to this critique by contending that the dismissal of affect can also inadvertently dismiss student expertise or foreclose the entry points from which students can engage with academic conversations around texts. The findings from this study suggest that women’s affective attachments to romance fiction stem in part from opportunities to demonstrate authority, collaborate with other readers, workshop writing material, and engage in political debate, all of which could serve as starting points for introducing students to academic discourse communities and practices.

In order to expand critical literacy pedagogies to better encompass students’ affective attachments to and experiences with popular culture, I suggest supplementing textual analyses with analyses of the social, digital, and literate practices that coalesce around texts. In other words, I propose that writing instructors incorporate assignments and activities that foster students’ examination of their own varied practices as they participate in popular culture genres both in and out of school; here is a place where the concept of genre participation could be particularly useful. The text-as-ideological-artifact approach is common to critical literacy pedagogies in composition studies, which is not surprising given the field’s interest in the rhetorical production and effects of texts. But the tradition of examining what popular *texts* do moves our focus away from what *students* can do with popular texts besides analyze them. In other words, if the goal is to empower students to transform their worlds through critical analysis of the discourses that shape them, assignments like these can instead suggest to students that classroom exercises of critique are the only means by which they can actively respond to popular culture.

This study suggests that the social, digital, and literate practices of romance readers/consumers co-construct the popular romance genre simultaneously and alongside the practices of romance writers/producers. This finding does not mean that the power dynamics among participants of the genre are equal; but it does demonstrate the ways in which genres are dynamically constituted and re-constituted through particular and contextual enactments. By positioning our students as not only consumers of popular culture but also active shapers of it,

we situate affective identification as proactive rather than merely responsive, and we offer familiar ground from which students might demonstrate their agency and expertise concerning popular culture genres. This pedagogical move would mean incorporating assignments that ask students to analyze their own varied practices around a particular genre and to consider how these practices shape it. We might also ask students to interview other users of the genre and examine their practices; consider the genre's uses across multiple contexts, time periods, or mediums; and appropriate, re-purpose, and re-circulate a popular media text. Such assignments might conclude with, rather than start with, critical analyses of the genre; in these cases, they might ask students to consider how ideologies are reproduced and resisted through texts as well as through the practices that coalesce around texts.

I see several affordances to this kind of approach to popular culture genres that foregrounds process and practice over product and text. First, it allows for multiple modes of engagement in addition to critical analysis and therefore validates everyday experiences with popular culture as important sites of literacy practice and meaning-making. In "Enthymematic Rhetoric and Student Resistance to Critical Pedagogies," Kristen Seas suggests that instructors often ignore or dismiss the idea that, in order for students to buy into critical pedagogies, they must first buy into the implicit argument that undergirds such pedagogies: "Students should be taught cultural critique (in the composition classroom) because cultural critique is necessary for understanding the meaning of culture and students lack the skill to understand the meaning of culture" (437). In contrast, the approach that I am advocating here positions academic, critical analysis as one of several ways to engage with and analyze popular culture.

This approach can also deepen students' awareness of how real-world genres operate and the role(s) students play within these operations. Elizabeth Wardle argues that many of the writing assignments typical of first-year composition courses should be considered "mutt genres" because they "do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author... Thus, FYC students are told to write an argument in order to write an argument" (778). I echo Wardle's concerns that FYC writing assignments can feel disconnected from actual rhetorical contexts, and I argue that including the everyday and popular culture genres in which students engage may help to address some of the long-standing critiques of FYC curricula. In calling for writing instruction that explicitly incorporates the genres that matter to students my aim is not simply to "hook" their interests;

rather, my aim is to encourage writing instruction that begins with the genres that are socially embedded, meaningful, and familiar to students. In other words, the genres that students believe *do* respond to rhetorical situations and *do* require meaningful communication. If we want to students to recognize, re-purpose, and successfully participate in academic genres, then our instruction might begin with and build from their knowledges of the complex genres in which they already participate.

Foregrounding the many ways students participate in genres can also promote students' meta-awareness about their literacy practices. Rather than conceiving of literacy practices around popular culture as either "critical" or "uncritical," writing instructors might instead ask students to describe and reflect on the many kinds of reading, writing, talk, and analyzing they deploy in particular contexts and for specific purposes. To return to the TV analysis assignment I described in Chapter One, I might ask students to consider the knowledges that their viewing habits outside of school make possible and how these knowledges compare with the writing about the show they are asked to do in school. In both instances, students are actively making meaning about TV, situating the meaning within certain contexts, and developing particular kinds of literacy practices. Hopefully, this pedagogical approach might address the problem of student cynicism that can result from a focus on the ideological effects of texts without the consideration of individuals' roles in shaping the meaning, uses, and circulations of such texts (Langstraat).

Making space for students' affective engagements and literacy practices around popular culture may necessitate recalibrating our expectations for what critical literacy pedagogies in writing classrooms can and should do. Yoon argues that the discourses of critical literacy pedagogies discipline teachers through shame to align themselves with particular emotional dispositions, including:

righteousness, desire for change, and a certain euphoria of possibility. Teachers are to invest in the hope of democracy and faith that critical pedagogy will take us to that utopian democracy. Teachers are to exhibit or at least claim (perform) an interest in changing the world, in engaging the realities of inequality and the legacies of oppression, rather than question that goal or the means of achieving it. To fail to do so risks being shamed in the eyes of those 'whose opinions of us we [ought to] respect.' (732).

The desires that infuse critical literacy pedagogies suggest that anything less than radical commitment on the part of teachers and students can look like failure: we are either critical or uncritical, resistant or duped, committed or complicit. But our everyday engagements with

popular culture genres are far messier than these binaries allow. The findings from this study suggest that such engagements are also far more productive and meaningful: popular romance novels enable women to construct and enact intimate, collaborative, critical, and authoritative subjectivities by participating in a range of writerly and readerly literate practices fostered through the genre. In asking students to develop academic ways of analyzing popular culture, we might start with the skills they have already developed so that we situate critical literacy alongside other textual practices, asking students to consider the affordances and constraints of these practices.

I argue that writing classrooms are uniquely situated to forge connections between academic and extracurricular literacies and to encourage students to explore and draw from their own expertise within familiar genres as they learn to engage in new ones. Students learning to read and write in unfamiliar academic genres risk being positioned – by composition instruction and pedagogy – as perpetual amateurs, as novices who are continually struggling to enter into academic discourse communities, to assume voices of academic authority, and to – as David Bartholomae writes – “learn to speak our language, to speak as we do” (382). Continued attention to everyday and popular literacies, and to the kinds of readerly and writerly knowledges these literacies foster, can help break open this perception of the “perpetual amateur” and allow us to see our students as occupying shifting subjectivities of novice and expert across a range of rhetorical situations and contexts. It can also help us, as Beth Daniell suggests, to conceive of the writing classroom as a space where we teach students to write “not just for the next profession but for life in the culture” (406). By attending to the academic, public, popular, and digital literacies students navigate, we find a more complete picture of the resources and funds of knowledge students possess and the range of literate spaces they inhabit.

A valid counterargument to the recommendations I have outlined above might be that my suggested approach risks valorizing students’ problematic engagements with popular culture, engagements that might very well reproduce dominant ideologies and social injustice. Even so, I am reminded here of Postman and Weingartner’s claim, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, that “We can, after all, learn only in relation to what we already know” (62). The findings from this project have convinced me that women’s engagements with the popular romance genre are meaningful sites of identity and literacy enactments; while these enactments may, as Moje and Lewis suggest, conflict with those “typically built in the classroom space,” they nevertheless can

serve as a starting point from which to develop new ways of thinking, reading, and writing about the world as well as new ways of acting in it.

While much of this project has been concerned with how a study of popular romance fiction can contribute to the field of composition, I of course also hope this work contributes to popular romance studies. As I discuss in Chapter One, “genre” remains a tricky term within romance scholarship because “genre fiction” too often signals a false binary with “literary fiction” and because “genre analysis” too often signals a study of a small number of books (often Harlequins) to represent a diverse and dynamic body of texts that spans varied cultural, historical, and social contexts. That said, I believe rhetorical genre studies offers useful tools for thinking about popular romance fiction and its appeal for millions of readers. Much of current scholarship and conference presentations on popular romance remain focused on particular texts or notable authors – in part, I believe, because of a necessary trend within third-wave scholarship to legitimize romance novels and their authors as capable of participating in the same kinds of careful literary criticism and textual analysis traditionally reserved for “literature.” My hope is that a notion of genres as participatory constructs that organize particular affects, literate practices, and subjectivities can help to contribute to our understanding of how popular romance fiction can offer both diverse and shared pleasures for the millions of people who read them.

For the purposes of this project, this notion of genre has moved me away from textual analysis towards the range of practices women enact as they use romance novels. My findings have convinced me that – in addition to escape – part of the appeal of romance reading is that it makes space for women to connect with others. This finding was surprising to me, especially given the stigmatization that surrounds romance reading, study participants’ proclivities to hide their reading practices, and their descriptions of reading as an escape to a fantasy narrative world. By examining what women do with romance novels – in addition to reading them – I was able to see a range of ways in which romantic texts make possible connections with fellow romance readers, family members, and friends. This move also illuminated for me the myriad ways in which romance readers are both consumers and co-creators of the genre. By reading and writing about romances with others and by ascribing meaning to romance novels beyond their textual function, readers help to produce genre knowledge and help to create the contexts in which romance novels circulate and the rhetorical situations to which they respond. For popular

romance studies, these findings suggest further interrogations of “readers,” by considering reading as only one of many literate practices available to consumers of romance novels.

It was, in fact, romance readers’ descriptions of their online writing that led me to consider how digital technologies are having a profound impact on the production and circulation of popular romance fiction. In exploring the websites of three popular romance authors and the current landscape of e-publishing my aim is to contribute to research on the reading, writing, publishing, and marketing of popular romance. Specifically, while this study has offered several implications for how digital spaces are shaping popular romance, the field of popular romance studies (and scholarship interested in book history more broadly) would benefit from further research about how new media technologies, the “long tail” model of marketing, and changes within the publishing industry operate alongside established modes of book production and circulation. Of particular interest to me are the growing niche markets within romance e-publishing, which have the power to cater to non-normative gendered and sexual identities while also commodifying them.

Finally, as many within the IASPR community have suggested, popular romance studies is a relatively new field, spanning both interdisciplinary and international conversations. The development of annual conferences, a peer-reviewed journal, and networks of scholars have all contributed to the expansion of the field. Going forward, however, we will need to continue to ask questions about method, production, and circulation of research. As a popular romance aca-fan, I have been struck by the affordances and challenges of conducting a study on popular romance fiction; I believe I have benefited from insider knowledge (especially while conducting interviews with readers and authors) and have tried to theorize my own investments and desires in producing this work. In my attempts to offer a study that represents these women’s experiences – and not my own – I have tried to approach interview and book discussion transcripts with an ear towards the surprising and unexpected while also recognizing the inevitable partiality of qualitative research. Like the field of popular romance studies, I am new to this work as well and look forward to opportunities to revise and rethink my research and my role as researcher.



## Appendix A: Participant Survey

In the online and local call for volunteers, I provided a link to *SurveyMonkey.com* for interested individuals to complete an initial questionnaire. Below are the questions.

1. First name:
2. Please verify that you are over 18 years of age.
3. Please list an email address or phone number where you can be reached.
4. How long have you been a romance reader?
  - a. 0 – 4 years
  - b. 5 – 9 years
  - c. 10 – 14 years
  - d. 15 – 19 years
  - e. 20 – 24 years
  - f. 25 + years
5. On average, how many romances do you read per month?
  - a. 0 – 4 books
  - b. 5 – 9 books
  - c. 10 – 14 books
  - d. 15 – 19 books
  - e. 20 – 24 books
  - f. 25 + books
6. Which of the following kinds of romances do you read? Check as many as you like (some categories may overlap).

Chick Lit	Classic Romance	Contemporary Romance	Erotic Romance
Erotica	Fantasy Romance	Futuristic Romance	Gothic Romance
Historical Romance	Inspirational Romance	Mystery Romance	Paranormal Contemporary
Paranormal Historical	Psychic Romance	Romantic Suspense	Sci-Fi Romance
Series Romance	Time Travel Romance	Urban Romance	Vampire Romance
YA Romance			
7. Please list your top three favorite romance novels.
8. Please list your top three favorite romance authors.
9. How did you first hear about this study?
  - a. Through a website devoted to the romance genre
  - b. Through another website
  - c. Through a local flyer

## Appendix B: Romance Reader Interview Protocol

Although I conducted semi-structured interviews, in some places, it was best to offer prompts instead of questions. Some questions changed slightly in the context of the session. Participants were advised to skip any questions that they were uncomfortable answering.

### Background Questions

1. Can you please state your age?
2. Do you identify with a particular ethnic or racial identity?
3. Where are you from?
4. Do you work inside or outside the home, or both? What do you do?
5. Are you currently in a relationship? If so, how would you categorize your relationship?
6. What made you decide to volunteer for this study?

### General Questions

The purpose of this interview is to get a sense of what first brought you to the romance genre and what continues to bring you back. In other words, I'd like to get an idea of why you've enjoyed reading romances over the years, and why you think you'll continue to do so. Perhaps you'd like to start by talking to me a bit about this, and then I can ask clarifying questions as we go. [Pause for response] – Based on participant's response, below are some possible follow-up questions:

7. How long have you been reading romance novels?
8. Can you remember the first romance you ever read? What was it like?
9. What made you read your second novel?
10. Do you remember any other novels or authors from your early reading days?
11. When you first started reading romances, where and when did you read them? (At home? At school? At work?). How does this compare with now? How did you find romances? (at the library, at the store, through friends? Etc) How do you find them now?
12. When you first started reading, did you know anyone else who read romances as well?
13. Did you ever share your interest in romances with others?
14. Do you share your interest in romances with others now?
15. Have you ever been teased for reading romances? If so, can you recall any specific instances?
16. Can you tell me about some of your favorite authors and subgenres?
17. Do you have a sense about why you like these particular books and/or authors?
18. Are there any character traits or plot lines that you've come to really dislike or have always disliked?
19. Is there something you've never seen in a romance but would like to see?
20. Have you noticed any changes in the romance genre since you've been reading? If so, in what ways?
21. During the years that you've been reading romances, do you think your preferences have changed? If so, in what ways?
22. If someone were to ask you why you read romances, do you have a sense of what you might say? Is that something you've thought about or been asked before? (Based on their responses, I asked several follow up questions. For instance, if a reader said, "I read

these books for fun,” I would follow up with questions like “How is reading romances similar to or different than the other kinds of reading or hobbies you do for fun?”

23. Some people say that romances are really formulaic, that they’re basically the same story over and over again. What would you say to this comment?
24. Romance novels are the most widely sold and widely read books on the market. Why do you think this is?
25. Do you think your reasons for reading have changed over the years? If so, in what ways?
26. What kind of advice would you give an author about how to write a really good romance?

#### Questions for Online Participants

27. When did you become a member of the AAR site? What made you decide to join?
28. What do you like about the AAR site?
29. Is there anything you don’t like about the site?
30. What features of the site do you use?
31. Is there something you wish the AAR site would add or change?
32. Has participating in this site changed you as a romance reader in any way? If so, how?

#### Questions for Local Participants

33. Do you participate in any book clubs, social networks, online networks, etc that revolve around romance reading? Why/why not? If so, which ones?
34. Do you ever talk to other about the romances you read?
35. Besides reading romances, do you participate in any other romance-genre related activities? (Such as writing, reviewing books, attending book signings, conferences, etc)

#### Gender-Specific Questions

36. Tell me about your favorite kinds of characters – what are they like?
37. Are there certain character traits (internal/external) that you look for when picking books or that you most enjoy? Are there any that you least enjoy?
38. How would you compare the men and women in romances to the people you know in real life?
39. How much does it matter to you if the characters feel real to you? What about the romantic relationship?

#### Concluding Questions

40. Is there anything else you think is important for me to know about you as a romance reader? As a reader in general?
41. For our next interview, I’d like to talk to you about a book of your choice. Can you pick a book that holds significant meaning for you? It could be something that really resonated with you at the time you read it, it could be an all-time favorite or least favorite, the first romance you ever read, or a particularly memorable book. You can tell me the name of the book now or by the end of the week. If possible, please bring the book with you to our next meeting.

## Appendix C: Romance Reader Book Discussion Protocol

Each member of the study participated in one book discussion. Drawing from Spradley's (1980) grand-tour and mini-tour approach, I began book discussions by asking readers to talk generally about each book, about why they chose it, what it means for them, etc. I then designed text-specific questions that asked readers to walk through their reading of selected passages. This discussion also focused more specifically on issues of gender.

### General Questions

1. We talked about a lot of things last time. Was there anything that you were mulling over that you'd like to add? Did anything we talked about last time affect your reading since then?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about why you chose this book for our book discussion?
3. When did you first read this book? Can you tell me about how you selected it and what you remember about the first time you read it?
4. Is there anything specific about this book that particularly resonates with you?
5. What kinds of things do you like about this book?
6. What kinds of things didn't you like about this book?
7. In what ways is this book typical or atypical of the kinds of romances you tend to read?

### Text-Specific Questions

8. Romances usually feature two characters who are attracted to each other. What's your sense of why these characters were attracted to one another?
9. What were the obstacles that these characters faced in the relationship?
10. How would you describe the heroine of the story?
11. How would you describe the hero?
12. Did the romantic relationship between the characters feel real to you? Why or why not? Did it matter to you?
13. Did the characters themselves feel realistic to you? Why or why not?
14. Were there any passages that really stood out for you in the book? Are there any passages you most want to talk about?
15. Can you recall a passage that illustrates why you chose this book for our talk?
16. There's a passage that really interested me on page \_\_\_\_\_. Can we look at that together? What did you think of this scene? What seemed to be going on here?
17. Romances are read almost entirely by women. Why do you think this might be?
18. Some people suggest that romance novels depict men and women in stereotypical ways. What do you think?
19. The romantic relationship between characters is central to all romances. Why do you think people like to read about these relationships?
20. Throughout the years you've been reading, have you noticed any changes in the kinds of characters or romances that most appeal to you? If so, how would you account for these changes?
21. Do you think that being a man/woman plays a role in why you read romances?
22. Is there anything else you'd like to say about this book or about yourself before we conclude?

## Appendix D: Romance Author Interview Protocol

Like the interviews conducted with romance readers, these interviews followed a semi-structured approach, and asked romance authors to talk about their histories of participation with the genre as well as their digital presence. Because each author's digital presence looked somewhat different, the questions were tailored accordingly. Authors were also advised to skip any question they were uncomfortable answering.

### General Questions

The purpose of this interview is to get a sense of how and why you participate on your sponsored websites. In other words, I'd like to get an idea of what you see as the purpose of these websites, how they work for you, and/or why you participate with them.

### *Jennifer Crusie Questions*

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your websites? How and when were they started? Why did you start these sites?
2. I notice you write a blog at ArghInk. Can you tell me a little bit about that?
3. What do you take away from your experience on these sites? For instance, what do you get out of posting something and receiving feedback from your readers?
4. Do you think this online presence/blog presence has shaped your writing or writing process in any way?
5. Has your online participation shaped the way you imagine who you're writing for in any way?
6. If you had to guess, what do you think your readers get out of participating with these sites?
7. Can you tell me a bit about your writing process? Do you participate in any writing groups?
8. I notice you share your writing experiences/expertise on the Cherry Forums website. Why do you do that?
9. Can you talk a little about how much time you spend online? Can you walk me through a typical day?
10. Can you explain your website, Popcorn Dialogues? How does it compare to ArghInk and The Cherry Forums?
11. What do you think your readers want from a Jennifer Crusie novel?
12. Have there been any surprises for you in the ways the genre has or has not changed? Or in your career?
13. Was there anything you were hoping we talked about today but didn't?

### *Eloisa James Questions*

1. I notice you have a regular review column on the Barnes & Noble site; can you tell me a little bit about it and how it got started?
2. How do you receive the books B&N asks you to review?
3. When you're writing the review column, who do you imagine your audience to be?

4. I've also been looking at your Eloisa James homepage. Can you tell me how it got started?
5. I notice on this site you have a link to "From Eloisa's Desk." Can you tell me about this page?
6. Your website also offers extra and revised chapters. Why do you post these?
7. I'm interested in thinking about whether virtual spaces change the ways readers and writers interact – what do you think?
8. I notice you're also on Facebook. Can you tell me about this site? How often do you check this site?
9. Do you think this virtual interaction has changed the way you conceive of your readership?
10. Has this interaction changed your writing or your writing process?
11. What do you think your readers want from an Eloisa James novel?
12. I noticed on your website you said that writing each successive book gets harder; why do you feel that way?
13. Can you tell me about your writing background?
14. Do you participate in any kind of writing group?
15. Have there been any surprises for you in the ways the genre has or has not changed? Or in your career?
16. Was there anything we didn't get a chance to talk about?

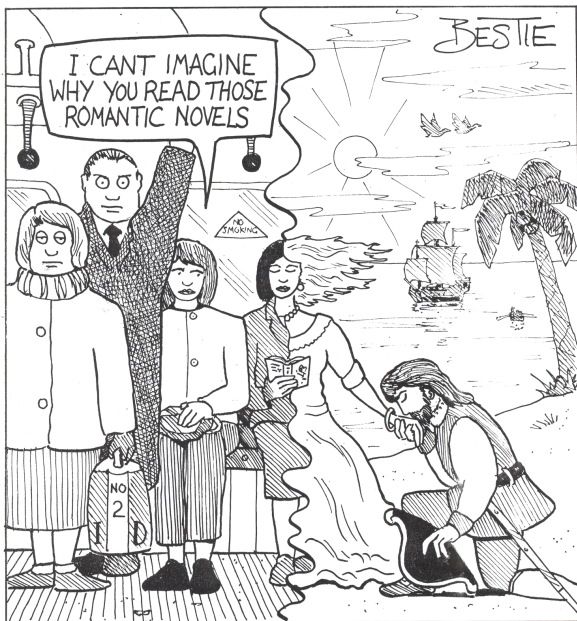
*Beverly Jenkins Questions*

1. I notice you have a website and Facebook page. Can you tell me a bit about these sites? When did you start using them? How do you use them?
2. How often are you on Facebook?
3. I notice you respond to the readers that are on Facebook. Can you tell me about this?
4. Generally, what kinds of posts do you put on Facebook?
5. You have another website on Yahoo; can you talk a bit about this?
6. What do you think your readers are looking for in a Beverly Jenkins novel?
7. I notice that you started writing historicals and then contemporary. What appeals to you about these categories?
8. Can you talk to me a little about the research you do for your historicals?
9. Do you participate in any kinds of writing groups?
10. Were you a romance reader before you began reading?
11. Has becoming a writer changed the way you read?
12. Have there been any surprises for you in the ways the genre has or has not changed? Or in your career?
13. Was there anything we didn't get a chance to talk about?

Appendix E: Cartoon Images of Romance Readers



© Ron Leishman \* www.ClipartOf.com/440520



© Original Artist  
Reproduction rights obtainable from  
www.CartoonStock.com



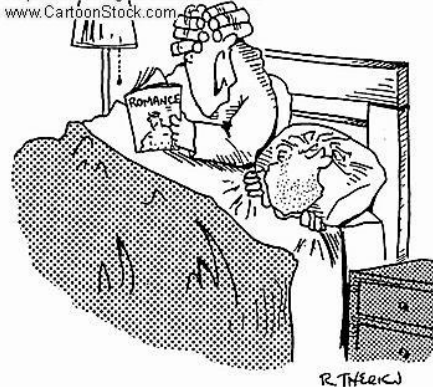
"Really! The things that go on in other people's bedrooms!"

© Original Artist  
Reproduction rights obtainable from  
www.CartoonStock.com



"Your book is the biggest load of over sentimental, gushy rubbish I've ever read. I love it!"

© Original Artist  
Reproduction rights obtainable from  
www.CartoonStock.com



"How come we never collide with the burning heat of a thousand fires?"

## References

- Adler, P.A. and P. Adler. "Observational Techniques." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Eds. Norman Denzin and Yvanna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (1994): 377-392.
- Adorno, Theodore and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- All About Romance* (2010). [www.likesbooks.com](http://www.likesbooks.com).
- Alvermann, Donna and Margaret Hagood. "Fandom and Critical literacy." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 43.5 (2000): 436-446.
- Anderson, Chris. *The Long Tail: Why The Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. New York: Hyperion, 2006.
- Anderson, Virginia. "Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice." *College Composition and Communication*. 48.2 (1997): 197-214.
- Angrosino, Michael. "Recontextualizing Observation: Ethnography, Pedagogy, and the Prospects for a Progressive Political Agenda." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (2005): 729-745.
- Arnold, Judith. "Women Do." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 133-140.
- Aronowitz, Stanley. "Mass Culture and the Eclipse of Reason: The Implications for Pedagogy." *College English* 38.8 (1977): 768-774.
- Balogh, Mary. "Do it Passionately or Not at All." *North American Romance Writers*. Eds. Kay Mussel and Johanna Tuñón. London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. (1999): 24-28.
- Barlow, Linda and Jayne Anne Krentz. "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance." *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 15-30.
- Barlow, Tom. "Six Reasons That Self-Publishing is the Scourge of the World." *Daily Finance*. 29 January 2009.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Bawarshi, Anis. And Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2010.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Trans. Andy



- Blunden, 2005. Online.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Berlin, James. "Composition and Cultural Studies." *Composition and Resistance*. Eds. C.M. Hurlbert and M. Blitz. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1991: 47-55.
- . "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." *Rhetoric Review* 11.1 (1992): 16-33.
- . "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* 50.5 (1988): 477-494.
- Black, Edwin. *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.
- Bouricius, Ann. *The Romance Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Love in the Stacks*. Chicago: American Library Association (2000).
- Boyd, Valeda and Marilyn Robitaille. "Composition and Popular Culture: From Mindless Consumers to Critical Writers." *The English Journal* 76.1 (1987): 51-53.
- Brackett, Kim Pettigrew. "Facework Strategies Among Romance Fiction Readers." *The Social Science Journal* 37.3 (2000): 347-360.
- Bradley, Jana, Bruce Fulton, Marlene Helm, and Katherine A. Pittner. "Non-Traditional Book Publishing." *First Monday*, 16.8 (2011): n. pag. Web 28 April 2012.
- Bradley, Jana and Heather Vokac. "Reframing Book Publishing in the Age of Networking." *Proceedings of the iConference* (29 February 2008).  
<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/214215095>.
- Brown, Matthew P. "How is Cultural Studies Anyway?: Evidence, Discipline, and the Iconographical Impulse." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*. 34.3 (2001): 54-69.
- Browne, Ray B. and Michael T. Marsden. "Introduction." *Pioneers in Popular Culture*. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Michael T. Marsden. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. 1-3.
- Brummett, Bary. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: 2006.
- Burley, Stephanie. *Hearts of Darkness: The Racial Politics of Popular Romance*. Dissertation. University of Maryland – College Park. 2003.
- "What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Book Like This?" *Doubled Plots*:

- Romance and History*. Eds. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. 127-146.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Campbell, Jennifer Riley. *A Long Strange Trip: Mapping Popular Culture in Composition*. Dissertation. Auburn University. <http://etd.auburn.edu:8080/etd/handle/10415/445>. 1996.
- Christian-Smith, Linda K. *Texts of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity, and Schooling*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Cole, Kresley. *If You Deceive*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2007.
- Cooper, Dianne. "Retailing Gender: Adolescent Book Clubs in Australian Schools." *Texts of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity, and Schooling*. Ed. Linda K. Christian-Smith. New York, Routledge, 1993. 9-27.
- Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Crang, M. "Qualitative Methods: Touchy, Feely, Look-See?" *Progress in Human Geography* 27.4 (2003): 494-504.
- Crusie, Jennifer. *Bet Me*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. 2004.
- Daniell, Beth. "Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture." *College Composition and Communication* 50.3 (1999): 393-410.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Davies, Bronwyn and Rom Harré. "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*. 20.1 (1990): 43-65.
- Davis, Bridgett M. "Break the 'Street Lit' Habit: Can Black Literature Be Saved?" *The Root*. 11 Feb 2008. 21 Feb 2013.
- Davis, Kimberly Chabot. *Postmodern Texts and Emotional Audiences*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975. 192.
- Deveraux, Jude. *Remembrance*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1994.
- Devitt, Amy. "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre." *College English* 62.6

- (2000): 696-718.
- "Re-fusing Form in Genre Study." *Genres in the Internet: Issues in the Theory of Genre*. Eds. Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009.
- . "Teaching Critical Genre Awareness." *Genre in a Changing World*. Eds. Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini, and Débora Figueiredo. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse, 2009. 337-351.
- Dolby, Nadine. "Popular Culture and Democratic Practice." *Harvard Educational Review* 73.3 (2003): 258-284.
- Durst, Russell. "Can We Be Critical of Critical Pedagogy?" *College Composition and Communication*. 58.1 (2006): 110-114.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- Edley, Nigel and Margaret Wetherell. "Jekyll and Hyde: Men's Constructions of Feminism and Feminists." *Feminism and Psychology* 11.4 (2001): 439-457.
- Fay, Sarah. "After '50 Shades of Grey' What's Next for Self-Publishing?" *The Atlantic*. 2 April 2012.
- Felski, Rita. *The Uses of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Fialkoff, Francine. "Are We Dumbing Down the Book Review?" *Library Journal* 120.60 (1995).
- Flesch, Juliet. "Attitudes of Victorian Public Librarians towards Romance Readers." International Association for the Study of Popular Romance. Queensland University of Technology. Brisbane, Australia: 13 August 2009.
- Flint, Kate. *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York, Vintage, 1980.
- Frantz, Sarah S.G. and Eric Selinger, eds. *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.
- Gabalton, Diana. *Outlander*. New York: Delacourt Press, 1991.
- Gambrell, L. B. "Incentive and Intrinsic Motivation to Read." In J. T. W. Guthrie, A. (Ed.), *Reading Engagement: Motivating Readers Through Integrated Instruction*. Ed. J. T. W. Guthrie. Newark: International Reading Association, 1997. 205-217.

- Garwood, Julie. *For the Roses*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1995.
- Gee, James. "Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces." *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power, and Social Context*. Eds. David Barton and Karen Tusting. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 214-230.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Goade, Sally. *Empowerment Versus Oppression: Twenty-First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.
- Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Pantheon, 1967.
- Gorton, Kristyn. "Theorizing Emotion and Affect: Feminist Engagements." *Feminist Theory* 8.3 (2007): 333-348.
- Gregg, Melissa & G. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *Bringing it All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Gutiérrez, Kris. "Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space." *Reading Research Quarterly* 43.2 (2008): 148-164.
- Hairston, Maxine. "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 43.2 (1992): 179-193.
- Hidi, Suzanne. "Interest and its Contribution as a Mental Resource for Learning." *Review of Educational Research* 60.4 (1990): 549-571.
- Holloway, Karla F.C. *Bookmarks: Reading in Black and White*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- Hoppenstand, Gary. "Ray and Pat Browne: Scholars of Everyday Culture." *Pioneers in Popular Culture*. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Michael T. Marsden. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. 33-67.
- Howard, June. *Publishing the Family*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Howard, Linda. *After the Night*. New York: Pocket Books, 1995. Kindle Edition.
- . *Death Angel*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008. Kindle Edition.

- . *Son of the Morning*. New York: Pocket Books, 2009. Kindle Edition.
- Hull, E.M. *The Sheik*. 1921. Kindle Edition.
- Hunt, Lyman. C. "The Effect of Self-Selection, Interest, and Motivation upon Independent Instructional, and Frustrational levels." *The Reading Teacher* 50 (1996): 278-282.
- Hunter, Madeline. *By Possession*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2000.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Ivey, Gay and K. Broaddus (2001). Just Plain Reading: A Survey of what Makes Students want to Read in Middle School. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36.4 (2001): 350-377.
- Jackson, Linda A. and Olivia D. McGill. "Body Type Preferences and Body Characteristics Associated with Attractive and Unattractive Bodies by African Americans and Anglo Americans." *Sex Roles* 35.5-6 (1996): 295-307.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.
- . *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- . *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009. Kindle Edition.
- Jenson, Joli. "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization." *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Kaler, Anne and Rosemary Johnson-Kurek, eds. *Romantic Conventions*. Madison, WI: Popular Press, 1999.
- Kendall, Alex. "Playing and Resisting: Rethinking Young People's Reading Cultures." *Literacy* 42.3 (2008): 123-130.
- Kinsale, Laura. "The Androgynous Reader." *Dangerous men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 31-44.
- Kortner, Aiex Nola. "Mass Media Use in the Classroom." *Eric Digest D147*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, 1999.
- Jackson, Linda A. and Olivia D. McGill. "Body Type Preferences and Body Characteristics Associated with Attractive and Unattractive Bodies by African Americans and Anglo Americans." *Sex Roles* 35.5-6 (1996): 295-307.

- Jensen, Margaret Ann. *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1984.
- Langstraat, Linda. "The Point is There is No Point: Miasmatic Cynicism and Cultural Studies Composition." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22.2 (2002): 293-325.
- Leight, David. "Cultural Studies and its Impact on Composition." *The Clearing House*. 69.1 (1995): 8-10.
- Lesesne, Teri. "Developing Lifetime Readers: Suggestions from Fifty Years of Research." *The English Journal* 80.6 (1991): 61-64.
- Lindsey, Johanna. *You Belong to Me*. New York: Avon Books, 1994.
- Linz, Cathie, Ann Bouricius, and Carol Byrnes. "Exploring the World of Romance Novels." *Public Libraries* 34 (1995): 144-151.
- Littau, Karen. *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*. London, UK: Polity, 2006.
- Lovelace, Ryan. "Students Told to Disavow 'American-ness, Maleness, Whiteness, Heterosexuality'". *The College Fix*. 27 November 2012.
- Marback, Richard. "Corbett's Hand: A Rhetorical Figure in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication*. 47.2 (1996): 180-198.
- Maasik, Sonia and Jack Solomon. *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009.
- McAlear, Joseph. *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- McDonnell, Andrea. *Just Like Us: Celebrity Gossip Magazines in America*. Dissertation. University of Michigan. 2012.
- McNaught, Judith. *Whitney, My Love*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1985.
- Medeiros, Teresa. *The Bride and the Beast*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2001.
- Miner, Madonne. *Insatiable Appetites: Twentieth-Century American Women's Bestsellers*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. New York: Routledge, 1982.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr. "Re-Framing Adolescent Literacy Research for New Times: Studying

- Youth as Resource.” *Reading Research and Instruction*. 41.3 (2002): 211-228.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr and Kathryn McIntosh Ciechanowski, Katherine Kramer, Lindsay Ellis, Rosario Carillo, and Tehani Collazo. “Working Toward Third Space in Content Area Literacy: An Examination of Everyday Funds of Knowledge and Discourse.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 39.1 (2004): 38-70.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr and Alan Luke. “Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research.” *Reading Research Quarterly*. 44.4 (2009): 415-437.
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr and Cynthia Lewis. “Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research.”
- Moje, Elizabeth Birr and Casper van Helden. “Doing Popular Culture: Troubling Discourses about Youth.” *Re/Constructing ‘The Adolescent’: Sign, Symbol and the Body*. Eds. Jennifer Vadeboncoueur and Lisa Patel Stevens. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004. 211-247.
- Morrell, Ernest and Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade. “Popular Culture and Critical Media Pedagogy in Secondary Literacy Classrooms.” *International Journal of Learning* 12 (2005). Online.
- Mussell, Kay. *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*. London: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Niffenegger, Audrey. *The Time Traveler's Wife*. San Francisco, CA: MacAdam/Cage, 2003.
- Pearce, Lynne. *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- Philips, Susan Elizabeth. *Lady Be Good*. New York, NY: Avon Books, 1999.
- Pilkington, Ed. “Amanda Hocking, the Writer Who Made Millions by Self-Publishing Online.” *The Guardian*. 12 January 2012.
- Postman, Neil and Charles Weingartner. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962.
- Price, Leah. “Reading: The State of the Discipline.” *Book History* 7 (2004): 303-320.
- Prendergast, Catherine. “Race: The Absent Presence in Composition Studies.” *College Composition and Communication* 50.1 (1998): 36-53.
- Pruchnic, Jeff. “Ironic Encounters: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the ‘Liberal Bias’ of Composition Pedagogy.” *JAC* 30.1-2 (2010): 53-93.
- Radway, Janice. “Reading is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor.” *Book Research Quarterly* 2.3 (1986): 7-29.

- . *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Romance*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Raye, Kimberly. *In the Midnight Hour*. New York: Dorchester Publishing, 1999.
- Reagan, Courtney. "Bookstore Bonanza: The Economics of Erotica." *CNBC*. 12 April 2012.
- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
- Reiff, Mary Jo. "The Spatial Turn in Rhetorical Genre Studies: Intersections of Metaphor and Materiality." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*. 31.1-2 (2011): 207-224.
- Romance Writers of America*. (2012). <http://www.rwa.org>.
- Rosenberg, Bernard. "Mass Culture in America." *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. Ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957.
- Santo, Avi and Christopher Lucas. "Engaging Academic and Nonacademic Communities Through Online Scholarly Work." *Cinema Journal* 48.2 (2009): 129-138.
- Schraw, Gregory, Terri Flowerday and Joseph Stevens. (1998). "The Role of Choice in Reader Engagement." *The Journal of Experimental Education* 72.2 (2004): 93-114.
- Schryer, Catherine. "The Lab vs. the Clinic: Sites of Competing Genres." *Genres and the New Rhetoric*. Ed. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway. London: Taylor and Francis, 1994. 105-124.
- Seas, Kristen. "Enthymematic Rhetoric and Student Resistance to Critical Pedagogies." *Rhetoric Review* 25.4 (2006): 427-443.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Introduction is About You." *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997. 1-37.
- Sellnow, Deanna. *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010.
- Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . "What is Critical Literacy?" *Journal for Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice* 4.1 (1999).
- Sirc, Geoffrey. "Nevermind the Tagmemics, Where's the Sex Pistols?" *College Composition and Communication* 48.1 (1997): 9-29.



- Smart, Dick. "Straight Women / Gay Romance." *Lambda Literary*. 8 June 2010.
- Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*. (2010). [www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com](http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com).
- Soles, Derek. "Problems with Confrontational Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 49 (1998): 267-269.
- Spradley, James. "Asking Descriptive Questions." *Qualitative Approaches to Criminal Justice: Descriptions from the Field*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002.
- Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Stuart, Anne. *To Love a Dark Lord*. New York: Avon Books, 1994.
- Sweeney, Megan. *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Thurston, Carol. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Trimbur, John. "Composition Studies: Postmodern or Popular." *Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies*. Ed. Anne Ruggles Gere. New York: Modern Language Association, 1993. 117-132.
- Ulen, Eisa. "The Naked Truth: Street Lit Sells Like Hotcakes. But at What Cost?" *The Crisis Magazine*. Winter 2008.
- U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2011*. Washington 2011.
- Ward, J.R. *Lover Eternal*. New York: Penguin Publishing, 2006. Kindle Edition.
- Warner, Michael. "Uncritical Reading." *Polemic: Uncritical or Critical*. Ed. Jane Gallop. New York: Routledge, 2004. 13-38.
- Weedman, Roslyn. "Mass Appeal: Pop Culture in the Classroom." *The English Journal* 77.7 (1988): 96-97.
- West, Candace and Don Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1.2 (1987): 125-151.
- Wetherell, Margaret. "Positioning and Interpretive Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue." *Discourse and Society* 9.3 (1998): 387-412.
- Will, George. "Radical English." *The Washington Post*. 16 Sept. 1990: B7.
- Williams, Bronwyn. "Are We Having Fun Yet? Students, Social Class, and the Pleasures of

Literacy.” *International Reading Association* 48.4 (2004): 338-342.

---. “Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing Beyond our Classrooms.” *College Composition and Communication*. 62.1 (2010): 127-146.

Williamson, Penelope. *Once in a Blue Moon*. New York: Bantam, 1995.

Yoon, K. Hyoejin. “Affecting the Transformative Intellectual: Questioning ‘Noble’ Sentiments in Critical Pedagogy and Composition. *JAC* 25.4 (2005): 719-759.