***Caribbean-Reading the Romance Novel:
Creativity, Positionality, and Vulnerability***

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Creativity – my own and that of other women – has not been a specific object of my research to date; it is, however, a question of considerable interest to me and something to which I’ve given some thought. I’m grateful for the opportunity to engage in a conversation about it. I have a lot of curiosity about my own creative process, a central question being how much it and my willingness to give myself over to it are inflected by the multiple and intersecting axes around which I am made legible to myself and to others. As a reader and teacher of literary texts by Caribbean women, and as someone increasingly interested in Caribbean pop culture, I want to think about what social indices (nation, race-class, occupation, and sexuality) might be most influential in shaping the internal and external narratives that Caribbean women (myself included) produce about our creative and intellectual endeavors. I’m increasingly drawn to the idea of interrogating my own position as a somewhat self-conscious scholar of pop culture (popular fiction and film, especially) from and about the Caribbean, and looking at the work of, and statements by, Caribbean women who produce pop-culture narratives.

I have said “pop culture.” What I really intend – in this symposium’s spirit of being-vulnerable-with-others – is to think here with you about my position as a consumer and not-scholar, or not-yet-scholar, of *romance novels*.

# 1. Defining terms

Here is Pamela Regis’s succinct definition: “The romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (14). I would amend this somewhat. Although romance novels conventionally end with a wedding, or at least the promise of one, some of the more satisfying contemporary romance novels I have read end *not* with a betrothal, but with the mutual acknowledgement of a permanent romantic partnership between the novel’s principal characters: in other words, with a *refusal* of the idea that marriage is the necessary end-point of the romance-novel plot trajectory.

If I were to hazard a definition of the Caribbean romance novel, it would be something like the above, with the added conditions that it should be set primarily in a Caribbean location, that at least one of the principal characters should be a Caribbean national, and that the author her- or himself should be a Caribbean person, or at least someone with deep familiarity with the region. But this presentation will not just be about reading and writing Caribbean romance novels – for one thing, there just aren’t that many of them. Instead it will be, as the title suggests, as much about *Caribbean-reading* the romance novel – a practice with deep roots in the region. Caribbean women – Anglophone Caribbean women – are indefatigable readers of romance fiction: most of it, for most of the past several decades, produced elsewhere and about other people (white, middle-class and upper-class characters from and in the United States and Britain). What it might mean to Caribbean-read such novels is one of the possibilities that I hope this presentation will begin to sketch.

# 2. Lamenting my condition

The decision to focus this presentation on romance novels, and on my own position as a reader of them, was difficult to come to. To be blunt, it felt scary – terrifying, in fact. To come to a professional forum and declare romance novels an object of my scholarly interest, as well as a longstanding feature of my reading life, seems tremendously risky. And so I have decided that I *must* do this presentation, on this topic, precisely so that I might consider the origins of that anxiety. Why – despite the fact that there already exists a body of scholarship on romance novels, and even a journal dedicated to the topic – do I have the strong (and, I would argue, well-founded) suspicion that this is perhaps a very bad idea?

Well, for all the reasons you can probably predict: Because romance novels are a denigrated genre, perhaps themost denigrated genre of modern fiction. Women are looked down upon for just reading them, much less openly admitting that they read them, much less treating them as the subject of scholarship. (The issue of men reading them – as some men do, indeed some men *write* them – just never comes up.) Pamela Regis opens her study of romance fiction by saying, “More than any other literary genre, the romance novel has been misunderstood by mainstream literary culture…. Even the most cursory survey of criticism of this genre yields a ringing condemnation of it” (3). Jayne Ann Krentz opens her edited collection with an equivalent gesture: “Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open her romance novel on an airplane. She knows what everyone around her will think about both her and her choice of reading material. When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature but on the reader herself” (1). Because, in a word, patriarchy. Modern patriarchy, we might argue, produces successful, mutual romantic attachment as the only proper quest-goal for women, then belittles them for their imaginative and affective investment in it.

In this landscape, to take romance novels seriously risks accusations of sentimentality, and (worse) anti-feminism and bourgeois false consciousness – accusations (at least the first one) to which women scholars are always particularly vulnerable. (Even writing about romance novels in a hyper-critical feminist mode, which several female scholars have done, opens one up to the accusation of frivolity: Why would you waste your time and intellectual energy on such eminently unworthy material?) How much greater is the risk for black/brown women scholars in the US academy? For non-US-national black/brown women scholars in the US academy?

But there’s more. There’s my idea of myself as a feminist, an anti-imperialist, an anti-racist, a critic of heteronormativity, and – although not a Marxist – a critic of bourgeois cultural hegemony. To reveal myself as a reader of romance novels – to take the enterprise seriously, to the extent of *writing* about it – is in conflict with all those axes of identification. In short, I experience cognitive dissonance.

But here’s the thing: I *am* a reader of romance novels. I have been since I was about twelve years old. I’m a more selective and skeptical reader of romance novels now than I was then, and a more conflicted reader – but still a reader. It is a persistent feature of my reading life.

Which might be an argument for lingering, at least a bit longer, in the space of lamenting – or at least, in the space of sitting with and acknowledging my sense of vulnerability. Because (here comes a claim) *vulnerability feeds creativity, and seeking to avoid vulnerability stifles it.*

# 3. Pop/romance fiction as fertile site for my creativity

So, the thing is not actually that I’m a reader of romance novels. The thing is that I suspect that *romance novels would be an especially fertile site for my scholarly creativity* because:

* They are a persistent feature of my reading life.

Which is to say: I don’t know what, exactly, but there’s something here about *creativity and stubbornness*. My writing/scholarly life has taught me that that which I cannot let go of, or that which won’t let me go – at some point, if I yield to its insistence, it produces work that I value.

* I am affectively engaged with them – and all my scholarship, or at least the scholarship I value most, arises to some degree out of affect and desire.

Which is to say: My creativity is born in/nurtured by/intimately entangled with *my emotions and my desire*.

* I am also *politically engaged* with them, on several fronts (or, with several attitudes).

On the one hand, I see the many ways in which they are politically problematic – and the easiest and perhaps best way to write on them (the route taken by several feminist scholars) would be to take up these lines of analysis and critique. On the other hand, they are a large part of what vast numbers of women (and some men – between 16% and 18% of US readers are male) across the Anglophone world read: statistics for the United States say that sales of romance novels totaled $1.08 billion in 2013, and that the genre accounted for about 23% of adult fiction sold.[[1]](#footnote-1) To affirm them as worthy reading matter is arguably both a feminist and an anti-elitist gesture; to refuse to do so assumes that these readers (mostly women) do not make good choices for themselves, do not have an adequate understanding of their own socio-political positions and interests. My stance here is a variation of Curdella Forbes’s argument about pop fiction more generally, and a (somewhat wary) appropriation of Pamela Regis’s argument about romance novels in particular (although I have grave reservations about what that argument elides and overlooks).

Which is to say: *I want my creativity to align with (to serve?) my politics*. And sometimes it does, and sometimes it resists, and sometimes it forces me into a more nuanced understanding of what my politics actually are, or what they ought to be.

# 3.1 Reading/Writing “back”

As a Caribbean scholar, another pole of my intellectual and political engagement with romance fiction (and other pop-fiction genres) concerns the regularity with which, and the terms on which, my homescape becomes the setting for other people’s romance novels. Whether they involve Caribbean main characters (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Tropical Sins*) or not, there are any number of romance novels set “on a lush/remote/exotic/exclusive Caribbean island” (as opposed to *in a Caribbean country*), and centered on at least one primary character who is white and from elsewhere, or (less frequently) black and from elsewhere. Again, these are texts that circulate in the world and have effects on how my region and country are imagined, perceived, positioned, and related to. That they are worthy of my attention seems self-evident.

# 4. Romance fiction as fertile site for Caribbean women writers’ creativity – and their politics?

Valerie Belgrave’s *Ti Marie* (1988) is one of very few romance novels set in the Caribbean, written by a Caribbean author, featuring primarily Caribbean characters (although the romantic hero is English) and intended – according to the author – primarily for Caribbean readers. The novel traces the relationship of a mixed-race Trinidadian woman, Elena, and her lover, Barry, an English aristocrat, within the slave society that was late-eighteenth-century/early-nineteenth-century Trinidad.

The novel has attracted considerable critical comment, most of it negative. Jane Bryce critiques *Ti Marie’s* inability to overcome the stereotypes that are (on Belgrave’s account) its explicit target, yet closes by saying that her “purpose … is not to ‘trash’ the novel, which … succeeds admirably in … its project of providing pure entertainment” (354).[[2]](#footnote-2) Hers is less condemnatory than other assessments of *Ti Marie.* Gillian Kathryn Smith argues that the novel fails in its “revolutionary and noble” attempt to “revise the [race and gender] stereotypes of the period” in which it is set, because of the restrictions imposed upon it by the romance genre (90). A more compelling reading of the novel comes from Faith Smith, who concludes (somewhat wryly), “As an elitist reader-critic I would have preferred Belgrave to try to find a ‘pleasurable’ way to demystify the romance itself, to show how slavery proved the lie of the romance” (180). Yet this somewhat scathing disquisition ends on an interesting note of equivocation: “In offering us a recuperation of the Harlequin Romance that claims the genre for Caribbean readers, it seems to me that Belgrave vastly complicates our present ‘truths’ regarding the textual production of ‘Caribbean women writers’ or even ‘Third World feminism’” (180).

I want to invite you to linger with me in the space created, right at the end there, by Faith Smith – there where she allows that Belgrave has, perhaps incompletely and contingently, succeeded in achieving some small part of her avowedly political aim: she has claimed the Harlequin Romance (product and vehicle of Euro-American cultural imperialism) for Caribbean people, *and* she has troubled complacent notions of who the female writers (and readers) of the Caribbean are, and what is properly required by their pleasure, and their politics.

Despite the cool reception *Ti Marie* received from critics, its sales were brisk (and perhaps continue to be so – it was re-issued in 2007 for the US market and has been adopted for courses at several universities). While I’ve been unable to find specific figures so far, Faith Smith notes that it was the “impressive sales” of *Ti Marie* that encouraged the publisher, Heinemann, to launch a romance line (Caribbean Caresses) featuring Caribbean main characters as well as Caribbean settings (179). The popular success of the novel suggests that Belgrave was at least somewhat successful in her aim to “show you … what a romance we’d really like to read would be like if it belongs to us” (Tanifeani int., 24). As she describes them, her intentions for the book (and her other writing) have a strong streak of cultural nationalism, and sense of the importance of popular fiction within a cultural-nationalist program:

West Indian books sell to specialist readers … or school children who are forced to read them…. But there are thousands of us who buy those paperbacks that come from America or England, who read every night and avidly. We are letting all the foreign media … dominate our pleasure reading and viewing. Nobody is doing anything about that and that is the area I’m interested in. (25)

Interestingly, while some of Belgrave’s comments suggest that her decision to write in the romance genre is a pragmatic one, a product of her intention to provide Caribbean pleasure-reading for Caribbean audiences, she has published at least three novels in that mode, and has made other comments that seem to imply an aesthetic and affective investment in the genre and its conventions – as when she tells an interviewer (2007), “If I were forced to pick a favorite character it would probably be my hero/s. ... I love a hero who could enhance the life of the heroine and perhaps, even give her a helping hand up to become more of herself.”

At least some of the objection to *Ti Marie* from critics seems to stem from the fact that it hews to romance-novel conventions (which critics interpret as reinforcing conservative race and gender norms). Significantly, that seems to be exactly the aspect that its author values, but she construes it differently: as providing readers with a text that they will find accessible, in which they will see themselves represented, and that, above all, will bring them pleasure. Roslyn Carrington, a contemporary romance novelist from Trinidad and Tobago who writes under the pen-name Simona Taylor, also celebrates the importance of pleasure: “I don’t have a problem appealing to a broader audience and using smaller words. I allow my humour to permeate my work. I like to have fun.” Later on, Taylor explicitly rejects older romance-novel tropes such as “arrogant millionaire bastards slapping women, and all that rubbish.” Elaborating further, she says, “I can’t respect a man who has a private jet. I think it is selfish to have that kind of carbon footprint. For you to become a billionaire, you must have stepped on somebody at some point. I could never write about that.” Thus, Carrington sees her novels as providing “fun” for herself and for the specifically female readership she imagines, but also as re-envisioning the politics (and the aesthetics) of her genre, by adhering to a particular set of values around decency, environmental responsibility, and the rejection of excessive consumption.

I find myself in sympathy with both of these stances: that of the anti-romance critics and that of the romance novelists. I believe *both* that the romance novel (even in its best instantiations – and there are some very well-written romance novels) is a conservative and politically problematic form, *and* that it merits a place at the literary table and offers liberatory political potentialities. In trying to navigate between these positions, I find myself returning repeatedly to ideas about – and conflicts over – *pleasure* (or perhaps I mean *desire*): how one defines it, how it relates to politics, how many forces press inward upon it, arrogating unto themselves the right to define its proper sources and objects, and how resistant it remains to such disciplinary gestures.

# 5. Ways forward?

One issue that has surfaced in some of the less reflexively condemnatory scholarship, and that strikes me as particularly important / fraught / promising, is the question of romance novels as sites for *the exploration of female desire*, and not just romantic and sexual desire (although those also). Pamela Regis reminds us that the heroines of romance novels achieve many things besides romantic partnership: mended or expanded communities, more lucrative or more fulfilling careers, newfound or restored autonomy (which might seem ironic, given the oft-leveled critique that romance novels serve primarily to idealize the transaction by which a woman *surrenders* her autonomy in exchange for respectability and security).

On a related note,romance writers – most of them women – have (presumably in response to or even collaboration with their readers, also mostly women) significantly and intentionally *changed the dominant tropes of romance novels* in the last few decades – a fact of which the more disparaging critics seem unaware. For example, what is expected/permitted behaviour from the hero is very different: casual violence, or casual threats thereof, which used to be quite commonplace in novels of the 1970s and 1980s, is now beyond the pale, as are overt expressions of sexism. (More subtle expressions of sexism, particularly in the form of jealousy and possessive affect, seem to be still in vogue – sometimes coded as retrograde or politically incorrect, but sexy or appealing for that very reason.) The female romantic lead is, on the whole, a great deal more autonomous (financially and psychologically) than in decades past, and novels in which it is made quite explicit that the heroine self-rescues (from a stalker or abusive former partner, for example) are more common – although the familiar scenarios in which women achieve financial security via romantic attachment to a wealthier man are still with us. Common, too, are novels featuring heroines who are not slender, slim, wraith-like, delicately made, and so forth, but rather plump, round, fulsome, buxom, zaftig, or just “x pounds overweight.” The bodies of romance-novel heroines are changing, allowing for more typically-sized women to see themselves in the heroines and imagine themselves as the targets of male sexual desire, even as (and this I find particularly interesting) the norms for *masculine* beauty in these novels (romantic heroes are tall, strong, impressively muscled, with chiseled torsos, etc.) remain much the same.

Some of these changes respond to broader cultural trends – sharper awareness of and reaction to misogyny in the world at large; changes (for example) in Disney-princess narratives from Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella who required rescue by men, to Mulan and Merida who fought for themselves, and Merida and Elsa whose trajectories aren’t headed towards romantic attachments at all. The changes in the female romance-heroine body-type can, of course, be partially attributed to the successes of the size-acceptance movement and contemporary feminism in urging pop-culture and popular discourse towards a broader and more realistic view of women’s bodies. But I think we might consider them also, at least to some degree, as a kind of intentional social engineering, in which romance writers recognize their (potential) influence over the imaginations of their readers and decide to use that influence towards certain ends, or at least in service of certain values, *à la* Roslyn Carrington.

Beyond the changed norms noted above, the potential for this social-engineering effect to address other reservations about/criticisms leveled at the genre (its heteronormativity, its bourgeois tendencies, its racial conservatism) remains uncertain. There are robust industries (especially in the new era of electronic publishing) in LGBTQ romance, and hetero-romance novels are less exclusionary of LGBTQ characters than they used to be. More main characters may be of the lower-middle or working class (at least in terms of income and occupation) than in former decades, and there are more titles available today that feature main characters who are (one or both) people of colour. However none of these facts, on their own, adequately settles the discomforting questions raised above; the genre remains, on the whole, a conservative form. I am particularly aware of – sensitive to – this conservatism on questions of race and nation. While people of colour are more visible in the genre than ten, twenty or thirty years ago, the relationships portrayed tend to be overwhelmingly in-group. Inter-racial romance (specifically marked/marketed as such) remains a small subset of the romance-literature market, and the racial politics of those novels (the ones I’ve seen) are often quite problematic – by which I mean, reductive and fetishizing.

# 6. Where, then, do I end up?

I love the idea of working towards a methodology for reading the Caribbean romance novel, but even more important, as I suggested at the start, is to work towardsa methodology for *Caribbean-reading the romance novel* (in the spirit of Barbara Lalla’s *Postcolonialisms*). How to embark on that project – and what to make of my own positionality in relation to it – is a complicated question. The facile answer is that I must find a way of walking – or, better, *creating* – a line between reflexive acceptance and reflexive rejection of the romance novel’s allure and its (not unrelated) ideological tendencies and effects. A more specific starting point might be to find and engage in dialogue with a community of Caribbean readers of romance novels, to ruminate together about our collective and individual positionalities vis-à-vis the texts we consume: how they do and do not speak to and about us as we experience our identities in terms of nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, occupation, appearance, aspiration, historical traumas and future potentialities. How they do and do not liberate us. How they do and do not bring us pleasure.

But – quite apart from being more easily said than done – that does not entirely serve as a solution to the problem the outlines of which this presentation has tried to sketch, because it still fails to address the question of my *vulnerability*, as a reader and a scholar whose physical and discursive presence is marked in specific (and often constraining) ways in the US academy. My only response to this is to remind myself that – as I said at the start – vulnerability feeds creativity, and that, whatever I may be up against, I retain always the prerogative of the scholar and writer, which is to sit in / with / amongst all these tensions, and think through / write out of that fraught space.

Thank you.

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1. [https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580](https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid%3D580); <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/65387-the-hot-and-cold-categories-of-2014.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bryce – along with other scholars whom she cites – offers a thoughtful and entirely apposite critique of the discrepancy between the novel’s avowed cultural nationalism and its racial politics, as effected by its representations of the bodies of (particularly) female characters. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)