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Romance Networks: Aspiration & Desire in Today's Digital Culture

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ROMANCE NETWORKS:
ASPIRATION & DESIRE IN TODAY'S DIGITAL CULTURE

by

Katherine E. Morrissey

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ABSTRACT

ROMANCE NETWORKS: ASPIRATION & DESIRE IN TODAY'S DIGITAL CULTURE

by

Katherine E. Morrissey

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Tasha Oren

Genres like romance have long been seen as nodes of cultural conversation that negotiate broader social tensions around women's lives and desires. As media industries increasingly design products to function across media platforms and serve as part of larger transmedia franchises, the technological and market structures which once helped to separate different areas of media production are becoming more porous. This project addresses the movement of audiences, texts, and creators across platforms and considers the ways popular genres and their various sub-categories work at both micro and macro levels.

This project focuses on four specific production networks for romantic content: commercial romance literature, romantic fan writing, romantic comedy films, and television's reality wedding shows. Each mode of production I examine in this project seeks to represent certain experiences of love and partnership, constructing different romantic "packages" from which audiences select. Each also struggles to accommodate different audience experiences and negotiate cultural tensions. The first two chapters emphasize the erotic fantasies available to romance readers, exploring ways digital reading and production has led to an expansion of romance categories, more explicit content, and is facilitating amateur and non-commercial production. I argue that commercial and fan romances are linked systems of cultural production,

each interested in narratives focused on love, desire, and partnership. Next, the focus shifts to moving images, looking at the narrative structures of popular film and television romances and the way they organize women's aspirational fantasies. Here, high production costs and global distribution produce complicated relationships between media producers and their revenue sources: advertisers and audiences. I argue that these shifts in content and narrative structure reflect evolving strategies for navigating divergent audience communities and ideological views and maintaining existing political and economic systems.

Rather than taking a taxonomic approach to genre, this dissertation argues that genre is a broad process of cultural mediation, extending across media forms and beyond any single commercial market. The project positions romance as a diverse cultural conversation distributed across a complicated network of texts and media platforms. Taking this wider and more discursive approach to romance genres is crucial to this investigation into the ways that collisions between culture, technology, and commerce shape the fantasies presented in romantic stories.

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Introduction

In 2012, a work of fan fiction hit the *New York Times*' bestseller list. Once a lengthy piece of free *Twilight* fan writing called "Masters of the Universe," the story had been deleted from fan archives and repackaged as a trilogy of erotic novels. Renamed *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the series made its way to the Writers' Coffee Shop, a website that serves both as an e-publishing/print-on-demand service and as a gathering place for writers of *Twilight* fan fiction.¹ Released on the site in May 2011, *Fifty Shades* quickly grew in popularity. Its sales got the attention of larger publishing houses and, in March 2012, Random House Inc. acquired the series for about a million dollars (Osnos). Within a month, movie rights for the trilogy had been negotiated and tabloids were speculating about casting choices. When the first film was released in 2015, it earned \$166 million at the domestic box office and \$404 million internationally ("Fifty Shades of Grey (2015) - Financial Information").

The success of *Fifty Shades* has been exceptional, but this is not the only work of fan fiction to have successfully moved into the commercial publishing market. Dozens of works of *Twilight* fan fiction have been converted over into commercial products (Romano, "Fifty Shades of Grey and the Twilight Pro-Fic Phenomenon"). Beyond *Twilight*, an increasing amount of fan fiction stories and authors are now making their way into the digital lit market. In particular, the m/m (male/male) sub-category of romance is a commercial outlet for many converted works of slash (male/male) fan fiction. It also constitutes a secondary market for slash authors interested in writing both professionally and for other fans.² This movement of authors and work from fan

¹ Works of fan fiction are fictional stories written by fan authors. These works typically use preexisting characters and story worlds—for example: telling the story of Harry Potter in outer space or writing about Star Trek's Kirk and Spock falling in love. These writing practices are often framed as a form of remix or transformative work as they typically repurpose material from commercial media.

² Fan fiction stories about romantic and erotic relationships between two men (male/male).

networks into commercial markets reveals multiple sites of production and forms of storytelling being profoundly reshaped by shifts in technology and industry, emerging digital markets, and participatory culture. These changes affect popular culture at the levels of production, distribution and reception. In the process, these types of systemic reorganization have profound implications for the ways that the content, creators, and audiences for popular genres are organized.

My dissertation explores these changes through the lens of popular romance genres, investigating the intersection of commerce, fantasy, and cultural norms within the world of romantic storytelling. The project focuses on four forms of romantic/relationship-focused storytelling in contemporary popular culture: commercial romance novels, fan fiction romances, romantic comedy films, and reality wedding shows. I trace the ways these different production networks represent and organize female desire, contributing to broader cultural discourses around love, desire, and sexuality in the process. Focusing on these four specific types of popular romance allows me to identify ways digitization, as well as niche and participatory audience models, are reshaping the production of popular culture and reconfiguring larger media flows of romantic and sexual content.

Digitized Genres and Indiscrete Markets

Traditionally, the ways in which sexual desire is represented within commercial publications has been shaped by cultural norms and the drive to find “market safe” products—products which investors believe can be produced and sold in large batches across different markets. Chris Anderson refers to this as the “tyranny of physical space” (“The Long Tail”). Within a market of physical goods, scattered interest in a product matters less than an overall density of interest in that product across multiple locations. Anderson explains, “retailers will

carry only content that can generate sufficient demand to earn its keep. But each can pull only from a limited local population” (“The Long Tail”). In this type of market, a product needs to have enough concentrated demand that it draws in a steady amount of customers and justifies its space on store shelves. To warrant the up-front investment, a physical product also needs to maintain these sales rates fairly consistently across different store locations. Out of this comes the demand for products with “universal” or mass-market appeal.

However, digitization and digital sales networks have radically changed this scenario. Digital markets are shaped less by scarcity (of shelf space, of safe bestsellers, etc.) and more by abundance (of products in the database, of the cumulative sales of many different items, etc.). Anderson refers to this as “the long tail” (*The Long Tail*), a sales environment where the market for non-bestsellers is actually bigger than the market for bestsellers. In this market, physical products can be stored in central locations and shipped directly to customers, or, the product may be something a customer simply downloads onto a device. Out of this comes a market with much greater ability to cater to niche audiences. With web-based stores like Amazon.com designed to accommodate an abundance of products, these digital markets allow smaller media producers to circumvent traditional routes for publishing and distributing their products. These types of long-tail markets are having profound effects on the publishing industry and, more specifically, on the types of romance literature being sold on and offline.

Digital production and distribution tools are also facilitating participatory cultures and the expansion of non-commercial and collaborative production networks. Now, in turn, the work of participatory cultures is increasingly monetized and fan work is emerging as a route towards professionalization. With works of fan fiction like *Fifty Shades of Grey* making the bestsellers

list, fan networks are seen by the publishing industry as resources to be mined for new products.³ This has led to increased efforts to track and monetize fan writing. In this project I investigate these commercial and non-commercial stakeholders, their interdependence, and the increased flows of content and producers across these different media spaces. Looking at the movement of texts and authors into the commercial marketplace and away from major publishing houses reveals significant changes in the ways genre categories are constructed.

These structural shifts are also reshaping content and thus affecting the structures of romantic stories. In our current moment, there is no single media platform dominating viewer attention. Instead, audiences are scattered across devices and accessing content from a variety of different interfaces. In response, media industries increasingly design products to function across media platforms and serve as part of larger trans-media franchises. These strategies can be seen at play in both the development of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, which I outlined earlier, as well as with the development of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* franchise. *Fifty Shades of Grey* relied on word of mouth and emerging digital publishing markets for its initial success, while *Twilight* took a more traditional path towards commercial success. The *Twilight* series began as a set of paranormal romance books written for young adult readers. After sending out inquiries, Meyer found an agent and, eventually, her manuscript was sold to Little, Brown Children's Books. At the time, Meyer's \$750,000 three-book deal was reported as being the most Little, Brown had ever paid for a first-time author (Murillo). The publisher was clearly investing in a product they believed could be a potential hit. The book series was so successful it eventually became a global media franchise, extending to five major motion pictures, two graphic novels,

³ *Fifty Shades of Grey* is one of many works of commercial fiction that started as *Twilight* fan fiction. For example, Christina Lauren's *Beautiful Bastard* was published by Simon & Schuster's Gallery Books in 2013 and film rights were sold to Constantin Films the same year (Hembree; Lewis; Wilkinson). Penguin's New American Library began publishing Tara Sue Me's *The Submissive* series in 2013 ("NAL Buys Hit Aussie Erotica Fan Fic"; Fleming Jr.).

and ancillary marketing deals that ranged from a Twilight Saga line of Barbie dolls to Alfred Angelo brand replicas of Bella's wedding dress ("Mattel Announces New Twilight Barbie Dolls"; McConnell).

However, these new technologies are not simply linking content across platforms. Changes are also occurring at the level of individual texts and their narrative structures. The ongoing changes in product distribution and marketing have been accompanied by shifting strategies for addressing and managing audiences. Television content is increasingly designed to stick with smaller-sets of dedicated audiences. A greater range of television shows are taking on serial qualities, using storytelling techniques borrowed from soaps and serials to engage and maintain an audience over time. Dependent on commercial advertising, television content is adapting to work with digital markets and to accommodate consumers who expect greater choices and opportunities for personalization when they select products. Television's use of ensemble-based storytelling has become one mechanism through which a television series can present a set of different stories and manage different audiences in the process. These strategies have also spread to film leading to an increased reliance on ensemble casting and the use of multi-plot narratives.

Genres have always been marked by intertextuality and cyclical shifts. These changes in media production further genre's intertextuality and shifting features, as well as blurring the boundaries between genre categories. As this occurs, the technological and market structures which once helped to separate different areas of media production are becoming more porous. This movement of audiences, texts, and creators across platforms, requires us to consider the ways popular genres and their various sub-categories work at both micro and macro levels. We need to study genre both within and beyond media-specific genre categories. This project models

a methodology for doing this type of work. It works purposefully across media, using four specific genre production networks for romantic stories to address their individual contexts and histories while positioning the romance genre as a broad category of cultural production.

Defining Romance Genres

Across genre studies there is a marked preoccupation with definitional or taxonomic work. These efforts at mapping genres allow us to outline generic norms within a specific production context and track generic tendencies over time. However, the focus on mapping and defining genres also comes with drawbacks. A preoccupation with category construction inevitably puts the emphasis on the texts that fit neatly into the box, rather than accounting for generic outliers, hybridity, and genre shifts. In the process, this approach has a tendency to emphasize the most normative of generic texts, an issue with significant ramifications for cultural critics and the ways popular romance genres are theorized.

In its approach to romantic and sexual relationships, romance is often assumed to be problematically conventional. The genre is sometimes identified as having a specifically conservative ideological agenda. However, the process of genre definition plays a hand in reinforcing this idea that romance is stagnant or that it has a particular ideological agenda. The limitations of genre definitions have been identified by popular romance scholars across a range of media forms. Discussing film, Celestino Deleyato argues that “[a] circular argument has been more or less universally accepted whereby only those films that include certain conventions and a certain 'conservative' perspective on relationships are romantic comedies and, therefore, romantic comedies are the most conventional and conservative of all genres” (3). Pamela Regis expresses a connected frustration with traditional definitions of the romance novel. Critics tend to “focus on the elements most associated with the popular romance novel: love and the happy

ending” (21). The problem with this strategy is that it leaves many of the popular romance novel’s other key features unexamined. For example, Regis points out that romance literature shifts the hero’s journey to a female protagonist, makes her desires central to the narrative, and moves her “from a state of unfreedom to one of freedom” (30).⁴ Focusing only on the ending the book reaches, risks leaving the journey towards that happy ending unexamined. Finally, Adrian Martin identifies on a third tendency to focus on “classics” and use them to establish a timelessness to genre, setting the terms for what constitutes a whole genre category in the process. Martin argues, “[w]ith hindsight, it is easy to distill... something like a solid, stable core of generic conventions—thus giving rise to the illusion of a classical tradition, and artists knowingly working in that tradition” (19). In the process of emphasizing classic tradition, the many contemporaries of these classic texts, which they were in conversation with at the time, are omitted from our view.

Deleyato, Regis, and Martin all point to a circular process of genre definition and analysis where our assumptions about romance, and the definitions we craft for it, inhibit our perception of changes a genre’s “formula” and our understanding of a genre’s inner workings. However, I want to push these critiques of genre taxonomies even further. The definitions of romance genres and their tendency to paint romance as overly conventional and conservative also reflect our larger cultural inability to disentangle desire, particularly feminized forms of desire, from ideological norms around partnership, monogamy, and procreation. Without recognizable narrative markers like marriage and parenting to mark its “legitimacy,” desire is rendered illegitimate and without romantic meaning. Instead, it becomes much more likely that it will be labeled pornographic, obscene, amateur, or distasteful. As this project will demonstrate, these

⁴ Regis explains, this is not typically an idyllic and utopian type of freedom, but a more pragmatic one (30). In romance, the heroine’s happiness is negotiated and contingent, reflecting the complicated position women hold in contemporary society.

mechanisms for making desire in/visible and in/accessible can be repeatedly identified in the ways that women's sexual and aspirational desires are represented and distributed across popular culture. The act of defining a genre, particularly popular romance genres, is also an act of ideological and aesthetic boundary policing—one that media producers, audiences, and academic critics all play a role in. In today's convergent media culture, where texts proliferate and audiences are distributed across channels and platforms, genre definitions are playing an even more important role in reinforcing hierarchies of taste and establishing modes of legitimate and illegitimate authorship. However, these same convergent and participatory structures also mean that genre labels are constantly being renegotiated, as texts, authors, and audiences move from site to site and platform to platform. These shifting categorizations complicate the clear conversion of content from one production network to another, affecting the broader movements of texts, authors, and audiences. In the process, genre taxonomies contribute to the broader cultural value and visibility of texts, authors, genres and their sub-genres.

Rather than taking a taxonomic or medium-specific approach to genre, I position genre as a broad process of cultural mediation that extends across media forms and beyond any single commercial market or medium. Taking this wider and more discursive approach to genre is crucial to understanding the presence and organization of female desire in contemporary popular media. Highlighting multiple production networks for romantic stories, rather than focusing solely on one area of cultural production, makes visible the multi-layered roles genres play in both supporting and remediating cultural norms. It reveals the different ways that desire is represented within different production networks and at different tiers of commercial production.

Project Overview: Representations of Desire In Popular Culture

This project is organized around two ways that desire functions in popular romance genres: the ways in which romantic stories organize erotic fantasies and the ways in which romance narratives navigate different characters' dreams and aspirations. In popular romance genres, love can be used to legitimate or obfuscate the erotic; it can also lend meaning, personalization, and affective significance to commerce and cultural ritual. In these contexts, love becomes a tool for argument, persuasion, inclusion and exclusion. Acknowledging it can lend legitimacy to a same-sex relationship, making the argument that a same-sex marriage is just as romantic as a heterosexual one. Marketing a sexually explicit story as romance, instead of pornography, allows a story to circulate more widely, change the types of stores it appears in and the shelves it is stocked on. In the process, this can increase a reader's access to it. Denying a text the romance label can also imply that certain expressions of sentiment or desire are abnormal and unromantic. Linking love to material objects and cultural rituals can reinforce structures of commerce and social traditions. The different categories of romance explored in my dissertation each activate and utilize themes of love in different ways, reflecting and reconfiguring common depictions of love, marriage, and desire based on the perceived demands of the market.

In this project I focus on creative work that either directly labels itself as romantic or takes up the themes, symbols, and narrative structures traditionally associated with romance. Chapters One and Two concentrate on romantic literature (print and digital) and the ways romance organizes and represents sexual fantasies. These two chapters examine the ways that digital publishing and participatory marketing strategies are reshaping both commercial romance and fan writing. I argue that commercial and fan romances are linked systems of cultural production, each interested in narratives focused on love, desire, and partnership. Historically,

these two production networks have organized and represented sexual desire in very different ways. While commercial romances traditionally work to produce market-safe products that are carefully contained by copyright, fan work pushes against this, recycling and altering commercial products to expand upon them for non-commercial purposes. This work, in turn, increasingly becomes commercialized itself, as we see with texts like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. These different approaches to authorship and cultural production are shifting as media industries adapt to manage and incorporate fans into their production and marketing practices. As a result, categories of commercial romance are expanding and an increasing number of fans are using their work to gain the notice of the publishing industry.

At a time when book sales are continually projected to fail, romance publishing seems to be dodging many of the problems affecting other areas. Romance sales continue to increase annually and hold "the largest share of the consumer market" (Romance Writers of America). Notably, romance publishers have been at the forefront of digital publishing and distribution and the industry has an intriguing history of both failed and successful attempts at digital publishing that predate Amazon's introduction of the Kindle. One 2012 study found that roughly 52% of romance purchases are conducted online and that 94% of romance readers are reading e-books (Kulo, *The Romance Book Consumer in the Digital Age: A Joint Study with Romance Writers of America*). Alongside well-established romance publishing companies like Harlequin, smaller digital publishers are playing a significant part in these emerging digital markets. Digital publishers have taken advantage of gaps in the existing industry, offering books that are both a) more sexually explicit and b) marketed in ways that more directly acknowledge a text's sexual content. Less concerned with finding a place on the shelf of a brick-and-mortar bookstore, digital romances can more actively advertise their kinks and their explicit content. In online bookstores,

the more traditional Regency and Western romances appear alongside newer romance categories like m/m (male/male), BDSM, queer, and ménage (threesome) romances. This expansion of the kinds of content that are labeled "romantic" signals changes in the ways that romance literature is marketed and sold, as well as indicating broader shifts in assumptions about romance readers and the types of texts they want to read.

In analyses of today's "conglomerate Hollywood," much attention has been paid to the emergence of big budget and globally distributed action/fantasy franchises (Schatz 2009). However, romantic comedies remain some of Hollywood's most successful global products (Kaklamanidou 2013). In particular, Ashley Elaine York argues that the global success of films like *Sex and the City* with "older and younger heterosexual women, lesbians and gays, heterosexual men, and transnational viewers... transform what was once a small domestic following into a large and sutured global audience" (qtd. in Kaklamanidou 4). Chapters Three and Four of my dissertation examine ways that romantic media are working to address and attract various audiences via content that reconfigures traditional "boy-meets-girl" courtship stories to address broader consumer demographics (globally and locally) and to multiply the number of romantic stories a single text might contain.

In Chapter One, "Romance's Revolutions: The Redistribution of the Erotic in Romantic Storytelling," I map the emergence of sexually explicit romances, asking how romantic literature has been reconfigured by the romance publishing industry and readers' early adoption of digital technologies and markets. In popular romance scholarship, the last major projects to assess the structure of romance publishing were Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Carol Thurston's *Romance Revolution* (1987). Both these projects were published during an earlier time of significant change within romance publishing and addressed romance's incorporation of

sexual content in the 1970s and 80s. In the thirty years since this work was produced, however, romance literature has continued to change. However, there has been very little research addressing the changes in romance publishing over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. This chapter offers a much-needed account of romance publishing after the 1980s, tracing these shifts by outlining the gradual emergence of the term “erotic romance” as a marketing category, the role digital technologies have played in this process, and the implications they raise for romance publishing’s future.

In Chapter Two, “‘Embarrassing, Dirty, or Downright Trashy’: A History of Fic/Romance,” I examine the complicated interplay between fan fiction and commercial romance literature. Fans have a long history of producing creative work that both comments on and expands pre-existing media content. Fan work is often romantic and sexual in nature, centered on exploring the potential for romantic “pairings” between various characters. In particular, fans have a history of focusing on characters and relationships less common to traditional commercial romances. In this way, fan networks have become alternate non-commercial spaces for the production and distribution of romantic and erotic stories. However, contemporary understandings of fan writing practices as non-profit, amateur, and unoriginal only began to solidify in the late 1970s and 80s.

In our current moment, digital publishing and broader industry attention to fan cultures are challenging the non-commercial traditions of fandoms. Fans and media producers increasingly intersect on social networks. Contests, tools, and apps soliciting fan work are now incorporated into the marketing of media content. Where fan work once was perceived as being under legal threat, it is now embraced by commercial producers as a way of building an audience. However, the monetization of fan practices and works is not evenly distributed across

all types of fandoms and fan content. To better understand the ongoing monetization of fan work and the changing ethos of fan networks, we need to more carefully address fan fiction's longstanding role as a production network for romantic storytelling. To do this, I retrace fan fiction's historic ties to commercial publishing and the reconfiguration of fan fiction that began in the late 1960s. This history reveals the strong influence that erotic romance novels from the 1970s and broader feminist debates on pornography in the 1970s and 80s had on the development of fan fiction and fan production networks. To better understand fan production today, it is critical to recognize what this history tells us about contemporary fan networks: 1) that fan production networks can be organized, not only around products, but also around specific sets of creative practices, 2) that historic and highly gendered legal and social pressures shaped the norms of gifting and non-commercial creative exchange prevalent in many fandoms today.

Chapters Three and Four turn to moving images, looking at the narrative structures of popular film and television romances and the way they organize women's aspirational fantasies. Film attendance and television viewing rates have diminished in recent years, forcing media producers to test different methods for targeting viewers and controlling costs. Film producers increasingly design their products to either accommodate a variety of viewing demographics via ensemble casting or to focus more narrowly on niche markets. On television, channels proliferate, the narrowcasting model continues to expand, and reality television programming has become a way of managing production costs and incorporating advertising into the programming content. As media industries increasingly target niche audiences, the narrative structure of film and television stories are adapting to manage these different audiences. In particular, these strategies can be seen in the types of conflict represented over the course of a particular story and

in the forms of narrative resolution granted to different characters. Broader sets of experiences do seem to be finding their way onto screens. However, the niche audience model continues to organize audiences into a series of demographic targets, connected to consumer markets, identity, and income. I argue that these shifts in content and narrative structure reflect evolving strategies for navigating divergent audience communities and ideological views and maintaining existing political and economic systems. These narratives are often structured so that they activate a range of romantic fantasies, joining divergent experiences within a unified narrative structure. In the process, these texts shape and manage their different audiences, using seemingly universal romantic ideals and cultural rituals to construct categories of taste and to direct consumption.

Chapter Three, “Love and Plurality: Contemporary Rom-Coms and the Hyper-Romance,” analyzes the films *He’s Just Not That Into You* (2009), *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (2012), and *Think Like A Man* (2012). These texts represent an emerging narrative strategy for films about love and relationships: the hyper-romance. Each film works to stretch romantic conventions, adapting narrative strategies from television and using them to reshape film’s romantic comedy conventions. These movies rework relationship stories to address a mixed gender audience, expand romantic comedy conventions to tell stories centered on people-of-color, and using ensemble casting as a strategy for multiplying the versions of relationships and types of endings that might be addressed within a single film. Each of these films attempts to work with and around romance and desire, testing new romantic configurations and, in the case of *He’s Just Not That Into You*, also toying with the possibility of unhappy endings. In the process, these films rely on intertextual reference and on the audience’s familiarity with generic norms to both link to and detach from romantic conventions. I use these films to highlight a set

of narrative strategies that the film industry is using to target and manage different viewing demographics within a single film.

The final chapter, "Saying Yes: Romance and Reality on Wedding TV," shifts away from more traditional forms of romantic fiction, focusing instead on television's use of reality programming and the ways reality wedding shows bind romance with consumption. While reality television has become a popular genre in recent years, television has longstanding ideological, technological, and programmatic links to the presentation of reality (Friedman 4). James Friedman argues that what "separates the space of contemporary reality-based television from its predecessors is... the open and explicit sale of television programming as a representation of reality" (7). In particular, Friedman emphasizes "the marriage of reality conventions with dramatic structure" (8). This chapter traces precisely these kinds of programming strategies, outlining ways that reality wedding shows are using romantic tropes to provide structure and meaning to their programs.

Shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* and *My Fair Wedding* focus on replicating the emotional experience of falling in love and having that relationship affirmed, only here the bride says yes, not to a life-partner, but to material objects. Picking the right dress, the right cake topper, or the right invitations are crucial decisions for a bride. What kind of bride will she be? What kind of relationship is she claiming for herself? Today's successful bride-to-be needs to be a savvy shopper. The fate of her wedding (and future happiness) depend on her budgeting skills and good taste. A bit of originality and personalization may be tolerated, as long as certain key elements remain at the foreground and the cultural significance of marriage remains uncontested.

Chapter Four identifies ways that reality wedding shows use romantic themes to strike a balance between individual choice/expression and social norms/limits. For example, shows on

WE tv present a very different wedding experience than the one seen on TLC. The brides on TLC may struggle with costs but they usually have the financial means (or an occasional last minute bailout from a wealthy relation) to help them pull off their wedding on their own terms. In contrast, on WE tv's *Bridezillas* and *My Fair Wedding* we meet brides who are generally without the economic means and resources to pull off a dream wedding. These brides, often poor, often women of color, are typically positioned at two extremes: either as loud and unfeminine or as sweet, feminine, and deserving. The former are presented to be mocked on *Bridezillas*, the latter to be rescued by David Tutera and given the dream day that they deserve.

Rather than focusing exclusively on the initial meeting and courtship stage of the relationship, these shows focus on the wedding, emphasizing its romantic and social significance. These shows present romantic stories that, like the films examined in Chapter Three, seek to address a wider array of consumers. They accomplish this goal by assembling divergent "real" experiences into a common romance narrative. I identify ways that these shows are using modularity and continuity as narrative strategies that allow them to accommodate a broader array of women's experiences while simultaneously organizing these experiences into a set of emotionally charged consumption choices. In this way, these shows are working to accommodate more pluralistic approaches to marriage while enclosing them within the economic system that television is itself dependent on for its survival.

Conclusion

Romance is the subject of this project because of its long-term success as a product category across media forms and its long-standing association with female audiences and feminized storytelling conventions. Romance's ongoing viability as a product makes it a testing ground for new production and distribution methods. As media industries test strategies that sell

their products on multiple platforms and to both mass and niche audiences, romantic conventions are stretched and reconfigured. In turn, the kinds of love and desire represented and the ways these stories are structured in popular media are also changing. My investigation of these four production networks for romance identifies ways that romantic stories are shaped and categorized within different media forms and how the production of romantic stories is shaped by notions of commercial viability and audience demand.

Each mode of production I examine in this project seeks to represent certain experiences of love and partnership, constructing different romantic "packages" from which audiences select. Each also struggles to accommodate different audience experiences and negotiate cultural tensions. The first two chapters emphasize the erotic fantasies available to romance readers, exploring ways digital reading and production has led to an expansion of romance categories, more explicit content, and is facilitating amateur and non-commercial production. The final two chapters focus on the aspirational fantasies presented by film and television texts. Here, high production costs and global distribution produce complicated relationships between media producers and their revenue sources: advertisers and audiences. Exploring these different production systems reveals ways in which copyright, profit, cultural capital and media ownership push upon processes of cultural discourse, constraining representation and creative practice.

Chapter 1: Romance's Revolutions: The Redistribution of the Erotic in Romantic Storytelling

“Revolution is not too strong a word for what’s going on in the publishing world.”
(Carolyn Jewel)

This was author Carolyn Jewel’s summary of her experience at the 2013 Romance Writers of America (RWA) conference. At the event, a large annual gathering for romance writers, publishers, scholars, and fans, Jewel saw that more mid-list romance authors than ever were rejecting contracts from big-name publishers, turning instead to digital and self-publishing services. This ongoing movement of mid-list authors, away from traditional publishers and towards smaller digital shops, is just one in a much larger series of reconfigurations happening within romance publishing. These shifts are indicative of the dramatic impact digital publishing is having on commercial romances and the ways these titles are made available to readers. As publishers and authors have gone digital, the availability of particular kinds of romantic content has also shifted. Romantic sub-genres that once struggled to find space on store shelves are more easily offered in online databases where they do not displace larger selling categories and titles. The growth of the digital market has allowed smaller sub-genres to thrive and enabled the expansion of more niche romance titles, series, and sub-genres.

The erotic romance sub-genre has particularly benefited from digital sales. In 2012, the increase in erotic romance titles provoked *Publisher’s Weekly* to declare “Kinky is the new Vanilla!” and, in 2013, “erotic romance has become a booming and profitable new genre” (Naughton 28; Reid, “Patty Marks” 11). Research by the Romance Writers of America in 2012 found that readers of romance ebooks were much more likely to buy erotic romance titles than print buyers were (Kulo, *The Romance Book Consumer in the Digital Age: A Joint Study with Romance Writers of America* 26). Also, in the brick-and-mortar bookstores, sexier romances can be harder to find. Assuming a store carries them, are they mixed in with the romance titles? Are

they part of a small erotica section tucked into some corner? Not only are these books easier to find online, the selection is broader. Also important, without easily identifiable covers, e-books are discrete. All of these factors have contributed to the growth of the erotic romance market online.

Despite the recent declarations of erotic romance's newness, the sub-genre has actually been around for a very long time. Carol Thurston's *Romance Revolution* (1987) focused on the new, more sexually explicit version of romance which "came to full bloom between 1972 and 1982" (3). In *Fantasy and Reconciliation* (1984), Kay Mussell explained that the 1970s-era books were "described by publishers and commentators as 'erotic historical romances' or 'bodice rippers'" (10). Newspaper reports in 1975 describe the "eroticism" of the Avon romances and in 1975 a Rosemary Rodgers fan explained to reporters: "I buy these for me and I buy Penthouse and Hustler for my husband" (Martinez 32; Dickey F1).

While many popular romance titles were described as erotic in the 1970s and 80s, awareness of these books' eroticism seems to fade significantly in the following decades. One major difference between the erotic romances of the 1970s and the erotic romances that are published today is the more recent use of "erotic romance" as a marketing label. Industry figures and academics may have been calling these books erotic by the 1980s, but the books themselves do not appear to have been sold under this label. In the 1970s and 80s, erotic romance was a not an identifier that could be used to sell titles to a broad range of consumers. As Kristin Ramsdell observes, sexier romances are "often content to simmer quietly in the background" of the romance market (Ramsdell, "Sexy, Steamy Reads" 153). They are available to readers but have traditionally opted to signal their sexual content more discretely. Today's iteration of steamy titles is not new so much as the books are newly labeled. The term "erotic romance" has shifted

from a label used by academics to differentiate between types of romantic literature into a marketing term used by publishers to organize content and sell books to readers. The adoption of this label marks a more public acknowledgement of romance's erotic elements and the increased normalization of erotic content targeted for female consumers in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Today's so-called digital publishing revolution is one in a series of important moments where technological and cultural changes intersect in different ways to initiate significant shifts within romance publishing. While I am linking today's erotic romance sub-genre to a long line of trends in romance publishing, I do not want to underplay the changes currently unfolding in romance publishing or the role erotic romance is playing in this process. Classic models for the evolution and cycles of popular culture, in particular the equilibrium and disequilibrium paradigm (Thurston 1987), do not cleanly apply to digital markets.⁵ To the contrary, the ways the erotic romance sub-genre has established itself online and its heavy-reliance on digital publishing have significant implications for the ways scholars understand trends in popular media and conceptualize genre cycles. In the past, new approaches to depicting sexual intimacy have been regularly reintegrated into romance publishing, moving from notable trends to part of the status-quo. However, today's contemporary digital markets resist these traditional types of stabilization. Unlike past moments of market upheaval, when experimentation was limited by production costs and the need for market-safe content, today's digital markets thrive on a process of seemingly endless boundary pushing. These shifts can be seen when key moments in erotic romance's

⁵ Thurston uses erotic romance to outline an evolutionary paradigm that regularly resurfaces in popular culture. Thurston argues that the romance genre only exists in a "state of equilibrium... when all romance publishers are producing fundamentally similar products..." and that "one or more publishers can fluctuate products while others do not" (Thurston 213–214). She argues that the "introduction of a new technique or product may break a kind of social, technological, or economic equilibrium" (Thurston 211). When successful, these fluctuations initiate a period of disequilibrium, often triggered by social and technological changes.

history are examined side-by-side. The erotic romances of the 1970s transformed the print romance market, but today's digital publications have far fewer content limits, today's authors experience lower barriers to entry online, and the digital market more readily accommodates new and hybrid genre forms. The shifts from analog to digital and from mass to long-tail markets have profound implications for how romance and popular culture are conceptualized.

Romance publishing is not simply a useful case study for examining for trends in popular literature. The romance genre's dominance within publishing makes it a critical component of the larger industry. The estimated sales value for romance in 2013 was \$1.08 billion ("Romance Industry Statistics 2014"). The genre makes up 13% of the adult fiction market and 39% of romance sales come from ebook purchases, more than any other medium ("Romance Industry Statistics 2014"). Given the significance of romance within the larger publishing landscape, and the popularity of ebooks with romance readers, it is not surprising that romance publishers, readers, and authors have been leaders in the move towards digital publishing, social media marketing, and the adoption of e-readers. By the mid-90s romance authors and publishers were jumping online and experimenting with web marketing and outreach, romance readers were establishing wildly popular online review sites and discussion boards, and small clusters of individuals were organizing early experiments with digital publishing and e-reading.⁶

Also significant are the ways that romance's sexual fantasies so often resurface and capture public attention during moments of technological, industrial, and social change. Erotic romance, as readers know it today, emerged in parallel with the development of digital publishing. In the process, erotic romance developed as both a recognizable romance sub-genre and marketing term. Genre modifications are often responses to changes in social norms and to a

⁶ See Dyer and Dahlin, "Birds Do It, Bees Do It;" Hall, "RomStat 1998;" Rosen, "Love is All Around You" for more.

perceived “new” reader. From the 1970s on, genre shifts were initiated when different companies and industry stakeholders attempted to introduce their content into the existing romance publishing market. Rather than competing with established publishing companies for readers, newer and smaller publishers found success when they offer alternatives to standard content. Changes in production and distribution technologies, as well as changed marketing strategies, facilitated contact between new publishers and readers. These patterns can be seen in the history of romance publishing, in the emergence of erotic romance in the 1990s, and in the ways today’s romance publishers continue to experiment with digital content and marketing. This chapter will outline key moments in this history, highlighting the role sexual content has played in these shifts, signaling changing social norms and, often, reaching the public via new technologies and distribution methods.

Romance, Erotica, and Pornography

More explicit sexual content is generally thought to have appeared in romance novels during the 1970s, beginning with the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972. In this context, the book’s “explicitness” was due to *The Flame and the Flower*’s more detailed descriptions of sexual intimacy as well as several scenes in which the heroine is raped. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the more detailed content crossed over from historical romances into contemporary ones. The “New Heroines” of the 1980s experienced multiple orgasms, engaged in a variety of sex acts, initiated sex, and took pleasure in it “with neither shame nor apology for her feelings, needs, responses, and actions” (Thurston 144). What this type of content is called, however, depends on who is doing the labeling and their particular relationship to romance novels. The term erotic romance has been and continues to be used in very different ways by academics, romance readers, and publishers.

Among academics, the 1970s are typically framed as an origin point for erotic romance. Hsu-Ming Teo identifies the late-70s as the "burgeoning of the erotic romance novel" (156). Kay Mussell calls these books "the first erotic romances" (10). Carol Thurston refers to them as "erotic heterosexual romances" (10). The scholarly understanding that the erotic romance emerged in the 70s contrasts with the view of many romance readers that the erotic romance sub-genre is a relatively new phenomena. In *Romantic Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, Kristin Ramsdell cites the 1990s as the point "when the [erotic romance] genre began to make its presence felt" (*Romance Fiction* 535).⁷ Part of Libraries Unlimited's "Genrelecting Advisory Series," this book serves as an important guide to librarians building romance collections. Significantly, *Romantic Fiction*'s erotic romance bibliography does not include a single book published before 2001. Ramsdell notes the "steamier" aspects of historical romances in the 1970s, but she refers to these books as "sensual historicals" or "sweet/savage romances" (*Romance Fiction*).

Academics may be calling romances from the 70s and 80s erotic, but within romance's reading and publishing communities, these are now more commonly referred to as sensual historicals, hot historicals, or bodice rippers. Popular romance bloggers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan describe the books of the 70s as euphemism filled, "more humpy" than other romances of the day, and "discrete enough" (Wendell and Tan 12). This is hardly an enthusiastic endorsement of these books' erotic potential. When looked at retrospectively, contemporary readers understand that these romance novels were sexier than what came before, but that detail alone does not necessarily mesh with their experience of erotic romance today.

Romance publisher's incorporation of more explicit language and more overt sex scenes in the 1970s and 80s helped pave the way for today's erotic romance sub-genre. However, when

⁷ Note the easy slippage here between erotic romance as a "genre" and/or a "sub-genre" of romance.

compared to today's erotic romance titles, the content from the 1970s seems far less direct and explicit. This means that, regardless of the categorizing done by academics, for many romance readers the erotic romance emerges in the 2000s, not the 1970s. This does not mean that romance scholars are wrong to call the hot historicals erotic, however. Instead, it is an important reminder that eroticism is a constantly moving target and that terms like erotic and pornographic do not describe a consistent set of genre elements so much as they organize and identify content society wants to control access to.

In *The Secret Museum* (1987), Walter Kendrick's history of pornography in modern culture, Kendrick famously refuses to define pornography or classify the formal qualities of pornographic texts. Instead, Kendrick insists that the real common denominator for pornography is the term's use as a label for content a society wants to manage and control access to. Historically, Kendrick argues, "pornography is simply whatever representations a particular dominant class or group does not want in the hands of another, less dominant class or group" (L. Williams 12).

While pornography and obscenity were once nearly synonymous terms, over the course of the early 20th century additional refinements were made to the general category of "obscene." In particular, "a distinction was beginning to emerge... between old-fashioned 'obscenity' and something now called 'pornography'" (Kendrick 186–187). At the same time, an additional distinction between pornography and art was forming (Kendrick 178). Much of this work took place in American courts, as the legal system debated the circulation of different works. Significantly, written work made up the bulk of the material fought over in these obscenity cases. One outcome to the legal battles in America over pornographic material was that "printed words are no longer 'pornographic...' Pornographic now means pictures, preferably moving pictures"

(Kendrick 243). Throughout the early 20th century, sexually explicit *literature* was regularly tested and, in many key cases, deemed more artistic than obscene.

The term “erotica” comes into more common use in parallel with this. The word “erotica” dates back to at least 1853 and was initially used to categorize books in bookseller catalogs (Kendrick 244). However, as “‘pornography’ became increasingly tainted with low-class associations” and deemed without value in the 50s and 60s, “erotica” began to be more commonly used (Kendrick 244). There was a cultural need for a term that described the “increasing number of books that, though they dealt with sex, somehow did so in a safe and classy way” (Kendrick 244). Erotica became the term of choice for texts in this nebulous category of sexy but somehow more artful works.

Just as the term pornography, historically, has not been applied to materials with entirely consistent traits, the same has been true for erotica. Historically, both terms have been used to refer to a range of texts, encompass multiple media forms, and generally signal content society wants to control access to. Within this process, the erotic is not a consistently definable concept, but instead serves as marker for certain kinds of sexual content, boundary pushing, cultural change, industry trepidation, and public discomfort. Erotica serves as a narrative testing ground for the inclusion of various acts, fantasies, types of relationships and terms in popular media.

This history is important, given the ways that terms like pornography and erotica have been used historically to describe romance. If romance is pornography, this associates it with something that is classified as low-class, crude, and without artistic merit. If romance is erotica, this assigns it greater social value and associates it with other respected literary works. The distinctions between romantic, erotic, and pornographic content are lines constructed as much by cultural norms and social discomfort as they are form and content. With each surfacing of erotic

content, the boundaries between the more domestically acceptable realm of romance and the realm of the pornographic are both reinforced and redrawn.

The erotica label still comes with stigma and many romance readers have been uncomfortable with this association. (More on this in the upcoming section on romance in the 1990s.) While the erotica label came into use as a means of separating high and low cultural materials, over time particular commercial genres have been set apart as more middlebrow implementations of the erotic. Middlebrow status, however, is “a tool of exclusion and condescension” (Andrews 32). In film and television content, “softcore” often operates in this middle space. Much like softcore, the erotic romance label works with and against similar middlebrow associations. This content privileges female experiences and desires in ways that harder or higher tiered content does not, but its middlebrow associations also mean that its feminized aesthetics are generally dismissed as cliché and without artistic merit.

There is strong potential for overlap between erotic romance and soft core, as well as between erotic romance and erotica. Romance and the erotic romance subgenre have much to add to existing analyses women’s pornography and erotica for women. For example, June Juffer’s *At Home With Pornography* (1998) dedicates an entire chapter to the Black Lace erotica novels being published by Virgin Books in the 1990s. However, there were concurrent publications from Red Sage (an early erotic romance publisher with strong ties to romance publishing) and Bantam, (racy romance titles being published by well-known hot historicals authors like Susan Johnson and Beatrice Small) during this same period.

Juffer positions romance primarily as a concept that erotica is redefining. According to Juffer, romance is “a cultural construction, capable of being altered” and “contemporary erotica redefines romance through its emphasis on raw sex from the woman’s point of view” (141; 140).

The problem with this claim is that, according to romance scholars like Carol Thurston, the romance genre had already been focusing on sexual desire from a women's point of view since at least the early 1970s. Equally important, the erotica publications were coming from publishers beyond Virgin's Black Lace and many were affiliated with romance publishing. I will outline this history in more detail in my upcoming discussion of the 1990s. For now, however, I want to stress that erotica was not simply "redefining" romance. At this point in the 1990s, romance readers, authors, and publishers had already been redefining romance for decades. Moreover, the most consistent element of any genre is the reality that it is always redefining itself.

Romance and erotic romance can also contribute to more recent work on feminist pornography. In the *Feminist Porn Book* (2013), the anthology's editors work to introduce a broader theory of feminist pornography, but in practice romance and erotic romance are less addressed by the anthology's content. This may be because Penley, Shimizu, Miller-Young, and Taormino do not feel romance and erotic romance meet their definition for feminist pornography. They define this as:

an established and emerging genre of pornography, feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type and other identity markets. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure at their most confounding and difficult, including pleasure within and across inequality, in the face of injustice, and against the limits of gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homonormativity. It seeks to unsettle conventional definitions of sex, and expand the language of sex as an erotic activity, an expression of identity, a power exchange, a cultural commodity, and even a new politics. (10)

This list includes narrative elements that many pornographic, erotic, and romance titles “use,” “explore,” “unsettle” and “expand” on a regular basis. There is space in this definition of feminist porn to accommodate more research on the stories being told in romance generally and erotic romance specifically. However, the closest *Feminist Porn* seems to come to erotic romance or romance is a mention of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the introduction, which the authors identify as “women’s erotic literature” (Taormino et al. 14). This gap is instructive. The authors imply that *Fifty Shades* does fall into their definition of feminist porn when they state: “these books and the feminist porn movement show that ‘women are taking control of their own fantasies’” (Taormino et al. 14). However, the collection still primarily focuses on moving images and visual media. When writing is addressed, it tends to focus more narrowly on titles appearing in the erotica section of the bookstore. Labels and different sets of aesthetic choices play a part in making the intersections between these different categories of sexual content recognizable.

There are also historic reasons for contemporary emphasis on visual pornographic content. Kendrick argues that obscenity trials in the early and mid-20th century broke down the connection between pornography and print. Beyond this, the fact that so many porn scholars work within film and media studies may also explain the nearly exclusive focus on film, video, and visual media in porn/ography studies. In the 2004 *Porn Studies* anthology, editor Linda Williams generally frames porn as something we watch or look at. The lone mention of “Literature, erotic” in the index simply redirects readers to writing on pornographic comics for women. Again, it is the visual that’s emphasized over the written. The rebranding of “pornography” into “porn” may also help explain why writing (-graphy) is now so often neglected. However, Kendrick’s argument that pornography and erotica are labels used to control

and manage content may also help explain why romance and erotic romance are not being adequately addressed in studies of pornography and erotica. In refusing to label this content as explicitly *pornographic* or *erotic*, porn/ography and feminist porn/ography scholars protect romance and erotic romance from being tainted by association with them and vice versa. On one level, this means romance and erotic romance content can circulate more freely and the more sexual aspects of the materials may go unnoted. Unfortunately, however, all of this also has the effect of marking romance and erotic romance as some sort of middle(brow) sibling, hovering neglected between literature/art and pornography. Dodging the relationship between romance, erotic romance, and *erotica* denies romance the more elevated literary status that Kendrick argues that many erotic texts are ascribed. As a result of this, romance, one of the oldest genres of literature, is ignored as literature and romance publishing, a body of writing that has systematically emphasized women's relationships, needs, and sexual fantasies for decades, is ignored by researchers interested in the representation of sex in our culture. When I critique the overlooking of romance and erotic romance in porn/ography and erotica studies, I am not arguing that romance must be categorized as erotica or porn. I am suggesting that romance and erotic romance, their long history of producing sexual fantasies for a predominantly female audience in print, and their own context-specific aesthetic choices have much to contribute to research on pornography, erotica, and representations of female desire.⁸

Of course, as I urge for greater attention to the erotic and pornographic aspects of romance and erotic romance, I also need to acknowledge the challenges this will pose to many romance scholars, readers and authors. It is telling that literary scholar Pamela Regis describes the sex

⁸ Studies on soft core and erotic thrillers in relation to film, television, and video content (see Andrews 2006; Martin 2007; Williams 2005) may offer useful models for this type of research. Juffer's *At Home With Pornography* (1998) offers an excellent starting point for doing more cross-media analysis on these issues.

scenes in romances as “distracting particulars... in the context of the genre’s essential elements” (27). Regis is frustrated by past comparative analyses of romance which have “focused almost entirely on sex scenes, which are optional or accidental occurrences in the romance novel” (22). Given that Regis is interested in romance as a literary narrative, it is entirely understandable that she is disappointed. The lack of attention romance literature receives within literary studies means that other areas of inquiry (in particular, cultural, feminist, and media studies) and their priorities (often gender, sexuality, and cultural norms) dominate scholarly discussion on romance. In the process, cultural and media studies scholars (myself included) keep the focus on romance’s sex scenes.

Regis reminds us, “[a] larger narrative surrounds such scenes” (23). Without being attentive to romance’s place in literature and the larger narrative, literary history, and publishing contexts which surround these scenes of sexual intimacy, researchers miss a great deal of romance literature’s scope and nuance. However, I disagree with Regis when she argues that sex scenes are optional or accidental. In a narrative form so focused on female protagonists and their relationships, the ways that sex is incorporated into the narrative is profoundly important. Romance narratives are stories of courtship and betrothal (Regis 2003). Even when left unspoken, sex is present in nearly every element of a romance narrative. For romance’s female protagonists, sex is a part of their lives, their relationships, and their place in society. In these stories, sex comes in many forms, sometimes pleasurable but other times less so. For these heroines, sex can be present in their stories as a threat, as a source of power and of pain, as a commodity they can exchange, and as a something they fight to not be defined by. Rather than isolating sex and setting it apart from these women’s lives and larger stories, the fact that the

romance genre demands a larger narrative surround these scenes may be one of its most political and radical acts.

These are just some of the reasons why it is so important that we trace the moments when the erotic appears in romance, while being attentive to the legacy erotic romance has, its history as a sub-genre of romantic literature, and to the larger role romance publishing has played in developing erotica for women. The erotica, soft-core and feminist porn/ography movements of the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s are all indebted to romance, both to the work romance is doing as literature and to the ways the genre continues to work with and around social norms in order to represent women's sexual desires.

Romance's New Directions

At the start of the 1970s, gothic romance dominated the publishing market. However, these titles peaked in 1971 and the next year the market began to shift in other directions (Radway 33). The publication of Kathleen Woodwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972 by Avon is often credited with kicking off the genre cycle that came next. This title was noticeably different from other romances being published at the time. Its content was more direct about sex than the romances of the proceeding decade. It was also significantly longer and first released in paperback, rather than hardcover. Finally, it was published by Avon, which, at this point in time, was not a particularly well-known name in the romance industry. Authors like Woodwiss, Beatrice Small and Rosemary Rodgers all published now classic historical romances with Avon during this period. These were erotic, female-authored, historical romances (Teo 3). The books were "characterized by action, adventure, and sensuous, explicit, and occasionally brutal, sex" (Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction* 189). Sometimes disparagingly referred to as bodice rippers, today they are also commonly referred to as "hot historicals."

Competition between publishing companies played a direct role in romance's move to incorporate more explicit sexual content. In the 1960s, the North American romance market was dominated by Harlequin, a Canadian publishing company. At the time, Harlequin's success was due, in part, to their long-term relationship with British publisher Mills & Boon. Then, in the early 1970s, Harlequin hired Lawrence Heisey to head the company. Heisey made significant changes to the ways Harlequin marketed its publications and approached consumer research (Thurston 46–48). During this period, Harlequin expanded their publication lines and escalated their relationship with Mills and Boon, securing a controlling interest in the company (Thurston 46–48). Harlequin also introduced a mail order service, started providing tipsheets (or editorial/writing guidelines) for authors, and began selling books in supermarkets and with other mass-merchandisers (Thurston 46–48). In addition to the changes introduced by Harlequin, B. Dalton opened their first store in 1966 and continued to open stores throughout the 1970s (Radway 37). With a focus on putting stores in shopping malls, Dalton's expansion increased the number of lower-cost chain bookstores the general public had access to (Radway 37). As romance's popularity increased, this, in turn, enabled chains like Walden and B. Dalton to expand even further. It also boosted the used-books market and changed the way libraries acquired and organized content (Thurston 3). These changes from Harlequin and from the chain bookstores had a profound effect on romance publishing practices. However, one of the most wide-reaching effects was that romance publications were now more accessible and more affordable to a larger number of women.

Romance's success in the 1970s and 80s clearly coincides with changes to the ways romance titles were produced, distributed, and marketed. This systemic reconfiguring, combined with the genre's remarkable sales, prompted Janice Radway to wonder if the high sales were

more “evidence for the effectiveness of commodity packaging and advertising” than they were evidence of readers’ desire for the actual books (20). However, effective distribution and marketing strategies alone do not explain the content modifications that also occurred during this period. Significantly, Harlequin, an industry leader during this period, was one of the slowest publishers to respond to the trend for more explicit content. To the contrary, Harlequin was known for their conservative content policies. These company’s content requirements were even causing tensions with Mills & Boon, greatly frustrating the Mills and Boon authors who wanted to have their titles reprinted in North America. It was perceived that Harlequin would not or could not “publish these books because of the ‘sex’ in them” (McAleer 123). At the time John Boon commented, “I think they sometimes feel that the job of the editorial department is to keep Canada pure” (qtd. McAleer 123). Overall, Harlequin was an important player in publishing during this period, but their marketing department did not cook up the hot historicals trend and hand it off to readers.

Instead, the history of the romance novel is marked by moments where the sexual aspects of certain books were temporarily notable and subject to debate. Jay Dixon argues, “[s]ex has always been a part of Mills & Boon romances, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the era, the author and the type of plot” (Dixon 133). If sex is always a part of romance, it is not surprising that there have been particular moments when genre patterns shifted and authors began to write about sex in ways that stood out from the norm. In the history of romance publishing, the 1970s are widely recognized as one of these moments. However, the erotic historical romances of the 1970s trace their origins back to the orientalist sheik romances that were popular in the early 1900s. “Imperial erotic romances” like Victoria Cross’ *Anna Lombard* (1901), Ethel Dell’s *The Way of the Eagle* (1912), and E.M. Hull’s *The Sheik* (1919) bridged “the

decline of the moralizing Victorian romance and the rise of the mass-market women's romance" (Hipsky 153). Each book was known for its erotics, direct language, and for going into further detail than was customary at the time. Dell's writing was described as "shockingly lucid. No women's novelist has ever provided the women's eye view of the approaching lustful man. She spares her readers no detail in what ensues" (Hipsky 171–172). In 1945, Gershon Legman claimed that following the success of *The Sheik* "readers began to '[insist]' in sex in the novels they borrow from the very influential lending-library chains" (Gertzman 69). Jay Gertzman questions this, noting that new titles "did not attempt the exotic romance, let alone [E.M. Hull's] sultry aggression" and that romantic encounters were "only lightly suggested" (69).

However, it is important to keep two qualifications in mind when evaluating the books following *The Sheik*. First, popular entertainment went through a significant shift in the late-1920s and 1930s. After a series of Hollywood scandals, there was widespread public pressure on the entertainment industries to set a better moral example and on government to set strict standards on content. Film censorship moved from state-level censorship boards over to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, which adopted the Production Code in the 1930s. Second, if the criteria for eroticism are constantly shifting, the erotic qualities of these texts may be less visible to contemporary readers. The best way to understand these books may be to study the responses of readers when they were first published, rather than relying primarily on the textual analysis of contemporary researchers.

Dell and Hull's books were published during the same period in the early 1900s when "the mass-market women's romance, as we today understand it, came into being in Britain" (Hipsky 172). This was a period which "saw the rise of the bestseller 'sex novel'" in Britain (dixon 137). When *The Sheik* was adapted by Hollywood into a film starring Rudolph Valentino in 1921,

America also experienced “sheik fever.” These books and their popularity helped establish that there was a large market for romances and women’s fiction. “[W]hile the “Orientalist romance largely vanished after the 1930s” mass-market romance was now an established genre in publishing. Also important, in the 1970s these orientalist romances would reemerge “in the form of the historical harem bodice ripper” (Teo 143).

Given this history, instead of positioning the 1970s as an origin point for today’s erotic romances, this period should instead be seen as another moment where the erotic dramatically resurfaced. During the 1970s, certain depictions of sex in romantic storytelling were momentarily visible and distinct. Like the sheik romances so popular in the 1920s, the erotic romances of the 1970s mark another period of reconfiguration within broader American culture, within the mass-market publishing industry, as well as a moment where the representation of sexual desire in romance was renegotiated. In 1919, romances like E.M. Hull’s *The Sheik* acknowledged the existence of sexual passion and female desire. By the 70s, so-called “bodice rippers” like *The Flame and the Flower* took further steps to include depictions of sexual intimacy into their narratives.

Broader social changes and an increased awareness of human sexuality in the 1960s and early 70s set the stage for romance stories which took new approaches to representing women’s lives and sexual experiences. Human sexuality researchers Masters and Johnson’s released a series of reports on sexuality over the course of the 1960s, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963 and The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective released early versions of *Our Bodies Our Selves* in 1966 and 1971. *Playgirl* released its first issue in 1973. The women’s movement was gaining momentum, birth control was becoming more widely available to women, and social attitudes regarding marriage and sex were shifting.

Amidst these broader conversations about sexuality, marriage, and women's roles in society, Harlequin's initial reluctance to respond to the changing market stands out. The fact that Mills and Boon titles were being rejected tells us that Harlequin certainly had the option to publish less conservative titles and had evidence that these books were selling well in Britain. (Although, it is important to remember, in this context the sexier aspects of these titles meant "intense lovemaking of the Mills and Boon variety, not actual intercourse" (McAlleer 123).) However, Harlequin was not the only romance publisher at the time. It was simply a very important player in the expanding North American book market. In 1972, Avon was a smaller company and struggling to compete with the larger paperback houses (Thurston 47). Avon turned to paperback originals in a simple attempt to stay afloat, famously pulling *The Flame and the Flower* out of the slush pile (their stack of unsolicited manuscripts) in order to publish it (Radway 33; Thurston 47). At the time, *The Flame and the Flower* was a publishing risk for Avon, numerous publishers had already rejected it. In 1974, following the novel's success, Avon published a second book by Woodiwiss and *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. By 1976, sales of gothic romances had significantly declined and many other publishers were beginning to offer their own hot historical titles in an attempt to compete with Avon (Thurston 50).

During this period in the seventies, romance publishing was polarized. The market was generally organized around two poles: steamy historicals and sweet contemporaries. The sweeter romances typically focused on contemporary women and were often published within well-established publisher series. The steamier historicals were typically sold as longer single-title publications, which meant that riskier and more explicit content was strategically kept apart from the rest of the romance market. This occurred, in part, because established romance publishers like Harlequin were not publishing it yet, but also because publisher categories always allow

romance readers to self-select the versions of romance they prefer. The dividing line between historical and contemporary stories is also significant. The more explicit texts were the historicals, stories focused on exotic foreign settings and faraway times. They presented sensual fantasy worlds that were carefully removed from the day-to-day lives of readers. By the late-70s, a space was slowly being marked out for the inclusion of more direct representations of sexual intimacy in mass market paperbacks, but, as a whole, romance publishers were not ready to broadly integrate this approach to sexual content into all their titles or connect it directly to the lives of contemporary readers.

Eventually, after the hot historicals established themselves as a successful genre category, publishers began to introduce lines of contemporary romances that also included explicit sexual content. Gradually, in the 1980s, there was a second wave of changes. Sexually explicit content was incorporated into a range of stories by a range of publishers, usually carefully organized within a specific publishing imprint, so that readers could find or avoid these stories.

Like the earlier content shifts, renegotiating the boundary between explicit sexual content and contemporary settings went hand-in-hand with another round of changes in the romance industry. In the late-70s, Harlequin took back their American distribution rights from Pocket Books, a division of Simon and Schuster (Thurston 51–52). This, in turn, left Simon and Schuster in need of content for their existing distribution chain. Simon and Schuster decided to publish their own original romances to compensate, much like Avon had in the 70s. In 1980, the company launched Silhouette, a romance imprint that dramatically shook up the market and initiated the legendary “romance wars” of the period. At the same time, Dell and Pocket Books began publishing erotic contemporaries and Ballantine followed in 1982 (Thurston 52-56). To say that these different imprints simply appeared on the market risks under-emphasizing the

significance they had within the romance genre. In the 80s, “other series, generally those of the innocent variety, were disappearing from the racks... Sensual series proliferated and the [romance] market exploded” (Ramsdell 10-11).

Until this point, Harlequin had an “estimated 80-90% market share of the series romance market” (Thurston 52). Silhouette, however, “made huge inroads into a market that Harlequin had regarded as its own” (Regis 156). Harlequin lost half of its market between 1981 and 1983 (Thurston 63). Part of the reason why these other publishers were able to act so quickly may have been due to the number of American authors sitting on manuscripts during this time, all eager to find a publisher. As a reprinter of Mills and Boon romances from the UK, British settings and authors dominated Harlequin’s content. Infamously, Harlequin even rejected an early manuscript from the (now) wildly successful Nora Roberts during this time, informing her that they already had their American author (Regis 159). Not only was Harlequin reluctant to introduce more explicit content, they also seemed uncertain about incorporating American settings and authors into their publications, both elements that with the potential to bring romance closer to its readers’ experiences. This slower response from Harlequin is important. Well-established in romance publishing, there was little incentive for Harlequin to shake up its market with potentially risky content. Instead, the newer content provided smaller and start-up publishers with an alternative product, something that Harlequin did not offer.

Shifting social norms created gaps in the market and helped smaller publishers' identify viable and distinctive content. Popular interest in more explicit sexual content, coupled with competition in the publishing industry, all helped drive the larger changes in the romance publishing landscape, making a broader variety of stories and authors available to potential readers. As the 80s progressed, however, publishing companies merged, sexual content spread to

a broader array of romantic sub-genres, and the genre gradually restabilized. The newer and more sexually explicit content did not disappear, but this content became less notable as these storytelling strategies were integrated into the larger web of romance categories and sub-categories. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan argue that there were additional important changes to romance in the 1980s. They observe that heroes tended to be gentler, there were more scenes written from the hero's point of view, heroines became much more self-sufficient and sexually experienced, and, very importantly, forced seductions and dubious consent were no longer compulsory elements used to justify or excuse to women's sexual encounters (Wendell and Tan 22–25).

The period of turbulence and disequilibrium in the 70s and early 80s, followed by a gradual return to equilibrium in the mid-80s, has been identified as a paradigm for how of popular culture simultaneously integrates, reflects and participates in social/political change (Thurston 1987). Carol Thurston argues that under disequilibrium "one or more publishers can fluctuate products while others do not" (213–214). Crucial to Thurston's theory is the notion that during disequilibrium, the existing system bifurcates into two parallel ones, reflecting old and new models simultaneously. This bifurcation is important to romance scholars because it may help explain some of the inconsistencies in romance scholarship published in the 1980s when compared with readers' experiences of romance during this time. For example, Thurston observes, "[a]ll the titles Radway used to formulate the narrative structure... [of] the ideal romance were published prior to 1981 and the appearance of the erotic contemporary series romance" (137-138). Regis expresses similar concerns that Radway studies a very particular romance formula and "[y]et her conclusions concern the genre as a whole" (25).

Similar concerns can be raised regarding Tania Modleski's *Loving With A Vengeance* (1982) and its references to Harlequins (1982). Modleski's analysis focuses on a list of roughly nine Harlequin titles, eight published in 1976 and one in 1974 (113 n14). Modleski's project undoubtedly brings forward important insights into these nine Harlequin titles, but given the bifurcation in the romance market during this period, and the number of titles Harlequin put out in a year, it would be irresponsible for other scholars to use Modleski's research to make claims about the entirety of the romance genre during this time. If the romance genre was hard to generalize in the 1970s and 80s, when there was still a smaller set of established publishers controlling the market, imagine the impossibility of this task given the amount of titles being produced today and the many different ways these titles are published (current options include: traditional companies, a variety of digital publishers large and small, as well as self-publishing).

Thurston also takes the step to make broader claims about romance in the 1980s. Thurston argues that the romance genre returned to equilibrium in the mid 80s. Silhouette and Harlequin eventually merged, existing publishers streamlined their various imprints, and competition was reduced (Thurston 214). The range of readers romance acquired from 1972-82 and the pluralism Thurston celebrated seemed to be on the wane. According to Thurston, "a state of equilibrium exists when all romance publishers are producing fundamentally similar products" (213). I agree that the market seems to stabilize, particularly following the Harlequin and Silhouette merger. However, I disagree with Thurston's assessment that romance publishing returned to producing fundamentally similar products.

Big-name publishers incorporated the new degrees of sexual explicitness into various imprints throughout the 1970s and 80s. However, this did not mean that the structure of each and every romance novel changed accordingly. Reaching equilibrium again in the mid-to-late 1980s

did not result in each and every romance novel being fundamentally the same. Instead, the state of equilibrium meant that the major publishing companies were offering a similar range of imprints and organizing their titles in to a similar range of sub-genres (along with their different degrees of explicitness). More accurately, disequilibrium and bifurcation started to become the new equilibrium. After 1982, the new equilibrium was one in which the existing publishing companies responded to new trends, adjusted their offerings where needed, and tried to do this without unduly disrupting existing readers/sales.

Today, many of the ways hot historicals depicted sex had now been standardized across multiple publishing imprints and romantic sub-genres. Publishers arranged the various approaches to intimacy along a spectrum, using different publishing imprints and series to organize them. This meant that publishers could gradually incorporate trends, and target these titles towards a particular reading audience, without undoing older approaches or destabilizing existing readers. For decades now, the print romance market has been constructed out of a very carefully organized (and market tested) range of stories. In book and imprint descriptions, terms like “inspirational” or “sweet” continue to signal to readers that intimacy will be limited to kissing (and, in some cases, will avoid even that). Words like “spice,” “heat,” “sensual,” and “steamy” appear more casually on book covers and in the plot summaries of many different romance sub-genres. Contemporary publishers even provide guides to their imprints and content categories on their websites. These lead readers and authors to the appropriate spots for their style of romance.

The range of story types and the shifts in their degree of explicitness over time can be seen when the current Harlequin imprints (and their current “hotness” level) are connected with earlier versions of that imprint. Lines like American Romance, Special Editions, and Intrigue

began in the early 1980s as new erotic imprints. Today (as indicated on the chart) they fall in the middle of Harlequin's content spectrum. Temptation, once Harlequin's more risqué imprint, was eventually replaced by Blaze, an even more explicit and direct imprint. At the same time, romance publishers continued to put out sweet and inspirational content, along side the other imprints.

The disequilibrium/equilibrium model of popular culture is intended to emphasize the ways that introducing "a new technique or product may break a kind of social, technological, or economic equilibrium" (Thurston 211). In the case of romance in the 1970s, the new products were the initial erotic romances (or hot historicals), the eventual erotic contemporary series, and the new techniques were a variety of changes publishers made to the ways they produced, distributed and marketed their content. Not only did the romance market not return to homogeneity in the mid-80s, the introduction of both the historical and contemporary erotic romances in the 70s and 80s, and their coexistence with the pre-existing (and sweeter) romance sub-genres, helped romance publishers further develop a carefully segmented organizational structure for their titles—a system that (as I will discuss shortly) models the kind of heterogeneous market romance publishers (and popular culture more broadly) see developing online today. This earlier paradigm was designed around an analog/print market that needed to produce, distribute and market physical copies of books. Digital publishing and web-based

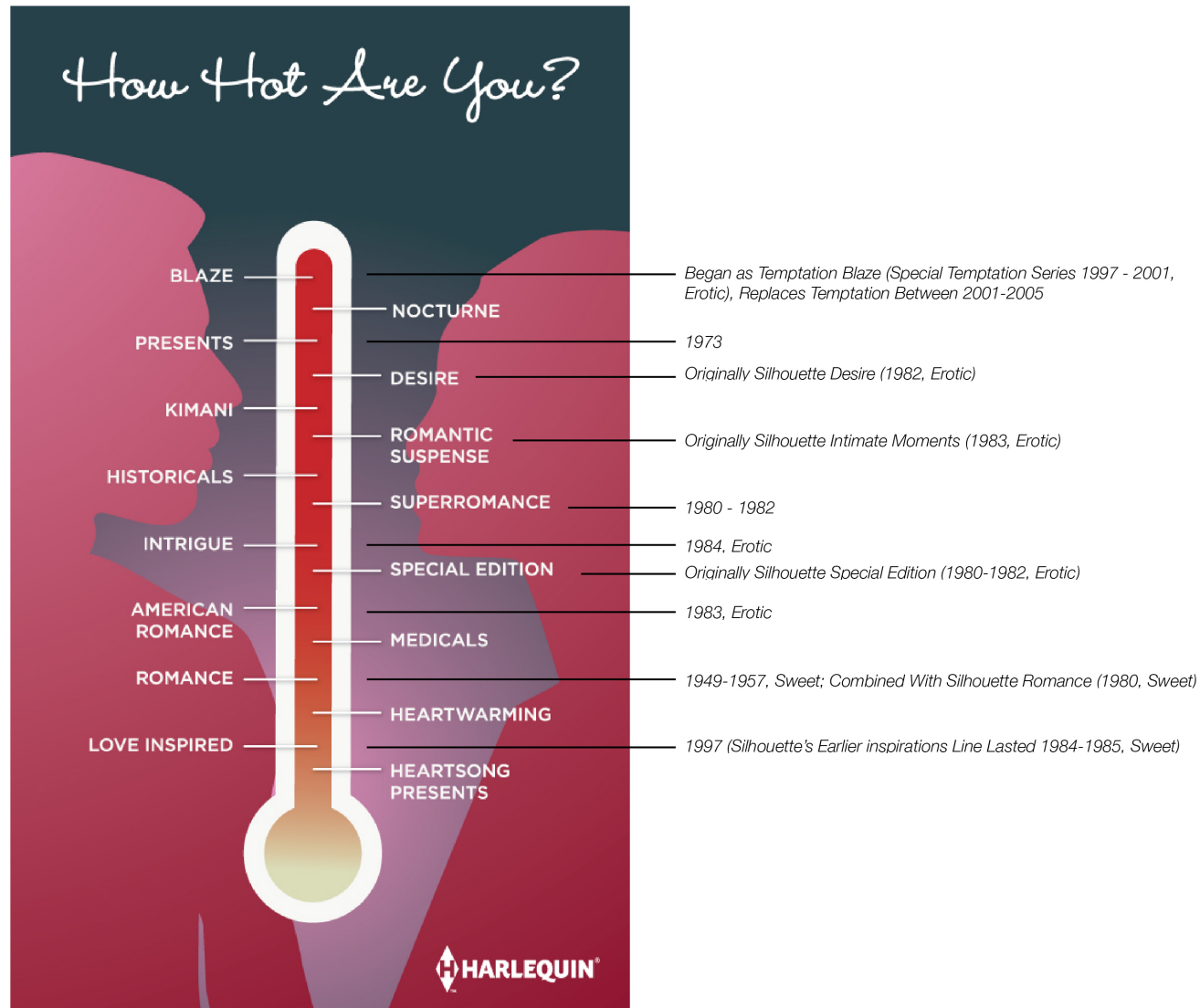


Figure 1: Harlequin’s self-reported “hotness” levels for their imprints in 2015, alongside the imprint’s initial start dates and Thurston’s hotness ratings from 1987. (When more than one date is reported, range is included.)

markets have profoundly changed the accessibility of popular culture and its range of available content. To better understand the changes unfolding online and their implications for the romance publishing market, I want to reconstruct what happened to romance in the period after the 1980s. Next, I will outline the gradual development of erotic romance as a sub-genre and marketing term within romance publishing in the 90s and early 2000s.

(Romantic) Erotica

Following the stabilization of the romance market in the 1980s, it took roughly a decade for authors and publishers to begin renegotiating romance's sexual boundaries again. This time, however, the issue was not around including or acknowledging sex. Instead, in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was debate in the romance community online around the very notion that romance could be considered erotic and whether that term should be associated with romantic stories. There was also debate regarding the types of fantasies and sexual relationships romantic stories might incorporate and still be considered romance. For example, masturbation, anal sex, fantasies of dominance and submission, depictions of same-sex relationships, and ménage or triads (threesomes) are all story elements that—at different points and for differing reasons—have been positioned as either erotic or pornographic and outside of the romance genre.

Much like in the past, the next push on romance's sexual boundaries began away from core romance publishers like Harlequin, starting with the marketing of soft-core and erotic material to female audiences. In the 1980s, awareness of a potentially untapped female audience for sexually explicit materials was increasing. A 1987 Redbook survey reported that nearly half of the 26,000 women they surveyed were regularly watching pornographic films (L. Williams 231). New lines of "female-friendly" soft-core and erotica content appeared in print, on television, and in film in the late 80s and early 90s. *On Our Backs*, the first women-run erotica magazine, also recognized

for its early inclusion of female/female content, was launched in 1984. Candida Royalle founded Femme Productions in 1984 and a cycle of soft-core featurettes appeared on premium cable in the early 90s (Cameron 1990; Andrews 5). Shows like *The Red Shoe Diaries* (Showtime, 1992) and *Women Stories of Passion* (Showtime, 1996) positioned themselves as offering a new kind of female-friendly sexual fantasy. Each series focused primarily on female protagonists and heavily promoted their use of women writers and directors.⁹

This expansion of adult content could not have occurred without romance already having laid so much of the groundwork in the 70s and 80s. The success of the hot historicals in the 70s and the incorporation of more erotic contemporaries in the 80s helped reinforce the idea that there was a market for sexual content for women. In conjunction with the political work of the women's and gay rights movements, these books facilitated a larger conversation in popular culture about women's fantasies and desires, as well as helping to make the argument that this content could (or should) be a part of women's lives. It also worked discursively to separate "adult" content from a one-to-one association with "pornographic" content. This was a significant move, given the heated debates about pornography and misogyny (often called the "porn wars") that took place in the women's movement during the 1980s. Not only was pornography traditionally considered lower-class, vulgar, and artless (as discussed earlier), now many were arguing that it was inherently misogynistic. The "porn" content label was not particularly female-friendly. However, terms like sensual, adult, and erotic, did not necessarily carry the same stigmas.

In print, British publisher Virgin Books launched their Black Lace imprint, a women's erotica series, in 1992. Black Lace was also distributed in the United States in the 1990s, "perhaps most prominently in Borders bookstores" (Juffer 107). It is unclear whether Black Lace

⁹ For more on this trend see Juffer, 1998; Backstein, 2001; Andrews, 2006; Martin, 2007.

had any ties to the existing romance publishing community in Britain. However, within romance publishing in the United States, well-known romance authors like Susan Johnson and Beatrice Small continued to publish and push content limits. Johnson and Small were established romance authors, both writing hot historicals in the 1970s. In the 90s, Johnson, who had been writing for Playboy Press, was recruited to write for Bantam Books (Interview w/Johnson). Bantam Books published Susan Johnson's *Forbidden* in 1991 and both *Blaze* and *Sinful* in 1992. The cover language for these titles hints at their more erotic elements, but does not go further. *Forbidden*'s front cover promises "passion that burns so hot it could only be love" and the back hints at "scandalous love" that is "destined to break every rule" (Johnson 1991). On the back covers of *Blaze* and *Forbidden*, the descriptions strike a similar tone. Both quote a review stating that Johnson's "love scenes sparkle, sizzle, and burn" (1991; 1992). The *Blaze* cover assures readers that Johnson is "at her sizzling, sensual best" and *Sinful*'s front cover promises "unbridled sex" (1992). Neither of these covers, however, includes any mention of the term erotic.

By 1995, Bantam had begun to more clearly embrace the connection with the erotic on the covers of their romance titles. Johnson's *Brazen* (1995) and *Wicked* (1996) would both use the same *Romantic Times* review quote on their covers, each declaring Johnson "the queen of erotic, exciting romance" (1995; 1996). *Brazen* also promised readers a "sizzingly erotic new novel" (Johnson 1995). This is one example of the way the term erotic slowly made its way into the marketing language for romance titles. And yet, this was precisely the kind of connection that would soon be the focus of significant debate by members of the romance community.

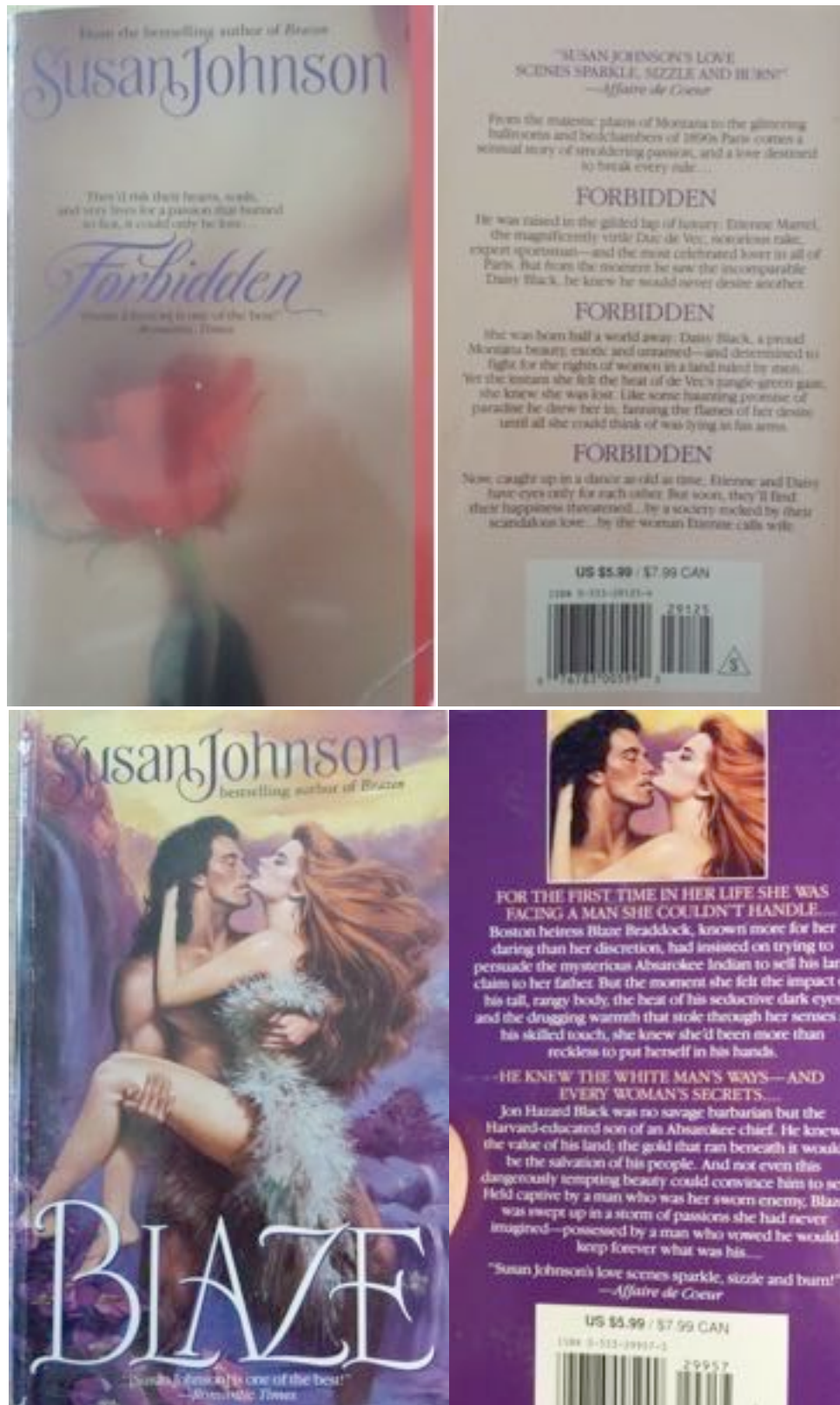


Figure 2: Susan Johnson's *Forbidden* (1991) and *Blaze* (1992)

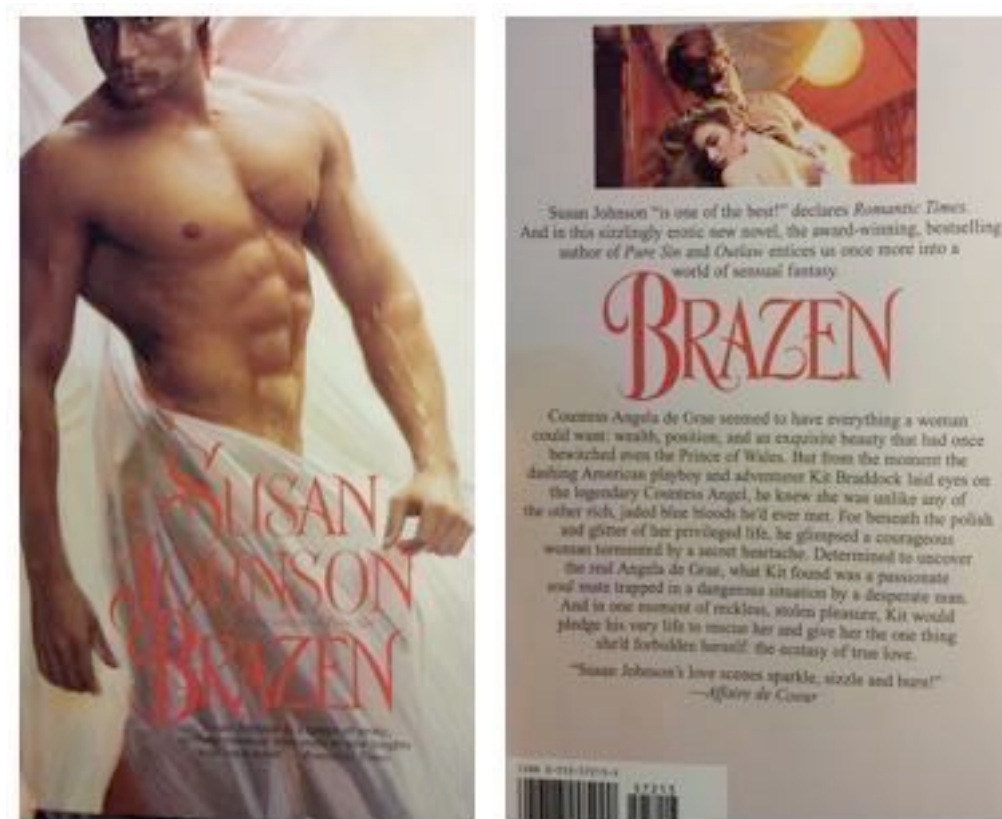


Figure 3: Susan Johnson's *Brazen* (1995)

1994, Alexandria Kendall founded Red Sage Publishing and Red Sage began publishing their (now classic) *Secrets* anthologies in 1995 (Litte). Red Sage had strong ties to the romance publishing community in America. Kendall even attributes Red Sage's origins to her attendance at Romance Writers of America conventions. While attending the events she, "kept hearing... authors complain about their publishing houses not letting them write the sex they wanted to write in their stories" (Litte). Essentially, Kendall began Red Sage as a way of addressing this gap and creating space for more sexually explicit romances.

While Johnson's titles were beginning to incorporate the term erotic at this point, Red Sage appears to have been a little more cautious. Instead, they were taking pains to link their material to romance. Along with Kendall's pre-existing professional connections to the RWA and the

romance community, early versions of the Red Sage website also make these connections clear. In 1999, the Red Sage website welcomed visitors by declaring that the company provided “the best in women’s sensual fiction” and in 2000 the site added that these were “stories for the daring romance reader” (“1999 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”; “2000 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”). In an appeal to authors, Red Sage explains that their “authors have the freedom to write creative sensual romances which break out of the cookie-cutter mold” (“1999 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”). A call for manuscripts directly solicited existing romance authors asking, “Are you an [sic] romance author? Interested in having your story published” (“1999 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”).

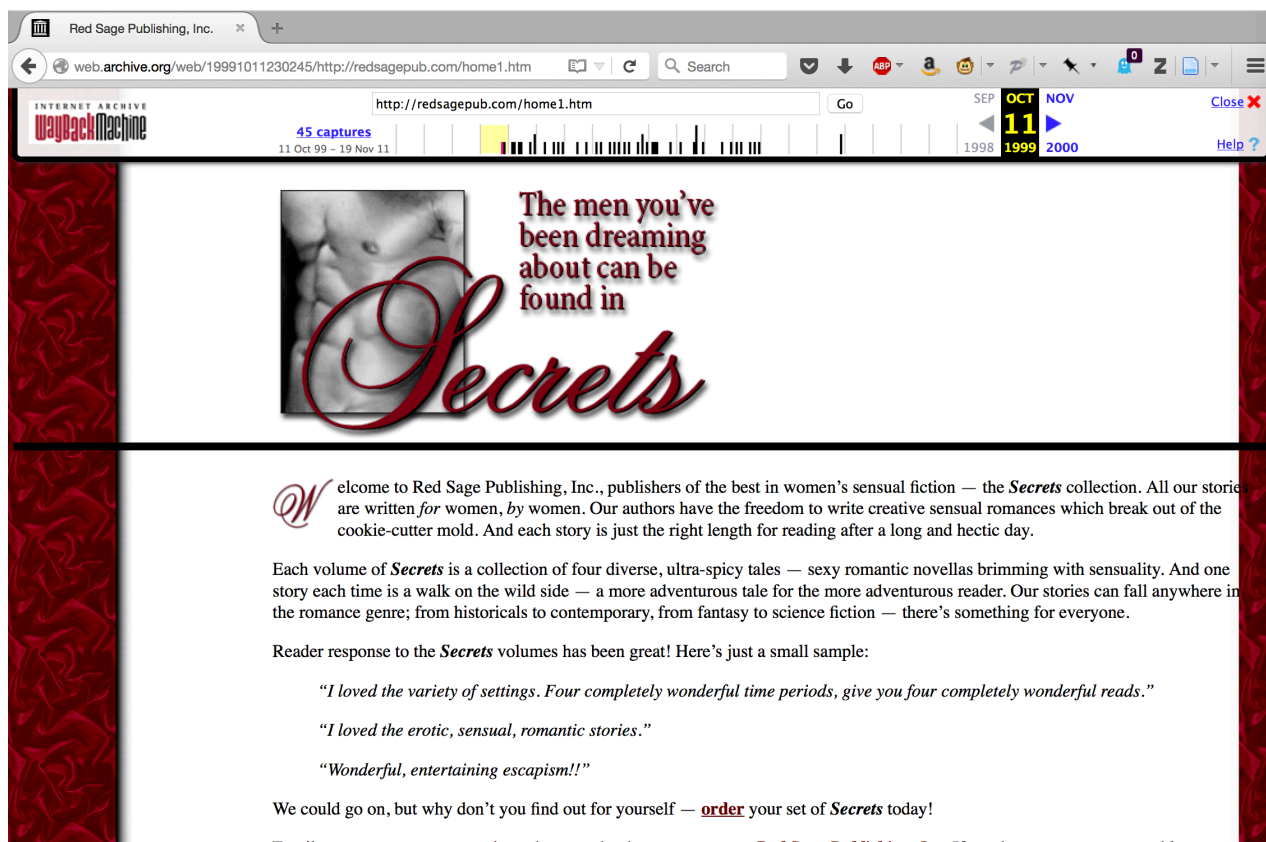


Figure 4: Red Sage Website in 1999 (Wayback Machine)

The Red Sage marketing language also makes use of language romance readers would already be familiar with, rather than immediately utilizing terms like “erotica” to set them apart. A 1999 description of the *Secrets* anthologies explains:

“Each volume of Secrets is a collection of four diverse, ultra-spicy tales — sexy romantic novellas brimming with sensuality. And one story each time is a walk on the wild side — a more adventurous tale for the more adventurous reader. Our stories can fall anywhere in the romance genre; from historicals to contemporary, from fantasy to science fiction — there’s something for everyone.” (“1999 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”)

The emphasis here on “sensual,” “spicy,” and “sexy” draws on romance readers’ prior knowledge of these terms and the types of content they might refer to. The description also emphasizes that their stories “fall anywhere in the romance genre” and that “there’s something for everyone”—presumably for everyone in romance. The description also sets Red Sage apart from other romance publishers. These books are “wild” and “more adventurous.” The 1999 website quotes readers referring to the books as erotic, but that word does not appear in Red Sage’s description of the anthologies. Overall, in 1999 Red Sage is being careful to suggest eroticism without directly using the term erotica. This caution with language suggests that Red Sage is working to manage the expectations of different readers simultaneously. The company does not want to offend, but it also wants to challenge readers, authors, and the industry to be “more adventurous” with sexual content.

While Red Sage was careful with the term erotica in the late 1990s, they are much more direct about the early anthologies’ erotic content today. At first, Red Sage described its titles as “sensual fiction for adventurous women,” (“1999 Red Sage Publishing, Inc.”). By 2007, however, the company was repositioning this history and framing their earlier publications as

groundbreaking erotic work. Since 2007, the company's "About" page has declared: "The first Secrets anthology was released in 1995... The very first authors of erotic romance are Bonnie Hamre, Alice Gains, Jeanie LeGendre and Ivy Landon" ("About Red Sage (2007)"; "About Red Sage (2010)"; "About Red Sage (2015)"). Today, Red Sage claims a role in the erotic romance sub-genre's pre-history, stating: "Before there were e-books, before there was something labeled 'erotic romance,' there was Red Sage" ("About Red Sage (2015)").

Despite Red Sage's claim to be the first, when this history is placed side by side with Bantam's publications during this period, it is clear that Red Sage was not the sole origin point for erotic romance. However, both publishers' initial positioning of their content as highly sensual romance (rather than erotica), and the publishers and authors' connections to the romance publishing community, played an important role in further graying the line between sensual romances and the erotica being marketed to women in the 90s. Red Sage and Black Lace's books were typically marketed as erotica, but they also frequently included classic romantic elements and themes. Authors, readers and publishers were moving across these spaces and recognition of romance's erotics was becoming more widespread.

Bantam, Red Sage, and Black Lace and others gave female readers content that was portable and discreet, but that also could be found more easily at an area bookstore or in other retail locations women frequented. Jane Juffer argues that, in moving from the adult video store and men's magazine rack into television sets and bookstores, erotica was becoming more domesticated (Juffer 1998). This domestication is a complicated move. "Domestication" can imply a watering down of content. However, as Juffer argues, it also signals the ability this content has to enter women's private spaces. Domesticating content enabled a greater number of women to access it. The process Juffer outlines intersects with important and ongoing changes

happening in romance publishing during this period, changes that played a significant role in this domestication process. As romance publishers became comfortable more explicitly declaring the significance of sex to particular imprints, authors and titles, the field of romance was also working to make certain types of sexual content more female-friendly and more accessible to female audiences.

Romance readers did not readily accept all the content changes, however. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the possibility that the genre would be (or should be) associated with the erotic was the subject of significant debate online. By the mid-90s, romance readers had begun to develop a robust internet presence. In the process, review sites, bulletin boards, and email lists were connecting larger networks of romance readers, authors, and publishers to each other. In 1996, following the publication of *Brazen* and *Sinful*, popular romance web forum and review site *All About Romance (AAR)* began initiating discussions about the racier romances. One major question being: Were these even romances?

In one of the regular AAR newsletters in 1996, site founder Laurie Gold observed that “books written by authors such as Thea Devine, Susan Johnson, and Bertrice Small become more erotica than romance” (All About Romance, “Issue #16”). In a later 2000 interview with Emma Holly, she referred to these Holly’s titles as “erotica/romance hybrids” (All About Romance, “A Writer Rants”). Gold’s comments suggest that, despite the attempts by publishers to link erotica and romance on book’s covers and in their marketing, erotica and romance remained separate categories in the eyes of many. Authors like Devine, Johnson, and Small were departing from many readers’ conception of romance. It is also clear that these authors were doing this from within the romance publishing community. Thea Devine was attending the RWA annual conventions and, in an interview with AAR’s Laurie Gold, Devine explained “she wants to push

the envelope of what is accepted sexually in romance and that she does so purposely” (All About Romance, “Issue #16”). Romance readers were being pushed, quite purposefully, to change its boundaries.

In response to both Devine’s comments and the new publications, Gold uses the site newsletter to ask:

Do you like where some of these sexually adventurous authors are leading us? Should they move beyond mainstream romance and have their own category of erotic romance...? Are these authors' books truly even romances or are they erotic fiction, historical erotica or something else altogether? (All About Romance, “Issue #16”)

This question suggests a complicated relationship between the erotic romances and “mainstream romance” during this period. Importantly, readers were aware that they were being asked to imagine new possibilities for romance.

Gold’s request for comments lead to significant debate on the AAR website. These conversations on the website and its forums began in 1996 and continued into the early 2000s. (I suspect many readers could still enter into debate around these issues today.) In these discussions, the conversation regularly returned to the question of whether these types of stories were “good” for either women or romance. Was this a celebration of female pleasure or a denigration of women? Was it immoral or natural? In defense of “authors who are breaking the envelope,” reader Toniya argues “if we keep labeling every romance novel that has sex in it as ‘graphic’ or ‘demoralizing’, we’re not going to have anything left but a story that’s unfulfilling and boring” (All About Romance, “Issue #17”). However, Gold counters that other romance readers have more mixed feelings. Gold explains, “most of the readers I’ve heard from... prefer

something in-between the allusion of sex as [‘]waves crash onto shorelines[’] and the ‘in your face’ sexuality some authors offer up” (All About Romance, “Issue #17”).

Gold gave reader and author “Holly” the last word in issue 17’s discussion: “In the best of all possible worlds, there will be romances for all tastes: sweet, steamy, erotic... And no one will look down on anyone else because the books they like either do or do not contain explicit sexual content” (All About Romance, “Issue #17”). This point of closure is important because it is a reminder of the way romance publishers were already organizing their titles. With the different imprints available, there generally was a range of romances available to readers. This leads me to wonder if these debates were a reaction to the internet as much as they were to changing content. The internet was a new tool that the romance community could to communicate with each other and for publishers and authors to promote new work. In the past, old and new genre systems were able to operate in parallel without disrupting these different clusters of readers. However, when readers came online, they were confronted with the reality that there were other versions of “romance” that existed in parallel with their own. Holly’s comment about readers being looked down upon also reminds us that there are larger stakes to this debate about romantic content. Romance readers were (and are) very concerned with stigma by association. When romance stays distinct from erotica, readers can more readily activate the “literature” label and shield their reading habits from being dismissed as smut. If the romance and erotica labels are conjoined, then romance readers find the genre moving closer to the pornography label than they might be comfortable with.

AAR continued to collect and archive these “Rants About Sexuality” on their website through the year 2000, regularly adding comments and updating these pages to represent the continuing debate. These conversations were ongoing because notable sexual content kept

coming. The next important moment in this conversation came in 1999 when Kensington Publishing began to test more erotic content on romance readers. The company approached Johnson and asked her to write for them instead of Bantam (Johnson, “Interview With Susan Johnson”). Johnson moved over to Kensington and, in 1999, Kensington published *Captivated*, an anthology featuring stories by Thea Devine, Susan Johnson, Robin Schone and Bertrice Small. Kensington used an anthology format similar to Red Sage’s *Secrets* anthologies. Most importantly, *Captivated* was the first in a series of anthologies that Kensington explicitly labeled “tales of erotic romance” (Johnson, Devine, and Schone). Johnson even recalls debate within Kensington at this time over whether they would dare to “put the word erotic on the cover” (Johnson, “Interview With Susan Johnson”).

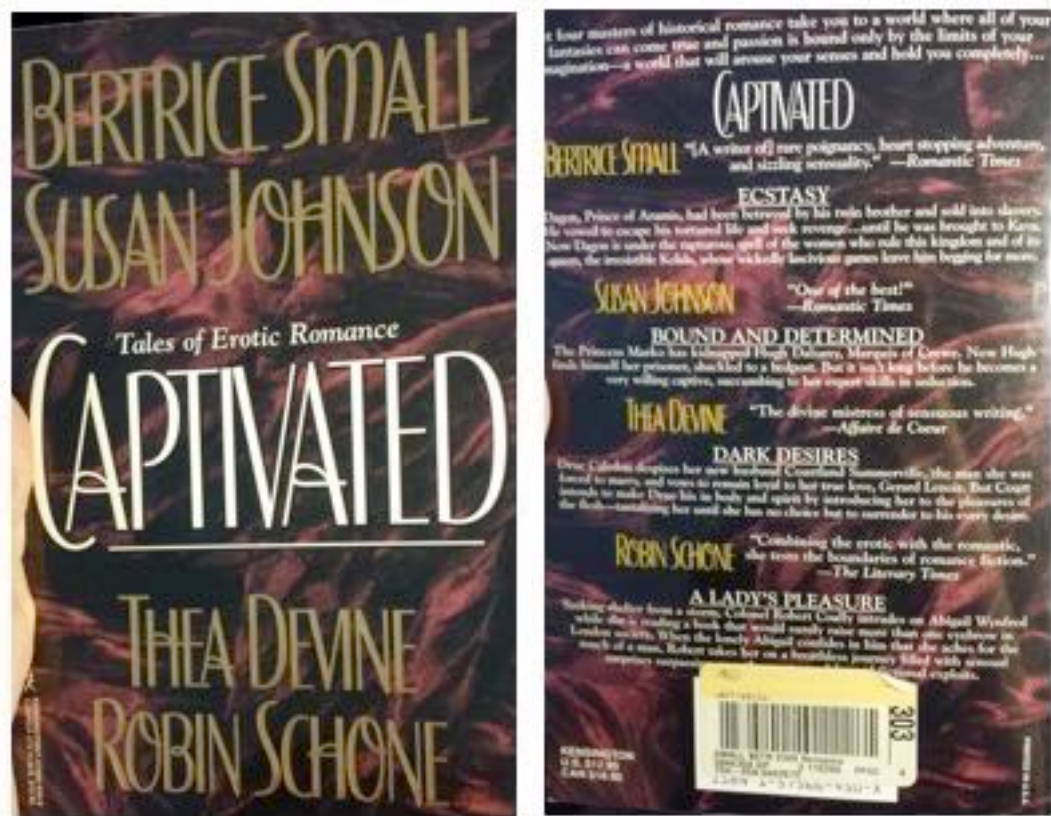


Figure 5: Bertrice Small, Susan Johnson, Thea Devine & Robin Schone, *Captivated* (1999)

When the *Captivated* anthology became a success, Kate Duffy, Kensington's editorial director, predicted that the next big trend in romance was going to be "anything but sweet" (Rosen, "Love Is All Around You" 42). The company worked quickly to capitalize on this prediction and put out more titles. Kensington's publications kept sparking debate within the romance reading community. In a 1999 review of *Captivated* on *The Romance Reader* website, Linda Mowery proclaimed "[t]hese stories not only push the envelope, they rip it to shreds" (Mowery). Next, as Kensington prepared to publish Robin Schone's *The Lady's Tutor*, the AAR website published "A Writer Rants About Sexuality" (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants"). This AAR update mirrored the regular "Reader Rants About Sexuality" AAR was posting, however, it featured an essay by Schone titled "Masturbation, Wanton Women, & Other Romance No-Nos" (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants").

In her essay, Schone called for romance that includes the "emotional and physical bonding that truly unites a man and a woman: sexual intimacy" (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants"). Shone also argues that explicit erotic content is an important tool for romance writers:

Surely there is a place for controversy in romance. Surely there is room for erotica as well as inspirational. For drama as well as lighthearted comedies. For reality as well as fantasy. Masturbation. Oral sex. Anal sex. Sex acts that are not always performed with body parts. These are great tools to advance a plot and develop character. (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants")

In addition to asking "romance experts" to broaden their conception of what a romance could include, Schone is also arguing for grittier stories. She wants "reality as well as fantasy" and "drama as well as lighthearted comedies" (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants").

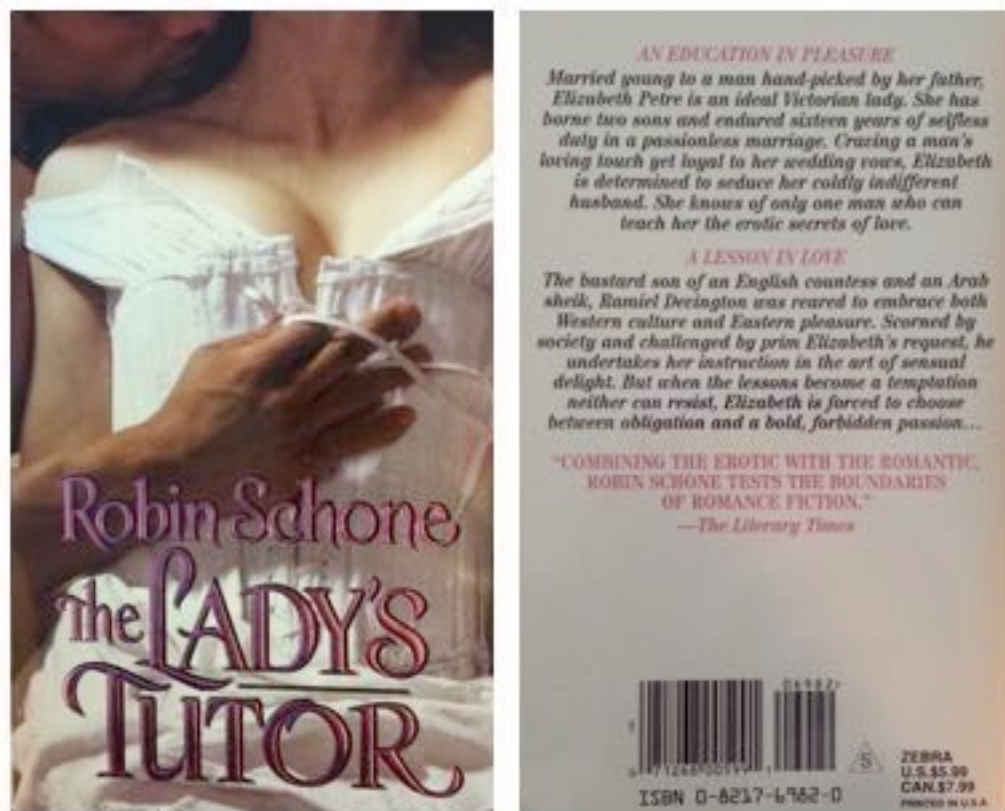


Figure 6: Robin Schone, *The Lady's Tutor* (1999)

This time, the debate on the AAR community was so heated that *Salon.com* eventually covered it, publishing an article on the AAT discussions and these new publications (Gracen). On AAR, some commenters strongly supported Schone's argument. One reader and author expressed the hope that "Robin and those like her will have opened some doors (and minds) in the romance industry" (All About Romance, "Part V"). However, other readers wished for the opposite. Morgan comments, "I hope writers like Robin Schone aren't the wave of the future because I think she writes soft porn" (All About Romance, "Part V").

One exchange between two readers highlights the two sides in this debate. Beginning in a discussion thread titled "Let there be shame," "Puzzled" comments:

Robin has simply found another package for pornography. The fact that an impressionable 17-year-old is reading it under the guise of romance should give the industry pause... Is romance publishing so low on plot that it must cater solely to sexual appetites? (Questionable ones at that?) And what, indeed, will romance publishing's already shaky reputation be after Robin is finished with her proposed introductions? ...it's time to take stock when a simple romantic story cannot be enjoyed without a veritable sex bath of perversions. (All About Romance, "Part V")

There are several layers to Puzzled's concerns. First, they evoke the image of impressionable minors in need of protection (a classic argument for the control of illicit materials). Then, they worry about catering to questionable sexual appetites— suggesting that Romance has a moral responsibility to consider which sex acts it will include. Finally, Puzzled is concerned with the romance genre's long-term reputation and, presumably, the reputation of its readers.

Next, "Candy" responds:

it all depends on what you consider 'perversions...' Although I do agree there are perversions (bestiality and pedophilia, for instance), I don't like to put labels or judgments sexuality in general. Which aspect of sexuality in Schone's book or rant did you find perverse? Was it the sex toys? Masturbation? Anal sex? I, personally, don't see a problem with any of these acts... if they're performed by consenting adults in a safe manner... And I don't think the publication of Schone's new book will do the romance industry any harm... I, for one, think many of the 'great' works of romance have damaged its reputation beyond repair already. Read the Flame and The Flower by Kathleen Woodiwiss lately? The heroine is raped several times by the hero, with little or no show

of remorse on his part. No masturbation, no sex toys, but talk about perversity... (All About Romance, "Part V")

Candy pushes in a different direction. The reputation of the romance genre also matters here, but now its the "great" and classical works of romance which are damaging the genre's reputation. To protect romance and romance readers, Candy wants the genre to change.

As this conversation unfolded on AAR, concerns regarding romance's reputation, the moral implications of depicting sexual intimacy, as well as the potential repercussions to committing aspects of women's sexuality were all raised. Various readers evoke god, some consult the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* for the definition of pornography, while others respond that the dictionary is no basis for determining human sexuality. Some participants express concern over their ability to enter the romance section with pride, while others criticize the practice of women shaming the desires of other women.¹⁰

The passion and complexity of this debate reflects the deeply personal and complex role desire plays in women's lives, as well as the complicated position romance has there. Following the work of feminists and gay rights advocates in the 1970s and 80s, women were experiencing a greater degree of empowerment when it came to experimenting with their bodies and acknowledging the role of fantasy in their sexual pleasure. At the same time, AIDS, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections were being touted in the media as public health threats and President Clinton was being impeached for lying to congress about sexual acts with a White House intern. Amidst this, the terms associated with the romance genre books still mattered deeply to romance readers.

¹⁰ See All About Romance, "Rants About Sexuality"; "Rants About Sexuality Part II"; "Rants About Sexuality Part III"; "Rants About Sexuality Part IV"; "Rants About Sexuality Part VI" for more.

The discussions on *AAR* tell us that the romance community was thinking consciously and carefully through these terms and the role sexual fantasies played in their lives. Emma Holly raises the issue of labeling in her interview with Laurie Gold:

Defining erotica and pornography (or romance for that matter) is rarely a simple matter...Consciously or subconsciously, we're trying to develop a consensus about what sort of sexual behavior is "okay." When we say one work of art qualifies as erotica and another as pornography, we're usually saying one is acceptable and the other is sort of sick.

Moreover, we're not just passing judgment on the creative object, we're passing judgment on the act it represents. We're saying if you do or think this, you're normal, but if you do or think that, you need help. (All About Romance, "A Writer Rants")

Not only were participants in this conversation aware of the issues they were debating, many of them perceived the larger stakes: that their labeling choices did not simply affect the organization of story content, but also made larger statements about which types of content "should" be bringing readers pleasure. The makeup of participants on the site is also important here. In the late-90s and early 2000s, *AAR* was a forum where readers, publishers and authors were put into conversation with each other, representing a variety of perspectives across the romance community. The debate on *AAR* was never clearly composed of one set of stakeholders versus another (for example, publishers versus readers). Instead, there were many different perspectives on the new directions the Kensington authors were pushing romance in.

While Kensington's new erotic romance publications were particular catalysts for debate, St. Martins and Harlequin also began testing out steamier content in the late 1990s. St. Martins

tested a series of sexier anthologies, starting with *Naughty, Naughty* in 1999 and Berkeley's Seduction line started in 2000 (Rosen, "And the Sales Keep Climbing" 44). In 2001, Kensington built on the success of their anthologies and introduced Brava, a publishing line that promised readers "the best in erotic romantic fiction" (Ramsdell, "Sexy, Steamy Reads" 153). Harlequin also escalated their sexual content. First started in 1984 as a response to the more explicit contemporary romances of the 80s, Harlequin's Temptation line introduced a special Temptation series called Blaze in 1997 (RomanceWiki, "Harlequin Temptation Blaze"). Flagging its content for readers via a special logo and often accompanied by images of flames on the cover, the Blaze series contained Harlequin's most explicit content to date. Over the next few years, Blaze became successful enough that Harlequin made the series its own imprint in 2000 (Rosen, "And the Sales Keep Climbing" 44). In 2005, Harlequin would cease publishing new Temptation titles entirely (RomanceWiki, "Harlequin Temptation"). Harlequin's sexiest romance imprint since the 1980s was, essentially, replaced by the even sexier series Temptation helped launch.

A link between erotic and romance was beginning to be more explicitly acknowledged in the marketing of certain texts and authors. Despite the blurry lines between the romance genre's approach to sexual content and erotica's version of sexual intimacy, many romance publishers continued to carefully draw a line between their more "sensual" titles and the erotica label. Early writing guidelines for Harlequin Blaze use very careful language. The guidelines stress that they are looking for "authors who have a strong sexual edge to their stories" (Harlequin, "Blaze Guidelines '01"). Writers are instructed that stories need to place "an emphasis on the physical relationship developing between the couple: fully described love scenes along with a high level of fantasy and playfulness" (Harlequin, "Blaze Guidelines '01"). By 2007, however, this language shifted. The Blaze writing guidelines explained, "fully described love scenes along

with a high level of fantasy, playfulness and *eroticism* are needed” (Harlequin, “Blaze Guidelines ’07,” emph mine).

Eroticism is not, however, the same thing as erotica. Some time around 2012 Harlequin felt the need to change the language of their writing guidelines and clarify this. From 2012 on, the Blaze guidelines explained: “Harlequin Blaze is not... Erotica. While our books are very sensual, they deliver on the Harlequin promise of one hero, one heroine and an implied committed relationship at the end” (Harlequin, “Harlequin Blaze (2012)”). Harlequin’s consistent caution regarding sexual content may be due, in part, to the company’s size and the various romance readers it wants to reach. For example, Harlequin has had problems getting Christian bookstores to carry their lines of Steeple Hill inspirational romances (first launched in 1997) because of these booksellers belief that the company’s overall publications are “too racy” (Mantell, “Reinventing the Wheel?” 42).

These kinds of balancing acts, as romance publishers juggle their various imprints, affect how larger and older publishers like Harlequin organize and market their products for readers. The realities and practicalities of being a major publisher with multiple imprints, a great deal of which is produced in print form, lend themselves to the kinds of caution that lead to market equilibrium. These considerations lend themselves to publishers seeking a balance between keeping up with reader trends while also, always, playing it safe with their existing readers, authors, and titles.

Within digital markets, however, the more established companies are competing with much smaller digital publishers, companies that do not need to manage so many audiences and concerns. In contrast, digital publishers often sell particular niches of romantic content directly to readers, either through their own website or via a web retailer like Amazon.com. Also important,

digital publications do not require the same upfront costs as print, this significantly reduces the financial risks a publisher faces when acquiring and publishing new titles. While the phrase “erotic romance” had already begun to circulate by the early 2000s, and publishers like Kensington were introducing more erotic lines of content, the “erotic romance” label was not fully visible as a subgenre and marketing term yet. The more risk adverse publishers still hesitated to push too far. As they hesitated, this gave newer digital publishers the opportunity (and incentive) to explore the erotic aspects of romance even further.

Erotica and Romance’s Digital Hybrids

Web-based publishers began to appear in the late-90s. However, this did not initially lead to dramatic changes in publishing platforms and sales. In its 1998 “RomStats Report,” the Romance Writers Association (RWA) counted just 95 e-published titles for the year. This constituted a mere 4.8% of romances on the market (Hall, “ROMstat 1998”). That was a bit better than the entire ebook market seemed to be doing. “In 1999, downloads of E-books added up to only 1 percent of the \$12 billion spent buying books online” (Terrell). In early 2000, Barnesandnoble.com announced plans to open an ebooks superstore. (Although, they would stop the service in 2003 due to low sales (Reid and Holt).) While Amazon.com had experimented with some ebooks earlier, the company did not begin selling ebooks in earnest until November 2000 (“Amazon.com Inc.”; Wingfield).

In 2002, the RWA announced that a variety of e-books formats were being offered by all major print publishers (Hall, “ROMStat Report 2002”). Availability was increasing, but actual sales numbers remained low. Romance's e-book sales remained modest until 2006 when, suddenly, the numbers doubled (Romance Writers of America 35). At this time, several important technological changes also occurred: The International Digital Publishing Forum established

.epub as a standard e-book format, Sony debuted its Sony Reader, and Amazon followed with the Kindle in 2007. These changes gave e-books the technological and market support they needed to thrive. Also important, the romance genre, specifically, was increasing its ebook sales. Initially, the ebook bestsellers were “dominated by science fiction and other titles favored by men” but by 2007 the ebook bestseller lists were “led by romance and women’s fiction” (Wayner C7).

Although 2006 and 2007 were important years for digital publishing, romance had already been building its presence online for some time. As a popular genre with a proven audience, romance was important to many early web-based publishers. Hard Shell Word Factory, Fiction Works, and Dreams Unlimited were all early e-publishers, each of them selling romance titles as early as 1998 (Hall, “ROMstat 1998”). Like Avon selecting *The Flame and the Flower* from their slush pile or Silhouette grabbing up rejected American authors in the early 80s, rejections from publishers in the 90s and early 2000s also seem to have nudged many authors towards the new digital venues.

A number of early digital publishers and writers report that rejections from print publishers were leading them online. Author M.J. Rose self-published her erotic thriller *Lip Service* online in 1998, after print publishers had rejected it. Rose bought banner ads to promote her book and received over 20,000 hits to her website (Abbott 42). By 1999, enough people were reading and reviewing Rose’s book on Amazon.com that Doubleday Direct approached her about selling the book. Rose was able to leverage her initial success in order to get a more conventional print contract. However, she also reported that there were significant differences between her print and digital sales: The erotic material was clearly selling better online than it was in bookstores (Abbott 42).

Early digital publishers felt that they filled a niche the print publishers could not. Hard Shell Word Factory owner Mary Z. Wolfe cited freedom from strict publisher guidelines as one reason for the publisher's success attracting authors (Subversion Romance). Wolfe explained, "[w]e have some wonderful books that I'm sure print editors practically cried at having to turn down, not because they weren't written well enough, but because they were too 'different,' ...or just didn't fit comfortably enough into that publisher's line" (Subversion Romance). Similarly, author Tina Engler's manuscripts were being rejected by publishers. They informed her that her writing was strong but "too racy" (Ellora's Cave, "About '15"). Engler founded Ellora's Cave in 2000 because it was a way for her to sell her own work. However, Ellora's Cave quickly grew. In the first year, the company reached nearly \$30,000 in sales (Reid, "Patty Marks" 10). Next, they added more authors and by 2004 their sales reached about \$1 million (Millard). That same year, Ellora's Cave began selling print editions in Borders and Barnes & Noble bookstores and in 2006 their sales reached \$6 million (Flamm; Millard).

The popularity of Ellora's Cave also helped introduce a new term to readers: romantica. Somewhere in between romance and erotica, romantica was defined as "any work of literature that is both romantic and sexually explicit in nature. Within this genre, a man and a woman develop "in love" feelings for one another that culminates in a monogamous relationship. Lust is experienced within the relationship, but is not necessarily mutually exclusive from love" (Ellora's Cave, "Romantica '01"). By stressing both the sexually explicit content and their requirement that romantica emphasize monogamy and love, Ellora's Cave helped to establish what erotic content might look like in order to be considered romantic.

For authors at the time who were unable to break into publishing through the traditional routes and had manuscripts in hand, web-based publishers quickly became an alternate route to

publication. These early digital publishers became resources for the bigger-name print publishers. In 2006, citing the success of erotica sales with smaller online publishers, Avon and Harlequin both announced new imprints (Avon Red and Harlequin Spice). Avon “looked around the Internet and tried to find writers who were putting out good stories and then approached them with offers to write for Avon” (Millard). Avon’s strategy was to look online to find new authors for Avon Red, essentially using the internet as their new slush pile and testing ground.

Whether called erotica, romance, or both, once *Booklist*, a publication produced by the American Library Association, published “Core Collection: Erotic Romance” in 2006, the erotic romance had clearly and officially arrived (Charles and Mosley). However, it appears that publishers were calling these imprints both erotica and erotic romance. *Publisher’s Weekly* was describing Harlequin, Avon and Kensington’s new imprints as erotica (Patrick). In contrast, *Booklist* said Harlequin Blaze titles were “still romances” but the new Spice imprint was “erotica territory” (Charles and Mosley 48). A 2006 *New York Times* article on the trend refers to the Avon Heat imprint as “erotic romances and erotica” (Flamm). A *Los Angeles Times* article from the same year uses a similar strategy. In it, “erotica and erotic romances” are connected with Harlequin Spice, Avon Red, and, overall, described by a Borders buyer as “a growth category in our romance department” (Millard).

Perhaps there were differences between titles published under these imprints that explain the use of both terms. For example, erotica is often distinguished from erotic romance based on its focus on sex and its potential lack of a happy ending (Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction* 533; Charles and Mosley). In contrast, erotic romances “embrace the same basic elements found in all romance novels— a story that focuses on the relationship between the book’s two protagonists

and the genre's obligatory happy or optimistic ending" (Charles and Mosley 48).¹¹ Erotic romances adhere to this narrative pattern while linking the relationship's evolution "inextricably... to sexual interaction" and using more "graphic yet realistic language" (Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction* 553; Charles and Mosley 48). Underlying all of this is an additional reinforcement of monogamy and of long-term sexual partnerships, rather than temporary encounters. Simultaneously calling these titles erotica and erotic romance would have allowed the books to be both recognizable and accessible to a wider set of readers. For publishers introducing new lines and hoping to attract readers, signaling to erotica and romance readers simultaneously would have been a necessary move. It also reflects the reality that publishers were not sure what content would or would not sell with their readers.

Print publishers like Kensington and Bantam pushed along the current erotic romance cycle in the late 1990s. Red Sage and Ellora's Cave did similar work online. Once most of the major print publishers noticed these trends in digital publishing and responded with their own lines, romance publishing could have been working towards a point of equilibrium again, one where they all offered a similar range of products.

This time, however, authors had the means to entirely circumvent the major publishing houses when their content was rejected. Online, smaller shops could offer even more niche categories and far racier content. Quietly, and with sales numbers that seemed insignificant compared companies like Harlequin, authors and independent publishers began to sell ebooks online. In addition to erotic romance, digital publishing was important to romance sub-genres

¹¹ Historically, these "two protagonists" were a man and a woman. Since the early 2000s however, gender-neutral language has been increasingly adopted and same-sex romance publishers are slowly been gaining visibility within traditional romance publishing networks. The debates regarding the definition of romance, particularly related to the Romance Writers of America's definition of romance, are fascinating and complicated. Given the goals of this chapter, I cannot give them the full attention they deserve here. For more, see Crusie 2000.

like male/male (m/m) and female/female (f/f). At the time, interest in m/m was considered “a bit of an industry secret” and something publishers were reluctant to make widely available in print (Robbins 32). Much like other writers who were unable to find publishers, m/m authors began developing their own publishing companies. Laura Baumbach founded ManLove Romance Press (MLR) in 2006 and by 2008 MLR books ranked “third, fifth, and eighth in Barnes & Noble’s gay erotica best sellers” (Robbins 32).

Wondering if m/m was the “newest frontier in erotica,” *Publisher’s Weekly* highlighted m/m titles being released by Ellora’s Cave, Cleis Press, and ManLove Romance Press (MLR Press) (Robbins 32). Despite the predictions, romance sub-genres like m/m and f/f are much more widely available online than off. The larger romance publishers have been slow to move on this trend. Harlequin’s digital-first imprint, Carina Press, does publish m/m and f/f titles. However, the number of titles they have available are telling. In 2015, out of 734 romance titles on the Carina Press website, there were 5 f/f and 98 m/m titles available (“Female/Female”; “Male/Male”; “Romance”). On Ellora’s Cave, their “Gay and Lesbian” section listed 221 titles. In contrast, Bold Strokes Books had 530 titles in its lesbian romance section alone and Amazon.com lists over 22,000 titles in its gay romance section (Bold Strokes Books; Amazon.com). (More on m/m and its production networks can be found in chapter 2.)

Today, the erotic romance label is being applied to an ever-expanding range of content, much of it sold exclusively online, much of it only available as ebooks, and some of it also available in print. Rather than erotic romance being a label loosely applied to particular niche of content being marketed to women (as it was in the 1990s), today erotic romance is a robust digital publishing category with many sub-categories of its own. The various sub-categories for erotic romance now include: historical, contemporary, ménage, BDSM, GLBT, paranormal,

interracial, erotic horror, western, older women/younger man, cross-dressing, steampunk... The list goes on and on.

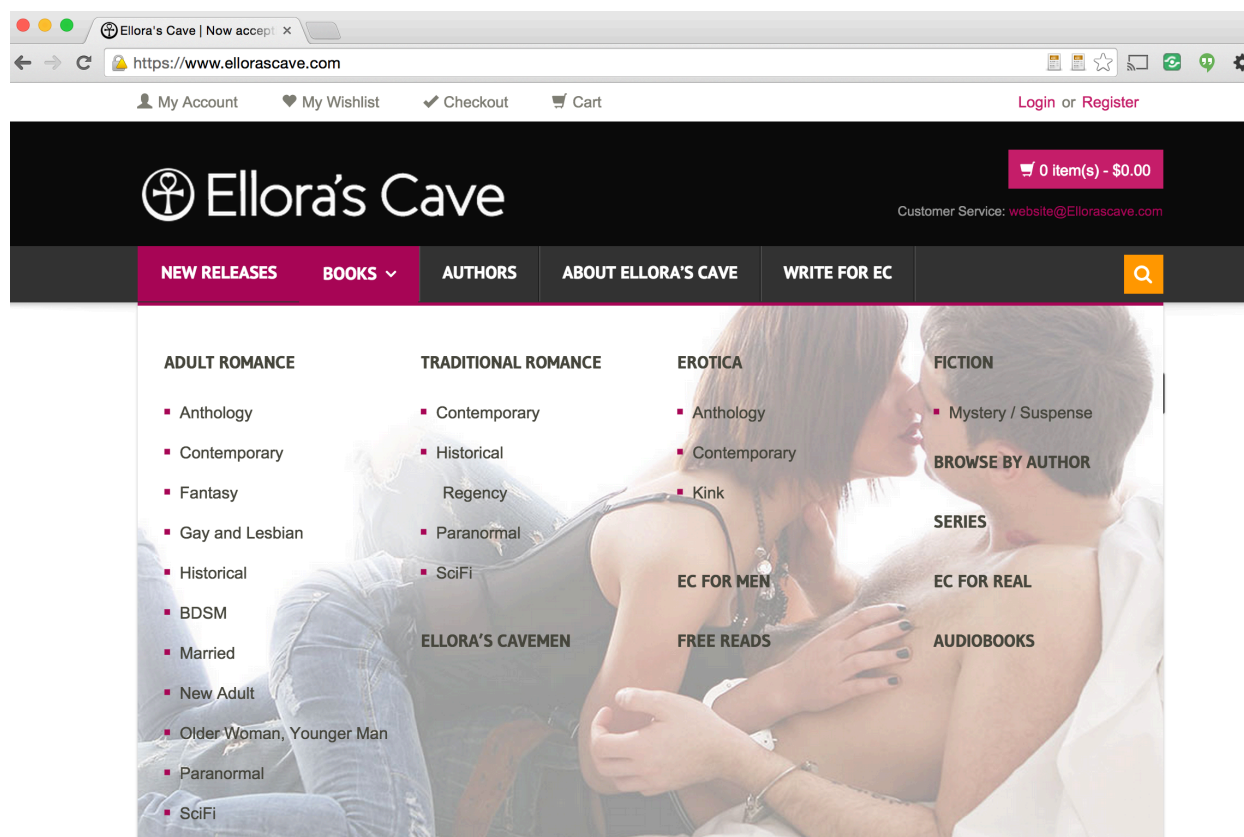


Figure 7: Organizational structure currently offered on the Ellora’s Cave website. (“Carina Press”)

In the writing guidelines Ellora’s Cave provides to authors, the company’s more internal language, they still identify three general content lines: romantica, exotika, and EC for men. The guidelines for romantica remain similar to the original 1999 definition of romantica on the site. Exotica is the company’s “line of quality erotica for women” and EC for men is “written specifically for our male readers” (EC Guidelines).¹² These three areas reflect more traditional

¹² EC for men’s guidelines deserve more attention than I can give them here. The writing guidelines explain that women also enjoy these titles, but insist that the stories contain “[m]ore of what men want or

organizational strategies for content. Significantly, however, none of these three categories are readily identified for visitors to the current website. Instead, on ellorascave.com, there are dozens of story categories for readers to choose between, from “older woman, younger man” to “regency.”

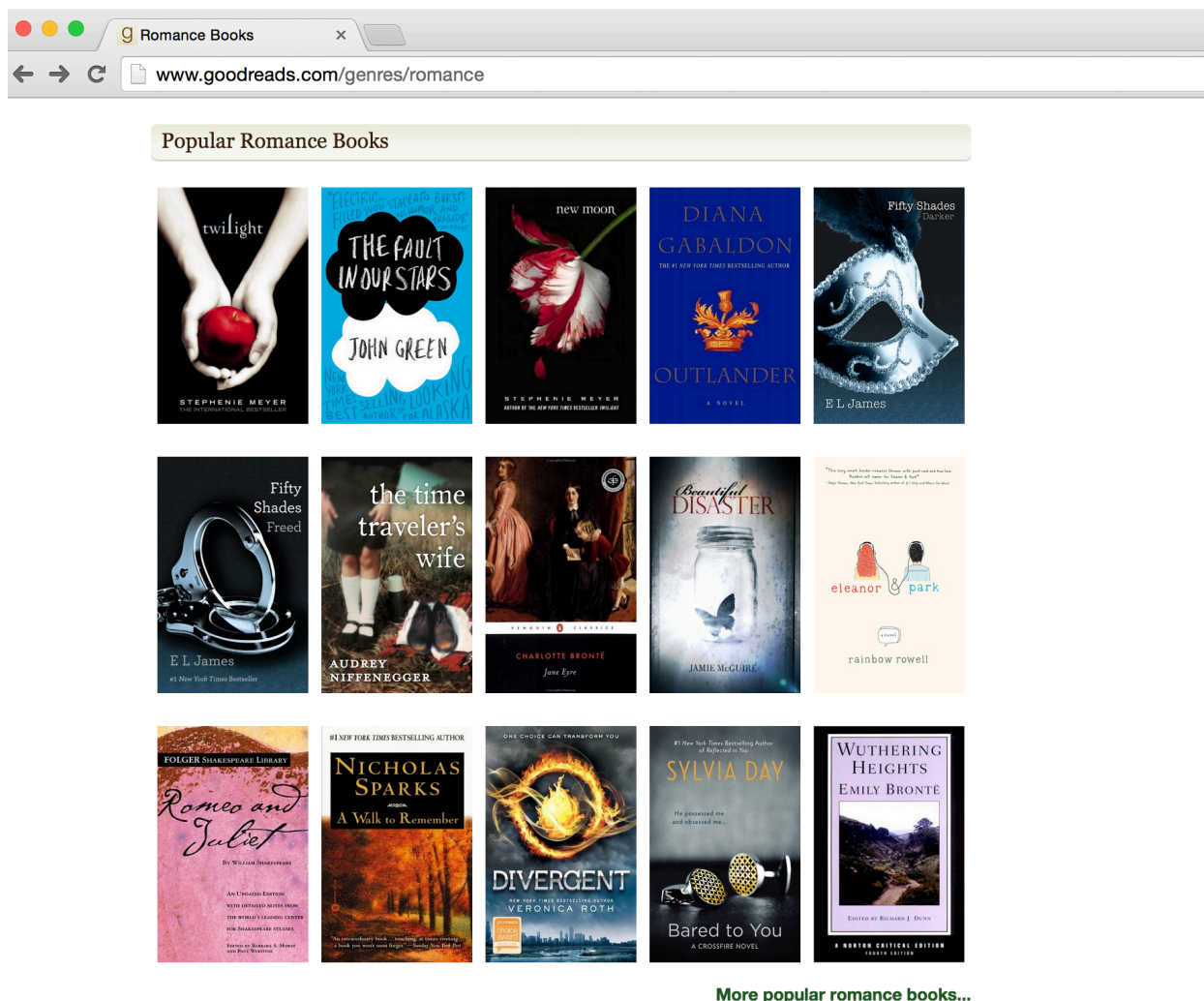


Figure 8: Top 15 Popular Romance Titles on Goodreads.com (Goodreads, “Romance”)

need from women—sex, love, acceptance, admiration, dirty talk; less of what they don't need (judgment, drama, expectation of anticipating woman's needs)” (Ellora’s Cave, “Author Information and Submission Guidelines”). This language suggests that the narrative shifts its priorities in terms of which character’s sexual needs take prominence. However, the language also indicates that while shorter and “focus[ing] more on the sex than the “relationship” women readers like the stories too. This suggests an awareness that, despite the stereotypes regarding how women want their sexual fantasies delivered, Ellora’s Cave is aware that many women may prefer other narrative approaches.

**Figure 9: Popular Romance Titles on Goodreads
With Their Additional Genre/Sub-Genre Categories ¹³**

<i>Title, Author, Year</i>	<i>Genre Categories (Selected)</i>
<i>Twilight</i> by Stephanie Meyer (2006)	Young Adult, Fantasy, Romance, Vampires, Paranormal, Paranormal Romance
<i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> by John Green (2012)	Young Adult, Romance, Contemporary, Realistic Fiction
<i>New Moon</i> by Stephanie Meyer (2006)	Young Adult, Fantasy, Romance, Vampires, Paranormal, Paranormal Romance
<i>Outlander</i> by Diana Gabaldon (1991)	Historical Fiction, Romance, Fantasy, Historical Romance, Adult, Science Fiction
<i>Fifty Shades Darker</i> by E.L. James (2011)	Romance, Erotica, BDSM, Adult, Contemporary, Chick Lit, Contemporary Romance, Erotic Romance
<i>Fifty Shades Freed</i> by E.L. James (2012)	Romance, Erotica, BDSM, Adult, Contemporary, Chick Lit, Contemporary Romance, Erotic Romance
<i>The Time Traveler's Wife</i> by Audrey Niffenegger (2003)	Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Contemporary, Chick Lit, Adult
<i>Jane Eyre</i> by Charlotte Brontë (1847)	Classics, Romance, Historical Fiction, Gothic
<i>Beautiful Disaster</i> by Jamie McGuire (2008)	Romance, New Adult, Young Adult, Contemporary, Contemporary Romance, Chick Lit, Adult
<i>Eleanor & Park</i> by Rainbow Rowell (2013)	Young Adult, Romance, Contemporary, Realistic Fiction, Teen, Chick Lit
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> by William Shakespeare (1597)	Classics, Romance, Drama, Poetry
<i>A Walk to Remember</i> by Nicholas Sparks (2004)	Romance, Chick Lit, Young Adult, Contemporary, Adult Fiction
<i>Divergent</i> by Veronica Roth (2012)	Young Adult, Dystopia, Romance, Science Fiction, Adventure, Teen, Action
<i>Bared to You</i> by Sylvia Day (2014)	Romance, Erotica, Contemporary, Adult, Contemporary Romance, Erotic Romance, BDSM, Chick Lit, New Adult
<i>Wuthering Heights</i> by Emily Brontë (1847)	Classics, Romance, Gothic, Historical Fiction

¹³ Information included on table comes from these webpages: Goodreads, “Twilight (Twilight, #1)”; “The Fault in Our Stars”; “New Moon (Twilight, #2)”; “Outlander (Outlander, #1)”; “Fifty Shades Darker (Fifty Shades, #2)”; “Fifty Shades Freed (Fifty Shades, #3)”; “The Time Traveler’s Wife”; “Jane Eyre”; “Beautiful Disaster (Beautiful, #1)”; “Eleanor & Park”; “Romeo and Juliet”; “A Walk to Remember”; “Divergent (Divergent, #1)”; “Bared to You (Crossfire, #1)”; “Wuthering Heights”; “Popular Romance Books”

Online retailers also rely heavily on user reviews, user generated content labels, and user generated recommendation lists to identify and sort content. Relying on users, and their individual conceptions of content categories, to help organize content means that the boundaries between romance, erotic romance, erotica, and porn have become much more porous. On Goodreads.com, a social cataloging site for books and book reviews, publisher categories blur together, mixing titles that would typically never be shelved together in a bookstore. Currently the top “Popular Romance Books” on Goodreads include: *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer and *The Fault In Our Stars* by John Green, both young adult titles; *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare, both literary classics; as well as *Fifty Shades Darker* by E.L. James and *Bared to You* by Sylvia Day, both sometimes labeled erotica or erotic romance.

In a brick and mortar bookstore, many of these titles would be carefully positioned in very different areas of the store. Online, however, they are blended together into one massive and amorphous “romance” category. Clicking on any individual title also opens up the possibility of being exposed to myriad different automated sales recommendation widgets, reader recommendation lists, customer reviews and discussion forums. In this context, titles are moved in and out of a range of categories, each of which fluctuates and reforms with each mouse click. As new category lists load, popular titles and authors appear and disappear whenever and wherever the database will allow it. This makes the today’s romance sub-genres simultaneously sticky and porous. New titles and authors can adhere wherever the database lets them stick. However, the database does not insist they stay in any one place.

This is where the equilibrium/disequilibrium paradigm Thurston outlined for print publishing reveals its limitations when it comes to digital publishing and sales. The range of romance options currently available online does indicate that we have reached a kind of

disequilibrium and a moment where romance's boundaries are being renegotiated. However, digital markets complicate what disequilibrium and equilibrium look like. Thurston claims that, "a state of equilibrium exists when all romance publishers are producing fundamentally similar products" (213). As I argued earlier, this was not entirely the case with romance publishing following the jostling of the early 1980s. Rather than each individual book being fundamentally similar, publishers settled into similar ranges of imprints and titles. For Thurston, disequilibrium existed when the system was bifurcated, with various romance markets operating relatively independently from each other. However, following the 1980s, romance publishers made these parallel tracks a deliberate part of the system.

The bifurcation Thurston observed was also a consequence of print and the considerations and distribution strategies physical books required. Readers were exposed to the content that was physically available in the stores they frequented or physically sent to them through publisher-driven mail services. Digital publishing and digital retailers mean that today's market can exist somewhere in between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Older and newer publishers do not operate apart from one another and the digital market is not fully separated from print. To the contrary, the older publishing houses are highly dependent on their digital sales. Globally, print sales are falling, ebook sales are rising, and the large international publishers rely on digital retailers like Amazon.com for both print and digital sales ("Erotica Surge" 8). Given this, these old and new systems are highly interdependent.

Today, an internet search or a quick browse through a web retailer's content renders up countless options for romance readers, but none of these tools are carefully policing the lines between different imprints and different sexual fantasies. At the same time, the current system does allow multiple publishers and sets of readers to co-exist (online and off) without unduly

disrupting each other. In this sense, the current system does still have aspects of the disequilibrium Thurston discussed. Only, instead of disequilibrium gradually leading back to a reestablished status quo, the new digital markets seem to thrive on fluctuating trends, new and hybrid subgenres, and user generated content categories. Without the prohibitive production costs of the print market, digital publishing allows genres to become far more expansive than in the past. With social tagging and sales tracking added to the mix online, genre categories are much more arbitrary and expansive.

The internet has also had a major impact on the ways romance authors interact with readers. Eliminating a publisher's traditional role as go-between in the process. Throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties, publishers served as a buffer between writers and readers. The publisher's used their market research and writing guidelines to lead authors towards content the publisher felt had the best chance of selling well and pulling authors away from less marketable stories in the process. Similarly, the authors were dependent on publishers to market their books and get them to readers. Publishers paid for advertisements and (for a lucky few) prominent displays in bookstores to help make readers aware of new content.

In the nineties, authors realized that doing their own self-promotion online was a way to reach out to readers directly and boost their own sales. By 1997, many romance authors, including well-established names like Nora Roberts and Debbie Macomber, had begun using websites and online newsletters to communicate directly to readers (Pack). Authors in the 90s may have felt additional pressure to get online and promote themselves because, at this time, the print system began failing many of them. In the early 90s, the "majority of romances... [were] sold in supermarkets, drugstores, variety stores and mass merchandisers" (Schulhafer 29). This market was mainly supplied by independent distributors (IDs), "whose primary business is the

distribution of dated magazines and periodicals” (Schulhafer 29). In 1994, IDs distributed 56.1% of romance novels (Schulhafer 29). By 1996, however, the independent distributors had begun to consolidate. This led to “greater returns, less rack space for new authors and intensified competition... to get books into the slots allotted to the genre” (Mantell, “Love on the Rocks?” 40). Romance sales during this time continued to grow overall, but “[b]uyers, suppliers and consumers” were more interested in bigger name authors— essentially, guaranteed sellers (Mantell, “Love on the Rocks?” 41). These changes left new and mid-list authors in much more precarious positions and with smaller royalty checks. Taking on the costs of self-production and promotion began to seem much more bearable when also promising authors a greater share of sales profits. As the print market continues to fluctuate, consolidation within the independent distributors, major bookstore chains, and other mass merchandisers continues to affect the success of mid-list authors with larger publishing houses.

Discussion regarding the plight of the romance mid-list has been going on in the pages of *Publisher’s Weekly* and on websites like *All About Romance* since the mid-90s.¹⁴ However, digital publishing is dramatically changing writers' options for dealing with this problem. Frustrated authors can simply opt to publish their manuscripts elsewhere. For example, in 2011 popular romance author Courtney Milan announced that she was turning down a new contract with Harlequin and, instead, planned to self-publish her next book. Milan cited concerns with the digital royalty rates specified in her contract, but she also emphasized the particular appeal self-publishing has for authors:

Under traditional publishing, every one of an author’s books needs to be at or around the same level of commercial viability... there’s pressure on authors to write to the largest segment of the market—and once they’ve captured that market, they have to keep writing

¹⁴ For more on this see: *All About Romance*; Mantell.

towards it... If I self-publish, the range of stories I can write widens. It's okay if not all my books aim for an audience of 100,000. (Wendell)

Texts rejected by publishing powerhouses because they do not speak to the largest segments of the market are able to find circulation as e-books online. With production costs lowered, the number of sales an author needs to make a profit also lowers.

All of this leads directly back to Carolyn Jewel's prediction of a romance "revolution" that opened this chapter (Jewel). The ongoing precariousness of authors' positions with traditional publishers and their increased options in digital and self-publishing play a major role in the revolution currently underway. Authors, Carolyn Jewel explains, are no longer accepting the contracts they are offered by major publishers. They often have better options online and they know it.

The mid-list is walking. I'm not sure it matters, though. Yet. There are still enough writers looking to break in that I don't think publishers are in any danger of not being able to find books to publish. Yet. Publishers increasingly look to self-publishers as the new slush pile. (Jewel)

Jewel's comments, and her repeated use of the term "yet," signal an unresolved question regarding the future of romance publishing, the expansion of self-publishing, and the growth of erotic romance online. Is this a period of disequilibrium that will come to a close? Can the current changes in romance end, again, with a series of mergers and with the remaining publishers retuning a similar spectrum of romantic categories? I do not think it can. With the traditional romance publishers loosing so many of their mid-list authors to self-publishing and smaller digital shops, this older version of stability seems too bound up in print to apply to publishing today. There are signs, however, of a new status-quo forming. If the internet is the

new testing ground for content, then two tiers of content and readership are forming as well. The “safer” and more globally marketable content makes its way to print, major marketing campaigns, and international distribution. “Riskier” content tries its luck with smaller publishers, word of mouth promotions, and more niche audiences.

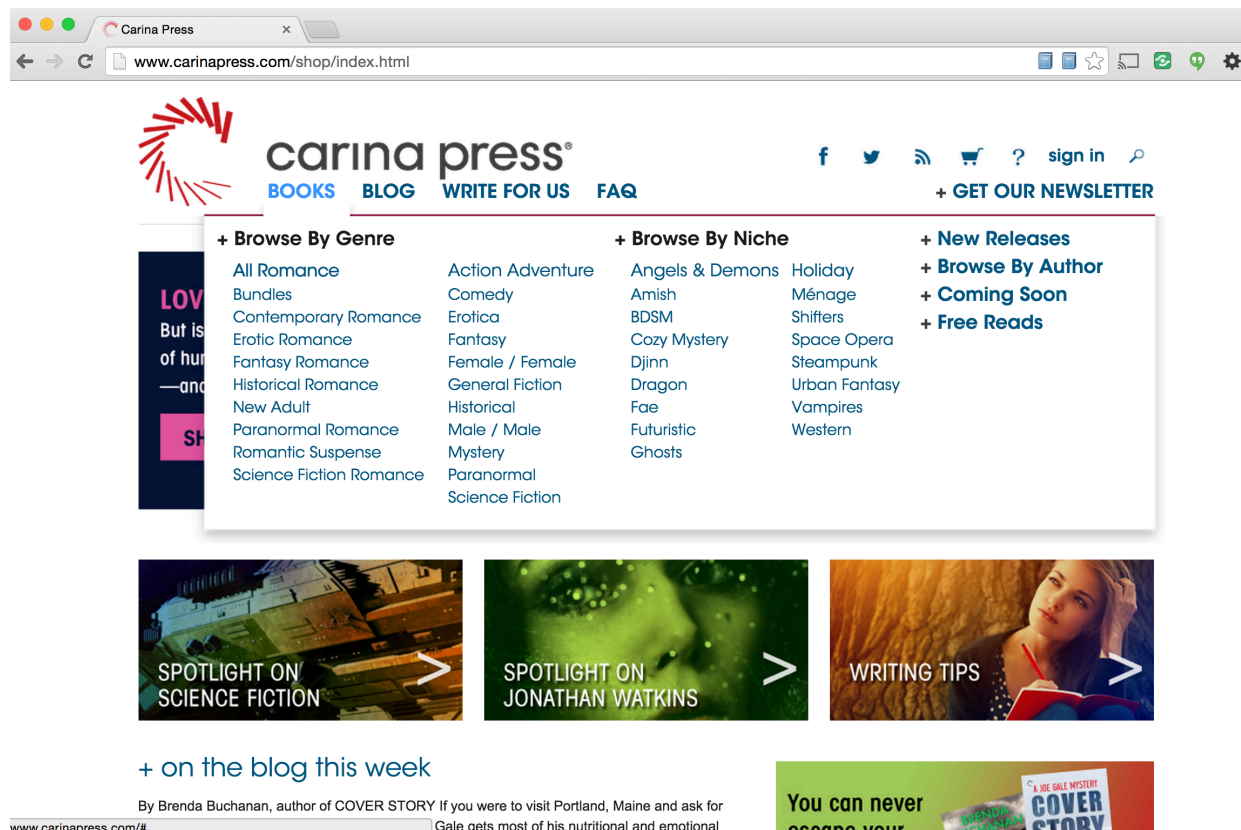


Figure 10: Genres and Niches Offered By Carina Press (“Carina Press”)

Digital publishing necessitates a more significant reconceptualization of the cycles of genre and popular culture. Historically, the larger and more established publishers do eventually respond to new trends. This can be seen in the ways publishers like Harlequin responded in the 1980s and early 2000s. The many variants of *Fifty Shades of Gray* that can be currently found in bookstores reflect attempts by many publishers to capitalize on one trend that began online. *Fifty*

Shades is an example of a trend that did cross over into the print market. However, digital publishing allows publishers to create more complicated tiers of content. Harlequin's digital imprint, Carina Press is where the bulk of Harlequin's more experimental content can be found, rather than in Harlequin American Romance. On the Carina Press website, content categories currently include erotica, male/male, female/female, BDSM, Amish, ménage, comedy, and new adult.

This inclusion of so many new and growing romance sub-genres does, in many ways, reflect the ways that big name publishers traditionally incorporate new trends. At the current time, this is where a Harlequin reader might go to search out same-sex romances. However, none of these titles are available in print. This also means that, unless a library includes these books in their digital collection, these titles are often not available in libraries, a crucial element of romance readership. Contemporary publishers' ability to organize content at a variety of tiers, across digital and print markets, brings new complexities to the notion of "market equilibrium." This also raises important questions regarding the ways readers are able to find content and what determines a particular title's form of distribution, as well as questions addressing the impact of these tiers on authors, author contracts, royalties, and the marketing of various titles. The level of risk a publisher/producer was willing to tolerate, the cost of production and distribution, as well as a mixture of cultural norms and expectations have all traditionally shaped genre cycles. Digital publishing accommodates, perhaps even encourages, a greater degree of fluctuation, risk, and norm transgression. This does not, however, mean that all readers will be able to see it.

Conclusion

Given the many points in time where romance's eroticism has become visible, it is clear that shifting sexual norms often produce gaps which smaller publishers and emerging authors

can try to fill. As seen in the 70s and 90s, when newer content seems to be successful, other publishers are able to adapt their own publications in response and address a now recognized "need" in the market. However, this game of catch-up and its ebb and flow were particularly bound up with print. If the internet has become the new slush pile for large global publishers, this publishing environment does not allow for the types of segmentation previously observed in print publishing. As niche products increasingly attract readers, rapid category shuffling, hybridity, and expansion constitute the new status quo for popular genres like romance online.

Compared to the disequilibrium of the 1970s, today's romance market is a near riot of options in terms of sub-genres, kinks, and writing quality. At this point, there are so many different publishers, and so many ways for authors to publish, it is challenging to fairly represent the variety of romances, erotic romances, and erotica titles available to readers today. What seems clear, however, is that as titles and authors make their way from one layer of the market to another, the digital publishing environment facilitates the selective "discovery" of unaddressed content categories. On the surface, this triggers an expansion of the kinds of relationships and sexual fantasies that are acknowledged as "romantic." This, in turn, can legitimate this content, moving it away from the stigmas associated with labels like "pornography."

Digital publishing does not require the same degree of market safety for a publisher to invest in an author. It also does not depend as strongly on clearly bounded sub-categories to test and market content. The database driven models of bookselling seen on sites like Amazon.com facilitate the blending of romance categories and audiences which were once carefully isolated from one another. Coupled with more flexible tagging features that allow readers, rather than the publishing industry, to tag, list, and organize their own genre and sub-genre categories, the ways the romance genre is rendered up to individual readers on an online bookstore looks very

different than the pre-determined selections of romance paperbacks available at the local bookstore or in a pharmacy's magazine section. Sub-categories, the publisher constructed silos of the past, may continue to guide readers towards new content. However, digital interfaces simultaneously support and break down these categories through user-generated searches, tag browsing, and algorithmically generated recs lists.

Digital interfaces significantly change the ways readers encounter new content. It may make it easier for romance publishers and authors to represent various forms of intimacy in romance, facilitating an ongoing expansion to romance's erotic boundaries in ways that print could not. Digital publishing is also becoming a production zone that continually tests broader acceptance certain types of relationships and fantasies, quantifying them more than ever before. Scored and tracked in databases, genre sub-categories and reading audiences are assigned ranks and market values. These numbers then determine if and how content is made visible to internet users. These rankings also shape which content is picked up for the broader market, makes its way into print, gets translated, and is allowed to circulate globally.

All of this raises significant questions about the future of the romance genre, romance publishing, romance narratives and how these things are studied. Generic modes have always been shaped as much by cultural norms and capital as they are aesthetic conventions. How do we begin to explore the social limits of genres in a production environment that renders up so many versions of romance and of the erotic? What are the long-term implications of this for the ways that romance is organized? These questions reach beyond romance, but romance's role in the larger publishing market and its dominance across popular media make it a rich area of storytelling in which to explore these questions. Examining various types of romantic

storytelling helps shine a light on the challenges facing contemporary scholars of media, genre, and popular culture.

Rather than slower cycles of disruption followed by reincorporation and calm, we are now seeing new types of stratification and siloing within popular culture. In this publishing environment, tiers are forming between individual authors, smaller digital-only publishers, and larger global digital and print marketplaces. At the individual level, online publications come out quickly and the range of content is broad. However, it's possible that only a small niche of readers will ever see these titles. This system also spreads significant genre gate keeping power from large publishing houses and bookstore chains out into an additional series of social media sites and online stores. Generic boundaries are now also shaped by the flexibility of databases and their methods for linking, arranging, and recommending products to consumers. This warrants significantly more attention and study of Amazon's 2011 launch of the Montlake Romance publishing imprint and their 2013 purchase of Goodreads.

Simply because a broader array of material might be found online by individuals in the know (or with the right cookies and trackers in their web browsers) this does not mean the same content can be said to be circulating freely or be readily available. How are rankings determined in today's review saturated websites? What role does aesthetic critique and discussion of "quality" versus "amateur" writing play in shoring up cultural norms and reinforcing older stigmas on romance and female desire? Which types of fantasies are permitted to flow outward to global markets? Which are recognized as having market value? When new forms of erotic content are "discovered" by the media, how are they covered? Are they strange phenomena to be marveled at or are they treated as natural and unsurprising aspects of popular culture? We need to be paying greater attention to the broader implications these layers of niche and mass content

have for the representation of desire and sexual fantasy in broader media culture. Doing this means being far more attentive to the range of content being made available to the public, the ways this content is labeled, and addressing the intersecting and co-dependent relationships between romance, erotica, and pornography.

Chapter 2: “Embarrassing, Dirty, or Downright Trashy”: A History of Fic/Romance

In May 2013, Amazon announced Kindle Worlds, an e-publishing service promising to “enable any writer to create fan fiction... and earn royalties” (Amazon Media Room). Amazon secured licensing deals with several major media franchises or “worlds,” including *The Vampire Diaries*, *Pretty Little Liars*, the work of Kurt Vonnegut, and the G.I. JOE universe. Early press releases pitched the Kindle Worlds as “a New Publishing Model for Authors Inspired to Write Fan Fiction” (Amazon Media Room). In reality, Kindle Worlds is simply a new approach to a much older product: the tie-in novel. Kindle Worlds operates around a similar principle of licensing and revenue sharing between the author and the licensor. The difference here is that Amazon is the middleman, pays a licensing fee to the “World Licensor,” and pays the author 20-35% of the net revenue (Amazon Media Room). The other difference between these titles and more traditional tie-in work is that the authors are, in a round about way, self-publishing their work. In this way, Kindle Worlds builds upon the public’s growing familiarity with fan fiction and leverages that connection to promise authors an audience, professional recognition, and extra income.

In May 2014, just a year after Kindle Worlds launched, Simon & Schuster’s Gallery Books announced a six-figure deal with fan author Anna Todd (Reid, “S&S Acquires...”). Todd’s novel *After*, an immensely popular work of One Direction fan fiction, was gently cleansed of references to One Direction (a successful British boy band) and published as an “original” work of fiction. *After* was initially published on the writing community website Wattpad, “a social platform that connects people through words” (Wattpad). Launched in 2006, by 2015 Wattpad had 40 million users and hosted over 100 million stories (Wattpad; Streitfeld). The Wattpad site has become a popular source for serial fiction with authors like Anna Todd releasing new chapters on a regular, often weekly, basis. On Wattpad, each of Todd’s books are roughly 100

chapters long. Chapter 278 in the series received over 10 thousand comments from readers within one day of being posted (Streitfeld). It is exactly this type of energy and enthusiasm that Simon & Schuster hoped to draw upon when *After* was repackaged and sold in stores.

Amazon's Kindle Worlds announcement and Simon & Schuster's deal with Anna Todd both came after the publication of E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, originally works of *Twilight* fan fiction. Republished and sold as original fiction in 2011, by November 2012 sixty-five million copies of books from the trilogy had been sold world-wide (Bosman).¹⁵ The popularity of *Fifty Shades* established the idea that there are potential best sellers hiding online and waiting to be discovered. *Fifty Shades* was also a test case. It demonstrated that a work of fan fiction could be converted over to something "original" and make a profit for traditional publishers without lawyers fighting over who owned the project.

The parallels between *After* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are clear. Simon & Schuster sought to duplicate the success of *Fifty Shades*, promoting *After*'s "one billion reads online" and making the book's history as fan fiction a selling point (Mayer). Kindle Worlds reflects another connected strategy. Publishers want to see if popular works of fan fiction can be mined and used to generate bestsellers. With fan fiction becoming more mainstream, and with more individuals sharing their writing online, why not try to leverage this energy in a way that gives existing copyright holders more control over fan works? Why not try to make fan fiction generate a profit?

And yet, roughly seven years earlier, some fans were declaring victory over corporate efforts to monetize fan work. Launched in 2007, the FanLib website was designed to be a for-profit fan fiction archive, funded through advertising and content promotion deals ("Frequently

¹⁵ The *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy was initially published on fanfiction.net as *Master of the Universe* in 2009. See Deahl 2012 for more.

Asked Questions”). At the time, FanLib aggressively reached out to fans, encouraging them to post fan fiction on the site. In response, fans got angry. FanLib was seen as an attempt to bypass fan communities, co-opt fan practices and break with fan community norms (Hellekson). The site shut down abruptly in August 2008, with its failure attributed to lack of funds and intense backlash (Cygnnet; Hellekson). The shutdown was hailed as evidence that efforts “to perform a new kind of (commerce-based) transaction with fan-created items will not be tolerated” (Hellekson 117). Despite this early victory, today companies like Wattpad, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook are all corporate hubs for different types of fan activity, each testing ways to convert fan labor into company profits. Today, converting fan fiction into commercial fiction is also a much more commonly acknowledged practice among fans.¹⁶ The past seven years indicate that commerce-based transactions with fan-created items are both being tolerated and may be becoming a new norm.

This stands in contrast with the nonprofit ethos that has been a cornerstone of fan cultures and practices. Historically, fans have been careful to show that they are not profiting from fan work. The assumption being that “if no money is exchanged, the copyright owners have no reason to sue because they retain exclusive rights to make money from their property” (Hellekson 114). This is not without precedence. In the late eighties and early nineties, companies like Paramount (the owners of *Star Trek*) “tended to treat fan magazines with benign neglect as long as they are handled on an exclusively nonprofit basis” (Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” 89).

The insistence on sharing rather than selling has been protective tactic for fan networks with limited resources. However, insisting that fan work needs this protection has secondary and problematic effects. The pushback from media producers has been over more than just profits

¹⁶ For more on this, see Romano 2014.

and intellectual property rights. It has also been a fight over how the public engages with a media franchise. If producers were uncomfortable with the materials fans were publishing, they could retaliate by claiming ownership over a media franchise and threatening legal action. These types of pressures have had significant long-term effects on the configuration of fan networks and practices. Furthermore, the emphasis on protecting fandom tells fans and the broader public that fan work is not only not original but also incapable of standing on its own, let alone being profited from. More importantly, if copyright exists to protect the rights of authors and fan fiction is inherently unoriginal, this implies that fan writing is not legitimate authorship. Of course, in return, many fans argue that their work is not copyright infringement but, instead, stands on its own as political critique, parody, transformative work, and qualifies as a fair use of previous work.

After, *Kindle Worlds*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are instances where the connection between profit and fan work has been made explicit. And yet, these projects provoked very little reaction from media producers and mixed reactions from fans. After the announcement of *Kindle Worlds*, fans were concerned and confused. If these were just novelizations, why bother to call it fan fiction? What was Amazon's agenda? To some, *Kindle Worlds* suggested a larger industry effort to redefine fan fiction and take greater control of fan practices.¹⁷ Fan reporter Gavia Baker-Whitelaw speculated that *Kindle Worlds* was "aimed at a new generation of fans—ones who are growing up with the assumption that it's completely reasonable to want payment for your fanfic" (Baker-Whitelaw). Given that fan fiction is a highly social storytelling experience, and that *Kindle Worlds* has no social features built into it, Anna von Veh suspects that Amazon's target audience are "the 'average' fan of shows and books rather than those already participating in the online fanfiction world" (von Veh). Overall, the actual structure of the *Kindle Worlds* platform

¹⁷ See Jefferson 2013; Baker-Whitelaw 2013; Helens-Hart 2013; von Veh 2013 for more.

suggested a disingenuous effort on the part of Amazon to leverage the term “fan fiction” and activate media buzz, rather than indicating a genuine interest in tapping into fan work and fan networks.

When Anna Todd’s deal with Gallery Books was announced, fan reactions were contradictory. This was fan fiction based on a highly successful boy band. One Direction has fans around the world, many of whom are not remotely interested in fan fiction. For many fans of One Direction, the news that Todd was writing erotic fan fiction about the band was, in itself, already offensive to their notion of “proper” fan behavior. It was one thing to be a fan of One Direction but another thing entirely to sexually fantasize about the band members and share these fantasies. Following the news that Todd had a publishing deal, some One Direction fans (or “Directioners”) were outraged, accusing Todd of doing harm to the members of One Direction and exploiting real lives for personal profit¹⁸. These fans organized a “#suspendannatodd” hashtag campaign on Twitter and a Change.org petition against the books over 27,000 signatures (Change.org). However, there were also many Anna Todd fans or “Afternators” who were very excited about the book deal. In addition to the Directioners and the Afternators, there was a notable non-reaction from media fandom and fan fiction communities more broadly. While Kindle Worlds provoked *Daily Dot* articles on the controversy, debates between fans on Tumblr, and cautionary coverage from the Organization for Transformative Works, *After* seemed to be met with resigned shrugs. There are 33 articles on the Organization for Transformative Works website that reference kindle worlds. A search for Anna Todd comes back with 1. *After* was framed as a predictable outcome to the success of *Fifty Shades* and an inevitable next-step in the mainstreaming of fan fiction.

¹⁸ See Alter 2014; Mayer 2014 for more.

The announcement of Kindle Worlds and the publication of *After* are just two examples of ongoing efforts by the publishing industries to draw upon the popularity and prevalence of fan fiction. They reflect one facet of broader social and economic shifts triggered by digitization and ongoing efforts to monetize the internet. As more and more of the spaces fans use to communicate become monetized, and as fan writing gains wider recognition and acceptance, fan networks and practices are being dramatically transformed and absorbed into existing creative/digital economies and digital labor practices. *After* and *Fifty Shades* are just two big name examples of these changes unfolding.

In the previous chapter I outlined the emergence of erotic romance as a publishing category and identified ways that digital publishing is transforming how commercial romance novels are organized and sold. Now I focus on a different production network for romantic stories: fan fiction. I identify ways that digital publishing is reshaping what it means to write and read fan fiction and, in the process, changing ways that fan networks connect and engage with each other. I argue that fan production networks have long operated as a separate publishing and distribution network for the reading and writing of romantic stories. In order to understand the changes unfolding today and their implications, we need to revisit the construction of these networks and consider what has sustained them over previous decades. This history reveals that romantic and erotic fan fiction emerged in parallel with the erotic romances of the 1970s, that early fan fiction writers thought of themselves as professional authors, and that these authors were publishing commercial works. As fan fiction emerged, fan networks developed content labeling and organization strategies similar to the ones that the commercial romance publishers did. Fans did this as a response to pressure from media producers and in response to widespread discomfort with the romantic and erotic content that was being produced and circulated among female fans.

These shifts force us to reconsider the traditional lines drawn between commercial romance and fan work. In doing so, we are also able to complicate how these commercial and non-commercial spaces have been theorized. In particular, it is critically important that both fan studies and popular romance scholars reexamine the relationship between these two writing communities and revisit older arguments positioning romance and fan fiction (particularly male/male fan fiction) as somehow diametrically opposed.

Since the emergence of contemporary fan fiction in the late-sixties, fans have constructed a production and distribution network for erotic and romantic content that connects discursively to other commercial genres, but particularly to commercial romance. The marketing of *After* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* as cutting-edge erotic romances is just another example of the long-standing connections between fan writing and romance. For decades, fan fiction's circulation networks distributed romantic and sexual fantasies that were not readily available to women in the commercial market. These networks have served as a means of generating/distributing content the market could not or would not provide. Fandoms have also operated as social networks that encouraged members to explore their sexuality and to experiment with sexual fantasy. Today, as fan practices are increasingly adapted into broad digital practices, and as niche content becomes easier to circulate commercially online, what do these shifts mean for fan work and fan networks? Rather than seeing *After* and *Fifty Shades* as some inevitable result of a monetized Internet, we need to ask what processes enabled these two particular works to be monetized? What has prevented other works of fan fiction from being sold commercially? And, even more importantly, which fan practices and works continue to be deemed amateur, unprofessional, and market-averse?

In this chapter I trace the emergence of contemporary fan fiction, and examine the origins of major fan fiction sub-genres. I connect this history to the networking and production technologies available to fans at different points in time. Much like the emergence of erotic romance as a commercial category, fan fiction was also influenced by changing social norms for women in the sixties and seventies. However, fan fiction networks circulated content that, until recently, rarely made it to the mass market. Despite significant pressure from media producers and other fans to police their desires, again and again, female fans have been able to take advantage of new technologies in order to create and circulate fan fiction on their own terms. Since the emergence of contemporary fan fiction networks and media fandom in the late-60s, fan fiction networks have become well-established production and distribution networks for various types of romantic fiction. In particular, the long-standing popularity of male/male (slash) fan fiction among fans has supplied romance readers with a category of romantic fiction that was once ignored by the commercial romance market. Moreover, since fan fiction communities are traditionally female-dominated spaces, these networks have operated as zones in which women are able to engage with the erotic and take risks in ways that many might be less comfortable within their day-to-day lives.

As digital social networking spaces are increasingly organized around commercial interests, the “separateness” of fan networks has broken down. This presents new challenges to fans and fan practices. It is changing the overall not-for-profit structure of fan networks and, in turn, has larger implications for the future of fan practices and fans’ creative work. It also marks an opportunity for us to revisit the relationship between commercial romance and fan fiction. We need to understand fan fiction reading and writing networks as production networks for particular types of romantic storytelling. Fan fiction is not a counter or oppositional force to

romance. Instead, romantic fan fiction constitutes another piece of romance and, as such, contributes to the larger processes of cultural sense making and negotiation that all popular genres contribute to. When viewed this way, the critical role fans have played in producing and circulating less “market-safe” content can be fully recognized and more carefully studied. It also allows us to better understand the changes occurring in commercial romance publishing today, in particular, the escalation in erotic as well as male/male and female/female story content.

Before launching into this argument, I want to acknowledge two clear and immediate complications: First, in emphasizing the connections between romance and fan writing, I am not arguing that all fan fiction is romantic. While “shipping” and “pairing” practices are popular among many fans, there are also many fan fiction readers with no interest in them.¹⁹ A significant amount of fan fiction is not romantic. Second, I am not arguing that romance novels and fan fiction share the same narrative and generic elements. The kinds of stories that circulate among fans do not clearly mirror the narrative styles of commercial romantic storytelling. Given their different production contexts, fan fiction writers often approach storytelling quite differently than an author seeking publication within the commercial romance market. Despite these complications, I believe that the history of fan writing, the efforts of fans to professionalize, and the ongoing attempts to monetize fan work cannot be fully understood if we do not acknowledge fan fiction’s historic and ongoing contributions to romantic storytelling. Just as commercial romance literature is a production network for stories that explore intimacy and partnership, historically, fan fiction networks have also served as production networks for these types of stories. The types of fan fiction discussed here will not be a part of all fans’ experiences. In some

¹⁹ Short for relationships, fans often refer to beloved romantic pairings as “ships.” The term “pairing” serves a similar function, sometimes referring to a fan’s “one true pairing” (or OTP), a term that indicates a favorite couple.

cases, they will represent a type of story that some fans actively dislike. However, none of that should distract us from the vibrancy of pairing and shipping practices within fan networks.

Defining Fans and Fandom

Camille Bacon-Smith once likened descriptions of fandom to the fable about three blind men who try to describe an elephant by only touching its trunk, body, or tail (*Enterprising Women* 282). Depending on where they are positioned, each individual finds themselves touching a very different creature. In writing on fans, this situation is further complicated by the reality that many researchers are fans and rely on their personal experiences to help them navigate the complicated webs of social networks and technologies that connect fans both on and off-line. Today, fandoms are "part of the fabric of our everyday lives" (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 9). Whether an individual is personally engaged in a particular fandom or simply checking up on a missed episode of a favorite show, in contemporary culture all of us have fannish impulses and moments.

Recently, fans, fandoms, and fan practices seem to be everywhere. The entertainment industries actively court engaged audience members and design marketing efforts to attract audiences beyond their initial minutes of viewing time. Henry Jenkins has described these approaches as part of a contemporary "convergence culture," where the Internet and new media technologies provide new means of communication and information dissemination and where the "fan" has become the model for audience engagement (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*). However, what exactly is a fan in this context? Is a fan anyone who livetweets while a show broadcasts? Is a fan anyone who pays for a movie ticket or cheers at a soccer game? What a fan looks like and what they do depends on who is asking the question. How these boundaries are drawn affects how studies of fans are designed, as well as their outcomes.

Despite varying views on what it means to be a fan, there seems to be a certain popular notion that being a fan means something a bit more than checking up on a show once in a while. Being a fan means being more engaged, with interests that are less casual and more intensive. Being in a fandom involves being part of a network of people deriving pleasure from a set of texts or practices and sharing that pleasure with others. (Text here being anything from a book, to a celebrity, a band, or a video game. Pleasure here being anything from discussing, debating, spoiling, recapping, vidding, snarking, writing, playing, lolcatting, grieving, etc.) Fans often self-identify these networks as communities, groups that come together and use their pleasures to define themselves. The emphasis remains heavily on fan self-identification, as well as the sharing of affect with others and, more specifically, on the sharing of pleasures.

In the singular tense, terms like “fan,” “fan culture,” and “fan community” are deceptive. This is not an organized and unified monoculture with easily definable edges or universal practices. Instead, these are diverse networks of individuals converging at various (and sometimes contentious) points: fan conventions, text-specific websites, general web archives, social media feeds, etc. Fans connect through shared interests, practices, and identity formations. They network to find others with compatible interests. Sometimes these networks remain active for multiple generations; in other cases, a fan network may form for a more limited period of time.

For fans, these points of contact are often identified and experienced as communities or cultures. This understanding derives in part from a time when it was common for fans to literally join a club, pay dues, and for that membership to serve as a marker of your status as a fan. Today, terms like fan community or fan culture are used more loosely. Rather than paying dues, contemporary fans may express their fandom through a user interest on their Facebook profile or

by reblogging a picture on Tumblr. Digital technologies and social media have made fan engagement a more casual act. This looseness should not invalidate the sense of community that many fans experience in fandom. However, it does speak to the need for researchers to continually interrogate how fans are activating these terms. All of these communities are inflected with their own group priorities, politics, and pleasures, as well as the limits and affordances of the technologies they are using to communicate. The values and codes of conduct embraced within these spaces reflect different technologies and group concerns. While common practices can be identified across fan networks, different groupings engage with texts and share their pleasures in different ways. In addition to expressing their fandom as interests on social media, fans engage in a range of creative and critical practices. These include the making of videos which engage with a particular media text (fanvids or AMVs), dressing up as a character from a particular story (cosplay), participating in role-playing games, creating fanzines, attending fan conventions, studying a particular genre or a content creator's work, creating art which references a particular storyworld, etc.

For many fans, the product is an excuse. A media franchise is a temporary framework for fans to engage with. As Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg remind us, "the most spectacularly successful fandom can also easily become the most passé" (575). The term fandom is typically held as synonymous with specific media texts/franchises. However, the fandom of the moment is often just another opportunity for fan practitioners to do the things they love to do: tell stories, make art, do media critique, write smut, remix moving images, and share this work with others. Fan studies has been accused of over-focusing on female fan communities and on fan fiction, but fan studies is equally guilty of indulging the product/consumer relationship. Continually reinforcing fandom as product reinforces a version of fandom that today's culture industries and

information economies are most interested in sustaining: one in which media franchises maintain their place as a unifying force and where producers, product canon, and profit set the standards for cultural engagement.

If being a fan is defined as admiration for something or someone, in a society where love and excessive emotion are feminized and devalued, this implies that being a fan is inherently disempowering and that a fan is giving something or someone a degree of control over them. If being a fan is defined as being a consumer of a product, this traps fans into yet another unequal relationship, one in which the fan always purchases culture rather than producing it. Equally important, in this framing purchasing habits define an individual's politics, identity, and suggest susceptibility to savvy marketing strategies. The problem with each of these conceptualizations of "fan" is that they take broad practices of cultural engagement and fix them within a series of binaries: active/passive, fanatical/rational, producer/consumer, moderate/radical, etc. When fan and fandom are used as nouns they seem to trap us in a conversation that is always reinforcing the power of products and ownership and, in turn, where the products are the only things allowed to speak for identity or politics. For example, academia, the media, marketers, and the public tussle over whether *Fifty Shades of Grey* is frivolous, sexy, badly written, feminist, misogynistic, mommy-porn, romance, fan or original fiction. All of these efforts to label *Fifty Shades* reveals our inability to move outside of a branding mindset: an environment where politics and identity are limited by what we do and do not buy and, in the case of romance and women, where fantasy can mark a betrayal of real-world feminist politics.

I am not attempting to eliminate the terms fan or fandom from our vocabulary, not when so much work has already been done to reclaim these terms. However, simply complicating our relationships with products is not enough, not when it continually reaffirms products and the

market values that accompany them. What if we think, instead, of what it means “to fan” or of fandom as a field of activity? What happens when we approach “fan” as a verb? To fan something can make it cool or hot, it strengthens or weakens an existing energy source. Activities and people can fan out from a central point, moving beyond, complicating, or extending it. All of these actions connect with broader processes of cultural engagement, production, and negotiation, as well as individual and collective meaning-making.

An individual will be a fan of many different things over the course of their lifetime, so many that it can render their declarations of fannishness fairly meaningless. Across this history, fans continually return to core sets of practices and to the networks of people that share their interests. Fan identity is far less about what an individual purchases and more about what they love to do. If the only way cultural engagement legible to us is through products and brands, that seems to say far more about our global society than it does about the people we label fans.

Studying Fan Fiction

Much of the early scholarship on fans was written as part of a broader conversation in feminist cultural studies about women in popular culture and women’s reception practices. Early work on media fandom include Joanna Russ’ “Pornography For Women By Women, With Love” (1985), Lamb and Veith’s “Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and Star Trek Zines” (1986), and Constance Penley’s “Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology” (1991). This work existed in conversation with other well-known pieces of scholarship on romance from this period, including Tania Modleski’s *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982), Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), and Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas* (1985).

Prior to 1992, feminist cultural studies and studies of fans seemed synonymous. As more stand-alone studies of fandom, Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992) and Camile Bacon-

Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) were two early signs of a departure. With a chapter on slash that engages with Lamb and Veith, Radway, Russ and others, *Textual Poachers* can be seen as both an extension of the earlier conversation and, given the project as a whole, also a contribution towards a parallel discussion on subcultures and popular culture.

Much of this early work has been critiqued for an over-celebratory “fandom is beautiful” approach to fans (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 3). Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington argue that “early fan studies did not so much deconstruct the binary structure in which the fan had been placed as they tried to differentially value the fan’s place in said binary” (3). This era of research has also been critiqued for its more exclusive focus on fan fiction and on specific primarily-female media fandoms producing it. While it is true that these early studies cannot speak for all types of fan and audience engagement, and that they focus primarily on a particular aspect of fandom, it is also unfair to accuse these scholars of inaccurately defining fans or of focusing on too narrow a set of fan practices. At this point, the focus was not on fans and fandom in any sort of universal way.

In more recent years, fan studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary network of scholars researching fans from a variety of disciplinary positions. In the process, the focus of fan studies has broadened. Fan networks and practices have been positioned as part of a larger “participatory culture” facilitated by new technologies that are reconfiguring the relationships between producers, consumers, and media content. For example, Henry Jenkins connects the creative role-play of Harry Potter fans to the cultural competencies needed “to become full participants in convergence culture” (*Convergence Culture* 176). Similarly, Lawrence Lessig positions fan remix practices as a part of a “read/write culture” where “ordinary citizens... add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them” (Lessig). In these configurations,

specific fan networks stand as examples of contemporary digital communities where various communication and technological skills are acquired.

However, Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg caution that the experiences of particular fan networks should not be allowed “to stand as the optimistic vision of the imminent media landscape” (566). Critical of a model of participatory culture that overlooks the reasons why individuals choose particular modes of participation, Driscoll and Gregg ask “how new media practices fit into working and home lives in schedules that allow little room for agency” (574)? One way to better address these particulars is to revisit questions at the core of feminist cultural studies. In particular, to interrogate today’s convergence culture and ask “which stories are told on which media platforms, and why” (Driscoll and Gregg 578). This is a question that also undergirds my own work. In taking up this question, I want this chapter to serve as a reminder that much of the early writing on fans was focused on predominantly-female fan fiction communities as a means of talking about the relationships between women and popular culture, pornography, and broader cultural norms around female desire. When theorizing about fans in relation to contemporary participatory culture, we cannot overlook the gendered history of fan networks and practices. Indeed, returning to fan fiction and studying it in its current form is necessary in order for us to better understand the effects that the monetization of the internet is having on fan networks and practices and on the production of popular culture.

As the entertainment industries increase their use of social media and web marketing campaigns, it has become clear that certain fan practices are more readily accepted and encouraged by media producers than others. For example, it is now common for film promoters to release teasers and previews in exchange for fan tweets promoting an upcoming product release date. These types of exchanges directly benefit producers by generating buzz and fans are

rewarded with additional content. Suzanne Scott argues that these types of ancillary content are designed to create alternative revenue streams for media franchises that are tethered to older (and potentially failing) commercial models like television (Scott). The ways industry engages (or disengages) with fans is also highly gendered. As Kristina Busse explains, “affect and forms of fannish investment get policed along gender lines... even the same behavior gets read differently when women do it” (75).

One area of fan work that media producers often avoid, knowingly mock, or very carefully court is fan fiction. It is striking that a work of *Twilight* fan fiction like *Fifty Shades of Grey* or One Direction fan fiction like *After* would have received such interest from the print publishing industry while simultaneously provoking such lukewarm reactions from other media industries. These tensions suggest that many media producers are ambivalent about fan fiction and unsure how to utilize it in their efforts to sustain an audience for their products. Some media franchises have organized fan fiction contests or hosted fan fiction archives, but these are typically accompanied by lengthy term of service agreements which dictate what types of stories will be permitted and often stipulate that the company retains control over the work.²⁰

The amused, confused, and often uncomfortable reactions to fan fiction reflect larger social and cultural tensions around gender, taste and affect. If a fan is someone who derives and shares pleasures, certain types of pleasure are going to be more broadly tolerated than others. Deriving pleasure from collection or from proximity with industry auteurs, both practices which reinforce and sustain product sales, is pleasure that media industries can profit from. Fan fiction, at its core, is driven by the pleasures to be found in examining unexplored and unsanctioned aspects of stories. This does not make fan fiction inherently more political or critical than other

²⁰ Although, this isn't always the case. MTV's *Teen Wolf* held a fan fiction contest in 2013 which directly encouraged fans to send in male/male fiction and the TOS was careful to state that the entrant retained copyright over their work. (For more, see: Rebaza 2012.)

fan practices. It does, however, make it more complicated thing for media franchises to incorporate into their marketing strategies. A television show can easily hold a cosplay contest and award a fan for making the best costume. They are not going to be as eager to host a fan fiction archive with adult content on it. Ancillary content models also heavily emphasize a unified and coherent transmedia product, something that fan fiction tends to work against (Scott). While fan fiction authors and readers are often very sensitive to “canon,” fan fiction’s overall drive towards story expansion and discontinuity counters the kind of unified messaging producers want to maintain.

While media producers may be struggling to monetize fan fiction, the publishing industry does not have this problem. Big name publishers are increasingly using the internet and self-publishing as a kind of “slush pile” for new work and ideas (see chapter 1 for more). The feedback systems fans have put into place to rank, rate, and give feedback to fan fiction authors, offer these publishers another means of identifying potential products.

Fan fiction’s pleasures are also deeply intertwined with its long history as a female-dominated storytelling practice. Much like commercial romance publishing, this history has been shaped by the historic treatment of women’s reading and writing, women’s access to production/distribution tools for creative work, the history of copyright law and, more specifically, women’s ability to own property and claim copyright. To understand the contemporary debates around the monetization of fan writing, it is critical to look back at the emergence of fan fiction as a cultural practice, the dominant storytelling categories within fan fiction, and at the codes of conduct fans established around different types of fan writing.

Much of the so-called “first wave” of fan studies focused on fan fiction, slash fan fiction, and media fandom. However, this does not mean that we fully understand fan fiction or that

contemporary fan scholars should move away from it. Research on media fans from over thirty years ago cannot address the ways these networks and practices are constituted today. Also, the more recent emphasis on understanding an individual's relationship with a product, which focuses primarily on fan consumption as commercial exchange, overlooks the aspects of fan practices that transcend individual products. Studying networks of practice, particularly those for fan writing, helps make these other aspects of fan work visible.

Fan fiction's production networks continue to be valuable and important production spaces for feminist cultural studies to engage with. However, we need to be careful not to replicate some of the more problematic aspects of this work. A preoccupation with categorizing slash as politicized, queer, female pornography and romance novels as heteronormative, domesticated, depoliticized fantasies has colored much of the analysis these two storytelling practices. At its extremes, studies of fan fiction have traditionally taken two stances towards romance. Fan fiction is either folded into romance and assumed to be just another form of romantic storytelling, with little attention paid to the very different production networks supporting them. Or, fan fiction is positioned as a kind of grassroots and pornographic opposite to a normative romantic mainstream. The first extreme overlooks the significantly different contexts in which fan fiction and commercial romance are circulated. The second extreme neglects the overwhelming amounts of fan fiction (slash and het) that are highly romantic, as well as the sexual charge that commercial romances often have.

I do not believe that the authors of these earlier pieces of scholarship are necessarily trying to reinforce a binary where certain female fantasies are bad/anti-feminist and others are good/feminist. However, given the different stigmas associated with fans and romance, it is easy for the work to be picked up and appropriated in this way. For example, Patricia Frazer Lamb

and Diana L. Veith describe slash as a “romantic sexual relationship” but follow this by explaining that slash is also a “radical departure from, the feminine romantic novel” because “the message of [Kirk/Spock] is that true love and authentic intimacy can exist only between equals” (238). This is a statement that will leave many romance readers scratching their heads, particularly given Pamela Regis’ argument that one of the driving elements of a romance novel is the heroine’s movement “from a state of bondage or constraint into a state of freedom” (15). Many would argue that building a relationship of authentic intimacy between two equals is the central project of romance narratives. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Woledge argues that “romance novels and pornography...work to separate sex and intimacy” (99). In contrast, slash is positioned as “intimatopic,” working “to connect these two elements” (99). Again, this is a statement that will confuse many romance readers. In many romance novels— probably the bulk of them— emotional intimacy and sexual pleasure are deeply intertwined.

This leads me to a larger question: What is it that prevents us from recognizing these elements at play in romance? There is something about the semiotics of romance that renders certain story elements valid or invalid depending on the reader. Given the many different expectations placed on men and women in our society, it seems likely that the play with form inherent in genre is also a process of assembling and recombining different storytelling elements in an effort to make different types of intimacy, equality, and desire coherent to different audiences. This means these combinations are constantly fluctuating and highly dependent on the various communication media, audiences, cultural traditions, and social norms involved in particular production networks.

Henry Jenkins speculates that fandom can be a means “for marginalized subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, etc.) to pry open space for their cultural concerns with dominant

representations” (“Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” 87). Similarly, Anne Jamison argues, “fic provides a venue for all kinds of writers who are shut out from official culture” (19). This idea that fan engagement serves as mechanism to “inflect program content with [fans] own social experience” has shaped the trajectory of fan studies and influenced cultural studies as a whole. Since writing fan fiction entails adding onto existing stories, it certainly opens up possibilities for complicating dominant narratives. This does not mean, however, that fan fiction is inherently more political, critical, queer, feminist, edgy, etc. Like all cultural materials, fan fiction reflects the societies and individuals that produce it. Nonetheless, as Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse argue, fan work generally involves a play with limits and constraints (Stein and Busse). Content produced for the mass market reflects dominant norms and, as individuals engage with popular culture they often find ways to make this content more meaningful and coherent to themselves. The act of personalizing popular culture can involve making these stories and characters more familiar, focusing in on underrepresented perspectives, or adding in characters and experiences. Meaning can also be found in fantasy, escape, and in imagining experiences very different from your own. However, we can only begin to appreciate the nuances of these types of fantasy and play when we understand that they are a part of a broader cultural process.

(Re)Defining Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is a storytelling practice in which writers build upon pre-existing storyworlds and characters. Fan writers utilize aspects of a pre-existing media text or franchise— its world, a set of characters, a particular storyline or narrative question, etc.— and experiment with alternate storylines and possibilities for the world and its characters. In some instances, fan writers will also construct alternative worlds or new characters, expanding upon the existing media text.

These are just some of the ways that fan fiction is “archontic,” part of an ever-expanding archive of stories (Derecho).

Fan fiction can be critical, with writers purposefully altering aspects of the pre-existing story world or exploring issues and characters less central to the earlier texts. Abigail Derecho argues that, given its inherent drive to expand, explore, and build out existing stories, archontic literature is particularly well suited to literature for the subordinate (Derecho). However, it is not only fan fiction’s drive to expand on existing texts which facilitates this. As non-commercial fiction written, edited, and circulated by (mostly) volunteer labor, these stories do not need to meet the same criteria for market safety that commercial publications do. This enables fan fiction’s content to be more niche and for a variety of sub genres to develop and grow. In today’s digitized fan networks, access to story archives online has increased fan fiction’s overall visibility and fans’ access to each other on social media. These factors have lowered fandom’s barriers to entry even further, enabling more writers to try their skills and see if they can find an audience. They also enable writers to experiment with more taboo content and kinks. All of these factors contribute to the many and varied fan fiction stories available.

In terms of form and technique, contemporary fan fiction is often released in serial form and the writing process can be highly collaborative. It is common for different types of digital artifacts to be incorporated into fan fiction, either serving an illustrative function or as an integral part of the narrative. Stories may incorporate visual, moving image, and sound elements, as well as containing a variety of interactive elements. Some fan fiction is designed to work with a specific communication platform or operating system. Individual works may be released simultaneously with audio recordings of the story (typically called podfic) or produced collaboratively with illustrators. These are just some of the storytelling devices fan fiction writers

utilize. Just as fandom can be a different creature to the various individuals in contact with it, so can fan fiction. Storytelling norms are shaped by different networks of writers, different levels of training and technical skills, the media text fans are working with, and the specific websites they are using to share their work.

Histories of fan culture often locate the origins of fan fiction in the 1970s and within communities of *Star Trek* fans. This is true to some extent. The forms of fan writing common today and the fan networks supporting these storytelling practices began to rapidly expand in the late-1960s and early 1970s. The *Star Trek* fans of this period would be critical “in developing the conventions and setting the standards for media zine publishing” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 157). However, the *Star Trek* fan fiction emerging in the late-60s built upon existing fan networks and fan publication practices, as well as longstanding cultural practices.

Henry Jenkins argues that fan fiction is “vitally connected to folk culture traditions” (*Textual Poachers* 272). In a similar vein, Lev Grossman argues, “[b]efore the modern era of copyright and intellectual property, stories were things held in common... Fictional characters and worlds were shared resources (xiii–xvi). There are many historic examples of writers reacting to earlier publications, incorporating ideas from others into their own stories, and circulating this new work. Well-known examples of this include: Shakespeare incorporating various stories, histories, and other plays into his work; Lady Bradshaigh rewriting Samuel Richard’s *Clarissa* to make it more to her liking; and the many pastiches of Sherlock Holmes that were written and published in the late-19th and early 20th centuries—not to mention the retellings still being produced today (Jamison). More recent commercial publications include Jean Rhys’

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001).²¹

Jessica Litman argues, "the very act of authorship in *any* medium is more akin to translation and recombination than it is to creating Aphrodite from the foam of the sea" (966). Clearly, whether describing a folk practice or commercial publications, the practice of building on preexisting texts and writing new ones is not new. Indeed, it is also a fundamental component in the writing process. What is new is using the term "fan fiction" to refer to this type of work. The idea that this writing must be noncommercial and that fan fiction is an amateur form of storytelling apart from "real" writing and authorship is a more recent concept. Even the term "fan fiction" pre-exists its contemporary meaning. The *Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* tracks the term being used in 1939 to distinguish between amateur and professional quality science fiction writing (Prucher 57). This was not writing that was based on someone else's "product" but, instead, was writing deemed unready for professional publication or widespread commercial readership. In 1944, J.B. Speer's *Fancyclopedia* added that the term fan fiction could refer to "fiction about fans, or sometimes about pros, and occasionally bringing in some famous characters from stf [scientifiction/scientifictionist] stories" (Prucher 57). Again, this is a very different take on the term as it is commonly used today. In this earlier context, fan fiction refers to a more amateur type of writing, but still signals original work. This work may draw upon preexisting characters, but these preexisting characters range from fictional to fictionalizations of real people.

By 1975, more familiar applications of the term begin to appear. In *Star Trek Lives!* (1975), Jacqueline Lichtenburg, Sondra Marshak, and Joan Winston devote an entire chapter to "Do-It-Yourself Star Trek— The Fan Fiction." Fan fiction was also getting attention from the broader

²¹ For more on this history see Jamison 2013.

science fiction community during this time. In 1974, Laura Basta and Jacqueline Lichtenburg were nominated for Hugo Awards, one of the most prestigious recognitions available to speculative fiction authors, for their *Star Trek* fan fiction (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 227; Hugo Awards, “1974 Hugo Awards”).

The Hugo Awards began recognizing fan writing in 1967, and continues to recognize fan writers, artists, and fanzines to this day (Hugo Awards, “Hugo Award FAQ”). The Hugo’s stance on fan work hints at the broader history of fan writing, beyond today’s associations between fan writing and derivative work. The Hugos define fan writing as “any writing fans do for other fans that they don’t get paid for” (Hugo Awards, “Hugo Award FAQ”). In this context fan writing can be original fiction, fan fiction, or non-fiction. The Hugo Awards are also careful to position the difference between fan and professional work as profit, not originality or skill. Significantly, a fan can also be a professional:

“many of our greatest and most famous pros were (and are) also fans: E. E. Smith, Poul Anderson, Ray Bradbury, Hal Clement, Fred Pohl, Joe Haldeman, and a hundred others... [for example,] David Langford, who won a Hugo for a short story in 2000 but also has won Hugos for his fan writing.” (Hugo Awards, “Hugo Award FAQ”)

In emphasizing the potential for fan writing to be equally valuable and original and positioning fan fiction within this history, the Hugo Awards are a reminder of the legacy of fan fiction within science fiction fandom, of older connotations of the term, and of a history in which many writers slip back and forth between the role of “fan” and “professional.”

In America, the term fan fiction came into use over the course of the twentieth century, but its contemporary usage, and particular association with derivative work, developed in parallel with an escalation in American copyright law. The history of copyright law is one in which the

concept of authorship has been “strategically deployed to extend copyright protection to new kinds of subject matter” (Jaszi 480). At the same time that the authors of *Star Trek Lives!* were speculating that *Star Trek* fan fiction was a new genre of science fiction, copyright law was undergoing dramatic changes in the United States (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 224). Before the 1970s, the last major change to American copyright law was the Copyright Act of 1909. Over the course of the 1950s and 60s there were ongoing efforts to revise the 1909 act, with several smaller stopgap policies put in place in the sixties and early seventies. Then, finally, The Copyright Act of 1976 was passed. The new act was meant to address the range of new technologies that had been introduced after 1909 and anticipated that more revisions would come in the future (U.S. Copyright Office). The 1976 act implemented a single system for copyright protection, extended the term of copyright protection to the lifetime of the author plus fifty years, codified the idea of “fair use,” and established certain “exclusive rights” related to reproduction, derivative work, distribution, public performance, and public display (U.S. Copyright Office). In *Star Trek Lives!*, there is no suggestion anywhere that fan fiction might be some sort of illegal practice. Instead, Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston are quite sure that fan fiction and its writers are a critical part of the science fiction genre’s literary future. Nonetheless, as the contemporary definition of fan fiction solidified and the practice took hold, fan fiction writers would come to be called “lawbreakers” and “poachers” (Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* 4; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*).

Given this history, it seems more accurate to say that the ever-expanding scope of copyright law in the United States has produced a grey area of cultural production and that over time fan fiction has become a label for work that exists in this space — a space where individuals engage with popular culture and produce creative work as they always have done, but where

popular myths and archetypes are “products.” In this configuration, engaging with popular culture means that certain stakeholders are not allowed to claim the same kinds of ownership, access, and control over their work as those in the entertainment industries do. This reality is critical to the current and ongoing debates taking place over the monetization of fan cultures and practices. Discursively, the term fan fiction operates as a protective shield for its producers, a label for fan production/circulation networks to use to share their work, and as a disciplinary tool denoting “unprofessional,” “unoriginal,” and “amateur” work. The term protects creative practitioners from legal action while simultaneously routing profits back to the “appropriate” channels.

The problems inherent in a producer/consumer binary have received increased attention in recent years. As digital technologies have facilitated amateur production and digital networks help fan practices and networks spread, the line between producer and consumer has increasingly blurred. Given that the internet depends on participation, George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson argue that Web 2.0 economies rely on a merging of production and consumption, giving rise to a new age of “prosumer capitalism” (Ritzer and Jurgenson). This echoes with Henry Jenkins’ argument that today “everyone’s a participant—although participants may have different degrees of status and influence” (“Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 132). This blurring of producers and consumers has been hailed by some as a democratizing of media production and criticized by others as being yet another way in which individuals are tricked into providing free labor within today’s information economy.

Contemporary Fan Fiction Emerges

Fan fiction as we understand it today began to be regularly circulated by fans in the late sixties. Fanzines were popular ways for science fiction fans to communicate and circulate letters

of comment on the genre, its stories, and authors and, at the time, these made up the bulk of zine content (Jamison). First published in 1967, *Spockanalia* was probably the first *Star Trek* fanzine (Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* 74; Jamison 85). It is thought that *Spockanalia* published some of the first contemporary fan fiction. It and other early *Star Trek* zines clearly helped popularize the newer writing practice, marking the beginning of a period of expansion and change for fan writing.

Early *Star Trek* zines like *Spockanalia* mark the period in the late-sixties and seventies when media fandom began to establish itself as distinct from (but still highly connected to) science fiction fandom. Traditionally, science fiction fandom focused on literary works of science fiction. The popularity of the original *Star Trek* television series (1966) and the initial *Star Wars* films (1977-1983) introduced new audiences to science fiction and increased science fiction readers' interest in other media. Fan interest also quickly expanded to other genres. The television series *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968) was popular with many science fiction fans and several well-known science fiction authors worked on the show's scripts and related tie-in novels (Coppa 44). By the mid-seventies, fan networks would begin showing a strong interest in several other procedural television shows. The American cop show *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-77) attracted fan attention and advertisements for its first fanzine, *Zebra3*, were appearing by 1977 (Verba 38). Zines for the British television series *The Professionals* (1977-1983) were being circulated by 1983 ("Professionals Slash Fanzines"). Overall, this activity contributed to the sense that "fandom" (i.e. literary science fiction fandom) was beginning to incorporate a greater range of genres, media forms, and people.

Not coincidentally, the lines between these two areas of fan activity (media and literary science fiction) were gendered. In an interview with Anne Jamison, early *Star Trek* fan Patricia

Poole explains, “the rising number of women in science fiction fandom coincided with SF appearing in places other than in books. A schism developed. ‘Media fans’ were interested in SF, but mainly as depicted in TV or film. ‘Literary fans’ maintained true SF was print” (Jamison 89). Poole estimates that early media fans were about 60-75% female, while literary fans were about 90% male (Jamison 89). There were also significant gender differences when it came to who was writing fic. Poole estimates that roughly 90% of the media fans writing fan fiction were female (Jamison 89).

In contrast to the wider field of science fiction where “the readership has been heavily weighted towards the male side and... most of the writers have been male” (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 223). The broader Star Trek fandom was “composed about equally of males and females” (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 223). Given this history, even having similar numbers of men and women participating in the fandom was a striking change. Lichtenberg et. Al. estimate that nearly all fan fiction writers at the time were women, explaining “[m]en are better represented in STAR TREK artwork, craftwork, science articles, humor, organizational work and a rare poem here and there in the fanzines (222). Lichtenberg et. Al. describe “a whole new fandom composed of people who did not cut their teeth on science fiction” (223). It is easy to imagine older fans feeling displaced by all the newcomers.

Between 1966 and 1979, “science fiction and the fan community underwent more changes than at any other time in their history” (Bacon-Smith, *Science Fiction Culture* 101). In addition to the popularity of *Star Trek*, another important cult-text made its way to American audiences. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* books were released in America in the mid-60s and quickly became cult favorites, driving up demand for fantasy fiction in the process (*Science Fiction Culture* 101–102). As discussed in the previous chapter, changes in the publishing

industry during this period, including the growth of bookstore chains and new developments in the production of paperback books also had an effect. All of this “brought in more readers and expanded genre publishing in general” (*Science Fiction Culture* 101). The changes in fandom paralleled with the growth of commercial romance novels, particularly romance paperbacks, during the seventies. The exotic historical settings that were so popular with romance fans during this period, coupled with the rise in science fiction/fantasy content, signal a broader interest in fantasy, costume, romance, and escape from realism during this time.

Historical accounts of this period do not typically spend much time discussing the role of the fantasy genre in this process or the popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* stories during this time. However, some fans speculate that one of the first works of fan fiction may actually have been published in a Tolkien zine, *I Palantir*, in 1960, some seven years prior to the publication of *Spockanalia* (Fanlore). Fantasy genres are often combined with science fiction under the label of “speculative fiction” or “science fiction/fantasy.” Most histories of fans continue to simply emphasize science fiction fandom, however. This is a gap that deserves more attention than I can give it here, but the lack of attention paid to fantasy in early fan fiction histories may also be connected with the gender divisions forming between media fans and literary science fiction fans in the 1960s and 1970s. Traditionally, science fiction has been granted greater literary legitimacy than fantasy. Science fiction is also, not coincidentally, the speculative genre that is most coded as male while fantasy tends to be coded as female. By emphasizing science fiction fandom, both scholars and fans are able to strategically focus attention on the (supposedly) more scientific and rational speculative genre. In the process, the

literary and cultural value of science fiction fandom is reinforced. (And fantasy, while omitted from view, is able to continue its collaborative relationship with science fiction.)²²

Fan Fiction Genres and the “Splintering of Fandom”

By the mid-seventies there were nearly two hundred fan fiction zines in circulation and the contemporary understanding of fan fiction had begun to take shape (Verba 35). The peak would be in 1977, when roughly four hundred and fifty different zines were circulating. However, the period from 1978-1980 would be described later as “the Splintering of Fandom” (Verba 43–53). Prior to this period, many of the fan fiction sub-genres that are most familiar to readers today had not developed as clear circulation labels. The late-seventies were the point where many of these categories would emerge and become the focus of heated debate.

In recent decades, it has been common for fan fiction to be organized along three broad category lines. Some fan fiction readers identify as preferring “gen” or general fic, which tends to refer to stories without any type of romantic or sexual relationship (although, not always). For a time, identifying as a “shipper” indicated an interest in “het” fic, male/female (m/f) stories. Today, however, “shipping” is used more generally, describing a relationship that an individual fan is particularly interested in. Identifying as a “slasher” signals a preference for “slash” or specifically male/male (m/m) relationship stories. (Technically, slash can also refer to female/female (f/f) stories but these are more commonly referred to as “femslash.”) While gen, het, and slash are terms commonly used in relation to western media texts, Asian media fandoms tend to use other identifiers for these categories. For example, in anime and manga fandoms, female/female stories might be called *yuri*, *shōjo-ai*, or “girls love” and male/male fiction *yaoi*, *shōnen-ai*, or “boys love” (Brenner 135, 36). Usage varies, depending on the fan network, what

²² Many thanks to Mel Stanfill for talking through this with me.

country the media texts are from, the age of the fandom, etc.²³ While identifying as a shipper or a slasher has been a common practice, it is by no means a universal one. There are also fans who prefer to be labeled using a specific fandom name (the media text/texts they are engaging with, for example *Harry Potter*) or with a specific practice (for example, as a cosplayer or vidder). What label a fan prefers may depend on where they focus most of their activity, which label they are most comfortable telling other people, which networks they identify most closely with, etc.

For decades, the gen, het, and slash categories have been used as a labeling system for fan work, organizing fan networks, practices, and various points of distribution among fans. The prevalence and use of these organizing categories was shaped by the ways that fan fiction emerged in fanzines in the seventies and eighties, as well as by the cultural norms of the time. Labels like gen, het, and slash do not simply indicate a story type, they also represent different tiers of social acceptance and stigma. These categories were shaped out of a practical desire to find content and also by the sense that certain types of adult, romantic, and erotic content could cause offense and needed to come with a warning label. Over the course of the seventies, fan fiction readers and writers jostled with other fans and each other in an attempt to make space for their various pleasures. These tensions played out at conventions, in local fan clubs, and in the pages of zines. By the mid-eighties, many of fan fictions content labeling and “warning” systems would be firmly in place.

Initially, the fan fiction appearing in zines was gen or general fic and writers focused on the existing *Star Trek* canon. Over time, original female characters, romantic stories, and stories exploring Kirk and Spock’s friendship began to appear. One of the first indications that some of

²³ These terms are used to refer to fan fiction but they have a different history from the more western terms. In particular, commercial male/male genres aimed at female audiences developed much earlier in Japan. Today, many of these terms are industry labels as much as they are fan terms. For more of this history, see Brenner 2006.

these stories were making readers uncomfortable can be seen in reactions to the fan story “The Alternate,” published in issue three of *Spockanalia* in 1968. “The Alternate” is thought to be one of the first “lay” or relationship stories to be published in a widely circulating zine (“The Alternate”). It is not particularly explicit or direct in its language, but it is clear from the story that a sexual relationship has occurred between Spock and the story’s female narrator. Some fans decried this as “embarrassing, dirty, or downright trashy” (qtd.in “Spockanalia”). In response, the zine’s editors defended the work’s quality and their right to publish it:

“Perhaps some of our readers are too accustomed to the tradition, in popular literature, of the male protagonist being aroused by the presence of attractive women. When they find that women write it the other way around, they find it strange. We, the editors... print only material which we consider well-written, interesting to us, and written within our format. We do not choose to limit ourselves by eliminating one effective segment of our submissions.” (qtd. in “Spockanalia”)

Not only do the editors defend the acknowledgement of sex, they also challenge what they perceive as a double standard, preventing women’s desire from being acknowledged in popular literature. Stressing, “[w]e, the editors,” they also claim their authority as the zine’s publishers and their ability to determine what constitutes quality writing. These editors, rather than public opinion, will determine what content makes it onto the pages of the zine. The issue of taste is that of the complaining readers and their inability to move beyond the “tradition... of the male protagonist being aroused” around attractive women. Rather than backing down from publishing stories like this, *Spockanalia* continued, including “Time Enough,” another early relationship story, in the same issue (qtd. in “Spockanalia”). In this way, zine editors began to define spaces where fan fiction could and would focus on particular pleasures and fantasies.

Divisions began to form regarding which types of content zines would accept. By 1972, “[m]any standard Trekzines [had] a policy of no Spock-goes-to-bed-with stories” (qtd. in “Grup”). At the time, *Star Trek* fan Judith Brownlee suggested that “someone ought to do an x-rated zine with nothing but that kind of story” (qtd. in “Grup”). *Grup*, one of the first fanzines dedicated to adult content, emerged out of this frustration and in direct response to these policies. In the first issue, *Grup* editors explained:

“the backlog of this type of story and art is unbelievable... 'Grup' is meant to provide a publication for those stories. We tried to keep fairly high standards, all the fiction had to have a plot and some characterization as well as a storyline... these are not just Spock-goes-to-bed-with stories, there are articles and poetry along with anyone/thing-goes-to-bed-with-anyone/anything stories.” (qtd. in “Grup”)

In this statement, *Grup* editors are careful to emphasize their “fairly high standards” and to link “Spock-goes-to-bed-with stories” to poetry and other written articles. They are also clearly enjoying the venue for “anyone/thing-goes-to-bed-with-anyone/thing stories” that *Grup* opened up. *Grup* editors constructed parallels between their fanzine and traditional adult men’s magazines. Each issue of *Grup* included naked centerfolds of *Star Trek* characters, parodying the signifiers of pornographic magazines. Only, here, the centerfold was recoded for a predominantly female audience. Another adult zine, *R&R* continued this playfulness with pornographic signifiers when it began to be released in 1975. Promoting itself as “the fanzine in the brown paper wrapper,” each issue of *R&R* featured a plain paper cover with simple roman numerals indicating the issue number (qtd. in “R & R”). *Grup*, *R&R* and other zines pushed against existing norms for fan content and set the stage for even more explicit content in the future.

When *Grup* finished publishing in 1978, the zine was considered “almost tame compared to what was coming out elsewhere” (Verba 45).

The sentiments behind *Grup*’s formation suggest there was a growing amount of adult content looking for a publication venue. Before *Grup* was released, adult stories would have already been circulating privately, but zines like *Grup* gave this content a wider audience. Buoyed by the broader social and cultural conversations happening around women’s sexuality during the sixties and early seventies, romantic and adult fan fiction authors were unwilling to accept the publication restrictions other fans wanted. All of this happened in parallel with the publication of *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972 and incorporation of more direct references to sex acts and female desire in the commercial romance market. The *Grup* editors’ comment that “the backlog of this type of story and art is unbelievable” also echoes the sentiments expressed by early digital publishers in the previous chapter. This history foreshadows the experiences many commercial erotic romance authors would have in the nineties. Content deemed too risqué was not being picked up by the more established publishing and circulation routes. With the new digital technologies available to erotic romance authors in the nineties, digital publishing became a means for these authors to organize and self-publish.

Financial resources and access to technology also played an important role in the development of the adult fanzines in the seventies. Given the history of amateur publications and fanzines in science fiction fandom, many of these fans would have had at least some second-hand familiarity with the process setting up a zine. However, to produce a zine the creators needed access to copying machines, often labor intensive mimeograph, ditto, or offset printers. Zine producers needed teams of people to help with collating and binding the zines, as well as with shipping zines and selling them at conventions. All of this required significant time,

organizational skills, and labor from fans, however it was still work that could be done locally and organized by volunteers. Contributing a story was one way of ensuring you received a copy of the zine. Helping to collate copies and put the zine together also meant access to a copy. In this way, participation in the network became synonymous with access to the content the network produced.

The bulk of the adult content in zines in the early and mid-seventies focused on male/female relationships. Much like the commercial romances of this period, the content was more discrete. For example, “The Alternate” depicted intimacy, but relied primarily on euphemisms and descriptions of sensations more than direct explanations of what was occurring. In general, the fan art depicting characters in the nude seems to have been far more explicit than the writing it accompanied.

In the late-sixties and early-seventies, it was also quite common for *Star Trek* fan fiction to focus on Kirk and Spock’s close friendship and working relationship. At the time, the phrase “Kirk/Spock” was used as a common shorthand for discussion of the two characters. In *Star Trek Lives!* Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston regularly refer to “Kirk/Spock” and discuss the significance the character’s (platonic) relationship. At this point the virgule or “/” did not signify the more romantic/sexual story elements that it does today. However, “the premise” that Kirk and Spock’s relationship might not be platonic was beginning to intrigue some fans. While romantic Kirk/Spock stories would not start to appear in zines until 1974, at least one story depicting a sexual relationship between Kirk and Spock was circulating as early as 1968 (Sinclair). These were privately circulated stories, typically passed between friends, and it is unclear which stories were the first or how widely they were shared (Penley, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Study of Popular Culture”). By 1975 the premise was getting wider attention. This broader

conversation was provoked, in part, by the publication of “Fragment of Time” in 1974, a short Kirk/Spock story in *Grup* three. In 1975, *Grup* issue four, included an essay “on the possibility of a love affair between Kirk and Spock” (Verba 22). Issue twelve of *The Halkan Council* letterzine referenced “the Kirk/Spock homosexual love affair premise that’s been buzzing around fannish conversations for at least a year” (qtd. in “The Halkan Council/Issues 11-19”).

Debate on the premise was heated and continued throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties. Fan conventions were a place where these debates turned into fights over visibility and turf. Conventions have always served as moments when many different networks of fans come into contact. Some conventions are attended by actors and industry professionals, others are designed to be more fan-only events. Limited space, time, and convention budgets can lead to tension over which aspects of fandom are incorporated into the official program or are allowed space to sell/trade materials like zines. During the seventies, it is clear that the appropriateness of any romantic relationship story, including adult fan fiction, and the Kirk/Spock stories, was being challenged. Adult content, however, received particular attention. One key moment for this came in 1977 at “SeKWester*Con, Too,” a fan-only convention. SeKWester*Con, Too hosted two heated panel discussions: “Pornography and Sex in Star Trek” and “Kirk and Spock: Do They or Don't They?” Following the convention, one fan complained, “I do not enjoy being invited to a *Star Trek* convention, only to find instead it is a pornography con; I do not relish having pornography shoved down my throat!” (qtd. in Verba 40; “Open Letter”). Other fans countered by praising the convention’s atmosphere of “free expression for all its members.” (qtd. in “Open Letter”). As debate continued, another zine asked: “Pornography in fanfic... why is it tearing fandom apart” (qtd. in “The SekWester*Con Porn Debate”).

In tandem with the fight about Kirk/Spock, there were growing concerns about the legality of zines and fan work. *Star Trek* producer Gene Roddenberry generally saw fan practices as a means of keeping the *Star Trek* franchise alive after the television series was cancelled in 1968 (Coker 195). The broader web of *Star Trek* stories, including the eroticization of the Star Trek characters, was treated as fairly benign by Roddenberry and *Star Trek* actors. The producers and actors were reading the early Star Trek zines and writing letters back, often writing in character (Jamison 85). In 1968, Gene Roddenberry reportedly “called [*Spockanalia*] ‘required reading’ and he communicated that it was given to ‘every new writer, and anyone who makes decisions on show policy’” (Jose and Tenuto). Then, in October 1978, *Dreadnaught Explorations* reported “Paramount had demanded that they no longer publish their fanzine” and there were rumors circulating that Paramount would shut down zines because they disapproved of Kirk/Spock (Verba 44).

At the same time, the *Star Wars* films were beginning to generate their own fan stories and zines. Over the course of late-70s and early-80s there were a series of exchanges between fans, employees at 20th Century Fox, and representatives of the Official Star Wars Fan Club, all attempting to discern the permissibility of fan fiction and what types would or would not be sanctioned by media producers. At first, word circulated that Lucasfilm would turn a blind-eye to fanzines, as long as no one was making any money off of them. In 1977, Lucasfilm established a no-fee licensing bureau to “review fan materials and offer advice about potential copyright infringement” to *Star Wars* fans which was seen as a sign of acceptance of fan practices (Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 150). According to fan legend, however, all this changed when George Lucas “stumbled onto some examples of fan erotica that shocked his sensibilities” (Jenkins, “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars?” 150). In 1981, several *Star Wars* zines received a

letter from Maureen Garrett, director of the official Star Wars Fan Club. The letter asserted Lucasfilm's ownership of *Star Wars* and insisted that there be no pornography. Garrett threatened, "[t]his may mean no fanzines if that measure is what is necessary" (Garrett). As a result of the legal threats, a great deal of *Star Wars* fan writing was pushed underground. Some fans even left the *Star Trek* fandom for *Star Wars* due to the controversy around slash and adult content during this period (Verba 39). The controversy and Lucasfilm's actions indicate that some of the earliest assertions of intellectual property rights from a major media franchise towards fans came in an attempt to manage the types of fantasies fans, particularly female fans, were engaging in.

Three critical points can be gleaned from these debates. First, while Kirk/Spock was clearly being set apart from other types of stories, it is not accurate to claim that only male/male fan fiction was being singled out and stigmatized. Initially, romance and sexual intimacy of any kind was being questioned. Prior to this point, science fiction literature was seen as a genre that was "almost sexless" and where "emotions [tended] to be hidden with a stiff upper lip" (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 224). Critiquing "old wave s-f," Lichtenberg et. Al. complain that "women— if in evidence at all— [tend] to be damsels to be rescued or virtuous rewards for the hero's virtue" (224). In contrast, they believed the new wave of fan fiction content was firmly connected with a turn towards emotion and intimacy in science fiction. "[O]ld wave s-f" downplayed relationships and avoided exploring emotions. *Star Trek* fan fiction was celebrated as a new wave of science fiction, where "the focus is primarily on characters and their... problems" and "most pervasively, a theme of human closeness, human love, transcending role stereotypes... permitting closeness and love even between those who claim they have no emotions" (Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston 226–227). Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston

argued that the new fan fiction made it apparent “that love has many levels, most of them not altogether simple, some of the them not altogether pleasant, all of them having a price” (241).

These are precisely the themes that would be teased out and emphasized within much of the early scholarship on male/male fan fiction. And yet, here, the stories Lichtenberg et. Al. are analyzing are male/female relationship stories. In 1975, just a few years after *The Flame and the Flower* was published and the hot historical trend was starting in commercial romance, the authors of *Star Trek Lives* were also celebrating a move by female authors to write about sexual/emotional intimacy. Moreover, these authors equated this turn with sentiments of female empowerment. Old-wave science fiction was guilty of overlooking women or emphasizing damsels in distress, but the new wave of fan fiction was noted for the way it valued emotional connections, privileged domestic spaces, and emphasized female desire.

While early male/female relationship stories, particularly ones more based in canon, were less contested than the Kirk/Spock stories to come, the feedback early lay-stories like “The Alternate” received indicates that some fans perceived romance and intimacy as threats to the seriousness of fan work and the literary traditions of science fiction fandom. Intimacy represented a more emotional, less rational, and feminizing force. Along with concerns over public perceptions of fans, the fights over the place of relationship stories and explicit fan art in fandom suggest real discomfort with the ways fan work might be used to sexualize male bodies and explore the emotional lives of male characters.

In the midst of all this, both sexually explicit content and male/male content of any kind would have been particularly controversial. The debates fans were having were concurrent with the growing women’s movement in America and a public debate about homosexuality and gay rights that unfolded over the course of the seventies. In 1978, the Save Our Children campaign

(lead by Anita Bryant) pushed Dade County, Florida to repeal laws preventing discrimination against homosexuals. In 1978, Harvey Milk was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office and he was assassinated less than a year later. Sodomy laws were in effect across most of the United States and state-level obscenity laws would have made it illegal for male/male content to be mailed in many states. 1979 was the initial deadline for thirty-eight states to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, the amendment had passed the House and the Senate, but it still needed thirty-eight states to sign on and there was a strong conservative effort against this. The campaign led by Bryant in Florida and the campaign against the ERA were part of a larger conservative effort to push back against the rapid social changes that unfolded during the sixties and seventies. The debates playing out within the *Star Trek* fandom over adult fan work echoed political and social tensions that were present across the United States during this period.

Debates over adult and male/male content were also affecting where stories could be published, how zines were sold, and how different fans were received in the broader *Star Trek* fandom. In order to find zines, readers and zine creators depended on promotional flyers, space at conventions, and listings in common zine indexes. Sources with the widest reach were often the least likely to be comfortable courting controversy. Fan conventions that depended on celebrity appearances and autograph sessions needed to be more conservative. Shore Leave, a Baltimore-area convention that invited celebrities and hosted signings, was known for its stricter restrictions on content. Like many fan conventions, Shore Leave's "art show had some slashy or explicit art" (qtd. in "IDIcon"). However, at Shore Leave, "they had to mask the naughty bits... They covered them with cardboard..." (qtd. in "IDIcon"). At another convention in Tulsa, "everything had to be under the table, and somebody... called the police" (qtd. in "IDIcon").

This sequence of events led a group of fans to organize IDICon in 1984, the first slash-dedicated convention. The letters Lucasfilms sent to fans drove much of the adult and male/male content for *Star Wars* underground, further dividing up and isolating the circulation networks for gen, het, and slash content from one another. Fandom was splitting into a series of connected channels for content, some with direct access and approval from media industries and others carefully avoiding industry attention.

Ultimately, the public discussion and debate around slash and adult fan fiction served as a kind of training process for fans. During a time when women were expected to be interested in heterosexual romances, a group of female fans were beginning to articulate their desire for a different type of relationship story. During a time when women were not generally able to talk publicly about their fantasies this group of fans had to defend their desire to explore these fantasies and produce their own networks to circulate this content.

Despite the controversy around it, slash thrived. As discussed in chapter one, this is also the same period when romance novels were undergoing both a major surge in popularity and seeing significant changes in their levels of sexual explicitness. The kinds of content appearing in both commercial romance and fan fiction during this period, as well as their growing audiences, signal larger social changes occurring with women. They also indicate sets of readers unable to find the types of stories and depictions of intimacy that they wanted. One network of readers found the newer hot historicals more to their liking. Another set of readers, not finding the content they wanted on the commercial market, began to supplement it with a production network of their own.

From Safe Spaces to Digital Enclosures

In her 2009 piece “Should Fan Fiction Be Free?” Abigail De Kosnik observes “the authors of fan fiction, who are predominantly women, have never, as a group, sought payment for their labor” (118). However, this is a complicated statement. It is true that the entirety of fan fiction writers have not organized and demanded compensation for their writing. It is also true that particular networks of media fans have, for decades, held to a strong not-for-profit ethos. Historically, however, many fan fiction authors have been and continue to be interested in being paid to write. Many fan fiction authors can, in fact, be called professional writers. To understand the changing nature of fan writing today and the broader shifts digital publishing is facilitating, the idea that fan writers do their work for “free” must be interrogated further.

It is not entirely accurate to say that fan fiction writers, predominantly women, have not sought payment for their labor. (To be clear, De Kosnik has also been careful to not say this either. Her language clearly specifies: “as a group.”) Nonetheless, I want to complicate the common belief that fans want to do their work for free. De Kosnik worries that “[f]an fiction authors are in some danger now of... waiting too long to decide to profit from their innovative art form” (120). What if we reframe this concern, balancing it with the understanding that many fan writers have *not* been waiting to be paid for their writing? What if we assume that, along with the love for particular story-worlds and characters, that fan fiction’s origins are deeply tethered to a desire to write, to find an audience, and to write commercially. The history of media fandoms indicates that the fan writing practices connected to them originated, at least in part, out of a desire for writers to find audiences. When we trace the history of certain fandoms, and examine earlier definitions of fan fiction, these desires can be seen in the origins of the term and its usage prior to the 1960s.

Remember, prior to the sixties, the term fan fiction applied to “original fiction by amateur writers” (Jamison 74). Historically, fan fiction was conceived as a means towards commercial publication for many literary science fiction fans. Anne Jamison describes the early science fiction fandom as “less like us (fans) v. them (creators/rightsholders) and more like us (science fiction world) v. them (“mundanes” or nonfans)” (75). Many science fiction fans saw fan writing (fiction and non-fiction) as a means to gain exposure in the science fiction community and many of these individuals moved back and forth between commercial and fan writing. Within this network, fan conventions operated as social-networking spaces where prospective writers and illustrators could share work and get useful feedback. Local science fiction clubs offered prospective authors similar opportunities to workshop their writing. During this time there was a clear continuum connecting commercial and amateur science fiction writing.

This point is particularly crucial to understanding the shift that occurs in the 1970s and 1980s. The contemporary understanding of fan fiction develops in parallel with a marked increase in women’s participation in this fandom, as well developing in tandem with certain fan fiction sub-genres, in particular, the popular category of male/male fan fiction or slash. It is also important to recognize that there are many fan fiction readers and writers who never needed to “cross over” into the professional sphere, because they were already there working as journalists, bloggers, academics, and grant writers. Or, they were churning out copy in any of the many professions that involve writing on a regular basis. This point is particularly crucial to understanding the emergence of fan fiction sub-genres like slash.

There have always been fans being paid to write. However, in the seventies and eighties, the content and the authors society valued were not necessarily going to be women writing romantic stories, let alone stories about two men. As Anne Jamison reminds us, the “gender

imbalance in literary and mass cultural production doesn't just affect venue opportunity, and reception for active writers; it affects people even wanting to try" (20). As fan fiction writers circulated zines in the 1970s and 80s, they developed their own, alternate production and distribution network for stories that were not deemed marketable. The more social elements of the network meant that successful stories and authors were rewarded with letters of comment, friends, and reading/writing circles that supported further work. None of this, however, means that these women were disinterested in writing professionally. Or, that they did not also write as part of their work.

The history of science fiction fandom and the difficulties early fan fiction writers faced demonstrates that fan work has never been blissfully not-for-profit or solely built around gifting. Fannish gift exchanges are not solely driven by altruism or entirely without economic motivation. Instead, fan networks and practices can serve a variety of needs simultaneously. Through these networks, fans are able to return, again and again, to a set of practices that engage, critique, and personalize popular culture. At the same time, within the reputation-based economies of fandoms, sharing and gifting can result in increased access, strengthened skills-sets, and material benefits to an individual. E.L. James and Anna Todd are just two recent and well-publicized examples of this process in action.

Richard Barbrook argues, "[o]n the Net, the same piece of information [can] exist as both a commodity and a gift" (2005). However, *After* and *Fifty Shades* remind us that these dual existences are not always visible simultaneously. As these stories were identified for broader publication, we can also see the ways that the digital economy, as Tizana Terranova argues, operates as "an important area of experimentation" in which certain goods are "voluntarily *channeled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices" (39). When certain

fan fiction authors go pro or certain fan practices are monetized, we are watching these authors and practices go through this process of translation and recoding in the contemporary digital economy.

For *Fifty Shades* and *After* to reach commercial publication, the authors needed to translate their reputations within fan networks into signs of value that other more overtly commercial production networks would recognize. For E.L. James, this involved changing character names and making *Fifty Shades*' intertextual references to the *Twilight* books less obvious. Essentially, the work went through a conversion where a fandom's cultural storytelling/sense making practices resulted in a set of stand-alone products. This made James' work more legible as authorship to the publishing market. The series' high sales and unexpected popularity made the work's value even more apparent to publishers and the media. With *After*, we see a different enactment of this conversion process. In this context, the Wattpad website Todd used to publish her stories is designed to help in this translation. Wattpad tracks and records the responses its site users/authors are receiving. The various data collection systems coded into the site flagged Anna Todd, brought her writing to the attention of Wattpad, and helped translate the writing's value.

In each case, it was not until the writing went through some type of translation, and outside companies saw its potential value to them, that these authors were able to move from one production network to another. In the process, the exchange between writers and readers shifted from gift to sale. However, there clear power imbalances in this system. Wattpad "discovered" Todd and acted as a kind of agent for her, helping to arrange her publishing deal with Gallery Books. Sites like Wattpad and services like Kindle Worlds constitute another kind of "digital enclosure," Mark Andrejevic's term for sites where industry sanctioned fan practices are facilitated and fan activities are carefully monitored (Andrejevic). Only here the enclosures are

designed to parallel some of the functions of fan fiction archives, hosting fiction and monitoring it for possible commodification.

The channeling process is not limited to media producers and their more product specific digital enclosures, however. Today's fan networks also rely heavily on for-profit websites to connect with other fans and share fan work. Social networking platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook are all popular websites for fans. They are also companies that are designed to work with the dual aspects of digital economies. Fans may directly not share in Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook's profits, but they certainly contribute to them. In this way, the digital spaces many fans use today are designed to operate as a kind of dual or hybrid economy. At one level fan labor produces profit for companies but this layer is less visible to fans. Instead, the more familiar fannish exchanges of gifts, affection, and time are what float on the surface. Given this, the notion that fandom is a non-profit enterprise or a separate space of gifting, is more myth than reality.

While I want to challenge the notion that fan networks are gift economies, I am not ready to argue that the fan ethos of gifting is entirely an illusion. For many fans, the not-for-profit aspect of their networks is deeply political and carefully thought through. It is part of a conscious effort to channel media consumption in multiple directions. The dual layers of fan networks (fannish gifting and monetized webspaces) reveal larger ideological, cultural, and economic, and political tensions around what kinds of cultural production are valued, what types of pleasure are permitted on various communication platforms, and what forms of fandom are valorized or pathologized. We can only begin to unpack the current tensions over monetization and the insistence by many fans that fandom remain non-profit when we recognize two things: first, that the content being by labeled aberrant and unprofessional in the 1970s and 1980s was romantic

and erotic fan work, materials primarily being produced by female fans. Second, that this targeting shaped the organization and ethos of fan networks.

Christian Fuchs argues that web 2.0's concept of participatory culture operates ideologically to "affirm society as it is and forestall potential changes" (Fuchs 279). For fans, the rhetoric of gifting serves its own ideological function in return, encompassing a complicated and sometimes contradictory mix of ideals. Earlier, I discussed how the term fan fiction operates as a protective shield, a generic label, and as a disciplinary tool denoting "unprofessional" work. The insistence by some fans that fandom is and should be a gift economy works in similar ways. Gift exchange serves to strengthen affective ties within a particular production environment for fans, promoting an ongoing process of gifting and reciprocity that sustains the network. In this context, the labeling of fan networks as gift economies reflects efforts by its members to construct and maintain their own production network.

The debate over where and how to best enjoy fan writing— as a free story on a fan archive or as a book purchased in a bookstore— indicates larger tensions over the ways fan networks are constructed, which practices fans engage in, and how visible fan networks want to be. The different views fans hold signal larger generational shifts, fans that are distributed across a range of web platforms, and suggest that the traditional gift economies of fandoms are being either displaced or supplemented by more conventional commercial exchanges for materials and services. Overall, the current moment is marked by significant changes in what it means to be a fan or be in a fandom. These are just part of ongoing efforts by various production networks to negotiate and renegotiate hierarchies of cultural production and value. These, in turn, influence which cultural materials attain the most public exposure and which lines of cultural sense making the public will be most literate in.

Labeling fandom a gift economy works discursively to maintain a line of separation between producers and consumers. Unfortunately, however, maintaining this line also reinforces the power imbalances between these commercial and non-commercial networks. The gift economy rhetoric does not address the historically hybrid nature of fan economies or the long-standing desire many fans have for their work to have greater visibility and economic value. For decades fan networks operated as a means for marginalized voices and stigmatized writing genres to find readers. This system existed, in part, because the market had little interest in it. However, many of these writers and readers have a strong desire to be recognized within the broader cultural marketplace. They want to be visible as more than a quaint niche of creative production and have a desire to be visible and valued by society as a whole. These are the contradictions inherent in working to be visible within a society that equates visibility with market clout.

Chapter 3: Love and Plurality: Contemporary Rom-Coms and the Hyper-Romance

The traditional boy-meets-girl story has typically been one of a courtship. Two young people meet, stumble towards love, and then commit to spending their lives together. In Billy Mernit's popular guide, *Writing the Romantic Comedy Screenplay*, this story is broken into a three act structure: meet, lose, get (13). While bulk of romantic films still focus on the stories of white, heterosexual, and upper-middle class characters, since the 1990s parallel markets for gay and lesbian romances and romances featuring predominantly African American casts have developed. Additionally, today's romantic films often depict multiple courtship narratives within a single film and focus on an ensemble rather than a single pair. Films like *The Best Man* (1999), *The Broken Hearts Club* (2000), *Love Actually* (2003), *The Family Stone* (2005), *Valentines Day* (2010), *New Year's Eve* (2011), *Friends With Kids* (2011), *Jumping the Broom* (2011), and *Crazy Stupid Love* (2011) all fall within this category. Each film has an extensive cast and multiple, sometimes connecting, storylines. These films, stories I am calling hyper-romances, use ensemble casting and overlapping storylines to multiply the number of relationship stories told within the space of a single film. This storytelling tactic opens up room for narrative experimentation with romantic comedy in two ways: first, it leaves the door open for a greater range of life experiences to be represented in the course of a single film, second, it provides an opportunity for divergence from the romantic comedy's traditional "meet, lose, get" structure, experimenting with different narrative arcs and relationship-stages within the context of a single film.

Since the 1980s, the number of romantic comedies released each year has been growing (Krutnik 131). The genre has proven to be a reliable moneymaking brand for the film industry. Applying the label "romantic comedy" to a film "carries such commercial potency that distributors and reviewers routinely apply it to films with only minimal or tangential romantic

plotlines” (Krutnik 132). The romantic comedy is also a relentlessly self-conscious genre, continually questioning its own cultural value and relevance. From the repeated references *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) makes to *An Affair to Remember* (1957) to the fictional rom-com starring Rashida Jones and Jason Segel embedded into *Friends With Benefits* (2011), contemporary romantic comedies are constantly talking to themselves about romance. Contemporary romantic comedies continually reflect on the genre’s history and question their ongoing relevance. According to Tamar Jeffers McDonald, this pattern began with the “radical romantic comedies” of the 1970s and continued on into the “neo-traditional romantic comedy” which has dominated romantic film for the past 20-plus years (2005). While the radical romantic comedy was marked by self-reflexivity, McDonald argues this has changed to reflect a deeper underlying anxiety in the neo-traditional romantic comedy (91). This is a change that, according to McDonald, indicates an “awareness of the genre’s sell-by-date, looming or already past” (91).

It is now so common for romantic comedies to reference other romantic comedies, or to feature debates on the romantic comedy, that these elements have become a key feature within the genre. However, this self-reflexiveness, no matter how anxious or defensive it may sometimes be, does not indicate a genre whose time has expired. Instead, it reflects a genre that regularly negotiates between aspirational ideals and day-to-day practicalities. Quoting self-help author Lori Gottlieb, Michele Schreiber argues that postfeminist romance films continually pose the question: “What does it mean to be empowered and also want happily ever after?” (Schreiber 4). The reflexiveness of contemporary romantic comedies is one way these films confront this question. However, no single narrative journey can provide a satisfactory answer. What is traditional for one protagonist may be radical and new for another. The increased reflexivity of

romantic comedies also highlights the challenges inherent in making the genre's classic meet, lose, get structure match with the different ways relationships are enacted in today's society.

If, traditionally, the romantic comedy is "a particular type of story centred upon two lovers that is told in a particular manner" this framework poses a continued problem for the relevance and realism a romantic comedy might hold for viewers (Krutnik 132-133). Focusing exclusively on two people, isolating them from their daily lives, and making the focus of the narrative their relentless drive towards each other, turns courtship into an artificial and overly narrow life event. On the one hand, crafting fantasies and escaping reality may sound like exactly what movies are supposed to do. However, the noticeable anxiety in contemporary rom-coms suggests that these films are highly conscious of just how far they depart from reality and are actively working to manage that distance. This tension reinforces Schreiber's argument that "the ongoing, cyclical interdependency of the two discourses of fiction and everyday life is a hallmark of postfeminist culture" (81).

In reality, relationships form amidst our daily lives. They are filled with stops, starts, and brief encounters that go nowhere. Many relationships (sexual and/or emotional) are temporary and meaningful because they mark a particular moment of growth and change in someone's life, not because they indicate an individual's destiny and life-partner. Self-reflexive romantic comedies like *Sleepless and Seattle* or *Friends With Benefits* structure their own narrative as a kind of compare/contrast conversation with romances of the past (*Sleepless*) or with an imagined romance comedy formula (*Friends*). In the process, they work to hold themselves apart from an imagined genre while using the distance they create as an opportunity to indulge in the romantic comedy's pleasures.

With its multiplication of storylines and protagonists, the hyper-romance builds on this inherent self-reflexivity and offers romantic comedy an additional mechanism for playing one romance narrative against another. In stretching narrative structures to accommodate multiple protagonists and relationship stages, hyper-romances have the option of starting and stopping their various story arcs at different points, departing from a strict adherence to the “meet, lose, get” formula in the process. The multiplication of stories also opens up the option for telling stories with a range of characters and perspectives on romance, desire, and partnership. In doing this, hyper-romance films may not always be, in the strictest sense, romantic *comedies*. More accurately, they are multi-plot romance stories that can include elements of comedy and drama. However, all three of the films analyzed in this chapter indicate an ongoing desire to keep romantic comedy traditions at the forefront. In this way, the hyper-romance reflects David Bordwell’s argument that “the traditions of Hollywood storytelling... can make innovation accessible to audiences” (17). Given the dominance of romantic comedy narratives within many hyper-romance films, the hyper-romance operates as both a sub-category and an extension of romantic comedy, as it touches upon and integrates other storytelling conventions.

One clear example of this can be seen in *Love Actually* (2003) which, amidst several more conventional romantic endings, closes by reaffirming the friendship between an aging rockstar and his manager, revealing the unrequited love a man has for his best-friend’s wife, and by highlighting the unhappiness of a woman learning about her husband’s infidelity. Within the context of *Love Actually*, each of these endings are positioned as the right ones for these characters. However, none of these three storylines match with romantic comedy conventions. Instead, they are intermingled with the film’s other, more traditional, romantic-comedy storylines. In this way, the hyper-romance builds upon the inherent self-reflexivity of romantic

comedies. Within the course of a single hyper-romance film, romantic comedy is placed side by side with drama and tragedy. The genre continues to talk to itself about the different types of endings it might provide its characters. In the process, the hyper-romance's narrative structure opens up new possibilities for romantic comedy, building on conventions already present in the genre and extending them in new and innovative ways.

In this chapter, I focus on three recent hyper-romances, each based on popular self-help books of the same name: *He's Just Not That Into You* (released in 2009), *Think Like a Man* (2012), and *What To Expect When You're Expecting* (2012).²⁴ Both *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and *Think Like a Man* feature couples at different stages in their romantic relationships. Both films also have multi-racial casts, although *Think Like A Man* is particularly focused on the lives of men and women of color. On the surface, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* will seem like an outlier. As a film about pregnancy, its primary focus may not appear, at first, to be on courtship. As I will discuss, however, there are many ways in which *What To Expect When You're Expecting* incorporates romantic comedy tropes and is, ultimately, a film about men and women questioning and then reaffirming their relationships with each other.

I use these films to outline ways that contemporary romantic films are using a multi-plot structure to continue the romantic comedy's self-reflexivity, to experiment with romantic-comedy norms, and to expand the audiences for romantic films. Each of these films highlights a particular aspect of the hyper-romance. *He's Just Not That Into You* works to complicate the traditional "meet, loose, get" structure of romantic comedies. *Think Like A Man* purposefully

²⁴ I have chosen to focus specifically on *He's Just Not that Into You*, *Think Like a Man*, and *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. However, there are many other films following this model that deserve more attention. In particular, Tyler Perry's use of ensemble casting and multi-strand, multi-generational storylines needs greater study. Perry's films and his reliance on a bevy of characters to move the story forward reminds us of a different approach to storytelling and to story protagonists: an approach that emphasizes the community individuals are connected to and the importance of family and social networks in shaping an individual's journey and relationship choices.

continues many classic romantic comedy conventions. *What To Expect When You're Expecting* builds on the efforts of earlier romantic comedies to rebrand and defeminize the genre. In the process, all three films work to appeal to male and female viewing audiences. To demonstrate the significance of these different moves, first I will address some of the ways that these types of multi-plot film narratives have previously been theorized, the historic whiteness of the romantic comedy, and the generic and romantic storytelling traditions feeding into contemporary hyper-romances. After this, I will focus on each film individually and what they reveal about the hyper-romance as an adaptation of the traditional romantic comedy.

The Multi-Plot Film

Hyper-romances follow a pattern of ensemble casting and multi-stranded narratives that can be seen in an increasing number of Hollywood movies. *Love Actually* (2003), *Crash* (2004) and *Babel* (2006) are just some of the films often associated with this trend. These kinds of film narratives have already been studied under many different names—mosaic narratives (McVeigh 2008, Martin 2013), hyperlink cinema or hyperlink narratives (Quart 2005, Ebert 2006, Baker 2013), thread narratives (Smith 1999), network narratives (Silvey 2013), multi-protagonist films (Azcona 2010), multiple narratives (Parshall 2012), etc.—with each of these terms drawing out different aspects of narrative experimentation. There has also been a connected trend towards narrative complexity and nonlinear storylines in films focusing on a single protagonist. Movies like *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Run Lola Run* (1998), and *Memento* (2000) are often pointed to as early indicators of this trend.

While films utilizing multiple plotlines, nonlinear narratives, and other types of narrative complexity are not new, there has been a rise in these types of films since the 1970s (Berg 2006; Parshall 2012). Charles Ramírez Berg argues there was a noticeable increase in films featuring

“alternative plots” over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s (6). By Peter Parshall’s count, over 200 films from the past two decades have used the multi-plot format (2012). Berg refers to this trend as the “Tarantino effect” citing director Quentin Tarantino’s use of non-linear narratives and his influence on other filmmakers. However, this trend may be even more heavily influenced by contemporary television and its narrative strategies. Jason Mittell has pointed out parallel trends towards narrative complexity in American television over the same time period, as indicated by shows like *The X-Files*, *Arrested Development* and *24* (2006). Features of this narrative mode include “a reconceptualization of the boundary between episodic and serial forms, a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demands for intensified viewer engagement” (39). Multi-protagonist films have appropriated many of these same storytelling strategies. They also utilize interweaving storylines, non-linear storytelling practices, play with genre and form, and demand intensified forms of audience engagement. While film and television each adapt serial storytelling tactics to suit their specific media contexts, the parallel trends indicate a broader engagement with serial storytelling across media. As I will discuss shortly, this trend can also be identified in romance publishing. This indicates broader changes in romance genres across media.

Defined by Parshall as films that “interweave two, three, or even... dozens of stories,” a multi-plot film is not simply any film with a large ensemble cast (6). Instead, these films differ by “having truly separate plot lines” for their various characters (Parshall 8). María del Mar Azcona takes the category further, arguing that multi-protagonist films constitute their own genre of cinema (2011). While I agree with Azcona that the multi-protagonist film has “proved extremely appropriate to deal with certain sets of cultural meanings which have taken center-stage in contemporary society,” I do not want to isolate this trend as its own genre (27). Doing

this separates these films from their generic contexts and reduces our ability to analyze the different ways film genres are utilizing multiple-protagonists and multiple storylines. Popular genres have long operated as cultural mechanisms for negotiating cultural norms. Looking at multi-protagonist films from within individual genres reveals the different ways in which these techniques are being applied and the work these narrative strategies are doing within those specific cultural conversations.

Much of the analysis of changing film narratives has focused on the ways digital recorders and DVDs facilitate different forms of narrative engagement (Allen 2013), the ways these films expose “the underlying database structure that usually lies hidden beneath the story” (Kinder 2002), or the ways this more modular approach to narrative can represent time and memory (Cameron 2006). Ensemble films also reflect contemporary networked realities where “communication technologies have profoundly affected our perception of the world... from that of the physical borders of nation states ... to that of fluid relationships, interactions and interconnections across them” (Silvey 4).

While significant scholarly attention has been paid to the relationships between digitization and non-linear, modular, or multi-plot narratives, the critical role romantic films, particularly romantic comedies, are playing in developing and sustaining these storytelling practices has been left unaddressed. The one notable exception to this is María del Mar Azcona and her discussion of the ways multi-protagonist films are able to multiply intimacies (2011). Azcona identifies “*Choose Me, Hannah and Her Sisters, Queens Logic, Singles, The Brothers McMullen, Denise Calls Up, Beautiful Girls, The Real Blonde* (1997), *Playing by Heart, The Last Days of Disco, This Year’s Love* (1999), *200 Cigarettes, Sidewalks of New York, Love Actually, Goldfish Memory* (2003), *Friends with Money*, and *He’s Just Not That into You*

(2009),” as examples of this trend. Azcona argues that these “movies combine the conventions of the multi-protagonist film and the romantic comedy,” but her list of films stops in 2009 and the bulk of the analysis focuses on the 1997 film *Singles*. When more recent multi-protagonist romantic comedies are added to the mix, they paint a more complex picture of the ways these narrative tactics are being implemented. For example, Azcona argues that multi-protagonist films are characterized by open endings and “stop rather than end” (106). While it is true that these types of multi-plot films have the option of open endings, not all of them choose to finish in this way. Many opt, instead, for precisely “the utopian possibilities” and “coming-together of improbable couples” which Azcona argues multi-protagonist films avoid. I agree entirely with Azcona’s argument that open endings “reinforce the idea of intimate relationships as contingent and short-lived, subject to constant change, and plagued by uncertainty” (106). However, it would be more accurate to say that, while multi-protagonist films *can* do these things, there are also many times when they opt not to (106). Furthermore, the decision to opt for a closed ending can, at times, be equally significant.

This is another reason why it is important to look at these narrative trends within specific genres, rather than isolating individual titles and detaching them from the genres they are already in conversation with. We need to understand the different ways that these narrative trends are playing out within particular genre contexts. While I am reluctant to add yet another term to the already crowded field of descriptors for complex film narratives, none of these existing terms fully meet my need for a more genre-specific moniker. In labeling these films “hyper-romances” my intention is to emphasize the tendency towards abundance, and sometimes even excess, which characterizes the storylines and protagonists of the hyper-romance. These films exceed romantic comedy conventions, both in the ways they multiply these conventions and in the ways

they sometimes move beyond them.

While hyper-romances experiment with cinema's classic narrative structure, these films still stay true to many of the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, often relying on tried-and-true techniques to balance out their more experimental elements. In this way, these films reinforce David Bordwell's argument that, "[w]hatever new shapes degrees-of-separation plots take, most remain coherent and comprehensible, thanks to the principles of causality, temporal sequence and duration, character wants and needs, and motivic harmony which have characterized mainstream storytelling" (100). In light of this, the romantic comedy's generic familiarity may offer another explanation for the genre's ability to operate as a hub for these types of multi-plot/multi-protagonist films.

Generic familiarity, however, is not enough to explain the popularity of these forms of narrative play within films focused on family, dating, and relationships. I contend that romance audiences are already accustomed to the kinds of intensified engagement that complex film narratives demand. In adopting serial storytelling tactics, these complex narratives implement storytelling strategies common in many feminized genres across media. Longstanding storytelling practices within romantic literature, film, and television, mean that romantic films (and their audiences) are particularly primed to for stories with multiple protagonists and plotlines. To fully understand the increased prevalence of the hyper-romance, however, it is also critical to address the work the hyper-romance is doing to diversify romantic comedy and to address a range of audiences, relationship contexts, and romantic fantasies.

A Pre-history of Hyper-Romances

The use of multi-strand narratives in romantic storytelling will not be particularly surprising or new to scholars of popular romance. It has long been common for romantic novels

and films to have an “a” and “b” plot within an individual text. Perhaps even more significantly, romantic literature has an extensive tradition of telling linked stories. Kristin Ramsdell defines these linked romances as “individual Romance titles connected in some specific way—usually character, place, theme, or artifact” (*Romance Fiction* 481). Typically, one book ends, while leaving room for the next story in the universe to begin. Romance readers are adept at noticing secondary characters and filing away details about them for later. These readers are ready for the moment when a secondary character will be given their own story.

These kinds of linked narratives can also turn into elaborate, serial narratives. For example, in Nalini Singh’s popular Psy/Changeling Series, each individual book focuses on a particular couple. However, the storyworld’s dysfunction increases over the course of the series, leading to a global crisis and system collapse in book twelve, with the following books touching on the aftermath. In recent years, the romance series has become incredibly popular in romance publishing. Between 2007 and 2011, “sixty-three percent of the top bestselling romances... were part of a narrative series” and “[r]oughly eighty-five percent of the romance novels that appeared on the extended *New York Times* bestseller list in April 2013 similarly belong to a narrative series” (Goris). Not only do romance readers expect secondary characters to return in later novels, they are also adept at following both one book’s immediate story and the longer-term story elements that extend across a series.

This emphasis on a story that always continues seems to stand in contrast to romance’s traditional insistence on an ending. Romance’s “happily ever after” (or HEA) “is not a coincidental element of the genre, but is universally recognized as one of the romance novel’s defining and distinguishing features” (Goris). The need for an ending is so important that the Romance Writers of America (RWA) specifies “An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic

Ending” as one of two required elements for romantic fiction (“About”). In romance literature, authors have developed several different narrative strategies for preserving romance’s defining characteristics, while creating a story that extends beyond a single text. Whether the individual stories are focused on different characters within a common location/world or the series focuses on one couple’s ongoing adventures (which eventually close happily), both of these approaches allow for a complicated storyworlds, an array of characters, and serial storytelling which maintains romance’s common features.

In addition to complicated webs of stories and characters connecting over a lengthy series of books, it is also common for an individual romance title to incorporate multiple storylines. The two sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* or the five sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* are just two classic examples of romantic literature that incorporate several courtship stories into an individual novel. This means that romance readers are well accustomed to navigating multiple characters and storylines over the course of both a single book and a series.

With romance serials like Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* trilogy, E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones* books being made into major motion picture franchises, these publishing trends are also making their way into the cinema. However, these are examples of romance series with clear protagonists and a primary storyline carrying the tale. Films like *He’s Just Not That Into You*, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and *Think Like a Man* represent a different approach. Instead of “a” and “b” plots, or a linked series of stories, each of these films incorporates at least 10 central characters and focuses evenly on at least 5 different relationships. These films ask their audiences to track each character, their individual problems, the obstacles preventing them from being with a partner, and the ways that all of these different characters do or do not intersect in the larger story world. At the same time, viewers

have the option of singling out particular characters and focusing more on their individual storylines.

These are precisely the skills a long-time soap opera viewer might also possess. They are a reminder that narratives with multiple protagonists and plot lines date back to early radio and television serials. Since the 1990s, however, the narrative strategies of serials and soaps have been making their way across the television landscape and into primetime. As elements of the television serial are applied to a range of television narratives, television viewers are increasingly accustomed to following multiple lines of action over the course of an episode, a season, or an entire television series. Watching these shows, viewers are asked to simultaneously keep track of large and small-scale narrative arcs. Depending on their preferences, viewers may focus more on certain characters and lines of conflict than others. Simultaneously, the viewer also needs to track the broader story world and any larger narrative questions for the series to cohere.

With the hyper-romance, we see these strategies making their way into film as well. Hyper-romance films also adopt serial approaches to narrative and storytelling. One meet-cute is stacked on top of another, one couple's fight is intercut with another character's bad date, and one happy ending sits next to another character's break-up. However, television's segmented structure allows a television series significant flexibility when it comes to the scope and scale of stories it can tell, either within an individual episode or across multiple seasons. In contrast, film demands some type of end-point. Hyper-romance films adapt serial storytelling to better fit film's formal and narrative conventions, particularly film's need for an ending. Hyper-romances draw upon the viewing practices audiences use when watching a television show or reading a romance series, but film's more standardized end-point, combined with the familiar narrative

patterns of the romantic comedy, help stabilize the viewer and tailor the broader trend towards serial storytelling so that it fits the needs of mainstream cinema.

While not as overtly sectioned as television, film narratives have always contained a degree of segmentation. Film's classical narrative paradigm constructs a chain of causality where characters have clearly defined goals and one conflict escalates to the next. This creates momentum, leading the protagonist and antagonist towards the film's final segments of narrative climax and resolution. Hyper-romances are able to take advantage of these preexisting segments in film narratives and use them as transition points as they move viewers from one storyline to the next. They multiply the number of characters and conflicts, arranging these storylines so that they overlap, weaving in and out of one another. In *Think Like a Man, Too* (2014), all the major couples from *Think Like a Man* return for a weekend in Vegas. Within the first nine minutes of the film, the viewer is reintroduced to each couple in succession, given some quick exposition to establish each couple's status and an unresolved problem affecting their current happiness. Then, narrator Kevin Hart announces, "The whole crew was back together! Without even realizing the men and the women had divided themselves into opposing teams." With this move, *Think Like a Man, Too* finishes its brief update on the characters and resets the story back to the battle of the sexes structure the previous film employed. The viewer is able to call upon their knowledge of the previous film's structure, as well as their awareness of common rom-com storytelling devices, to help them navigate the shifting storylines and characters. Each couple's conflict is individualized, but on the whole they escalate according to a common pattern: problems unfold, conflict escalates, and, eventually, there is resolution. Following this pattern, the film moves between an individualized and common story arc.

This technique of moving between specific stories and a common story structure is applied in different ways by the hyper-romances that use it. The overlap can be used intentionally to emphasize sameness and a kind of universal human story/struggle. Alternatively, the overlap can be used to de-emphasize sameness, stacking individual stories together in ways that point out distinctions between various characters and choices, playing up the different experiences they have along the way. Both of these strategies build upon a foundational element of generic storytelling, one critical to romance genres: the balancing of the familiar with the new.

In its reliance on the viewer's knowledge of preexisting genre patterns, hyper-romance also offers viewers one of the singular pleasures of genre. Romance and other genre fans are well versed in the intertextual patterns of their preferred genre. One of the pleasures in reading or watching a range of popular genre titles comes in being able to compare and contrast the different storytelling strategies each individual iteration of the genre uses. For example, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is enjoyable to readers both because of the story Fielding has written and because of the book's intertextual relationship to *Pride and Prejudice*. Experiencing *Bridget Jones' Diary* means readers also experience the ways that Fielding has updated Austen's novel for a more contemporary setting. Similarly, fans of a romantic author will read many of that author's titles to see the different ways their writing and their characters change from book to book. A hyper-romance is able to offer these types of pleasures within the context of a single film. It takes the intertextual work genre readers/viewers already do and condenses these practices into a single film, offering multiple characters and storylines for the viewer to intratextually compare. Given the increased prevalence of the hyper-romance and serial storytelling strategies across romance genres, this suggests broader shifts across in romance genres and an overall escalation in the intertextuality of romance genres.

Advice Manuals As... Romantic Fiction?

All three of the films analyzed in this chapter are adaptations of popular self-help and advice books. *He's Just Not That Into You: The No-Excuses Truth to Understanding Guys* was written by Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo and published in 2004. Both Behrendt and Tuccillo were writers for the television series *Sex and The City* and the book can trace its origins to a passionate discussion in the *Sex and The City* writer's room and the season 6 episode "Pick-A-Little, Talk-A-Little." *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man: What Men Really Think About Love, Relationships, Intimacy, and Commitment* was written by comedian Steve Harvey and published in 2009. Written by Heidi Murkoff and first published in 1984, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is a now-classic advice manual for pregnant mothers.

He's Just Not That Into You and *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* both offer advice on finding and sustaining a fulfilling relationship. Each book promises 'real talk' on the complexities of dating, of understanding your partner and their needs, as well as navigating marriage and parenting. In each, the end-goal is a happy (and permanent) marriage. With its emphasis on pregnancy, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is more of an outlier. While the first two books focus on courtship, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* focuses on something that tends to occur after courtship. The book's focus is on pregnancy, what happens to a woman's body when she is pregnant, and on helping women and their partners through this process. Like the first two texts, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* also targets a female audience. Only, in this case, the book is built around the assumption that the couple has already found each other, already understand each other's needs, and that that they are moving into a new stage of permanence in their relationship.

All three of these books presume their default reader is female and heterosexual. Behrendt and Tuccillo focus on the "he" that is just not into you. In the entirety of *What to*

Expect When You're Expecting, the book mentions single-mothers and same-sex parents in two places, once in a small side-bar addressing single-moms and in a sidebar reassuring "expectant mothers (and families) who may be somewhat 'untraditional'" that they should just "mentally edit out any phrase that doesn't fit and replace it with one that's right for you" (Murkoff and Mazel 31). Written by well-known African-American celebrity Steve Harvey, *Act Like A Lady, Think Like a Man* works to hail Black readers much more directly than the other two texts do.

None of these are books aimed solely at young ingénues just starting to date. Instead, the books address women who are looking for a date, who are in long-term relationships, who are divorced, and who are married. The different age groups targeted by the books may be an additional reason these books have been adapted as hyper-romances. The books have already proven their broad reach and that they can address a range of dating and relationship experiences. As advice manuals, *He's Just Not That Into You* and *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* both maintain the classic romantic ideals of a permanent partnership and marriage. However, both books are clear that women need to date, sleep with, and generally test-drive quite a few men before they find a relationship that works in the long-term. *What To Expect When You're Expecting* is based on the assumption that a woman and a man are planning their parenting ahead of time and are ready to have a child. However, the book also addresses more somber topics like pregnancy complications and miscarriages. Overall, each book promises 'real talk' on the complexities of dating, of understanding your partner and their needs, as well as navigating marriage and parenting.

It might seem impossible to transform an advice manual into a fictional film, but the connections between these books and the films are not incidental. None of these films simply borrow the book's title in a play for audiences—although, *What To Expect When You're*

Expecting comes the closest. When Lionsgate announced it had acquired the film rights to *What To Expect When You're Expecting* in 2010, the company cited the book's wide-spread reach and "the warmth, wisdom and humor of its voice" ("Lionsgate the Proud Parent"). This interest in preserving a book's tone also carries over into the adaptations of *He's Just Not That Into You* and *Think Like a Man*. While all three films make an effort to preserve the tone of the books they are based on, *He's Just Not That Into You* and *Think Like a Man* take this a step further, giving the books a voice within each film. Both films utilize narrators and each film begins with the narrator restating the book's central premise. In *Think Like a Man* the book's role is made even more explicit. Author Steve Harvey appears as himself in the film and the book functions as a catalyst for conflict and change between the different couples. In *He's Just Not that Into You*, the book's role is less overt. Instead, various characters serving as the voice of the book at different times and the story's different couples replicate problems touched on in the book. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* has the least direct role in shaping the film's narrative. However, the book influences the film's major narrative beats and its protagonists. The book identifies different stages of pregnancy and types of issues women and their partners may encounter during the process. These, in turn, become fodder for the film's different storylines and the conflicts different characters experience over the course of the film.

Popular relationship advice manuals are particularly well suited for adaptation into hyper-romance films. They also help the romantic comedy with its concerns about its own relevance. Using a best-selling work of non-fiction as the raw material for a film offers romantic comedy a means of validating the experiences it presents. Not only is the film able to draw upon the attention the book has already garnered, it can now make the claim that its stories speak to real women's experiences and struggles.

They build upon a larger cultural trend towards multiplicity that I will also discuss in the next chapter. Adapting non-fiction also serves romantic comedy films' interest in self-reflexivity. They give the genre "real world" scenarios to integrate and respond to, helping romantic comedy films in their efforts to be relevant to contemporary audiences. Film producers are able to draw upon the books' popularity and leverage it when marketing the film. These books come pre-stocked with a variety of problems encountered by a range of individuals. These books construct a range of character "types," addressing a range of experiences in the course of a single text. Individual chapters offer readers advice and insights related to these types of men, dating situations, pregnancy issues, etc. The film adaptations trade upon each book's popularity and expertise, adapting the problems the books present into narrative conflicts suitable for a major motion picture. The films use their ensemble casts to represent the range of scenarios covered in each book. In the process, they expand the versions of relationships and families that are traditionally covered within a single romantic comedy.

De/constructing Whiteness in Romantic Comedy

Hyper-romances utilize their ensemble casts and expanded narrative arcs to represent more perspectives on/experiences with romance. Having said this, divergence from romantic comedy norms appears to be less common than adherence to traditions. While hyper-romances have the option of shaping characters so that they have a range of end-goals and playing with different endings, the films examined in this chapter all show a marked preference for affirming couples and their permanence. Nonetheless, these films should not be dismissed simply based on adherence to convention. Convention is, at times, significant in and of itself, particularly in light of the work Karen Bowdre has done to highlight the many ways "rom-coms with African-American casts consistently differ in fundamental and significant ways from those with

Caucasian casts” (105). For example, Bowdre argues “Black cast films do not adhere to many of the conventions that audience have come to expect of the genre, such as the ‘meet-cute’ [where the couple first meets] and the overcoming of a series of obstacles that enables the couple to unite at the end” (105-106). The history of racism in America and long-standing depictions of African-American bodies as highly sexualized or comical have inhibited our ability to connect Black bodies with romance (Bowdre 105-106). Also important, films starring African-Americans are often assigned labels like “urban” and framed as their own stand-alone genre. The labeling and marketing practices often used for films starring men and women of color segregate the market and distance these films from “romantic comedy” even when they might easily be labeled as such.

Since the 1990s, however, there has been a steady output of romantic films featuring African-American actors.²⁵ Significantly, many of the recent romantic comedies starring African-American actors have been hyper-romances featuring multiple, highly traditional, romance narratives. Films like *The Best Man* (1999), *Jumping the Broom* (2011), *The Best Man Holiday* (2013), *About Last Night* (2013), and *The Single Moms Club* (2014) all work to affirm the romanticism of Black heroes and heroines. These films do not necessarily overcome or erase “the highly sexualized and comical meanings placed on African-American bodies in the context of the United States and their historical representation in Hollywood cinema” (Bowdre 105).

²⁵ For example, a list of recent romantic films starring African-American actors includes: *The Perfect Guy* (2015), *My Favorite Five* (2015), *November Rule* (2015), *Beyond The Lights* (2014), *About Last Night* (2014), *Black Coffee* (2014), *Four Seasons* (2014), *Think Like A Man Too* (2014), *Act Like You Love Me* (2013), *Baggage Claim* (2013), *Best Man Holiday* (2013), *Note To Self* (2012), *Think Like a Man* (2012), *Jumping The Broom* (2011), *My Last Day Without You* (2011), *Just Wright* (2010), *Daddy’s Little Girls* (2007), *Something New* (2006), *Hitch* (2005), *Deliver Us From Eva* (2003), *Brown Sugar* (2002), *Two Can Play That Game* (2001), *The Brothers* (2001), *Love and Basketball* (2000), *Disappearing Acts* (2000), *The Best Man* (1999), *The Wood* (1999), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *Love Jones* (1997), *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate* (1996), *Waiting To Exhale* (1995), *Jason’s Lyric* (1994), *Love Don’t Cost A Thing* (1992)... and more.

However, they work with and around these stereotypes. Furthermore, as hyper-romances, they are able to repeat these classic romantic motifs over and over again within the course of a single film. In the process, these particular hyper-romances work carefully to assert (and reassert) the beauty and romanticism of Black bodies on the screen.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the hyper-romance and discuss the ways it extends romantic comedy. However, given the historic discrepancies in representing men and women of color in romance, as well as in assigning genre labels, it is important to address issues of racial and ethnic representation underlying this chapter's analysis. Given the prevalence of hyper-romance within films starring men and women of color and the hyper-romance's inherent tendency to multiply the amount of romantic protagonists within a single film, I want to take a moment to identify some of the questions these specific films (and hyper-romance more generally) raise for analyses of race in relation to romantic films.

Since the 1980s, the romantic comedy "has been remodeled for (and appropriated by) niche audiences defined by ethnicity, sexual orientation or age" (Krutnik 130). However, as Betty Kaklamanidou points out, these "non-traditional" romantic comedies "did not enjoy a strong distribution mechanism that could allow for these narratives to be enjoyed by an international audience" (137). When *Think Like A Man* was first released, there were rumors that the film had been banned from France due to its lack of diversity (Simpore). In other words, it was suspected that the film was banned for being too black. At the time, Sony representatives denied the allegations, insisting that the film was never planned for release in France in the first place (NewsOne Staff). However, *Think Like A Man* did exceptionally well at the domestic box-office, earning \$91 million in domestic sales. It nearly matched *He's Just Not That Into You's* domestic earnings and did significantly better than *What To Expect When You're Expecting* ("Think Like a

Man (2012): Summary”; “He’s Just Not That Into You (2009): Summary”; “What to Expect When You’re Expecting (2012): Summary”). In today’s global film industry, where movies are expected to be both domestic and international successes, the limited circulation of less traditional and/or non-white romantic comedies overseas raises important questions regarding Hollywood’s perception of what films will sell internationally and, in turn, how these perceptions might be affecting casting decisions.

The marketing strategies behind these films and their national/international reach (or lack thereof), have serious implications for academics, their analyses of romantic comedies and the methods used to study the genre. For example, in *Genre, Gender, and Neoliberalism*, Betty Kaklamanidou analyzes 162 romantic comedies made between 2000-2010. Due to their lack of international distribution, three romantic comedies with African-American casts were excluded from Kaklamanidou’s analysis (10). However, Kaklamanidou devotes an entire chapter to “Romantic comedy and the ‘other.’” She is careful to call attention to the issue and study it in more detail. Moves like this are critical for contemporary gender, genre, and popular media scholars, particularly because of the lack of attention being given to romantic-comedies starring non-white actors. In a 2013 *Cineaste* article on the state of the romantic-comedy, Adrian Martin mentions a number of recent films, including “mosaic narratives” *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and *He’s Just Not That Into You*. However, other than the reference to *What To Expect When You’re Expecting*, there are no films featuring people of color included in this overview (17). Martin’s article is a quick four-page overview. More troubling is the lack of diversity in the films Michele Schreiber looks at in *American Postfeminist Cinema* (2014). This book leaves race, and the overwhelming whiteness of the titles it analyzes, entirely unaddressed. My intention here is not to single out Schreiber, as her book offers many important insights into contemporary

romantic comedies. Instead, I want to highlight the omission of race as an ongoing problem in analyses of romance, romantic films and popular romance more broadly. The segregation of film markets has had a profound impact on the ways that scholars and the broader public conceptualize both popular romance genres and romantic comedy films. Romance genres, particularly romantic comedy films, may appear at times to be overwhelmingly white. However, this is not entirely true. More accurately, content featuring men and women of color is being assigned different genre labels, marketed to specific audiences, and generally being segregated from the supposedly “universal” label of romantic comedy. It is important that gender, genre, and media scholars work to trouble these separations and work against the accompanying erasure of diversity from romance. Each time a list of romantic comedy titles is compiled, and each time those lists exclude films starring non-white actors, the definition of a romantic comedy is artificially constrained. Analyses of gender, post-feminism, and popular culture all suffer as a result of these omissions.

He’s Just Not That Into You

He’s Just Not That Into You was directed by Ken Kwapis and released just in time for Valentine’s Day in February 2009. At the time, reviews of the film were mixed. One critic called the film a “breezily synthetic love roundelay” and another commented that the film “never soars, but it never flags” (Gleiberman; LaSalle). However, the film cost roughly \$40 million to make, made almost \$94 million in domestic box-office sales, and \$87 million internationally, making *He’s Just Not That Into You* a hit for New Line Cinema and Flower Films (“He’s Just Not That Into You (2009): Summary”). The film’s success may be due, in part, to its large cast of big name film and television actors— Ben Affleck, Jennifer Aniston, Drew Barrymore, Jennifer Connelly, Kevin Connelly, Bradley Cooper, Ginnifer Goodwin, Scarlett Johansson and Justin

Long all star in the film. The large cast of young and attractive men and women, the film trailer featuring a scene where Scarlett Johansson goes skinny dipping, as well as a viral marketing campaign urging men not to be afraid of seeing the film, may also have helped increase the film's appeal to both male and female audiences.

The film is set in Baltimore, a city which, in 2010, had a population that was 63.7% African American, 29.6% White, 4.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.3% Asian ("QuickFacts: Baltimore County, Maryland"). Despite this, the film's cast is predominantly white with a few men and women of color appearing in limited supporting roles. During the film's initial marketing campaign, Latoya Peterson (Owner/Editor of the *Racialicious* blog) criticized the film for its refusal to feature people of color as "anything but the sassy friend who shows up to give the real characters a dose of real-world truisms before disappearing back into the shadows of the script" (Peterson). This contrast was particularly evident in an early trailer for the film which, "[a]fter carefully showing the tortured romantic lives of Jennifer Aniston, Drew Barrymore, Scarlett Johansson, Kevin Connolly, and Ginnifer Goodwin... cuts to two heavyset black women sitting on a bench" who joke about ribs, ice cream, and getting dumped (Peterson).

Taking a page from early seasons of *Sex and the City*, this moment is one of several "person on the street" style interviews featured in the film. The film uses these asides to mark the progression of the film's different storylines, a move that was also common in early episodes of *Sex And The City*. Similar techniques have been used in many romantic comedies since the 1980s. Famously, in the process of writing *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989), Nora Ephron interviewed real couples asking how they met and then the material was reworked, shot with actors, and included in the film (Weber). In *When Harry Met Sally...*, these older couples provide a contrasting romantic nostalgia to Harry and Sally's lives in a more cynical 1980s

Manhattan. In the context of *He's Just Not That Into You*, the “on the street” vignettes mark this film’s efforts to manage both its lack of diversity and its more conventional rom-com moments. In a hyper-romance with multiple storylines and characters, it is easier to slip in these instances of manufactured “reality” and use them to provide the sense that the film remains in touch with the real world.

In what appears to be an attempt at addressing LGBTQ audiences, Mary (Drew Barrymore) works at the fictional LGBTQ newspaper *The Baltimore Blade*. Her co-workers, played by Wilson Cruz, Leonardo Nam, and Rod Keller occasionally appear to give Mary dating advice and, generally, to perform the role of a straight-girl’s sassy gay friends. While the film does offer these moments of color, their primary utility is to move along the film’s major story lines. These characters serve as accessories to the film’s primary characters, all white and heterosexual. Ultimately, these additional characters and moments reflect a rather lackluster attempt at diversifying the cast. Instead, the film’s real efforts at broadening the reach of romantic comedy can be found in two places: first, its bid to sell the genre to men and, second, its attempts to tell stories beyond the rom-coms classic “meet, lose, get” pattern.

These efforts are facilitated, in part, by the film’s ties to the book *He's Just Not that Into You* and the television series *Sex and the City*. The book comes with its own origin story. According to legend, one day a group of *Sex and the City* staffers were sitting around and dissecting the mixed messages a particular guy was sending one of them. As the female staff worked to explain and justify the guy’s actions, Greg Behrendt chimed in with his own advice: “it sounds like he’s just not that into you” (1). This moment turned into material for the *Sex and the City* episode “Pick A Little, Talk A Little” which aired during the series’ sixth and final

season. Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo, both former writers for *Sex and the City*, published the book seven months after the show's final episode aired ("Nonfiction Book Review").

In the book, Behrendt and Tuccillo argue that women are taught to analyze, pick apart, and excuse all sorts of things that men do. In the process, women are wasting a lot of time and energy on people who may not be worth their time. The book version of *He's Just Not That Into You* operates as a kind of advice column or forum. Each chapter focuses on one sign that a guy is not into a girl. For example, Chapter One's "He's Just Not That Into You If He's Not Asking You Out" or Chapter Two's "He's Just Not That Into You If He Isn't Calling You." Each chapter consists of letters from women asking for advice about their particular guy and their particular situation. Generally, the answer for each woman is: He's not into you. Move on. And, in the words of the book's authors, "Don't waste the pretty" (6).

The film references the book's segmented structure, breaking the story in five sequential parts. Echoing the book's introduction, the film begins with an introduction to the issue structuring the film. Next, it introduces the viewer to the three primary major lines of action: Gigi's search for a boyfriend, Janine's issues with her husband (and his affair with Anna), and Beth's efforts to get married. Following this period of exposition, the film is broken into four segments, titled like the chapters of the book: "...if he's not calling you," "...if he's not marrying you," "...if she's not sleeping with you," and "...if he's sleeping with someone else." Each segment begins with a one of the person on the street vignettes, then takes the viewer through one stage the main characters' stories. Early sections establish the ongoing problems and need for change for each character. Tensions build and lead towards climax in the later segments of the film.

...if he's not marrying you



Figure 11: Opening Moments From A Segment of He's Just Not That Into You

When it was published in 1996, the popular dating guide *The Rules* offered its readers 35 rules for playing hard to get (and, in the process, getting the guy). In 2004, the essential rule of *He's Just Not That Into You* is simply: If he's interested, you will know. Like the book, the film also argues that women spend too much time trying to interpret men's actions and convince themselves that they are an exception to "the rule." The opening of the film works to identify this habit as a global problem, showing women around the world dissecting and excusing men's actions towards them. This allows the film to construct the sense that there is a universal problem

affecting this story world. Then the film zeroes in on lead-character and film narrator Gigi (Ginnifer Goodwin) and her social network, isolating several instances of the broader problem to explore in detail.

The book's argument, and the revelation from the *Sex and the City* writer's room, are replicated in the film. As the viewer is introduced to each character, we immediately see these women working to interpret encounters, rationalize choices and desires, and generally make sense of the men in their lives. When Gigi's date, Conor (Kevin Connolly), never calls her back she comes up with dozens of different reasons why he did not call. After hearing these explanations, bartender Alex (Justin Long) informs her that Conor is never going to call. Echoing the book, he tells her: "the rule is this: if a guy doesn't call you he's doesn't want to call you." Realizing that Alex is right, Gigi vows to reform and carries Alex's advice to her coworkers Janine (Jennifer Connelly) and Beth (Jennifer Aniston). In assigning Gigi and Alex their respective roles as romantic and realist, the film activates a common rom-com storytelling device. The two perspectives duel each other and, in the process, help the film manage the inherent tensions between romantic fantasy and dating realities.

He's Just Not That Into You focuses on nine different characters and four relationships in total. Gigi moves in and out of all these characters lives, encountering them directly and indirectly. This provides viewers with a through-line to connect the different stories. Each of the four major storylines gets roughly the same amount of screen time, which allows the film to develop multiple and parallel lines of conflict. Will Gigi find a boyfriend? Will Janine find out that Ben is cheating on her? Can Beth convince Neil to marry her? Each character's story is framed as one individual's journey towards self-actualization and happiness. Over the course of

the film, each of these women will come to accept that the guy they are with is just not that into them.

The film version of *He's Just Not That Into You* borrows from the real stories presented in the book and uses them to construct a hyper-romance. However, the two texts are at odds in one critical way. A self-help book does not face the same generic pressure to provide a tidy ending for its characters; the advice manual simply needs to offer the reader the possibility of better and more productive relationships. As the “he’s just not that into you” lesson transitions from the self-help genre into romantic comedy, a new set of genre expectations comes into play. Within the romantic comedy tradition, learning a lesson is not enough to complete the film’s narrative. Despite its hyper-romantic story structure, and the different endings the film provides its characters, *He's Just Not That Into You* the movie still feels the need to place the greatest narrative emphasis on Gigi and Alex’s highly romantic ending.

All of the storylines come to a conclusion at the same time. Alex, having met and later lost Gigi, realizes his love for her and rushes over to her apartment to confess all. After a lengthy speech from Alex, Gigi forgives him, the music swells, and they kiss. The film then plays the other characters’ endings against this, the most traditional happy ending in the film. Janine’s decision to leave her husband is a significant step forward for her character. It could be positioned as very happy moment in her life. Instead, juxtaposed with the upbeat nature of Gigi and Alex’s ending, Janine’s situation becomes more somber. With the camera positioned at a distance, looking through an apartment window, Janine is shown unpacking boxes in a new apartment. She is alone, surrounded by boxes, staring at her reflection in the mirror. From a medium-shot of Janine and the mirror, the film cuts directly to Gigi, staring dreamily into space and stirring food in Alex’s kitchen. Both Janine and Gigi are shown in introspective moments,

but Gigi is quickly interrupted by Alex and dragged into a living room filled with people. The contrast between Janine's solitude and Gigi's happiness makes Janine's life feel very empty, despite the progress she has made in ending her marriage. In this way, the film's interwoven storylines comment on each other and reinforce the idea that marriage and long-term partnership for women are critical to women's happiness.

He's Just Not That Into You does try to feature different versions of relationships. For example, Beth and Neil (Ben Affleck) have been together, happily, for years and are very much in love. Neil, however, is strongly opposed to the idea of marriage. Their story begins long after the couple's first meeting. Instead, it focuses on the two characters losing and then finding one another again. Upset that he will not marry her, Beth leaves Neil in the middle of the film. At the time, her father is very sick and she stays with her family to help take care of him. Frustrated with her sisters and their unsupportive husbands, Beth decides that marriage is the last thing she needs. Neil, as a supportive and loving partner, is already enough. She tells him, "You are more of a husband to me not being married than those real husbands are ever going to be." This declaration comes in the final segment of the film and its timing makes it seem as if the film is beginning to outline a quiet critique of marriage or, at least, to make the argument that marriage and love are not always synonymous. Performing as Beth and Neil, Jennifer Aniston and Ben Affleck impart the sense that these two characters care deeply about one another and have worked to develop a highly successful relationship. Underplaying the inevitability of marriage and suggesting the relationship has just as much validity without it could be a bold move. However, after Beth and Neil settle back in their apartment, recommitted to each other and ready to face unmarried life together, Neil abruptly drops to one knee and proposes marriage.

This is a jolting moment in the film. After working so hard to show how good this relationship already is and how unimportant marriage is to its long-term success, suddenly Beth and Neil still have to get married. It is as if, at this stage in their relationship, the idea of any other happy ending is impossible for these characters. *He's Just Not That Into You* is a hyper-romance, but the film's additional story lines seem, ultimately, to serve as reinforcement for romantic comedy traditions. While *He's Just Not That Into You* makes gestures towards alternative endings, the possibilities its hyper-romantic structure opens up are, ultimately, closed down by the film's insistence on providing a more recognizable Hollywood ending for its characters.

This may be, in part, a medium-specific narrative problem. For example, a television series could use these same techniques while offering many different end points over the course of a series. This is a technique used repeatedly on *Sex and the City* as the lead characters marry, date, break-up, and have children at different points in the series. At the conclusion of the television series, Carrie breaks-up with her fabulous French boyfriend and goes home to her friends in New York City. The most romantic endings *Sex and the City* gets come later, when the series is adapted into two feature length films. Even when a television series does seem to be heading towards a moment of closure, television shows always carry with them the threat of cancellation or the promise of renewal, which can either leave a character mid-story or force a character further beyond a traditional end point. As a product, however, film is locked into a planned beginning, middle, and end point. In the case of *He's Just Not That Into You*, the film's story cannot continue on past the boundaries of the film, at least not if it adheres to romantic comedy conventions.

While the film's inability to give Beth and Neil a different ending is revealing, I do not want to underplay the choices made regarding the other protagonists in the film or their different endings. Of the film's nine major characters, three end up alone. Simply including unhappy endings is a bold move for a romantic comedy. In *He's Just Not That Into You*, the viewer is very clear that Ben, Janine and Anna are all better off alone. After Ben has an affair, the film could have focused on Ben and Janine working to repair and restore their marriage. Instead, the film chooses not to do this and frames their efforts to maintain the marriage as a misstep. The attempt at reconciliation is positioned in the middle portion of the movie, where the film's conflicts begin to rise to their peak. Placing it here tells the viewer that repairing the marriage is absolutely not the right move for these characters. It suggests that some relationships, no matter how permanent they may seem, should not continue. In this way, the film uses its cast of characters to offer viewers multiple, and some non-romantic, endings.

He's Just Not That Into You also uses its different characters to expand the audience for romantic comedies, working to appeal to male and female audiences. Prior to the film's release, there was a marketing campaign on YouTube in which Bradley Cooper, Kevin Connolly and Justin Long pitched the film to male viewers, reassuring men that they were safe seeing the movie because it was not "your typical chick flick" (qtd. in Schreiber 75).²⁶ In addition to the film's efforts at marketing itself to male viewers, there are also small ways that it works to address a male/heterosexual audience. Most of the film's segments are titled "if he's not..." addressing the female members of the audience. One, however, is "if she's not..." There is also significant screen time devoted to men talking to each other, including several scenes with no women in them at all. Alex and Connor hang out, drink beer, and complain about the women in their lives. Ben and Neil get together for beer or go out on Neil's boat to talk about Ben's

²⁶ For an analysis of this marketing campaign and a more detailed summary, see Schreiber 2015.

marriage problems, his affair, and talk about their mutual uncertainty regarding where their relationships are heading. *He's Just Not That Into You* suggests the potential for the hyper-romance to target male audiences, in addition to the rom-com's traditional association with women.

Gigi and Alex's story closes with Alex tracking Gigi down and declaring his feelings. Beth's boyfriend, Neil, eventually proposes. Each of these narrative threads ends with the promise of love and a happy ending. However, Anna, Ben, and Janine all find themselves single at the end of the movie. Anna works on her singing career and Janine moves into a new apartment. These three characters' stories are not presented as fully happy, but they also are not entirely sad. The film insists that this is the narrative resolution that the character needed. It does not, however, rest on a traditionally romantic ending. This places these character's narratives in contrast with the more conventionally romantic ones. The hyper-romance's segmented structure is what allows the filmmakers to move back and forth between these different endings. As a hyper-romance, the film swings from the romantic to the un-romantic, providing a sense of idealism and then counter-balancing it with sadness. In the process, the hyper-romance extends the audience for the genre and brings elements of drama into the romantic comedy.

Think Like A Man

Directed by Tim Story and released in 2012, *Think Like A Man* features a large cast of prominent African-American actors—Michael Ealy, Meagan Good, Regina Hall, Kevin Hart, Terrence J., Taraji P. Henson, Romany Malco, and Gabrielle Union. *Think Like A Man* also includes cameo appearances by comedian and author Steve Harvey and two “token” white actors (Jerry Ferrara and Garry Owen) are included among the film's multiple protagonists. Given *Think Like A Man*'s \$12 million production budget and the \$91.5 million it earned at the

domestic box office, it is not surprising that a sequel, *Think Like a Man, Too* quickly followed in 2014. *Think Like A Man*'s revenue nearly tied with the \$93.9 million *He's Just Not That Into You* earned domestically. However, given *Think Like A Man*'s limited international release, it earned significantly less than *He's Just Not That Into You* did internationally.

Think Like A Man is based on *Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man*, a self-help book written by Steve Harvey and published in 2009. The book was a best-seller, eventually reaching second place in the year's list of best-selling non-fiction ("Facts & Figures 2009 Revised"). *Think Like a Man* uses similar strategies to *He's Just Not That Into You* to translate an advice manual into a romantic comedy film. *Think Like A Man* focuses on five different relationships: three that are just starting, one that is trying to figure out where it is going, and a marriage which appears to be over. The film is narrated by Cedric (Kevin Hart), who is going through a divorce. As the film begins, Cedric introduces each of the male protagonists the viewer. They are introduced, not by name, but as particular types of men: "the player," "the dreamer," "the non-committer," "the mama's boy," and "the happily married man." Each of these characters are positioned as common type of man. All of them—except, perhaps, for "happily married man"—also embody a potential point of conflict within a relationship. These conflicts are derived from chapters of Steve Harvey's book. A chapter on "strong, independent and lonely women" informs the character of Lauren (Taraji P. Henson), who the film labels "The Woman Who Is Her Own Man." Harvey's advice that women should wait 90 days for sex and "keep the cookie in the jar," becomes a source of conflict between Zeke (Romany Malco), "The Player," and Mya (Meagan Good), "The 90 Day Rule Girl." The film lifts character types and relationship conflicts from the book, using them as prototypes to develop a classic "battle of the sexes" framework. In *Think Like a Man*, love is a competition between men and women, with sex and marriage as the two,

rarely complimentary, end goals. Like many romantic comedies, the film establishes a clear gender binary from the beginning. In this story world, men want sex and women want marriage. Each side wants to win and the fight moves the story forward.

The film's opening sequence operates as a walk through history. Narrator Cedric explains that, once upon a time, marriage used to be "the only way a guy could get what he really wanted from a girl." In the past, this gave women power. Today, however, "the balance of power has shifted" from the women to the men. Now, women do not need to wait until marriage to have sex which means that "men have the home court advantage." Like many traditional romantic heroines, each of the female leads in this film is on the hunt for a husband. Steve Harvey and his book operate as their allies in this quest. Harvey promises that his book is going to help these women "get into the mindset of a man" and "win in the game of love."

Like *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Think Like A Man* also uses intertitles to mark different segments in the film's narrative. Instead of marking progressive stages in the story, like *He's Just Not That Into You* does, *Think Like a Man* uses the intertitles to mark the film's different storylines. Each couple is given their own intertitle announcing the battle that is about to occur between them. There are four major narrative arcs: "'The Player' vs. 'The 90 Day Rule Girl,'" "'The Non-Committer' vs. 'The Girl Who Wants the Ring,'" "'The Mama's Boy' vs. 'The Single Mom,'" and "'The Dreamer' vs. 'The Woman Who Is Her Own Man.'" Unlike *He's Just Not That Into You*, where the intertitles are used to mark different acts in each couple's journey, here the intertitles emphasize each individual couple and set their story apart from the others. Each character type is placed with its counter, fueling conflict and, of course, also setting up a perfect pairing of opposites. As the narrator, "Divorced Guy" Cedric provides exposition, helps the film with story transitions, and works to keep the different stories linked together.

Unlike *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Think Like A Man* is much less interested in crafting non-romantic outcomes for its characters. As a hyper-romance, *Think Like A Man* uses its multiple storylines and characters to produce a very different effect. *Think Like A Man* links itself to romantic-comedy tradition by embracing tropes of the genre and using them to label each character. In applying these labels, the film does not simply emphasize its intertextual links to *Act Like A Lady*, *Think Like A Man*, it also reinforces its ties to romantic-comedy traditions. The heavy emphasis on convention may be due, in part to *Think Like A Man*'s predominantly African-American cast and the work the film is doing to claim space for people of color within a genre so often associated with stories about white heterosexual women. In *Think Like a Man*, couples "meet-cute," have misunderstandings, and resolve them by making big declarations of love for each other. The women in this film need to find their perfect partner and the men need to accept that they desire a wife, not a weekend hook-up. Only growth, change, and love will leave both parties happy. To get there, each storyline follows the romantic comedy's traditional "meet, lose, get" structure.

This adherence to convention is critical to the work *Think Like A Man* is doing within the romantic comedy genre. If, as Karen Bowdre argues, Black bodies historically disrupt the semiotics of the romantic comedy, *Think Like A Man* is working very carefully to make these connections visible. Bowdre observes that several common rom-com elements are often missing from romantic comedies focusing on black characters: the meet-cute moment, an emphasis on longing over sexual desire, a hero's growth and change (the transition from rogue to hero), or a women's sense of romance and vulnerability. As a hyper-romance, *Think Like A Man* is able to make a point of hitting each of these elements, not with just one romantic story, but with five. Early in the film, Michael and Candace meet while in line at a bookstore, their introductions

closely observed by the burly, leather-clad biker in line next to them. “Divorced Guy” Cedric realizes he is miserable without his wife and declares to his friends, “I am going *home*.” Following Cedric’s example, “Player” Zeke stages an elaborate declaration of love for Maya, telling her he will give up sex for ninety more days if that is what it takes to prove his love for her. Each of the heroes eventually learns to take risks, make sacrifices, and change in order to win back their partners.

While *He’s Just Not That Into You* uses its many narrative threads to try and emphasize variance, *Think Like a Man* works to multiply romance and stress love and commitment as universal human needs. The film replicates the classic rom-com battle of the sexes and, at its conclusion, presents a mosaic of romantic gestures, apologies, and heartfelt expressions of love. In this way, *Think Like a Man* strategically reproduces and extends classic romantic tropes. In the process, the film combats the kinds of omission and exclusion Bowdre tracked in the 1980s and 1990s. Bowdre observes that, “while it can be argued that the love presented in neo-traditional rom-coms... is a fairytale... it is also an aspiration many hope to achieve” (116). In the process, Bowdre calls for an expansion of the romantic comedy. In the case of *Think Like A Man*, the film’s hyper-romantic story works to do exactly that, filling historic gaps with an abundance of beautiful, successful, and deeply romantic African-American heroes and heroines. In this context, the hyper-romance performs a very different function than it did with *He’s Just Not That Into You*. In addition to offering a means of complicating romantic comedy’s traditional narrative patterns, the hyper-romance serves as a mechanism through which romantic stories can proliferate. In *Think Like a Man*, fans of the genre are able to watch different romantic stories unfold simultaneously. In the process, the film is able to double-down on its representations of romantic African-American heroes and heroines.

What To Expect When You're Expecting

What to Expect When You're Expecting was directed by Kirk Jones and released 2012. The film is based on the pregnancy guide of the same name, written by Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel. The movie is, technically, an adaptation of the pregnancy guide. Lionsgate obtained the film rights to the book in 2010 and book author Heidi Murkoff was one of the film's executive producers. Out of three self-help books turned movies examined in this chapter, however, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* is the loosest adaptation. Despite this, the film still retains elements of the book it is based on. Pregnancy problems identified in the book become moments of conflict in the film. The film loosely follows the pregnancy timeline outlined in the book, pausing to emphasize particular moments in the process of planning for pregnancy and having a baby. The film also relies heavily on physical humor, often bluntly addressing the physical change women can experience while pregnant. These are all small ways that the film is able to draw from the book. Whether the film indicates a genuine effort at adaptation or a more cynical attempt at cashing in on bestseller is unclear. However, when the initial deal was announced in 2010, Lionsgate President of Motion Picture Production, Alli Shearmur, hinted that the company saw "this film as the first in a potential franchise" ("Lionsgate the Proud Parent").

The film's lukewarm reception from critics and poor performance at the box-office seem to have ended any hopes of an ongoing film series. At the time, *People's* Alynda Wheat summarized the film as "what moms-to-be can expect if they're healthy, wealthy, heterosexual, have an involved partner, and are Hollywood gorgeous" (Wheat). Similarly, *Sight and Sound's* Anna Smith declared the film an "an ode to the concerns of middle-class parenthood" (Smith). The film had a production budget of \$37.5 million and just barely made that back domestically, earning \$41 million in domestic profits and almost \$80 million internationally ("What to Expect

When You're Expecting (2012): Summary"). Overall, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* was not a notable success.

Like *He's Just Not That Into You* and *Think Like A Man*, this film also features a large ensemble cast. Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Elizabeth Banks, Anna Kendrick, and Brooklyn Decker star as the primary female leads and Chace Crawford, Ben Falcone, Dennis Quaid, Matthew Morrison and Rodrigo Santoro are the main male leads. In addition to the five primary couples, comedians Chris Rock, Rob Huebel, Tom Lennon and Amir Talai make up "Dudes' Group," a group of dads that meets regularly to collectively watch their kids, reminisce about their bachelor days, and ease new dads onto the path towards fatherhood. Finally, Joe Manganiello and Rebel Wilson also appear as secondary characters, with Manganiello's character eventually joining the dudes' group. In total, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* featured ten main and five supporting characters. *He's Just Not That Into You* stuck with nine and *Think Like A Man* focused on eleven. This large list of actors may be, in part, why the film struggled. It suggests that there might be a limit to the number of protagonists and plotlines a hyper-romance can maintain.

In total, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* has five primary stories that it asks viewers to follow, in addition to subplots involving members of the Dude's Group. Of the major storylines, only two intersect in a significant way. Estranged father and son Ramsey and Gary Cooper (played by Dennis Quaid and Ben Falcone) both learn that their wives are pregnant at the same time and the film uses this connecting storyline to focus on the father and son's relationship. Apart from this one conjoined story, most of the couples' stories are fully separated from one another. Jules (Cameron Diaz) and Evan (Mathew Morrison) abruptly learn that Jules is pregnant. Holly (Jennifer Lopez) and Alex (Rodrigo Santoro) are trying to adopt a child. Finally,

Rosie (Anna Kendrick) finds herself pregnant after a one-night-stand with Marco (Chace Crawford). The mix of planned and unplanned pregnancies, along with Holly and Alex's adoption story, represents the film's efforts to highlight different women's experiences with pregnancy and parenting.

What To Expect When You're Expecting uses its hyper-romantic structure to tell multiple pregnancy stories. Wendy and Gary are carefully planning Wendy's pregnancy and tracking her ovulation using a fertility app on their phones. Jules and Evan are caught by surprise, but they have been dating for a little while and decide to roll with the news and see what happens. Holly and Alex have opted for adoption because Holly is infertile, which gives the film some limited opportunities to talk about the expense of adoption. Finally, for Rosie and Marco the news that Rosie is pregnant is a very unpleasant shock, one further complicated when Rosie has a miscarriage midway through the film. Each of these represents different degrees of preparation and happiness around pregnancy. Unlike *He's Just Not That Into You*, however, the couples themselves all end on a similar happy note, affirming their love for one another— and, for 4 out of 5 of the couples, affirming their joy at being parents.

On the surface, the film may not sound like a traditional romantic comedy. In many ways it is not. When the movie begins, three of the film's couples are happily married—or, in the case of Gary, happily remarried. The only thing missing from these marriages are children. Over the course of the film, however, three out of the five major storylines begin to follow classic rom-com patterns. Jules and Evan had only recently begun dating when they discover she is pregnant. Over time, the pregnancy drives them apart and both character's need to grow, change, and recommit to each other before they have a happy ending. Similarly, Holly and Alex's relationship is threatened by her desire to adopt a child. Alex does not think he is ready to be a parent and, for

a time, the marriage seems to be falling apart. Eventually, however, Alex accepts that he will never be entirely ready to be a parent and decides to move forward anyway. Finally, Marco and Rosie have the most conventional romantic storyline. They have a “meet-cute” which leads to a one-night stand and pregnancy. The pregnancy quickly ends in miscarriage and, in the aftermath, the romance is derailed. Over time, however, the two characters are able to move on and recommit to each other. Ultimately, all three of these storylines adhere to tried and true romantic comedy conventions. Couples lose and get each other back. The primary difference is that the film does not always do the work of showing the viewer that initial meeting.

The film’s more conventional romantic endings may be, in part, what allows the movie to tentatively touch on some of the more unpleasant aspects of pregnancy. In this film women barf, fart, burp, and, on one memorable occasion, wet themselves in public. Over the course of the film, Wendy (Elizabeth Banks) complains about “bacne,” breast tenderness, “cankles,” and hormone induced mood swings. Wendy eventually breaks down completely, complaining bitterly about the differences between “the glow... they promise you on the cover of those magazines” and her misery and discomfort with being pregnant. These details operate as a means for the film to counteract its moments of romanticism. The crude body-humor adds unfeminine elements to the story, making the film easier to sell to men.

The film’s use of blunt body-humor may also be due to the fact that it was released just a year after the highly successful film *Bridesmaids* (2011), which was hailed as “[a] triumph for vomit, and feminism” (M. E. Williams). *Bridesmaids* was recognized as a breakthrough comedy film for women, however, it also signaled new strategies to make and market romantic comedies. *Bridesmaids* made clear efforts to pitch itself to male audiences. The film was also able to leverage the reputations of director Paul Feig (*Arrested Development*, *The Office*) and producers

Judd Apatow (*The Cable Guy*, *Anchorman*), Barry Mendel (*Rushmore*, *Funny People*), and Clayton Townsend (*Knocked Up*, *The Forty Year-Old Virgin*)— all known for bawdy and dude-friendly comedies— as a means of attracting male viewers. Beyond its casting of female-comedians in lead roles, the breakthrough with *Bridesmaids* was also the film’s ability to be both a romantic comedy and sell itself to male-audiences.

What to Expect When You’re Expecting uses similar strategies to mark itself as a comedy for both men and women. The film contains classic rom-com elements, but they are masked by the large ensemble cast, the film’s many different storylines, and the time it reserves for stories about men’s experiences as expectant or new fathers. The “Dudes’ Group,” in particular, helps the film define male-only spaces in the narrative. These are segments where well-known comedians like Chris Rock perform fatherhood, talking about the value of being a parent and, occasionally, breaking for beer and to hear stories about manly-man Davis’ (Joe Manganiello) hot girlfriends. Overall, it is the film’s status as a hyper-romance that allows it to reposition romantic comedy as a genre of film for a broader audience, appealing to men and women, as well as hailing some different age groups.

What To Expect When You’re Expecting’s more conventionally romantic story arcs are intermingled with the exploits of Dude’s Group and with Gary and Ramsey’s father and son story. Gary and Ramsey start the film distanced from one another. Their wives pregnancies allow the two of them to develop as individuals and begin to reconcile. Ultimately, the two characters begin the film having lost and end having found one another. This indicates another storytelling strategy available to hyper-romance films: not all the storylines they feature need to be romantic. As the storylines proliferate, other forms of relationship can be added to the mix. Rather than

simply multiplying the number of romantic stories it tells, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* also expands outward to incorporate other types of domestic and family conflicts.

This strategy also assists the film in its efforts to appeal to a range of different audiences. It makes the film's genre harder to pin down, which makes it easier to sell the film to less conventional romantic comedy audiences. The film's overall casting is also more diverse than *He's Just Not That Into You's* cast was. Puerto Rican-American actor Jennifer Lopez and Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro star as one of the film's primary couples, African-American comedian Chris Rock appears in the film as the leader of Dude's Group, and Iranian-American comedian Amir Talai is one of the group's members. The characters in the film also represent a nebulous range of ages, with Rosie and Marco appearing to be in their mid-20s, Ramsey's father, Gary, in his 50s, and the rest of the characters appearing to be in their 30s and 40s. The overall range of protagonists suggests a film that is trying hard to cover a lot of different bases. The film's disappointing box office sales could be interpreted as a sign that audiences are not willing to accept a film with so many different characters. However, *Valentine's Day* (2010) featured nineteen leading actors and actresses, cast several prominent African-American and Latino celebrities, and earned over \$110 million in domestic box office sales ("Valentine's Day (2010): Summary"). This suggests that some hyper-romances do very well with their large casts.

Unlike *He's Just Not That Into You's* use of happy and unhappy endings as a means of mixing up the rom-com formula, *What To Expect When You're Expecting* seems interested, instead, in expanding the range of characters it applies classic romantic-comedy elements to and the audiences it hails in the process. Pregnancy becomes an opportunity to tell yet another set of stories about couples overcoming obstacles to be together. On the other hand, pregnancy also allows the film to insert increased amounts of body humor and to move the narrative's emphasis

away from a woman's emotional longing and towards a couple's mutual desire for a child. In this context, domestic concerns and desires are shared by both parties in the relationship, male and female. Fatherhood— while marked by moments of humor— is framed as an experience that adds meaning and richness to men's lives, rather than emasculating them. This, coupled with the film's mocking of the feminine "glow" and beauty of pregnancy, makes for some significant repositioning of norms around emotions, parenting, and domestic desires.

Conclusion

The recent rise in hyper-romance films indicates the utility of multi-plot films for mainstream romantic-comedy filmmakers. This is a narrative format well suited to the romantic comedy, complimenting its inherent need to reference other iterations of the genre and to question the broader cultural significance of romantic comedies. Not only does the hyper-romance allow for an escalation in self-reflexivity, it also builds on classic romantic storytelling techniques. Romance, as a literary genre, already has a long history of multiple plotlines, linked stories, and serial narratives. The rise in serial television and the extension of serial storytelling techniques beyond soap operas and television serials similarly helps to prepare viewers for the hyper-romance.

He's Just Not That Into You, *What To Expect When You're Expecting*, and *Think Like A Man* each make particular aspects of the hyper-romance visible. This approach to storytelling offers filmmakers the option of experimenting with traditional romantic storytelling patterns and story elements. The hyper-romance's large cast also helps distributors market these films to men and women, destabilizing the traditional assumption that romantic comedies are made for female audiences.

Each of these films tries to accommodate different possibilities for relationships and test new possibilities for happy and romantic endings. However, despite the efforts to complicate genre conventions, hyper-romances also seem to be at a loss regarding how to shape alternative endings. Or, perhaps more cynically, they are unwilling to take the risk and to truly rework genre norms. While *He's Just Not That Into You* attempts to accommodate multiple endings/outcomes for its characters, the film genuinely struggles to let this happen. The need for a legible, Hollywood ending appears to take precedent. However, *Think Like A Man*, offers an important reminder that convention can be applied in new and important ways.

Given the historic whiteness of romantic-comedies, films like *Think Like A Man* signal that there are important shifts regarding race and representation occurring in the genre. This opens up important questions for future research. Since the 1990s, there have been a growing number of romantic comedies featuring predominantly African-American casts and, presumably, targeting African-American audiences. However, why are so few of these films being discussed in scholarship on romantic comedy films? In what ways are these movies being marketed and distributed? It seems likely that a segregated market affects the reach of these films, however, these are important questions that need more time and attention than I can give them here.

On the other hand, these questions lead me right back to the most perplexing aspects of the hyper-romance. These narratives inherently multiply, expand, and extend romantic convention. However, I have also outlined ways that the hyper-romance's attempt to move away from a strict "meet, lose, get" structure can be constrained and undermined. In experimenting with more complex narrative structures, the hyper-romance is caught in a bind. To be successful with mainstream audiences, the films need to balance their experimentation with familiar story elements and archetypes. Films, particularly romantic comedy films, insist on endings. Films are,

traditionally, stand-alone narratives. The medium of film and its narrative traditions complicate the hyper-romance's efforts to address variance.

None of this, however, should erase the hyper-romance's significance in our current cultural moment and what it signals in terms of popular romance genres. The hyper-romance is a profoundly intertextual mode of storytelling. These films adapt storytelling strategies from television and demand that audiences use skills acquired from regularly engaging with a variety of media forms. Hyper-romances then combine these elements, using them to construct self-reflexive texts—texts engaged in ongoing intertextual and intratextual conversations about men and women's romantic aspirations. The hyper-romance marks an evolution in romantic-comedy traditions, opening the romantic-comedy up to new possibilities in the process.

Chapter 4: Saying Yes: Romance and Reality on Wedding TV

On cable networks TLC and WE tv, Friday nights and weekends are a time for weddings. From disaster brides to wedding planners as personal fairy godparents, shows like *Bridezillas* (WE tv), *My Fair Wedding* (WE tv), and *Say Yes to the Dress* (TLC) take on the complicated process of wedding planning, dress shopping, and parent-of-the-bride management. On these shows, brides, families, and wedding planners taste cakes, compare color swatches, and debate the merits of sweetheart necklines and crystal embellishments. Reality wedding shows highlight various perspectives in the wedding planning process: the bride, her partner, family members, and professionals within the wedding industry. The bride is at the center of this drama, negotiating with these stakeholders in an effort to meet their approval and achieve her own dreams for her wedding.

By focusing on the preparation process for weddings, as well as the final event, these shows draw attention to the different choices a bride makes while planning a wedding. *Say Yes to the Dress* accommodates different types of brides and relationships by emphasizing that each bride needs to find the one unique dress that suits her best. *My Fair Wedding* takes an ideal and personalizes it. The show presents brides with a set of options for the dress, cake, etc., and when the wedding is finally enacted, each selection is carefully pointed out and explained. These shows take a modular approach to weddings, using this modularity to depict a world where the market can accommodate a variety of self-expressions. Within this setting, the wedding industry is on call to help brides achieve their dreams.

Underlying each of these shows is an expanded flexibility toward weddings and, in turn, marriage and family. The abundance of choices arises out of a more modular approach to social rituals and cultural performance, an approach that makes room for a range of consumers and purchasing possibilities. This modularity is also enabled by today's database driven sales and

global distribution systems, as well the broader shift from mass markets to long-tail and more niche consumer categories. These technologies and practices facilitate a system that accommodates a greater degree of variance. These shifts pair well with the current social and political efforts to rebrand both marriage and wedding ceremonies so that they accommodate (or appear to accommodate) a greater range of families and consumer choices.

Ultimately, however, these political and economic systems seek to manage risk and maximize investments. The wedding industry's efforts to accommodate difference also indicate a desire to manage these differences and keep both marriage and weddings relatively coherent and predictable within the larger social, political and economic systems that are dependent on them. These tensions inform the narrative structures of contemporary reality wedding shows, influencing how the shows depict and resolve narrative conflict. There may be a broader cultural push to construct a version of marriage, partnership, and weddings that is more inclusive, however, this flexibility has limits. On reality wedding shows, these limits emerge around questions of taste, budget, and women's bodies. *Bridezillas* reveals the consequences of these limits and of the markets failures.

Both *Say Yes to the Dress* and *My Fair Wedding* use their modular narrative structure to respond to and manage a bride's desire for choice and accommodation. Despite the many gown options available on *Say Yes to the Dress*, some brides still fail in their quests. On *My Fair Wedding* the bride's lack of taste has gotten her into trouble. In response, each episode stages a "rescue" and wedding makeover. In both of these shows, a failed bride does not have a handle on her budget, does not have the right taste, or is too unsure of her own personal brand. *Bridezillas* focuses solely on bridal meltdowns. While *Say Yes* and *My Fair Wedding* forefront the wedding industry and the many choices it offers to brides, *Bridezillas* emphasizes the frustration women

experience when this system fails them. On the surface, *Bridezillas* could be read as an attempt to discipline unruly brides. However, the beauty of a bridezilla is that she cannot be stopped and is rarely punished for her actions. The attention the show pays to bridezillas enables women's anger far more than it disables it.

Central to the narrative of these shows are two supposed truths about women: First, regardless of a woman's individual choices, women dream of being brides. Second, that the public performance of being a bride is a pivotal moment in women's lives and a successful performance is critical right of passage. The act of being a bride is positioned central to a woman's identity and sense of self-worth. Correspondingly, this establishes the idea that all women should have some sense of the kind of bride they want to be and of the kind of wedding they will have. On *Say Yes to the Dress* and *My Fair Wedding* there is an unasked question underlying the exchanges between brides and wedding professionals: What is your individual brand identity and how can I help you establish it? However, in order to ask this question, both viewers and participants need to be reminded, over and over again, that all women want to participate in this kind of identity construction and self performance. Building upon these assumptions, reality wedding shows place women's self-aspirations in negotiation with the types of self-expression the market accommodates. These negotiations reflect tensions between a woman's aspirations and her body, her financial situation, and broader social/family expectations. They reflect a reality where, rather than simply setting their own terms, women must work (and pay) to find accommodation for themselves within the global mass market and within societal structures.

Going Bridal

Weddings are a big business. In 2014, the average American wedding cost \$31,213 (PR

Newswire). In 2015, wedding industry profits were estimated at \$60 billion (IBISWorld). Even during economic downturns, the wedding industry is seen as “recession-proof” (Engstrom, *The Bride Factory* 4; Ingraham 38). In a 2010 survey, 68% of the women surveyed reported that, if they or their partners lost their jobs, the couple would proceed with their wedding, rather than cutting back or canceling it (The Knot; XO Group). Given that weddings are often viewed as once in a lifetime events, are typically financed by multiple family members, and can take months or years to plan, for many couples the idea of canceling or downgrading plans may not be an option.

While the cost of a wedding may seem astonishingly high, proportionately, contemporary households are spending less of their overall income on weddings than they were in the mid-19th century (Coontz 81). In 1960, “the typical formal wedding cost two-thirds of the median family’s yearly income” (Coontz 81). Also, while the cost of weddings and the cost per guest rises, the American marriage rate continues to decline (PR Newswire). Despite there being fewer weddings, the wedding business is booming. This may be due to the reality that the wedding business is now a global enterprise. With textile manufacturing moving overseas, labor costs for wedding apparel “have decreased dramatically at the same time that the price of the average wedding gown has doubled” (Ingraham 10). In addition to outsourcing labor and managing production costs, the popularity of destination weddings is further exporting the traditional Western white wedding outward, further expanding the industry’s reach (Ingraham 40).

Another way for the wedding industry to secure profits has been through the proliferation of bridal media products. While wedding coverage was once primarily limited to wedding announcements in local newspapers, today “weddings have become a mainstay of American popular and consumer culture” (Ingraham 11). This reveals a careful strategy of market

diversification on the part of the wedding industry, with weddings regularly appearing as media events in celebrity journalism, as major events in television shows, or as reality-television specials and off-shoots of existing reality-tv series (Ingraham 11).

Bridal media, “nonfictional, informational mass communication... that use the wedding as their central component,” play a major role in sustaining both the wedding industry and the centrality of weddings within American culture (Engstrom, *The Bride Factory* 4–5). Competitive dating shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* (ABC) or *Joe Millionaire* (Fox) air during primetime on major broadcast networks. Since 2000, NBC’s *Today Show* has held an annual wedding contest where viewers vote to choose a worthy couple, plan the couple’s wedding over the course of several months, and then collectively “attend” the ceremony as it is broadcast live from New York City (Lye). Meanwhile, on Lifetime, Style, TLC and WE tv, reality wedding shows have become a popular and reliable genre for these lifestyle-focused cable networks. Reality wedding shows like *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, and *Platinum Weddings* chronicle different aspects of the wedding planning process, typically focusing on the bride, the wedding planner(s), or a set of wedding professionals.

While reality wedding shows appear on many different channels, when it comes to dedicated primetime programming, TLC and WE tv stand apart from the rest. TLC’s Friday night schedule— or, “BrideDay,” as TLC calls it — is dedicated to reality wedding shows (Haugsted; Morabito). In 2014, TLC’s parent company, Discovery Communications, reported that *Say Yes to the Dress* was their 7th most popular show, across all of Discovery Communications’ networks (Discovery Communications 13). That year, *Say Yes to the Dress* reached 98.9 million viewers in the United States and 199.5 million globally (Discovery Communications 13). Until recently, on WE tv Sunday evenings featured their “WE Go Bridal” block of programming. In 2008, 40% of

WE tv's primetime programming was related to weddings (Haugsted). The same year 1 million viewers tuned in to watch the season premiere of *Bridezillas* (AMC Networks). Some of this programming is aimed directly at people planning their wedding, but the bulk of the audiences for these shows are not women currently planning their weddings. The focus on an event central to so many people's lives, as well as on the drama and excitement associated with it, draws in a much broader audience. Reality wedding shows are popular with TLC and WE tv due to their appeal to 18-49 year-old female viewers (Crupi 8). In 2008, WE tv reported that 49% of their viewers were "I Do-ers," "women who respond positively to the trappings of matrimony, have an interest in wedding-themed shows and report that they are in the midst of a major lifestyle transition" (Crupi 8). These major lifestyle transitions are often accompanied by significant upticks in consumer spending, making these audiences popular with advertisers (Crupi 8).

Unlike popular reality television franchises like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, reality wedding shows have not, traditionally, been connected to globally circulating television formats. Format shows are "franchised television programs... developed in one market and sold internationally for local adaptation" (Esser 273). Instead of establishing a format and selling the format to various global producers, TLC, WE tv, and the production companies behind these shows have generally kept their franchising internal to their own network. Three years after the premiere of *Say Yes to the Dress*, TLC announced *Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta*, a spin-off set in the southern United States. In the following years, TLC experimented with *Say Yes to the Dress: Bridesmaids* and *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss* (a series focused on plus-sized brides). There are two exceptions to this practice on TLC. TLC's *Four Weddings* (2009) is the American version of a British format that has been adapted in at least 12 different countries (Keslassy). After re-airing episodes of the British series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, TLC commissioned *My Big Fat*

American Gypsy Wedding which premiered in April 2012 (Harris). Next, in January 2015, Canada's W Network premiered *Say Yes to the Dress: Canada*, based on the format Half Yard Productions originally developed for TLC (Temple Street Productions).

Figure 12: Reality Wedding Shows on TLC and WE tv

Network	Year	Show
TLC	1996 - 2005	<i>A Wedding Story</i>
	2007 - 2014	<i>Say Yes to the Dress</i>
	2009 - 2013	<i>Four Weddings</i>
	2010 - 2015	<i>Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta</i>
	2010 - 2011	<i>Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss</i>
	2011 - 2013	<i>Say Yes to the Dress: Bridesmaids</i>
	2011 (60 minute special)	<i>Say Yes to the Dress: The Big Day</i>
	2011	<i>Say Yes to the Dress: Randy Knows Best</i>
	2011 (120 minute special)	<i>Nick and Vanessa's Dream Wedding</i>
	2012 - 2013	<i>Randy to the Rescue</i>
	2012 - 2015	<i>My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding</i>
	2012 - 2014	<i>I Found the Gown</i>
	2013	<i>Wedding Island</i>
	2013 - 2014	<i>Something Borrowed, Something New</i>
	2014	<i>Bride By Design</i>
	2014	<i>Curvy Brides</i>
	2015	<i>Brides Gone Styled</i>
WE tv	2004 - 2013	<i>Bridezillas</i>
	2006 - 2011	<i>Rich Bride Poor Bride</i>
	2006 - 2010	<i>Platinum Weddings</i>
	2008	<i>Bulging Brides</i>
	2008 - 2011	<i>Amazing Wedding Cakes</i>
	2008 - 2013	<i>My Fair Wedding</i>
	2009	<i>Girl Meets Gown</i>
	2011	<i>Big Easy Brides</i>

While TLC seems more interested in tapping into the global formats business, WE tv has limited their popular reality-wedding shows to programming tie-ins and spinoffs within the WE tv network. During the tenth and final season of *Bridezillas*, WE leveraged the show's success to cross-promote their new series *Marriage Boot Camp: Bridezillas*. The first and second seasons

of the new marriage counseling show featured couples that first appeared on *Bridezillas*. Then, in the *Marriage Boot Camp*'s third season, the show moved on to focus on other couples. This strategy allowed WE tv to transfer loyal *Bridezillas* viewers over to their new programming.

A comparable process unfolded with WE tv's *My Fair Wedding*. Built around event planner David Tutera, the series began airing in 2008 and, at the time, focused entirely on wedding makeovers. In 2013, as *Bridezillas* was finishing its final season, a newly repackaged *My Fair Wedding: Unveiled* premiered. This version of the show was still primarily focused on weddings, but added a bat mitzvah and a sweet sixteen party to the mix. Also, Tutera and his staff were shown being much more candid and critical of demanding clients. Essentially, the show began to feel just a little bit more like *Bridezillas*. These changes gave *Bridezillas* viewers a place to go when that show ended. The next year, *My Fair Wedding* was rebranded even further, turning into *David Tutera's CELEbrations*, a general event planning show. These programming shifts reflect WE tv's recent efforts to redefine their image, moving away from their identification as "women entertainment" and broadening their appeal to male viewers.

This emphasis on internal content franchises operates around similar principles to the global formats industry. Formats provide producers with tested show concepts and production guidelines. They provide a sense of security to producers and the networks picking up these shows. Similarly, with each iteration of *Say Yes to the Dress* TLC airs the network builds on both the success and the structure of earlier versions of the show. As WE tv rebrands its David Tutera programming, the network is able to continue its relationships with existing production companies, television personalities, and with viewers, leveraging them as needed to adjust content from year to year. These strategies provide these networks with a mechanism for establishing a successful model of show within programming blocks in their weekly schedule. It

also allows them to tweak particular details as they go, in order to respond to shifts in viewing preferences or changes in the corporate brand.

This structure is, in many ways, fundamental to television as whole. Television has always been dependent on programming that replicates tried and tested genres while simultaneously reconceptualizing these genres in ways that feel new and original. As many television scholars have observed, this programming process, combined with television's established presence in American homes, has broader social, political and ideological implications. Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch argue that television operates as a cultural forum, where ideological issues are regularly commented on rather than conclusively resolved (1983). John Fiske argues that television's many audiences necessitate polysemic content or texts that make multiple meanings available to their audiences (1986). However, on television certain messages are repeated more than others and, despite the many constructions of meaning television makes available, some continually float to the top as dominant norms. Furthermore, as content proliferates and more and more channels become available, viewer's access to the various ideological questions television presents is constrained in new ways. Amanda Lotz reminds us, "television content now represents a broader array of ideas, forms, and peoples than ever before... [however] the simultaneous fragmentation of the audience makes it difficult to assess the cultural consequences of this new diversity" (58). Examining specific reality wedding shows provides important clues to the ways that television content is working to accommodate a range of target audiences and manage viewer fragmentation. In particular, it reveals ways that reality television adapts television's classic content segmentation strategies to build appeals to different audiences into individual shows.

Barry King has described reality television shows as "training camps of the modular"

arguing that reality television offers "redefined mode[s] of appearance and behavior that can be transferred to anyone" (51). Emerging from modular conditions is a sense that different approaches are valid, so long as they work "in a given situation" (King 51). Essentially, maintaining the broader system and some sense of coherence across the multiple configurations is key. However, modular conditions do not simply reflect the contemporary work environment. Reality wedding shows reveal that modularity's reach is much broader, with modularity and continuity working together to organize different ideologies and traditions within a common thematic structure. One of the clearest examples of this process at work can be seen in way reality wedding shows work to accommodate same-sex weddings. However, this is just one indication of the ways that weddings are being reconfigured to address a wider range of consumers and price points while reinforcing existing political, social, and economic systems.

The Wedding Imaginary

The world depicted in bridal media has been positioned as a kind of heterosexual imaginary, a "way of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness" (Ingraham 26). Within this imaginary, the iconic white wedding is "a concentrated site for the operation and reproduction of heterosexuality" (Ingraham 3). This shoring up of heteronormativity is key to Ingraham's argument that romantic myth and the heterosexual imaginary are a "means to secure women's consent to capitalist patriarchal social arrangements" (223).

Renee Sgroi builds on Ingraham's heterosexual imaginary, arguing that reality television mines "the fields of the bridal fantasy" to help produce a "wedding imaginary" (114). The wedding imaginary operates by idealizing consumption and using narrative to bind weddings and commerce (117). In reality wedding shows, the story is not about the couple and their romance

so much as it is about the planning and shopping process leading up to the wedding. Reality television's wedding imaginary does not simply present dream weddings for consumers to emulate, it demonstrates how consumers should shop for these occasions and models the logics which should guide their purchasing decisions.

From Sgroi and Ingraham, two key points emerge: That the ideological imaginary bridal media sustains is deeply intertwined with heteronormativity and that consumption practices are used to reinforce those norms. However, with this work being produced in the late-90s and early-00s, these authors, and much of the connected scholarship on bridal media, do not address the recent efforts by bridal media to produce a more all-encompassing wedding imaginary. Shows like *Say Yes to the Dress* present an imaginary that, at least on the surface, works to hail both women and men, both straight and gay couples, and makes greater effort to represent people of color as well as brides of many different shapes and sizes. To understand the workings of contemporary ideological imaginaries, we need to understand the strategies contemporary television texts are using to address a multiple sets of audiences while, simultaneously, managing these differences and shoring up existing power structures.

Beyond heteronormativity, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *My Fair Wedding*, and *Bridezillas* exemplify what Lisa Duggan calls "the new homonormativity" (50). These shows model a more inclusive version of weddings "that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan 50). Key to this model of normativity is a "depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 50). However, homonormativity represents ideological strategies which go well beyond the mere inclusion of gay and lesbian couples into marriage. The emphasis on individual privacy and freedom is coupled with an emphasis on consumption. More specifically, the emphasis is on consumption as

a means of constructing identity and of participating in social systems and public life. These are models for normative citizenship well beyond issues of gay/straight “equality.”

The contemporary wedding imaginary is being adapted so that it reinforces hetero- and homonormativity. It acknowledges a range of changing norms, while also managing them. This version of the imaginary reflects the “double-entanglement” Angela McRobbie sees in today's post-feminist popular culture. In this context, “[t]he individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices... new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects which are judged responsive to the regime... and those who fail miserably” (36).

McRobbie uses this notion of dual entanglement to explore what she identifies as a new gender regime present in contemporary popular culture, a system of self-monitoring practices and individual purchasing decisions that appropriates the language of choice (34–35). Within this system, self-expression is as much a declaration of belonging, and of a woman’s successful navigation through a system, as it is a genuine moment of individuality.

Shared Desires: The Quest for A Dress

A television program traditionally introduces viewers to a setting, creates a cast of characters to populate that space, and then, week after week, produces problems for these characters to deal with. On commercial television, these narratives are regularly interrupted for commercial breaks, requiring multiple instances of narrative conflict and crisis over the course of an episode in order to preserve dramatic tension over the course of a commercial break. In many ways, the structure of *Say Yes to the Dress* stays true to this model. The original *Say Yes to the Dress* series is set in Kleinfeld Bridal in Manhattan. The bridal salon staff, predominantly women, are the show’s most regular characters. Each episode focuses on the customers coming into Kleinfeld and the staff’s efforts to help these women find a gown. However, despite

recurring appearances by store directors, managers, and bridal consultants, the staff come and go, varying from week to week. The most consistent face on *Say Yes to the Dress* is fashion director Randy Fenoli. Fenoli regularly steps in to help consultants, scold demanding mothers, and style brides. He serves as a consistent and friendly face for Kleinfeld Bridal. However, the show's regulars are not the people the narrative centers on. Instead, each episode focuses on brides entering the salon on that particular "day" searching for The Dress.²⁷

Each episode of *Say Yes to the Dress* introduces 3-4 brides with a linked problem. Dress indecision, too much or too little money to spend, parents with strong fashion opinions... all of these are potential issues for the episode to resolve. While the bride is shopping, moments of indecision or disagreement among the wedding party are emphasized. These mini-crises generate dramatic segments punctuated by moments of conflict and suspense. These form the modules that the show strings together to form an individual episode, gradually building micro-narratives about each bride. Throughout this, Randy and the staff at Kleinfeld's come to the rescue by grabbing gowns, giving advice, and occasionally serving as family therapists.

One of the key differences between traditional television narratives and reality television shows like *Say Yes to the Dress*, is that each episode revolves around the different brides coming *into* the setting. Rather than putting the lives and struggles of regular cast members at the front of the narrative, on *Say Yes to the Dress* a rotating set of real people and their individual needs, bodies, and experiences must be edited *into* the show's storyworld. Whether through the act of buying a gown or translating shopping into a consistent TV narrative, literally and figuratively these women need to be fitted into a product. The difficulties women experience as they attempt

²⁷ Episodes are typically structured to suggest viewers are witnessing one day in the life of the salon. Episodes start with a morning meeting and often end with shots of Kleinfeld Bridal closing down for the night. Nonetheless, it's clear that each episode covers far more than one day at the salon. For example, most episodes feature one woman returning to the alterations department multiple times and then follows her to her wedding.

to translate themselves into these products generate useful moments of conflict for television.

This approach requires that *Say Yes to the Dress* works with the various brides (and families) that come into the bridal salon each week. This creates a need for the narrative to find commonality and coherence across a variety of stories and experiences.

Say Yes to the Dress does this by emphasizing the women's common struggles and shared desires at the beginning and end of every episode. Over and over again, the series reminds viewers that women grow up dreaming of what they'll look like on their wedding day. *Say Yes to the Dress* also takes pains to reassure viewers that all women can be beautiful brides on their wedding day, regardless of their budget, size, skin color, or the gender of their partner. While reinforcing the universality of weddings, the show regularly reminds viewers of the variety of women and families Kleinfeld Bridal works with, the abundance of different gowns they offer, and the prowess of their alterations department. Every bride can have her requisite happy ending.

In choosing women to appear on the show, *Say Yes* producers take care to represent a diverse array of women, body types, and families. While the majority of couples on the show are women marrying men, the show has made a point of putting including same-sex weddings. Producers have even taken steps to recruit same-sex couples to appear on the series, posting casting calls for the show on gay wedding websites (sayyes). With the show set in New York City, the brides are primarily from New York/Tri-state area, but many others fly in from all over the United States and the world. Sonia Saraiya describes *Say Yes* as containing multitudes, "superficial in its fixation on dresses and frippery, but it's broad with its superficiality, which makes it an unexpected cross-section of American society" (AV Club). The majority of women on the show appear to be white, but women of color are a part of most episodes. The brides featured on the show also come in many different shapes and sizes, with the Kleinfeld Bridal

staff regularly emphasizing their plus-sized dress offerings. Women in wheelchairs, veterans, and firefighters, have all been featured on the show (Saraiya). *Say Yes to the Dress* smoothly integrates all of these different women into the show's narrative and generally presents them without comment.

The show's predictable and steady narrative structure is key in this process. To ensure a sense of continuity across its different brides, each episode of *Say Yes to the Dress* relies on consistent editing practices and narrative patterns, moving from bride to bride at similar moments of crisis and indecision. The series regularly emphasizes three narrative elements: linked problems, a love story motivating the wedding, and moments of romantic closure. These are classic romantic story tropes: attraction, conflict, and the happy ending. The generic nature of these elements makes them easily recognizable to audiences and adaptable to a range of women, families and body types. Their continuity in the show's format serves as a means of connecting different women's experiences to a set of shared aspirations and emotions, producing a feeling of universality that links the different women and relationships featured in the series.

Common Problems

Each episode of *Say Yes to the Dress* begins by introducing the issue of the day. The show starts as the narrator introduces a dilemma facing brides as they shop for a dress. In the opening moments of season two's "What a Bride Wants," the narrator declares: "When shopping for your wedding dress, it helps to know what you want. Unless what you want doesn't exist. Your mom may hate what you want. Your dad might love what you hate. Or you could second guess your decision altogether" ("What a Bride Wants"). As the voice-over is heard, the viewer is shown moments from the episode to come, each scene featuring brides and salon employees encountering this problem. After this quick preview, the episode begins. Episodes typically start

with a morning staff meeting. Salon managers brief staff on the women coming in that day, divvy up work, and discuss a particular problem brides encounter when dress shopping. In this way, each episode of *Say Yes to the Dress* is able to quickly reintroduce its setting, place the episode's featured characters within that setting, and generate a conflict that will link brides, their families, and the Kleinfeld's staff together in a shared quest: They need to address the problem and find the bride the perfect dress.

Figure 13: Morning Meeting, Say Yes to the Dress Season 1



In “What a Bride Wants,” the question underlying the narrator’s set up is: What if the bride cannot get what she wants? While this shared issue is being introduced by the narrator and the managers at the staff meeting, the show is already working to highlight differences between these brides and set up their individual story-arcs. From brief preview shots accompanying the narration, the viewer gains insights into each bride— one learns the dress she has in mind does

not exist, and the two other brides know which dress they want but are struggling to please their parents. *Say Yes to the Dress* suggests that each of these brides have their own obstacles to overcome, positioning each woman's quest as a mini-narrative for viewers to follow. However, the show is also careful to remind viewers that these smaller narrative arcs are still part of a larger struggle, it links these individual quests together to create a sense of cultural coherence and shared desires.

This continuity is also a safety net for the show to fall back on and a strategy for managing its different viewers. With the brides on the show hailing different audiences, individual viewers may not always feel connected to a particular bride and her problems. However, since the show has already previewed the range of women being featured in the same episode, viewers have the option of simply shifting their focus elsewhere. If one bride's approach to weddings does not appeal, if the viewer does not share a bride's individual taste and style, there are always other brides available to hold a viewer's interest. In this way, the differences the show features can still be managed, ultimately serving to reinforce the universality of marriage and weddings across various demographic categories. Whether the bride is wearing pants, looking for a red wedding dress, paying for a couture gown, or marrying another woman, all of these individuals come together to be brides and to reinforce the importance of marriage to ensuring a couple's long-term happiness and stability.

Love Stories

While introducing the different brides and individualizing their stories, *Say Yes to the Dress* takes care to reinforce the romance motivating the wedding. Women's individual approaches to marriage may be different but love is positioned as a universal motivating factor. On *Say Yes to the Dress*, each bride comes into Kleinfeld Bridal with a love story and a budget.

After the episode previews the problem of the day, these are the first pieces of information the viewer learns about each bride.

Significantly, the time each episode devotes to the brides' love stories has lengthened over the years. In early seasons of the show, introductions were handled very efficiently. To introduce each bride, a simple title card appeared on the screen. The display included a photo of the couple and listed the bride's shopping budget. With each additional season, this introduction has been given greater time. By season three, the bride's introduction and love story had become a featured moment in each episode. Now, after greeting the entire wedding party, *Say Yes to the Dress* makes a point of showing a bridal consultant walking the bride into a private dressing area and asking the bride to relate her individual love story.

Figure 14: Information on the Couple in Season One



During this segment in the narrative, the bride explains explain who she is engaged to, how they fell in love, and why they know their partner is “the one.” As she tells her story, images of the couple appear on the screen, providing a visual marker of their relationship. After leaving the louder and more open space of the salon's showroom behind, this moment is quiet, typically shot medium-close, and told directly to a Kleinfeld consultant in the smaller confines of the private dressing room. This moment introduces the bride to the viewer as an individual while also reinforcing the idea that she, like all brides, has found the perfect partner and is ready to mark this right-of-passage with a wedding.

With the bride's voice telling the viewer about her love for her partner and sense of completion and happiness, this moment provides viewers with an opportunity to form a more intimate connection with this specific bride. These stories provide romantic context, a motivation to drive the narrative forward, and gives the search for a dress emotional stakes. The impediments this bride faces on her quest are placed in parallel with her search for a life partner. Her hours in the bridal salon gain deeper meaning. The bride needs the right dress, the dress that makes her feel good about herself and reinforces the sense of completion she feels with her partner. In the process, the problems a bride confronts while shopping become symbolic of larger issues that might threaten the partners' romantic relationship and the bride's moment of self-fulfillment as she walks down the aisle and attains her happy ending.

Moments of Closure

With each episode of *Say Yes to the Dress* featuring multiple protagonists, each character's narrative arc offers its own instance of narrative resolution. Typically, individual brides finish the episode standing in the salon, surrounded by friends, family, and the Kleinfeld Bridal staff. The bridal consultants “pop the question” to each woman, asking if this is, indeed,

The Dress. The women say yes, cry, hug their families, and beam happily at the camera. At this point the bride's major problems have been resolved and her particular micro-narrative has come to a close. However, most of these brides are still months away from actually putting on their dress and getting married.

Figure 15: Saying Yes to the Dress in Season 10



With so many different brides featured on the show, and with most of their stories ending in advance of the actual wedding, the conclusion of these quests could have a loose and unfixed quality. *Say Yes to the Dress* works hard to manage this. Each shopping experience ends with the staff putting the bride in a veil and handing her a prop bouquet to pose with. The bride's decision to buy is structured so that it echoes both a proposal and wedding vows— “Do you say yes, to the dress?” “I do!” Nonetheless, the viewer does not see the actual “ending” with this bride walking down the aisle. This poses two problems for the series to deal with: First, if each episode begins with a love story, generic convention calls more a more recognizable romantic ending.

Second, if each bride's journey ends with a successful purchase, rather than the marriage itself, this risks undermining the emphasis reality wedding shows place on love and love as a justification for consumption.

To resolve these problems, the moments of resolution in each bride's micro-narrative are accompanied by one primary moment of closure. Towards the end of each episode, *Say Yes to the Dress* introduces a final bride. In contrast to all the brides just shopping for a dress, this woman is going through final alterations and preparing to walk down the aisle. For regular viewers, this bride may be someone they met in a previous episode. For less consistent viewers, the show assists by quickly recapping the bride's story and re-introducing her dress. Significantly, this bride is often slipped into the episode mid-way. She is the final module in the episode's overall structure and her storyline can feel quite disconnected from the episode's other lines of conflict. Yes, she is nervous about the fit of the dress or about some custom alteration she has selected, but this is a bride who has already said yes. The overriding sense is that her journey is on the brink of being concluded. In this way, the wedding imaginary the show constructs is able to jump forward in time, drawing one continuous line between the prospective brides' purchases and one particular bride's happily ever after.

Even though this bride slips into the story partway, she is the one who comes forward to conclude the story. Now, at the close of the episode, the viewer is presented with one final romantic ending, set to a montage of shots from the wedding itself. Typically, the bride and her partner stand arm in arm before the camera and tell the viewer how special the wedding was, how perfectly the dress fit, how special she looked on her wedding day, and how pleased she and her partner are with her purchase. These affirmations come hand in hand with the reminders of how happy the couple is to be starting their lives together. By focusing on this highly traditional

ending, the show skips over the earlier brides-in-progress, skips over any dress shopping failures, and highlights the successful conclusion of a single bride's quest. The ending focuses on her completed "look" on her wedding day and her successful transition into the role of bride.

This move is a kind of ideological release valve for each episode, managing any suspense around an individual bride's ending and reaffirming the connection between the purchase and a broader wedding imaginary. After presenting a common problem and a variety of different ways brides deal with it, the show selectively fast-forwards to one bride and one highly familiar ending. The modular strands of the show's narrative are pulled together to produce the image of a satisfied customer and romantic completion. In doing this, *Say Yes to the Dress* presents a more accommodating version of weddings while still consistently maintaining marriage as a critical rite of passage in women's lives. Despite the sense that there are many different ways to navigate the journey, in the end one bride steps forward to stand for the rest and signify where each of these women are heading. The wedding remains the protagonist's happy ending but is also an ideological balancing act. In this way, *Say Yes to the Dress* reaffirms the significance of marriage, while allowing space for different metrics of success, beauty, family, and partnership.

In his analysis of reality television's modular conditions, Barry King emphasizes contemporary work conditions. King argues that competitive reality television shows model the modularity of the current labor market, and the contemporary worker's need to continually adopt new skills and adapt to different labor contexts (2006). In the context of *Say Yes to the Dress*, this modularity can be seen in relation to other types of labor. In particular, the unacknowledged forms of labor often associated with women. These include, consumption, production of the self, and managing social and domestic settings. In the context of a reality wedding show like *Say Yes to the Dress*, these types of labor explicitly intersect with the cultural norms and social systems

structuring domestic settings. What *Say Yes to the Dress* models is romantic modularity. Or, more broadly, ideological modularity. Romantic modularity models a more flexible and adaptable romantic script. One where certain constitutive components are variable and where the script makes room for different budgets, tastes, and lifestyles, while the overall system remains coherent. By focusing on smart shopping, linking purchases to self-expression and individuality, and by modeling negotiations between family and friends, these more modular courtship narratives can accommodate conflicting political viewpoints, religious and cultural traditions, and vastly different spending budgets, while still maintaining the coherence of the underlying system.

Continuity and modularity serve two functions here: First, they serve as persuasive tools, integrating broader and more varied depictions of brides, bridal beauty, and weddings into an existing wedding industry. *Say Yes to the Dress* reminds viewers that goth brides love their partners as much as beauty queens do. A large-sized bride? No problem, we'll find a designer that makes dresses for you! The bride's culture doesn't wear white at weddings? Great! We have a dress for that too! The market is flexible enough to meet a range of needs and expressions of love and beauty. As long as the bride is buying a dress, and can pay for alterations, her needs can be accommodated.

Here a second function of continuity comes into view. Continuity and a sense of shared experience also operate as hegemonic tools. Continuity reinforces marriage as an institution, organizes the wedding process around consumption, and sets limits on what a beautiful bride looks like. On *Say Yes to the Dress*, being married and being a beautiful bride is available to anyone who can (literally) buy into the system. This is an important reminder that marriage, in and of itself, remains a marker of privilege and status in American society. At the state and

federal level, marriage secures child custody rights, insurance and tax breaks, immigration rights, visitation rights, access to social services, among many others (Ingraham 239-241).

In this sense, we might think about reality television's modularity as providing a framework that accommodates shifting ideals and social norms. In this way it echoes contemporary markets and the increased availability of a range of goods and services, distributed globally and relying on digital technologies and networks to coordinate them. The modular structure addresses the desires of multiple viewing demographics and incorporates an array of sanctioned niche markets. In the process, retail and the massive warehouses of global big-business are positioned as the allies of women, diversity, and acceptance. This modularity then folds these varied approaches to weddings back towards continuity and into traditional social, political, and economic power structures.

As viewers watch brides say “I do” to a dress and then witness one final bride wearing her dress down an aisle, the viewer is watching the conclusion of a romance (as the show has constructed it) and of a romanticized shopping experience. On *Say Yes to the Dress*, the process of purchasing a dress and selecting a partner are collapsed together. This move is an additional way of depicting a more varied and accommodating version of weddings and partnership. Every bride needs a different dress, *their* dress. Also implied in this is the idea that different women aspire to different partners. What is important is that the bride is happy and that her vision for her wedding is realized.

In order to find this happiness, however, a bride needs to be a good shopper. The saddest possible ending on *Say Yes to the Dress* is the rare moment when a woman leaves the salon without finding a dress. These are moments that stand out within the series. Rather than (literally) standing on a pedestal and saying yes, these women are shown walking forlornly

through the lobby of the salon, opening the doors, and leaving empty handed. The failure is typically placed on the bride, her friends, and her family. As the dress-less bride exits, the narrator, or a Kleinfeld staffer, comments on the bride and her problems. The market has not failed the bride. Instead, the bride's failure might be her family's fault— a mother or sister might be too pushy, trying to dictate the bride's day for her. Or, the show tells us the bride is being too picky, too indecisive, too accommodating... the list goes on and on. Sometimes, the bride is guilty of going to Kleinfeld Bridal for something the store cannot provide. Or, she is suspected of not being a serious shopper. These circumstances all circle back to the bride. Savvy shoppers know when to negotiate with family and when to stand firm. Savvy shoppers know their budgets and scale their expectations accordingly. In each of these scenarios, the women are guilty of being bad consumers. Their failure is that they do not know how to properly budget, plan, or adjust their needs according to the supplies a store has. They shop badly.

These moments are momentary blips in *Say Yes to the Dress*'s overall narrative flow. Since each episode has 2 or 3 other brides to focus on, the failed shopping experiences become instructive moments. They are aberrations surrounded by tales of successful purchases. These moments signal the threat underlying reality wedding shows. A failed shopping experience signals unresolved problems, issues that, if left unresolved, may threaten the entire romance.

Consumption, contracts, and economic negotiations have always been at the core of courtship. Satisfying romantic desires, along with economic needs, is a privilege. However, within the context of *Say Yes to the Dress*, being able to be a "good" shopper is also a privilege. For plus-sized brides, options are available, but only with designers willing to offer special sizes and for brides who are able to special-order a dress to fit them. The show's ability to accept and accommodate difference is highly contingent on budget. The women who choose to shop at

Kleinfeld Bridal are clearly not representative of all American brides. Located in Manhattan and with dresses that can cost over \$10,000, Kleinfeld Bridal prides itself on offering an upscale shopping experience where the starting price for gowns is roughly \$1800 (Geller 219). The show's narrative also works to focus more on individual fault than on the industry's high costs. This is one way reality wedding shows manage potential ruptures in their message of acceptance and accessibility. As I will discuss next, another way to manage shopping failure is to blame it on a bride's lack of taste and stage a rescue that relieves her of the responsibility of shopping.

Contemporary Heroines: Bad vs. Good Shoppers

On *Say Yes to the Dress*, the staff at Kleinfeld Bridal are the experts, but their role is to enable the bride and empower her to make smart shopping decisions. On WE tv's *My Fair Wedding*, well-known celebrity event planner David Tutera also serves as a kind of life-coach for brides. However, instead highlighting the bride and showing how she manages the shopping and selection process, *My Fair Wedding* is positioned as a kind of intervention and rescue for brides. *Say Yes to the Dress* stresses individual choices and self-expression, while *My Fair Wedding* is much more focused on achieving a particular standard for taste, beauty, and femininity. While *Say Yes to the Dress* obfuscates class, promising a gown for any budget, in *My Fair Wedding* economic limitations are much more evident. The brides on *My Fair Wedding* want to achieve their dream wedding, but a David Tutera wedding is something they are unable to access on their own. The show manages this problem by repositioning it. Rather than the wedding imaginary being inaccessible to brides on a budget, *My Fair Wedding* suggests that the brides are being limited in other ways. In particular, by their lack of taste, style, and shopping savvy.

Shopping Failures: Issues of Taste and Authority

At the beginning of each episode of *My Fair Wedding*, two things happen: First, Tutera

introduces himself to the bride and groom. Next, Tuteru sends the groom away so that Tuteru can spend time with the bride and learn about “her vision” for the wedding. As Tuteru shakes the groom’s hand and bids him farewell, Tuteru promises that the bride will “be in good hands” and that he will make sure she is given the wedding she desires.

The groom’s departure and Tuteru’s arrival serves as a kind of ceremonial handover, with authority being transferred from one male to another. This is not simply a transfer of authority, however. The moment also hints at the reality that the bride’s partner and her family are unable to support her in the planning process. While *My Fair Wedding* often frames the bride’s failure as struggles with taste and judgment, the reality is that cost also limits the bride’s plans. *My Fair Wedding* passes over these realities by turning them into character building traits that simply make a bride more worthy of being rescued by Tuteru. Either because of budget or because of a failure of style and taste, the bride needs a man with greater economic and cultural capital to step in for her to have her dream wedding.

On *My Fair Wedding*, the brides are bad shoppers, their taste is questionable, and their friends and family are either embarrassed by the plans for the wedding or are enabling the bride’s poor choices. Three weeks before the wedding, Tuteru takes over. Tuteru arrives on the bride’s doorstep, assesses her theme, surveys her purchases, then informs the viewers of all the things she has done wrong. These early scenes in the episode can be awkward. The bride is excited, in love, filled with ideas for her big day, and nervous about what Tuteru will think. Tuteru sits with the bride in her home, surrounded by items that often appear to have been purchased at a low-cost party supply or craft store. Brightly colored, heavy on glitter, and put together with glue sticks, before Tuteru intervenes, these are home-made weddings and clearly put together with an eye for cost more than style. Tuteru’s job is to help the bride transcend her limitations (both

economic and stylistic).

The premise of *My Fair Wedding* is that Tuteria and his team will use their expertise and industry connections to completely re-work the wedding and save the bride from disaster. Rather than watching the bride navigate herself through a series of choices, on *My Fair Wedding* the viewer watches as the bride has control taken away from her for her own good. Since she does not have the skills or finances to shop, someone else needs to shop for her.

Figure 16: Tuteria Meets with Quiana, "Discount Store Bride"



Like *Say Yes to the Dress*, here the narrative takes on modular qualities. On *My Fair Wedding*, however, it feels more like a shopping list identifying the constitutive parts which make up the wedding. Tuteria identifies elements of the wedding that need to be replaced. Then, for each one, the bride is shown a select set of new options. The wedding elements Tuteria focuses on vary from week to week, with different pieces swapping in and out as needed. (And when promotional arrangements are made with various wedding suppliers.) One bride may need a new gown, while another is allowed to keep her dress. Depending on the theme Tuteria wants

for the wedding, different novelties and extras will also be introduced: custom cocktails, live bands, custom ice cream flavors, or personalized shoes are all possibilities. With these elements changing from week to week, *My Fair Wedding* reinforces the idea that weddings are customizable and that, with the help of the wedding industry, every bride can have her own special, and lightly personalized wedding.

Personalized, however, is different from unique self-expression. Particularly given Tuter's insistence that there "are subtle ways of telling her story, while making sure the event still feels like a gorgeous wedding" (Kowalski). On *My Fair Wedding*, choice is not up to the bride. She has options, but each episode begins by establishing her inability to manage these choices on her own. Instead, the bride, accompanied by Tuter, tries out the options he makes available and expresses her options. Tuter watches her reaction, takes mental notes, reminds her that he alone knows what will work best with his vision for her wedding, and informs her that he will choose the best option. Then, Tuter whisks her away to their next shopping destination and to her next series of choices. In *My Fair Wedding*, these choices gradually add up to a "good" wedding. Here, the modules are a reminder that, in order for a wedding to be legible and to acquire social status, you need to invest in particular components. Making these items yourself is not enough, not unless you have the right skills and training.

With Tuter at the center of the show's narrative, he maintains authority over the wedding imaginary *My Fair Wedding* constructs. There are norms and these brides need to fit into them. On the surface, Tuter's approach is fairly gentle. The David Tuter who interacts with the bride and her family is complimentary, friendly, and sympathetic. The viewer, however, sees a very different version of Tuter. When speaking to the camera, Tuter is much more blunt and highly critical of brides' purchases and overall taste. In this way, the show aligns the viewers with

Tutera, placing them in a position of omniscient superiority over the bride. Evoking a Cinderella-story, Tutera talks about how lovely, kind, and deserving these brides are. Morally, they are deserving of his time and skills. They may have bad taste, but he can rescue them and help them acquire the taste and shopping savvy they need to transcend their problems and advance in the world.

Transformation

Much like the staff on *Say Yes to the Dress*, on *My Fair Wedding* Tutera also acts as counselor and confidant to each bride. He helps brides find absent parents to walk them down the aisle and tries to identify and deliver on the bride's wedding dreams. (After, of course, eliminating the ideas he does not approve of and reinterpreting her vision so that it is "appropriate.") Tutera's criticisms typically focus on the wedding's lack of taste and style. This is particularly important to the show's transformative premise. *My Fair Wedding* is a direct reference to *My Fair Lady*. On this show, each bride is Eliza Doolittle and Tutera is their Professor Higgins. Tutera's job is to transform her into a lady who matches the occasion.

The Pygmalion aspects of the show are most evident in the show's first season. Early episodes of the show include lessons in general etiquette, table manners, and proper hostessing for each bride. In "Jennifer Coppola," the second episode of the show, Jennifer's dream is to be a princess for a day. In response Tutera arranges a pre-wedding training session. Tutera and Jennifer sit down to a five-course dinner and practice session, "to really make her the princess that she should be" ("Jennifer Coppola"). As they eat, Tutera explains the table settings and corrects her whenever she uses the wrong fork. Within the structure of the show, these training sessions are just another module within the wedding planning process. Like the other items on the shopping list, the right manners are just as necessary as the gown, the cake and the bouquet.

In later seasons, Tuterá's coaching becomes more subtle. Rather than explicitly training brides in etiquette, the show settles for gentler nudges. In season 5, Tuterá and Kristina face off over her tattoos ("Goth Bride"). She wants to show them off, Tuterá insists that tattoos are inappropriate at a wedding. Kristina also wants to wear a black wedding dress. Tuterá convinces her to compromise on a white dress with black details. The shift away from dedicated training sessions underscores the reality that each piece of the shopping process is already its own type of training module. From table linens to table cards, each shopping excursion can also be used to significance of a bride's fabric selections or to explain the differences between escort and place cards ("Caroline, 'Bling Bride'"; "Quiana, 'Discount Store Bride'").

A common statement made by brides and grooms on *My Fair Wedding* is that the "whole experience has been magical," that Tuterá "transported us to another place" or that he "gave me everything I ever asked for and more" ("Krocket, 'Merlot Bride'"; "Varneka Edwards, 'The Golden Bride'"; "Belly Dancer Bride"). These statements are a reminder that these brides were unable to plan for the wedding they were given. They did not have the skills or finances to aspire to a wedding of this scope and size. It also suggests that the wedding they received was not actually the wedding they were looking for. The "dream wedding" Tuterá delivers may represent dreams a bride does not know she has or wants. Tuterá gets a sense of "her vision" in order to channel and adapt it into an expression of identity that meets his standards.

While Tuterá approaches each bride as a truth-talking friend and confidant, he is also a white, male, celebrity wedding planner. The camera continually defers to his authority, giving him the final word on the bride's ideas and choices. As Tuterá talks with the bride, the camera regularly cuts back to him so the viewer can see his reactions. These scenes with the bride are also interspersed with private interviews with Tuterá where he tells the viewer what he really

thinks. These moments remind the viewer that Tuteru belongs at the high-cost events he creates. The bride, however, may only be a princess until midnight.

Tasteful Modularity

Historically, weddings mark an important rite of passage for women. A wedding can signal a woman's readiness to be a mother and head her own household, as well as a transfer of responsibility over her from father to husband. As a rite of passage, contemporary weddings are also moments where the bride can rebrand her identity and establish who she is as a married woman. On *Say Yes to the Dress*, the gown is positioned as an expression of the bride's best self, something already within her. On *My Fair Wedding*, the focus is on transforming real women into "real" ladies. The segmented narrative structure, populated with different wedding components, display elements of modularity and suggests a more personalized wedding fantasy. Here however, the limitations of modularity and the market's insistence on norms are much more evident.

Rather than an endless stream of brides entering the store with different goals and needs each week, on *My Fair Wedding* a single bride is highlighted, and her choices are narrowed for her own good. The limited selections a bride looks at distract the viewer (and the brides) from the reality that each wedding vendor has been pre-determined for them based on a series of contractual arrangements and embedded product endorsements. From one episode to another, elegance, style and a general continuity of taste are maintained. However, this is a much more overtly normative version of continuity than the version shown on *Say Yes to the Dress*. On *My Fair Wedding*, modularity can clearly be seen as a closing down of options and as an effort at condensing self-expression down to the purchasing of particular (pre-vetted) goods.

These restrictions are positioned as being for the good of the bride. Rather than acknowledging that these brides lack the finances or time to access a so-called “quality” wedding, the show more often emphasizes a bride’s inability to manage the planning process. Unlike the bad shoppers on *Say Yes to the Dress*, however, the brides on *My Fair Wedding* are women who are guilty of having (quite literally) poor taste.

The White Wedding Imaginary

A wedding is an investment in the future but *My Fair Wedding* reminds us that there are barriers to entry and success. When compared to *Say Yes to the Dress*, this is a much more overt and directive approach to weddings. However, it is important to consider the kinds of women featured on each of these shows. *Say Yes to the Dress* offers the appearance of diversity, but simply entering Kleinfeld Bridal suggests that those brides have certain degree of cultural and financial capital. On *My Fair Wedding*, the weddings feel much more home grown. Until Tuteru replaces them, the venues are often church basements and school gymnasiums. Also important, over half of the women on *My Fair Wedding* appear to be women of color. Tuteru has a history of advocating for greater diversity in bridal media, including pushing to feature a black model on the cover of *Bridal Guide* magazine in 2012 (Brydum; Sainato). Black women constitute “loyal members of his fan base and a dedicated portion of his television following” (Stodghill).

This complicates the work Tuteru is doing and the problems that *My Fair Wedding* is trying to address. These are not simply women with poor taste who cannot attain the wedding imaginary on their own. Many of these women are struggling with a specifically *white* wedding imaginary— a system in which taste is a marker of racial, ethnic, and class privilege. This complicates Tuteru’s authority as a tastemaker. On one hand, as a successful white male, he plays the role of benevolent rescuer well and reinforces the traditional lines of privilege and access. On

the other hand, Tuttera has been very public about his homosexuality, his marriage and divorce from his partner, and, now, his status as a single parent. Tuttera has spoken openly about his middle-class upbringing and the racial politics of the school system in his home town. He explains, “as a gay male, who grew up in school [with] no one to go to, and felt challenged as a minority myself, I felt that there’s a connection to these women” (Stodghill). The comparison Tuttera draws between his own experiences and those of his black female fans is too tidy. However, the reality facing many of the women featured on *My Fair Wedding* is that they are struggling with issues of taste and access. They are struggling with them because taste is a marker of privilege and inclusion, as much as it is some indication aesthetic sensibilities. Given this, each time Tuttera reveals another successful bride, who just happens to be a woman of color, the show also inserts a broader range of women into the wedding imaginary. The catch, of course, is that while it resolves the problem of access, it does so by dodging the political, racial, and economic issues that are built into this imaginary.

Ultimately, *My Fair Wedding* presents an extreme version of what happens when a couple chooses to get married. From the venue to the cake, a wedding is controlled as much by the couple’s finances and social circumstances as it is by their desires for the day. The show’s framework adds a sense of excitement and risk for the viewer— will the bride be happy? Will Tuttera pick what she wants? — However, in the process, the show also sets a bar for what is and is not acceptable at a wedding. *My Fair Wedding* continually reinforces the idea that spending money is the only way to be a happy bride and have a successful wedding. Anything less than an extravagant wedding is a failure.

Within the reality *Say Yes to the Dress* constructs, the viewer returns again and again to the issue of budget. The weddings on *Say Yes to the Dress* may reflect modular social conditions,

but *My Fair Wedding* reminds us that modular social conditions are, more accurately, package deals organized at specific price points. Brides have the option to customize and adapt norms, budget permitting. If a woman wants her relationship to be recognized, and given social and legal legitimacy, saying yes to the right dress, and purchasing the other required items for her wedding, are the only options.

In saving these brides and giving them the “quality” wedding of their supposed dreams, *My Fair Wedding* conveniently sidesteps the issue of income and manages the contradiction between the “proper” way to be a bride and the reality that these women are unable to present themselves as proper ladies on their own. The reality is that, without the necessary economic and cultural capital, there are no choices available to these brides at all. For women who do not have the capital, the makeover and rescue story offered by *My Fair Wedding* operates as a kind of ideological release valve. In the imaginary, good women are always rewarded. David Tutera weddings are extravagant moments of magical intervention. But what about all the women who do not win the lottery? This is where the figure of the bridezilla begins to appear.

Bridezillas: Stepping Away from the Imaginary

The opening credits of *Bridezillas* focus on a bride and her wedding party. Decked out in classic bridal whites and blues, they present an iconic bridal scene. The bride (white, slim, attractive) holds her bouquet and, for a moment, smiles beatifically at the camera. Then the tone shifts, the music crashes, and the bride... snarls. Over the next thirty seconds the bride hurls platters of caviar across the room and slices apart ice sculptures with the help of chainsaw-wielding bridesmaids.²⁸

²⁸ These were the show’s opening credits from seasons 2 – 4.



Figure 17: Images from Bridezillas Opening Credits Season 2-4

Bridezillas began in 2001 as a small show on Cablevision's MetroTV, a New York City-area cable network (Traister; "Bridezillas"). After airing there, it was repackaged as a one-hour special for FOX in January 2004 (Traister). Finally, it moved to WE tv where it quickly became one of their most successful shows. The first season exclusively produced for WE tv (technically, the second season) was the "highest rated original series in WE's history ("Bridezillas' Returns as WE Orders Season 3.>"). In 2005, as primetime viewership for WE tv's original content increased dramatically, the network's increased its investment in wedding-themed content ("WE in Greenlight Mode"). This led to a series of programming blocks featuring shows like *Rich Bride Poor Bride* and the previously discussed *My Fair Wedding*. In October 2013, *Bridezillas* wrapped up its tenth and final season.

Each episode of *Bridezillas* focuses on 2-3 different brides. The women's storylines are staggered and the seasons take on a serial structure as a result. Typically, each episode continues 1-2 brides' storylines, while also introducing a new one. This narrative structure carries the viewer from one episode to the next. It helps the show reward repeat viewers and also makes it an easy series for WE tv to air in extended programming blocks, with older episodes leading into the new one on Sunday nights. *Bridezillas* thrives on high emotions and outbursts of temper. Typically, each segment in the narrative focuses on one particular bridal meltdown, before transitioning to another bride and the next loss of temper. This fits well with the show's serial qualities, allowing *Bridezillas* to jump from one outburst to another, with tension always rising and the viewer always waiting to see what happens next.

Bridezillas also relies heavily on narration. Each episode begins by introducing (or reintroducing) the brides. Like *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Bridezillas* also has the bride tell her love story. The viewer is introduced to her partner and the bride and groom talk about their attraction

to each other. On *Bridezillas*, however, the tone of the love story is more sarcastic and skeptical than it is romantic. In season two, when Adrianna and her fiancé Jason are introduced, the narrator's tone is biting. The viewer is told that Adrianna and Jason were engaged after three dates and are planning their wedding in less than a month ("Adrianna/Jada/Antonella"). While the viewer learns about the couple, candid shots of Adrianna and Jason shopping shown. Once the viewer learns about the couple, the narrator begins to set up the problems and meltdowns to come. There is footage of Adrianna crying and complaining about a dirty wedding dress. The footage cuts to an interview with Adrianna's mother Brenda who confides that Adrianna "can be a bitch sometimes, let me tell you" ("Adrianna/Jada/Antonella"). The pacing of the edits quickens and tension rises as the narrator lists the various things going wrong with Adrianna's wedding and proclaims her a "Bridezilla!" After the viewer gets a taste of Adrianna's story, the episode moves to the next bride, using similar strategies to introduce this next couple.

Bridezillas stands apart from the other popular reality wedding shows discussed in this chapter. On *Say Yes to the Dress* and *My Fair Wedding*, brides are narrative problems that the staff at Kleinfeld Bridal or Tuteria and his team work to fix. In these two shows, the bridal industry works to facilitate the perfect wedding for a bride. In contrast, on *Bridezillas* the narrative focuses on the bride herself and her fight to get to the altar. Even on the wedding day, when the bride finally walks down the aisle, this is no wedding imaginary.

Typically in bridal media, the "insistent focus on consumption... illustrates consumerism's centrality within the wedding imaginary" (Sgroi 120). On *Bridezillas*, consumerism remains central, but in this context it does not facilitate a sense of the imaginary. Instead, *Bridezillas* revels in an anti-imaginary. *Bridezillas* follows brides from one bridal boutique to another and from wedding shower to bachelorette party. On this series, the viewer

watches as disappointments and frustrations begin to overwhelm the bride.

The conflicts and bridal eruptions highlighted in the show are frequently caused by vendor problems. For example, in season two, despite her repeated requests to the bridal shop, Antonella's veil is still not detachable (“Adrianna/Jada/Antonella”). In the next episode, Gretchen's mother-in-law gets a flat tire on her rental car and the bride spends hours on the phone dealing with customer service representatives (“Jada/Antonella/Gretchen”). Then, Jada enters the reception hall the day before her wedding and discovers that the decorator she hired has barely begun to work on the space (“Jada/Antonella/Gretchen”). Rather than emphasizing how a bride's smart purchasing decisions help her produce her own wedding imaginary, *Bridezillas* instead illustrates consumerism's central role in the bride's misery.

Monstrous Women

Bridezillas is not kind to its brides. The narrator gleefully points out the women's flaws and anticipates their eruptions. Scenes with emotional brides are complemented by shots of family members, friends, and partners shaking their heads and sighing in exasperation. The refrain repeated again and again by friends and family is that the bride is usually a nice person, that they love her, but that this wedding has turned her into a monster. On *Bridezillas*, the bride's monstrosity is emphasized through her appearance and inability to control her emotions.

During the introductory love stories on *Say Yes to the Dress*, both the brides and their family members have clearly taken great care with their appearance and makeup. The introductions on *Say Yes to the Dress* are shot in prepared dressing rooms and in small interview areas, all carefully lit and staged to flatter the individual being recorded. On *My Fair Wedding* the first meeting between the couple and David Tutera does not take place on a set, but the scene still feels carefully lit and the couples appear to have taken care both with their appearance and

to make their homes look clean and appealing. In contrast, on *Bridezillas* everything feels much more roughly thrown together. The brides appear in everyday clothes and much less carefully prepared locations. During one segment in Adrianna and Jason's story, the viewer sees Adrianna wearing sweat pants, hair pulled up in a messy bun and looking as if she has just gotten out of bed. On *Bridezillas*, mascara runs, carefully curled hair droops, and the bride's clothes rarely flatter her. If the camera can capture back fat, arm flab, or muffin tops it will. Many of the brides on *Bridezillas* appear to be lower-middle class. They are often women of color. Many of the brides on *Bridezillas* are overweight. Overall, these are women who do not fit into the dominant image of bridal beauty and the series makes sure the viewer sees this.

Bridezillas could be seen as playing a disciplinary role. The series works carefully to depict its brides in the most unflattering light possible. Erica Engstrom argues that the *Bridezillas* series "creates a[n] image of not only stressed-out brides but of women in general as being immature, out of control, and, most important[ly], not men. Rather than showing the brides as strong and confident women," Engstrom argues, "this program actually demeans them" (Engstrom, "Hegemony in Reality-Based TV Programming" 11). However, reading *Bridezillas* as demeaning to women is too easy. Certainly, the show's narrator regularly comments on brides' petulance, spoiled nature, and emotional outbursts. The entire show is built on the premise that this is not the way good brides and good women are supposed to behave. However, the show's success is also entirely dependent on its departure from other reality wedding shows. For the premise of *Bridezillas* to work, these brides must fail at proper feminine behavior.

The viewer tunes in to see the monsters at play. These brides are rarely punished for their actions. Their partners are exhausted and their families exasperated, but these couples usually still get married. Despite her complete disregard for propriety, it is rare that a bridezilla is so

monstrous that she's left at the altar. When watching *Bridezillas*, the narrator's tone is biting, but it is also an invitation to viewers. The narrator voice rises in anticipation as tension increases and encourages viewers to take pleasure in each and every emotional outburst. When compared to David Tintera's patronizing tone and blunt criticism, it is hard to deny the ferocity and power of a bridezilla. Rather than seeing the *Bridezillas* series as demeaning to women, I argue that the way *Bridezillas* positions its brides is much more complicated. On *Bridezillas*, audiences revel in these women's failures. *Bridezillas* needs its brides to lose control over their emotions.

This desire to watch women struggle and fail to be perfect brides reflects a complicated set of social hierarchies in America today. *My Fair Wedding* and *Say Yes to the Dress* emphasize the fantasy wedding and position the mass-market as women's greatest ally in her efforts to have a dream wedding. In contrast, *Bridezillas* highlights the market's failures. It does this in two ways: First, *Bridezillas* shows the viewer the financial realities that block many women from being able to afford feminine ideals. In season 8, Gloria has problems with her veil ("Gloria and Tricia"). It is not clear if the veil was poorly made or if Gloria ripped it. What is clear is that Gloria does not want and, quite possibly, cannot manage the cost of a second one. *Bridezillas* keeps an eye on their budgets. When things go wrong, their anxiety shows.

However, it is rarely clear that the inability to pay is the sole motivator of a bride's anger. *Bridezillas* also makes it clear that these women are paying for their weddings. Gloria is angry about her veil, but we also see her taking out her purse and paying the store owner the cost for her exchanged veil. On *Bridezillas*, women go from one store to another and fight with the store clerks at each and every stop. Unlike *Say Yes to the Dress*, in the world of *Bridezillas*, the market does not provide these women with what they need and there are not options available for each and every wedding budget. As much as the show tries to manage these failures and suggest that

being a bridezilla indicates internal flaws, the monstrous bride nearly always emerges as a response to the market's failure to meet her needs.

Anger from Below

To talk more about what is happening in *Bridezillas* I want to return to the show's opening credits. Earlier I described the opening shot in the credits as an image that established an iconic bridal scene. In this visual, the viewer is presented with the heterosexual and wedding imaginaries described by both Chrys Ingraham and Renee Sgroi. The wedding party, the dress, the bride's clear skin and beautiful glow... These images conjure that sense of the romantic and the sacred. Until, of course, flames begin to shoot from the bride's mouth.

There is something else that is important about these images. The scene presented in the credits is very different from the actual brides and weddings shown on *Bridezillas*. With her passed appetizers and caviar, swan ice sculptures, perfectly tailored wedding gown, and flawless makeup, the woman in the credits is *not* a generic bridezilla bride. Instead, she's an ideal. This is a wealthy bride and an expensive wedding. Rather than seeing this as simply a wedding imaginary, it should also be recognized as a fantasy that very few women on *Bridezillas* can actually obtain.

The heterosexual imaginary Ingraham defines is one that works "to organize gender while preserving racial, class, and sexual hierarchies" (26). These hierarchies play out in the shift from *Bridezillas'* credit sequence into the actual show. The brides on *Bridezillas* are not generic but specific. They have credit card debt, cellulite, and annoying ex-husbands. The brides on *Bridezillas* are often working class, women of color, or the daughters of immigrants. The bridal shops these women go to are typically retail stores located in strip malls, very different spaces than the elegant boutiques and gilded banquet halls featured on *Say Yes to the Dress* and *My Fair*

Wedding. To understand the complicated social tensions *Bridezillas* gives voice to it is crucial to recognize these differences between the brides who can access their own wedding imaginary and the brides who most often become bridezillas. Bridal ideals organize social hierarchies by barring access and basing belonging on what people can afford or organize for themselves. On *Bridezillas* the narrative eats away at any sense of the romantic or sacred produced by the occasion. The show is riddled with both poor purchasing decisions and the failure of retail to meet the bride's needs.

Week after week, *Bridezillas* documents the failure of brides to access the wedding imaginary and successfully fit a bridal ideal. Each bride's story is told over the course of several episodes. Within each episode the story jumps from bride to bride, each cut taking the viewer away from one scene of disaster to another. This is also a very different use of modularity. Each segment of the show's narrative focuses on a particular bride and her failure to access the ideal. One bridezilla turns into another, one wedding ends and a new one is introduced. The show's modular narrative structure and system of intercutting also creates continuity, but *Bridezillas* does not do this to produce a sense of variance and flexibly openness in marriage. Instead, the series combines these different sequences to produce the sense that the bridezilla is not a single aberration but, instead, an unending stream of women weeping and raging their way through the wedding process. *Bridezillas* system of arranging brides together in overlapping storylines allows the series to deliver a seemingly endless stream of bridal and relationship meltdowns. With each new bride, the show poses the question: "Can she make it to the altar?" Each time, a woman's ability to work with the market's norms is put to the test. And, despite the bride's struggles, she still makes it to the altar nearly every time.

This feeling that the bridezilla is a continuous force or a shared response to the wedding

planning process is important to understanding the careful balance *Bridezillas* maintains between mocking an individual bridezilla and enjoying her rages. The world of *Bridezillas* is filled with real bodies and budgets. This is not a world of fantasy, beauty, and wedding perfection. Instead, this is a kind of anti-imaginary where the reality that these women are barred from accessing the wedding imaginary makes them very angry. Earlier, feelings of the romantic and sacred were argued to tie the viewer to a fiction and smooth over disconnects between fantasy and reality. In *Bridezillas*, however, the viewer is most often presented with the bride's anger and pain. Any sense of the romantic or sacred is constantly undercut by the show's focus on brides as monsters and weddings as the events that produce them.

The bridezilla demonstrates the emotional and economic pressures faced by many women today. Rather than falling back on feminine ideals and confronting these stresses with some type of "proper" emotional discipline or "natural" domestic know-how, bridezillas unleash their emotions. The show's emphasis of the bride's emotional response is critical. While the voice of the narrator tries to belittle the bride's meltdowns, the camera stays as close to the bride as possible. She remains at the center of the frame. The camera zooms in on her tears and freeze frames on her face when it is contorted with anger. These prolonged outpourings of emotion undercut the narrator's ability to create a disconnect between the viewer and the bridezilla. Instead, the viewer feels this anger and frustration along with her.

Bridezillas offers viewers a space where they can revel in the absence of taste, propriety, and emotional control. The voice of the show's narrator is one of both condescension and gleeful anticipation. This show deeply enjoys these women's inability to master their emotions and enjoys the aberrant version of femininity they present. The show's delight in the monstrosity of less privileged women is *both* a kind of problematic social policing *and* an opportunity for

shared catharsis between the brides and the viewers. *Bridezillas* model their lack of self-discipline for the viewer. Rather than depicting graceful women achieving the ultimate prize—perfect wedding, husband, and family—the bridezilla glories in being everything a beautiful bride is *not* supposed to be. In this way, the show performs the frustration many women experience as they are told they are promised the ideal but continually discover how limited their options are and how far they fall from the ideal bridal media promises them.

Conclusion

In each of these three shows, women's individual stories and experiences are balanced by larger lessons. *Say Yes to the Dress* dwells on the art of shopping and on the personal rewards that come with careful spending and planning. *My Fair Wedding* manages brides with poor taste by rescuing them and transforming them in ladies. These two shows emphasize that women need to be true to themselves, but also malleable and flexible in how they express their identities. Women need to have a sense of what their budget is, but they also need to be realistic in their expectations. If they want a quality wedding, they must pay to access it. They can find gowns that flatter their bodies and personalities or accommodate their religious and ethnic traditions, however they will need to pay extra for these accommodations. Good shoppers accept the market's limitations and work within its boundaries. Better shoppers have unlimited budgets and pull off the wedding of their dreams. These shows strategically blend consumerism with romance, ensuring that the process of planning and shopping for a wedding is always justified by its emotional significance.

To do this, reality wedding shows activate classic romantic tropes, using them to stitch together an array of characters, contexts, and moments of conflict. On *Bridezillas*, *My Fair Wedding*, and *Say Yes to the Dress* all brides have a love story. The shows utilize familiar

romantic elements to link their many different characters and families together in one seemingly universal tale: a women's quest to affirm the love between her and her partner and ensure her happiness. In the process, these narratives present familiar challenges for their heroines to overcome. Will the bride successfully transform herself from scullery maid to princess? Can the bride bring her family and friends together, negotiate the tensions inherent in family gatherings, and ensure everyone rallies around the couple? Will the girl get her happy ending? The wedding operates as a supposedly universal backdrop against which these familiar dramas can be enacted. Its cultural significance and iconic visual elements (dress, rings, vows, cake) make weddings legible to a wide range of television viewers.

This sense of universality is also a problem that these shows wrestle with. In our current cultural moment, tradition, sameness, and uniformity are loaded terms. On *Bridezillas*, *My Fair Wedding*, and *Say Yes to the Dress*, brides and their partners aspire to be valued as individuals, while also, simultaneously, fitting in and being recognized as a part of broader society. Within this context, dual desires can be identified: Individuals yearn for their differences to be both remarkable and unremarkable. Or, put another way, they desire to be recognized and “seen” as individuals without being “othered.” However, being seen— by family, friends, society, or government— means different things depending on an individual's racial and ethnic identity, religious affiliation, sexuality, and social or economic status. These contexts produce different negotiations with and against tradition. For some brides, the wedding becomes a performance of difference. In this context, a successful wedding is achieved when family and friends acknowledge and endorse a bride's differentiation from the norm. (Regardless of how surface-level these differences might be.) For others, success entails fitting into or achieving a norm, despite obstacles. In this context, differences are rendered unremarkable and are transcended—

even if only for the day. For many of the brides on these shows, success is marked by some combination of these different impulses.

One of the most striking aspects of *Say Yes to the Dress* is its overwhelmingly hopeful and inclusive tone. In contrast to the more critical and disciplinary tone struck on *My Fair Wedding* or *Bridezillas*, *Say Yes to the Dress* tells viewers, again and again, that all brides are welcome at Kleinfeld Bridal and all women's bodies can be made beautiful for their big day. Even when brides leave the salon in failure, the show's narrator often provides a quick update on the bride's progress, reassuring the viewer that a dress was found elsewhere. The show promises possibility. No matter your size, skin color, or sexual orientation, if you are a savvy shopper and careful budget manager, you can be a beautiful bride. Fairy tale weddings are available, at a variety of price points, to all who can buy them.

Clearly, the inclusion and recognition of a broader array of people within the institution of marriage is having a profound effect on the lives of many individuals, families, and children. Marriage is an institution that leads to healthcare and citizenship, allows a partner to make medical decisions, and relays many other important benefits. Given these positive effects, the more modular social conditions reflected in reality wedding shows may represent a critical step forward for many viewers. However, as the institution of marriage is reconfigured, we also need to be attentive to the continuing ways romantic fantasy can be used to construct norms and set limits on possibility.

My Fair Wedding, and *Say Yes to the Dress* balance their modularity with a specifically romantic continuity. These shows incorporate classical romantic themes and motifs, particularly those of love, commitment, and family, in order to provide the narrative with emotional stakes and to give purchasing decisions a sense of romantic necessity. These shows use a broad notion

of love and common romantic symbols to link a range of brides and families. This allows the shows to accommodate and link multiple audience communities. In the process, reality wedding shows are able to use romantic narratives and tropes as affective tools to unite viewers and to provide meaning to consumption. The combination of variety and repetition allows *My Fair Wedding*, and *Say Yes to the Dress* to gesture towards a range of audiences while consolidating a range of approaches towards weddings, partnership, and romance. In contrast, *Bridezillas*' modularity consolidates women's frustration and disappointment. Together, modularity and continuity are used to accommodate changing audience demographics, competing social norms, and to manage the non-fictional characters entering into "reality" television's highly manufactured settings. In this way, modularity and continuity become formal narrative devices that simultaneously organize consumption, audiences, and ideologies.

The methods used by these reality wedding shows reveal some of the strategies television texts are implementing in an attempt to accommodate the different approaches to dating and relationships active in American society today. However, these methods also intersect with broader technological shifts: the move from analog to digital media and the establishment of a highly networked and global mass market, where products — from bridal gowns to television programs— are assembled and shipped to consumers from around the world. Facilitated by digital technologies, contemporary mass markets organize women's identities into varying combinations of demographic, income, and identity categories. Within this digitized environment, identities can be instantly assembled and reassembled. Appeals to viewing audiences are generated as needed and according to the key terms and contexts of a particular instance. This more modular approach serves as a means of managing consumers and identities in an age of content proliferation, niche markets, and highly personalized marketing strategies.

“It’s my wedding day,” is a line that continually repeats, across all three of these shows. With this sentiment, the wedding becomes a need and an excuse for a woman to indulge, an imperative to extend herself beyond her financial means, and, in the process, becomes a high stakes venture where the failure to dazzle friends and family becomes a failure of the bride. With this failure, a bride indicates that she has not successfully performed a vital rite-of-passage, has not acquired the skills she needs to be recognized within contemporary society, and has jeopardized her own individual happy ending.

Conclusion

Whether looking at film, television, web, or print content, any scholar who wants address broad trends in popular romance genres faces a significant challenge. The sheer quantity of popular romance media released annually makes it impossible to fully account for or speak conclusively about ways romance engages “the” romance fan, reader, or viewer. The overall organization of different romance genres is significant here as well. As this project demonstrates, romance genres are highly segmented, Romantic content is organized into a broad array of sub-genres, categories which appeal to diverse audience interests—interests which often do not overlap. This project highlights some of the larger cultural functions this segmentation plays. The histories of commercial and fan romance demonstrate ways that labels—romance vs. pornography, author vs. fan—affect how these networks are organized, the content they generate, and their broader reach. Analysis of hyper-romances and reality wedding shows identify narrative strategies being used to manage different sets of audience demographics and aspirations. This system allows media producers to appeal to a broad array of audiences and tastes. It is a system that operates on a mass level, but carefully organizes products according to more modular categories and tastes.

Given the sheer quantities of romance titles, sub-categories, and content producers across media, no single medium, subgenre, or producer can represent the world of romance fiction or its various roles in today’s media culture. The same issue occurs when attempting to study audiences for romance. Different clusters of audiences gather around different sets of texts, authors, sub-genres, and sites of production. My analysis of romantic content across media can only shed light on pieces of this broader cultural system, and on particular moments and contexts for engagement. However, these are the limitations cultural scholars always confront when

closely studying a specific set of texts or audiences. Scholars of media and culture have always been limited in their ability to extrapolate findings outward.

Given the stigmas associated with romantic content, however, and the ways in which the label of “romance” so often complicates the ready flow of content, authors, and audiences across platforms and markets, the stakes here and the potential for researchers to do harm are higher. Each attempt at sampling a romance genre inevitably excludes and distorts the range of works available. In the process, research findings can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about romantic content and the (mostly) women who produce and consume it. The problem comes with moving between careful, close, contextual studies of texts and the systems which produce them and the kinds of broad, macro level questions about genre and culture we hope our research will help us answer. Cultural engagement entails involvement with a range of intersecting media products and communication platforms, as well as continually shifting between different production and reception contexts. With each migration, similar types of content are repackaged and reconfigured. Studying and participating in today’s media culture requires sensitivity to the different ways that communication is being structured across a range of databases and content delivery systems. Given these complicated and convergent networks, studying culture in contemporary society necessitates the constant movement back and both between local/global, micro/macro, and across different tiers of cultural production and engagement.

In this project I have modeled one method for doing this type of work. My strategy has been to isolate particular production networks for romantic content, to think about the different ways they represent and organize female desire, and about the interplays between these different production networks. My selections have not been arbitrary. In Chapters One and Two I examined the parallel development of erotic romance and romantic fan fiction. Looking at these

two production networks in tandem allowed me to track their parallel histories and the ways that the production systems for both commerce romance and fan romances have evolved to keep various forms of sexual content carefully segmented. This history also shows that both the audiences for commercial romance and the audiences for fan writing have engaged in significant debates for and against the inclusion of sexual fantasies in these texts. Each genre of writing developed in accordance with these debates. For fans, it meant that many fans split off to form their own conferences, zines, and circulation networks. For commercial romance, it meant the careful border policing of sub-genres and publisher imprints. As digital technologies make smaller-scale publishing efforts feasible, it may signal a future breakdown of commercial romance's long-standing sub-categories. To fully understand the impact of digital publishing on commercial romance literature, we need more research on digital publishers and the authors who are opting to leave traditional publishers for self-publishing or smaller digital shops. We also need to better understand the interfaces romance readers use to find and read romance online and the algorithms being used to sort and tag romance titles.

These same questions need to be asked about the sites that fans are using to connect and collaborate online. If fan networks, historically, have helped elicit and maintain certain cultural practices, what happens to these practices as they migrate onto new websites and social media platforms? As I outline in Chapter Two, the monetization of fandom is not an either/or option. Fan practices cannot be easily separated into two categories: political/feminist/queer/active/not-for-profit vs. apolitical/normative/passive/monetized. Thinking more carefully about the tiers of access and profit into which fan practices are placed allows us to better address the different directions that fan works are being channeled. It opens up important questions for further research: which fan authors and works of fan fiction are crossing over into commercial

publishing and why? What is it about *Twilight* fan fiction, specifically, that enabled so many authors to cross over and negotiate deals with major publishing houses? Also, what about the m/m authors who are more quietly crossing over to smaller digital publishers? We need more research on the different layers of digital publishing and the reach of different romance sub-genres.

In Chapters Three and Four I examined film and television content. Here my goal was to look more closely at two media forms with high-production costs and markets that present significant barriers to entry. Film and television producers continue to deal with issues of scarcity— of airtime, of movie screens, of viewers, etc.— but today’s film and television content is a mass-market product being sold to consumers much more accustomed to long-tail markets. These consumers expect products that address a range of consumer interests. Looking at reality wedding shows and hyper-romance films in parallel reveals two different sets of narrative strategies being used to adapt media content so that it better addresses contemporary consumers. Significantly, these are narrative strategies that have their origins in television’s soaps and serial narratives.

Reality wedding shows and hyper-romance films multiply the number of stories contained within a single text. By expanding the focus of the story beyond two individuals and their particular courtship, the hyper-romance has the option of telling stories that do not always follow the romantic comedy’s traditional “meet-lose-get” pattern. These films experiment with the possibility of different romantic endings, and test alternate options for courtship narratives in the process. At the same time, they work to address multiple audience demographics. In particular, all of the films analyzed in Chapter Three work to appeal to male and female audiences. This is a striking contrast, compared to the reality wedding shows analyzed in Chapter Four. These

television shows also multiply the number of protagonists and incorporate multiple narrative arcs into a single episode. However, these shows are still airing in programming blocks aimed at female audiences. It is telling that the both final season of *Bridezillas* and the repackaging of *My Fair Wedding* at *CELEBrations* came just before WE tv tried to rebrand itself and appeal more to male viewers. This suggests that, while film can repackage courtship stories for men and women, and while same-sex marriage is now an option for some couples, weddings and their iconic features are still seen primarily as women's domain.

Hyper-romance films like *Think Like A Man* are also reminder that sometimes the most conventional of narratives can also signal significant cultural shifts, precisely because of how conventional they are. With the film focused primarily on men and women of color, *Think Like A Man* makes the case that being romantic does not entail being white. A similar strategy can be seen in *Say Yes To The Dress* and the show's efforts to position weddings and bridal beauty as goals every woman can achieve. However, *Say Yes To The Dress* also reminds us of the costs that personalization can entail. Inclusivity is something that many people have to custom order. It requires that individuals have the financial means to afford it.

All stories gain meaning from the contexts we encounter them in. The play with form and content inherent in genre is also a process of assembling and recombining different storytelling elements. In romance, these interplays reflect an effort to make different types of intimacy, equality, and desire coherent. This means these combinations are constantly fluctuating and highly dependent on the various communication media, audiences, and norms involved in particular production networks. However, the particular semiotics of romance renders certain story elements in/valid or in/visible when this content moves from one reception context to another. In the process, stigmas regarding romance and feminized aesthetics can too easily

simplify the complexities of romantic texts. In the process, romance can too readily serve as a straw man in arguments about gender, sexuality, and culture.

One example of this is debate around romance's frequent happy endings. In western society, a romantic ending is typically one where the heroine finds true love/happiness. This love is frequently signaled by the heroine getting married and becoming a mother. Rather than reinforcing the supposed happiness of the couple and their newly equalized relationship, for some readers these details undermine the heroine's victorious ending. It represents a path they may not want for themselves. For other readers, negotiating a version of marriage and parenting that makes the heroine happy is a critical component of her happily-ever-after. These tensions over endings, and what makes a happy ending legible, are a part of what makes romance such a rich genre to analyze. Within the context of the story, marriage and parenting have been reconfigured. However, the tension over the ending is far less about the ending and more about the degrees to which an individual story has reconfigured its storyworld and the heroine's role within it.

Given the many different contexts in which women live, it is not possible for us to settle on one "good" set of journeys, symbols, or endings. It seems far more productive to ask what is going on within the context of each story to lead the heroine towards her particular ending and why a particular ending signals freedom and happiness for some audiences and oppression and dissatisfaction for others. The other critical question is: Why do certain stories and ways of negotiating intimacy appear more on particular platforms than others? What is it about different sites of production and their varied audiences that enable and disable particular narrative paths? As more and more content circulates online, what roles are these digital markets playing in the future of romantic stories? Looking at different storytelling and media contexts in tandem, as I

have done here, is one way to begin addressing these questions and mapping the broader interplays of genre across media and culture.

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WeddingChannel.com & Forbeswoman.com Unveil ‘Work & Wedding’ Survey Results.”

XO Group Inc. N.p., 23 July 2010. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

Curriculum Vitae

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Education

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Milwaukee, WI) Ph.D., 2016
English (Media, Cinema & Digital Studies)

Dissertation: “Romance Networks: Aspiration & Desire in Today’s Digital Culture”

Dissertation Committee: Tasha Oren, Patrice Petro, Michael Zimmer, Kristie Hamilton
(UW–Milwaukee), Eric Selinger (DePaul University)

Georgetown University (Washington, DC) M.A., 2008
Communication, Culture & Technology

Master’s Thesis: “Fanning the Flames of Romance: An Exploration of Fan Fiction & the Romance Novel”

Thesis Committee: Michael Coventry, Matthew Tinkcom

Emerson College (Boston, MA) B.A., 2000
Writing, Literature & Publishing, *Cum Laude*, Dean’s List

Publications

“Vidding and/as Pedagogy.” *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. Eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott. [Forthcoming, Routledge.]

“Gender and Fandom.” *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*. Eds. Elizabeth Kaplan, Patrice Petro, Kristin Hole and Dijana Jelača. [Forthcoming, Routledge.]

“Steamy, Spicy, Sensual: Tracing the Cycles of Erotic Romance.” *Women & Erotic Fiction: Critical Essays on Genres, Markets & Readers*. Ed. Kristen Phillips. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2015.

“Stop Teaching, Software Start Teaching Software Literacy,” *Flow*, 20 (2015).

“Rattling the Toolkit: Methods for Reading Romance, Gender, and Culture.” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. 4.2. (2014) 1-4.

“Fifty Shades of Remix: The Intersecting Pleasures of Commercial & Fan Romances.” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. 4.1. (2014) 1-17.

“Fan/dom: People, practices & networks,” *Transformative Works & Cultures*, 14 (2013).

Published Reviews

“Transmedia Storytelling & the New Era of Media Convergence in Higher Education by Stavroula Kalogeras,” *Transformative Works & Cultures*, 20 (2013).

“Archive of Our Own.” *Popular Romance Project*. 26 Nov. 2013.

Digital Project

Fandom Then/Now - <http://katiedidnt.net/fandomthennow> (2014).

Conference Papers

- “Fairly Using and Reusing: Remixing Copyright in the Digital Classroom.” Console-ing Passions: International Conference on Television, Video, Audio, New Media and Feminism. Notre Dame, Indiana, June 2016. [Accepted]
- “Keeping It Classy: Studying Sex and Romance.” International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR). Salt Lake City, Utah. June 2016. [Accepted.]
- “Modular Love: The Contemporary Hyper-Romance Comedy.” Society for Cinema & Media Studies (SCMS). Atlanta, Georgia, March 2016.
- “Fandom Problems: Networks of Practice, Digital Publishing, and the Dilemmas of Fans Going Pro.” Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, Arizona, October 2015.
- “From Derivative to Transformative: Making Remix and Vidding Practices Matter In Our Classrooms.” Console-ing Passions. Dublin, Ireland, June 2015.
- “Love and Plurality: Ensemble Casting and Modularity in Contemporary Rom-Coms.” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA). New Orleans, LA, April 2015.
- “Reading the Romance Turns Thirty: A Roundtable Discussion with Janice Radway.” PCA/ACA. Chicago, IL, April 2014.
- “Erotic Romance 2.0: The (Re)Emergence of the Erotic in Commercial Romance.” PCA/ACA. Chicago, IL, April 2014.
- “Rise of Bridezilla: Reveling in Love’s Discontents.” SCMS. Seattle, WA, March 2014.
- “Saying Yes!: Romance & Reality in Wedding TV.” PCA/ACA. Washington, D.C., March 2013.
- “Fifty Shades of Remix: The Shared Pleasures of Commercial & Fan Romances.” IASPR. York, UK. October 2012.
- “‘He Learned a Lesson... I Got an Education’: Female Desire in The Red Shoe Diaries.” Midwestern PCA/ACA. Milwaukee, WI, October 2011.
- “Sex & the City’s Ambivalent Women.” Midwestern Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference. Milwaukee, WI. February 2011.
- “Fen Responses to Fan Research: Methods of Participation & Engagement.” Midwestern PCA/ACA. Minneapolis, MN. October 2010.

Posters/Workshops

- “WordPress 101.” THATCamp Bootcamp. Milwaukee, WI. May 2014.
- “Teaching & Learning in the Digital Age.” Center for Instructional & Professional Development Workshop. UW–Milwaukee. Milwaukee, WI. November 2013.
- “Zotero 101: Collect, Organize, Cite, Sync.” Technology/Pedagogy Workshop. UW–Milwaukee. Milwaukee, WI. March 2012.
- “ecom: Creating a Collaborative Space for Composition Teachers,” (Poster session & web demo). Marquette/UWM First-Year Composition Conference. Milwaukee, WI. December 2009.

Teaching Experience

English Department, Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, NY) 2014 – present

<i>Visiting Assistant Professor</i>	<i>Course Number</i>
Future of Writing	E 150
Literary & Cultural Studies: Participatory Culture	E 210
Literary & Cultural Studies: Reading/Screening Desire	E 210
Text & Code	E 215 (online & in-person)
Storytelling Across Media	E 375 (online & in-person)

English Department, UW–Milwaukee (Milwaukee, WI) 2009 – 2014

<i>Film Studies & College Writing Instructor</i>	<i>Course Number</i>
Introduction to College Writing	E 101
Entertainment Arts: Film, Television & the Internet	FS 111 (online)
Participatory Culture: Audiences, Viewers & Fans	FS 212
Bad Romance: Romance Genres Across Media	FS 212
Introduction to Television Studies	FS 291 (online)

<i>Teaching Assistant</i>	<i>Course Number</i>
Film History Part 1: 1895-1945	FS/AH 205
Cinema & Digital Culture	FS 312 (online)
Entertainment Arts: Film, Television & the Internet	FS 111

Gotemba Minami High School (Gotemba City, Shizuoka, Japan) 2008 – 2009

Assistant English Language Teacher with Japan Exchange & Teaching (JET) Program

Communication, Culture & Technology, Georgetown University (Washington D.C.) 2007 – 2008

<i>Teaching Assistant</i>	<i>Course Number</i>
Researching the Visual: Theory, Method & Practice	CCT 505
Introduction to Communication, Culture & Technology	CCT 698

Teaching Interests

Film, Television & Digital Studies; Composition; Participatory & Digital Culture; Audience Studies; Gender & Sexuality in Popular Culture; Popular Romance Genres; Genre Studies; Digital Production; Digital Humanities

Awards, Grants & Fellowships

Provost's/UW–Milwaukee Libraries Scholar Award	2014
UWM English Department's Teaching Excellence Award (Finalist)	2014
Lesson Study Project Grant (with Drs. Rachel Baum, Shelleen Greene, Stuart Moulthrop)	2014
UW System's Office of Professional & Instructional Development	
PCA/ACA Kathleen Gilles Seidel Travel Grant	2014
UW–Milwaukee Golda Meir Library Scholar Fellowship (Finalist)	2013
International Society for Popular Romance/Romance Writers of America Travel Grant	2012
UW–Milwaukee James A. Sappenfield Fellowship	2012, 2011
UW–Milwaukee Chancellor's Award	2009

Academic Service

<i>Book Review Editor</i> , Transformative Works and Cultures	2015 – present
<i>Co-Director</i> , Feminist Scholars Digital Workshop, HASTAC.org	2014 – present
<i>Graduate Student Representative</i> , Media Literacy & Outreach Group, SCMS	2014 – present
<i>Representative</i> , Graduate Policy Committee, English, UW–Milwaukee (elected)	Spring 2014
<i>Representative</i> , Graduate Student Advisory Council, UW–Milwaukee (elected)	2013 – 2014
<i>Chair</i> , Special Projects Committee, UW–Milwaukee (elected)	2013 – 2014
<i>Co-Web Manager</i> , International Association for Popular Romance Studies	2011 – present
<i>Student Representative</i> , Media, Cinema & Digital Studies, UW–Milwaukee	2011 – 2014
<i>Member</i> , Think Make Digital, Center for 21 st Century Studies	2011 – 2013
<i>Organizing Committee</i> , Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference	2010 – 2014

Professional Experience

<i>Lab Assistant</i> , UWM Libraries Digital Humanities Lab, UW–Milwaukee	Spring 2014
<i>Project Assistant</i> , Digital Arts & Culture Program, UW–Milwaukee	Spring 2014
<i>Web Production Assistant</i> , Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.)	2007 – 2009
<i>Writer/Editor</i> , Georgetown University Research News (Washington, D.C.)	2006 – 2007
<i>Marketing Associate</i> , Boston Center for Adult Education (Boston, MA)	2004 – 2006
<i>Communications Coordinator</i> , YWCA Boston (Boston, MA)	2004 – 2001
Served on: Marketing Task Force, Regional Branding Rollout Committee	
<i>Programming Assistant</i> , YWCA Boston (Boston, MA)	2001 – 2000
Served on Staff Racial Justice Committee. Employee Recognition Award (Spring 2001).	

Professional Affiliations

Association of Internet Researchers	2014 – present
FemBot Collective & FemTechNet	2012 – present
International Society for the Study of Popular Romance	2011 – present
Popular Culture/American Culture Association	2010 – present
Society for Cinema & Media Studies	2012 – present

Digital Skills

Web Design & Development (HTML5, CSS3, PHP, WordPress, Scalar)
Design for Web & Print (Adobe CS: Dreamweaver, Photoshop, InDesign, AcrobatPro)
Video & Audio Editing (Premiere, iMovie, WeVideo, Audacity)