

NEW ROMANTIC NARRATIVES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY¹

Coordinated and edited by Paloma Fresno-Calleja

INTRODUCTION

This monographic issue of *Esferas Literarias* explores romantic narratives produced in the twenty-first century in light of their ongoing expansion, diversification and commercial success. «Romance» is a complex term to define because it encompasses various genres and literary conventions which have evolved over time (Fuchs, 2004: 1-2). In the context of this monograph, «romantic narratives» is used as a flexible term applicable to popular romance novels, films, and other media narratives which revolve around one of more central love stories. Leaving aside their evident differences, the works discussed by the contributors can all be categorised as samples of what Catherine Roach calls in *Happily Ever After* (2016) the «romance story». Roach uses this term to explore the pervasive and ever-expanding cultural narrative of romantic love which developed in the western world from the late nineteenth-century. The success and persistence of the romance story, Roach argues, derives from its value as

a guiding story that provides coherence and meaning in people's lives. [...] According to this story, despite the risks, love is what gives value and depth to life. Our purpose is to bond with a well-suited mate worthy of our love and to love and be loved by this mate within a circle of family and friends. [...] The happily-in-love, pair-bonded (generally, although increasingly not exclusively, heterosexual) couple is made into a near mandatory norm by the media and popular culture, as this romance story is endlessly taught and replayed in a multiplicity of cultural sites [...]. (4)

Although the force of the mandatory romance story has not receded, the narratives articulating this romantic imperative have altered dramatically in the last decades in agreement with changing understandings of love, marriage, sexuality, intimacy and gender relations. The new romantic narratives discussed by the contributors in their individual articles are new not only because of their recent appearance (post-2000 in most cases), but because they rework and sometimes supersede older, more traditional, and often exclusionary ways of narrating romantic love. In this respect, they come to fill the need for what Roach calls «counter-narratives to romance», narratives whose objective is «not to cancel out that storyline but to add more alternatives to it» (2016: 193).

Popular romance fiction is undoubtedly the format which best articulates the romance story. Critics trace the origins of the genre to various well-known predecessors, including Shakespearean comedies as well as eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Regis, 2003: 53-55; Teo, 2018). But the contemporary mass-market romance novel, a genre which enjoys global popularity, is a

¹ This work is part of the results of the research project «Romance for Change: Diversity, Intersectionality and Affective Reparation in Contemporary Romantic Narratives», Grant PID2021-122249NB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and by «ERDF A way of making Europe».

product of the twentieth century. The standardisation of the formula from the 1950s has resulted in generalised understandings of the genre as homogeneous and unoriginal; yet romance is, like any other form of fiction, extremely diverse thematically, aesthetically and politically, and thus worthy of serious academic attention. The genre's complexity is most evident in the variety of subgenres available in the market (Gothic, historical, contemporary, inspirational, paranormal, erotic, or YA romance, among many others), but also in its capacity to incorporate a wide range of themes and political agendas and to cater for the various needs of an increasingly diverse readership. It is therefore impossible to think of the genre in monolithic terms, nor of its core message as uniform and static. At the moment, as discussed by the editors of *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance*,

The genre includes progressive texts dedicated to expanding the universe of persons represented as worthy of romantic happiness, whether in terms of race, ethnicity, disability (mental, physical, and emotional), religion, age, size, or sexual and gender identity, but it also includes texts that are conservative and even unabashedly reactionary on all of these topics, and it is easy to find romance novels whose politics and representational practices are a hodgepodge of diverging or contradictory impulses (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, 2020: 5).

These thematic and ideological expansions must happen within the boundaries of the «happily ever after» (HEA), that is, the obligation that the love story concludes with «an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending», in agreement with the well-known definition by the Romance Writers Association of America («About the Romance Genre»). But beyond this mandatory outcome, the genre is, as Jayashree Kamblé puts it, «endlessly pliable, [...] its romance and novel genes allowing it the flexibility to bring in what is romantic and desirable in the present moment and discard themes and structures that no longer serve its goal» (2023: 1). Romance authors then work to create compelling, emotionally-fulfilling and relatable stories within the expected HEA requirement, while refreshing the well-rehearsed love plot on the understanding that readers' needs and expectations change overtime and must be addressed accordingly.

Critical appraisals of popular romance have also undergone radical transformations in the last decades, crystallising in the consolidation of popular romance studies (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, 2020: 9), a burgeoning field which explores romance in all its diversity and complexity and from interdisciplinary perspectives. Second-wave feminist critics were the first to turn to romance novels in the late 1970s and 1980s (Modleski, 1982; Mussell, 1984; Radway, 1984), often to discuss these works as escapist fantasies, damaging for their female readers because of their alleged perpetuation of regressive gender stereotypes and patriarchal patterns of domination. These early critics approached the genre with academic rigour, but with a common aim: «to identify the appeal of romance to its readers and to *unmask* how this ostensibly optimistic and idealistic genre —and the pleasurable, sustaining act of reading it— in fact encodes any number of real-world angers, anxieties, protests, and conflicts» (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, 2020: 8). In the following decades, critical views on romance changed substantially. In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992), a compilation of essays edited by Jayne Anne Krentz, romance authors collectively respond to some of these common misconceptions about the genre. In the introduction to the volume, Krentz explains the success of romance as deriving from its «deep-rooted optimism» (6), its «celebration of life» (7) and its prioritisation of «female power, intuition and a female worldview that affirms life and expresses hope for the future» (8).

More recent studies have expanded on these ideas, stressing the feminist potential of romance novels; Roach talks about romance as liberating or reparative because it helps its readers to negotiate the barriers of patriarchy and «work out deep conundrums of the culture» (2016: 67). In her recent study on the romance heroine, Kamblé argues that romance novels place women at the centre of the narrative constructing positive models of «companionate relationships and happiness based on equality and erotic compatibility» (2023: 1). Romance protagonists, Kamblé contends, «struggle to establish who they are amidst a world that seems determined to limit their choices» and manage to negotiate their selfhood against «the dichotomies women continue to face in the twenty-first century under late capitalism» (16). Thus, Kamblé sees the genre as evolving «to offer female protagonists a life of questing for their truth through —and *beyond*— love plots» (2). The dynamism of popular romance has also made it a suitable format to advance other agendas similarly geared towards liberation and emotional reparation, for instance, by focusing on characters identifying as LGBTQAI+ and engaged in relationships which transcend the heteronormative framework which otherwise continues to dominate visions of romantic love in literature and the media. Roach sees these changes as reflecting and at the same time contributing to a new gender and sexual revolution. In these new narratives, she explains, «the love story maintains its centrality, [but] the romance script *has* changed [to] become more inclusive of diversity and more sex-positive» (2022: 64) and to incorporate discussions of gender and sexual identity, body acceptance, or consent, among other pertinent topics.

In more recent times, popular romance scholarship has also called attention to the whiteness that has historically dominated the genre and the industry that supports it, which have resulted in the construction of racial hierarchies and in the naturalisation of romantic love as an exclusively white experience (Young, 2020; Pryde, 2022). An increasing number of authors from various backgrounds are now creating romantic narratives which incorporate racial and cultural diversity to decentre hegemonic visions of love and to vindicate the «happily ever after» for individuals, collectives or communities who have historically been excluded from the dominant romantic imperative. As Young puts it:

We need more diverse novels—with characters of color existing throughout history and around the globe, with protagonists whose racial identities are fully developed and not made symbolic. But as scholars, we must think more critically about how the genre has been and continues to be racialized, as well as the unique opportunities the genre affords in addressing and healing racial trauma (2020: 526).

The romance story is expanding and changing not only in relation to its thematic focus and its political scope, but also in relation to its production, distribution and marketing. The rapid expansion of digital and self-publishing has allowed many authors to bypass traditional publishing structures and speak to more specific audiences who did not find themselves reflected in romantic narratives published through mainstream channels (Teo, 2020: 462). Social media has also played a key role in the promotion of works published by smaller independent prints, and in the establishment of online communities of readers who engage in lively exchanges about the genre. Romantic relationships themselves have also been crucially influenced by the impact of social media and the advent of dating applications, and these topics have already made it into the plots of romantic narratives which keep up with social changes at an impressively rapid pace.

The articles included in this issue address these multiple transformations by exploring new ways of narrating romantic love in tune with our changing times. María García Muñoz goes back to the origins of the genre, by exploring two recent film adaptations of Jane Austen, who is often credited with establishing the blueprint for the romance story. The article focuses on two film adaptations of *Emma* (1815) —*Clueless* (1995) and *Emma.* (2020)— and explores the adaptability of the Austenian heroine in light of the popular appeal, global impact, and multiple transformations of her novels. The article contends that Austen’s discussions of femininity, gender roles, social expectations and emotional autonomy are reframed in relation to their respective contexts: *Clueless* is discussed as exemplifying the postfeminist sensibility dominating popular media narratives in the 1990s, whereas *Emma.*, employs the Regency setting as a lens to explore some of the current concerns of fourth-wave feminism.

The next three articles focus on different romance subgenres and explore their narrative and thematic specificities as well as their political agendas. Nattie Golubov’s «Female Warriors, Social Injustice and the Transformation Force of Anger in Jaye Wells’ Sabina Kane Series» analyses Urban Fantasy novels building on post-#Metoo feminist theorisations of anger. Golubov makes a case for anger as a viable affect in romance fiction, discussing how the female protagonist manages to channel her rage and turn it into a productive force. For Golubov, the presentation of the female hero as simultaneously violent and caring demonstrates that popular romance fiction can overcome traditional gender roles and dichotomies, displace the exclusive focus on the love plot and favour a narrative of personal quest and empowering transformation.

Jayashree Kamblé’s «Romancing the University: BIPOC Scholars in Romance Novels in the 1980s and Now» looks at evolving representations of diversity in campus romance novels from the 1980s and from the 2020s featuring BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) academics. Discussions of racial and social justice are notably absent from the earlier novels (by Sandra Kitts and Barbara Stephens) and topics like discrimination or racial bias are side-lined in favour of positive depictions of Black professionals. By contrast, the contemporary examples (by Adrianna Herrera, Katrina Jackson and Talia Hibbert) employ the academic figure as a pedagogical tool for discussing intersecting forms of oppression. These contemporary romance novels condemn racism, sexism and heteronormativity much more explicitly and can be read, Kamblé concludes, in the context of the global resonance of the Blacks Lives Matter movement, anti-racist and social justice activism, and demands for structural changes and racial equality in universities and other institutions.

Diversity is also central to Francesca Pierini’s reading of YA queer romance novels featuring characters facing cancer. Pierini focuses on Junauda Petrus’s *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* (2019) to elucidate how cancer determines the construction of the adolescent romantic love story between the two female protagonists. Pierini reads Petrus’s novels in relation to a well-known predecessor, John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), another YA cancer narrative, and explores how each author formulates life-affirming messages for their characters in the face of the unhappy endings that await them. The article argues that Petrus’s novel solves the main narrative conflict by emphasising not death but an all-encompassing vision of life as endless. Thanks to the narrative conventions of magical realism, Junauda revises some of the main thematic and formal conventions of earlier YA queer romances and cancer narratives and builds a unique story, rich in intertextual references.

Focusing on a rapidly-expanding format, Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez’s article explores the Nigerian romantic web series *Skinny Girl in Transit* (2015-present). The article pays particular attention to the depiction of plus-size heroines, until recently absent

from romance novels (Teo, 2020: 461; Kamblé, 2023: 183), and looks at issues of beauty and body size from a culturally-specific perspective. Cruz-Gutiérrez explores these topics in relation to Nigerian customary traditions and cultural expectations, as well as neocolonial precepts conditioning the physical appearance and the lives of these women. The series narrates the life of an urban professional middle-class Nigerian woman who uses her radio programme to encourage listeners to share their romantic experiences, but also to discuss socio-political issues, thus creating a space of dialogue, empowerment, and citizenship for her female listeners.

These articles are but a brief sample of some of the exciting expansions and transformations of the romance story in its present form and confirm that the cultural narrative of romantic love will continue to be influential and pervasive in the future, ideally managing to incorporate more inclusive, balanced and diverse visions of romantic love fit for the twenty-first century.

Paloma Fresno-Calleja

WORKS CITED

- «About the Romance Genre», Romance Writers of America, <https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx>.
- Fuchs, Barbara (2004), *Romance*, London, Routledge.
- Kamblé, Jayashree (2023), *Creating Identity. The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Selinger and Hsu-Ming Teo (2020), «Introduction», in J. Kamblé, E. Selinger and H. Teo (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance*, London, Routledge, pp. 1-23.
- Krentz, Jayne Ann, «Introduction», in A. Krentz (ed.), *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 1-21.
- Modleski, Tania (1990 [1982]), *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women*, London, Routledge.
- Mussell, Kay J. (1984), *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*, Greenwood Press.
- Pryde, Jessica P. (2022). *Black Love Matters: Real Talk on Romance, Being Seen, and Happily Ever Afters*, New York, Berkley.
- Radway, Janice (1984), *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.
- Regis, Pamela (2003), *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, University of Pennsylvania Press
- Roach, Catherine (2016), *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Roach, Catherine (2022), «A New Vision of Love: Diversity, Positive Sexuality, and Cultural Change in America», in A. Brooks (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, London: Routledge, pp. 59-68.
- Teo, Hsu-Ming (2018), «The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre», *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.415>>.
- Teo, Hsu-Ming (2020), «Love and Romance Novels», in J. Kamblé, E. Selinger and H. Teo (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance*, London, Routledge, pp. 454-484.
- Young, Erin. S. (2020), «Race, Ethnicity and Whiteness», in J. Kamblé, E. Selinger and H. Teo (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance*, London, Routledge, pp. 511-528.