



# IASPR Conference 2023

*Romance Revitalised*

28-30 June  
Birmingham, UK  
Program Guide



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE  
STUDY OF POPULAR ROMANCE

## About the conference

Romance Revitalised is the ninth annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance. It is also the first meeting in five years, and in this time, the world has changed significantly: how we live, and, as a result, how we love. In the spirit of renewal, the theme for the 2023 IASPR conference is a broad one and includes researchers from a range of disciplines, including literary studies; film, television, and media studies; communication and the social sciences; critical race, feminist, queer and disability studies; audience & fan studies.

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## About IASPR

The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) is dedicated to fostering and promoting the scholarly exploration of all popular representations of romantic love. IASPR is committed to building a strong community of scholars of popular romance through open, digital access to all scholarly work published by the Association, by organizing or sponsoring an annual international conference on popular romance studies, and by encouraging the teaching of popular romance at all levels of higher education.

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## **Attendance options**

*Romance Revitalised* is a hybrid conference, run at the University of Birmingham and on Zoom.

For those attending online, links will be emailed to registrants in the week leading up to the conference.

For those attending in-person, room information will be shared at the conference.

We look forward to seeing you in Birmingham and online!

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Conference  
Day 1

Wednesday  
June 28, 2023

		Topic
Registration	8:30-9:30 GMT+1	
Session 1A	9:00-10:30 GMT+1	BookTok and Publishing
Session 1B	9:00-10:30 GMT+1	Fandom
Break	10:30-11 GMT+1	
Session 2A	11:00-12:30 GMT+1	Black Romance in Britain and America 1
Session 2B	11:00-12:30 GMT+1	The Contemporaneity of Jane Austen
Lunch	12:30-1:30 GMT+1	
Keynote 1	1:30-2:45 GMT+1	Huike Wen
Break	2:45-3:05 GMT+1	
Session 3A	3:05-4:35 GMT+1	Paranormal Romance
Session 3B	3:05-4:35 GMT+1	Narrative and Genre
Break	4:35-4:45 GMT+1	
Session 4A	4:45-6:15 GMT+1	Young Adult Romance
Session 4B	4:45-6:15 GMT+1	Reading and Writing Romance
Book Launch	6:30 GMT+1	<i>Creating Identity</i> , Jayashree Kamblé

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Day 2

Thursday  
June 29, 2023

		Topic
Registration	8:45-9:15 GMT+1	
Session 5A	9:15-10:45 GMT+1	Black Romance in Britain and America 2
Session 5B	9:15-10:45 GMT+1	Queer Romance
Break	10:45-11:15 GMT+1	
Session 6A	11:15-12:45 GMT+1	Love Studies and Romance
Session 6B	11:15-12:45 GMT+1	Form and Trope
Lunch	12:45-1:45 GMT+1	
Keynote 2	1:45-3:00 GMT+1	The Birmingham Romance Research Group
Break	3:00-3:20 GMT+1	
Session 7A	3:20-4:50 GMT+1	m/m Romance
Session 7B	3:20-4:50 GMT+1	Romance Bodies
Break	4:50-5:00 GMT+1	
Roundtable A	5:00-6:00 GMT+1	Romantic fiction in the UK, USA, and Australia: An Author Roundtable
Roundtable B	5:00-6:00 GMT+1	Teaching Popular Romance Fiction: A Roundtable
Conference Dinner	7:00- GMT+1	

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Friday  
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	Topic	
Registration	8:45-9:15 GMT+1	
Session 8A	9:15-10:45 GMT+1	Erotics of Romance
Session 8B	9:15-10:45 GMT+1	Strange, Familiar Romance
Break	10:45-11:15 GMT+1	
Session 9A	11:15-1:05 GMT+1	Perspectives on Historical Romance 1
Session 9B	11:15-1:05 GMT+1	Feminism and Politics in Romance
Lunch	1:05-2:00 GMT+1	
Session 10A	2:00-3:15 GMT+1	Teaching Popular Romance Fiction: A Workshop
Session 10B	2:00-3:15 GMT+1	Love Across the Atlantic: A Roundtable
Break	3:15-3:30 GMT+1	
Session 11A	3:30-5:00 GMT+1	Perspectives on Historical Romance 2
Session 11B	3:30-5:00 GMT+1	Heroes
Farewell	5:00- GMT+1	

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## Session 1

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### A) BookTok and Publishing

**Screaming, Crying, Throwing Up: BookTok and the Romance Industry**  
Chels Upton

**#QueerBookTok's Reading Networks: Who gets to read and write LGBTQ+ Romance?**  
Katie Morrissey

**"Our Queen, Colleen": Exploring Affect, Reading Communities, and the Power of BookTok in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* Duology**  
Lucy Rouse

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### B) Fandom

**Ship Has Not Sunk, Romance is Not Dead: 'Clowning' as the Fandom's Mode to Revitalizing Romance**  
Andrea Anne Trinidad

**Queer readings of Jane Eyre**  
Lucy Sheerman

**A Love Enshrined in Time: Material Culture's Role in Nostalgic Romance in Netflix/tvN's Twenty-Five, Twenty-One and its Impact on Creative Digital Fan Cultures**  
Emily Mohabir

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## Session 2

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### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 1

**Rapping Black Romance: Sex and Empowerment**

Rita B. Dandridge

**Black Love, Society, and Subject Status in Britain: Dell's Entwined Destinies (1980) as a Milestone in Category Romance**

Jayashree Kamblé

**Black British Love Matters: Revitalising Contemporary Romantic Narratives**

Irene Pérez-Fernández

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Room

DRW

### B) The contemporaneity of Jane Austen

**Writing With and Against Romance: Jane Austen's Mansfield Park**

Anne Besnault

**After Jane Austen: "Regency" Romance Today**

Myriam Boussahba

**Transnationalising Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice**

Florence Cabaret

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## Keynote 1

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# Absence and Abundance: Romance and User Agency in a Contemporary Chinese Media Environment, *Huike Wen*

Romance is a land of paradox—abundance and absence, freedom and constraint, choice and control, and happiness and torment—we indulge in romance because of the complexity, even though we often use it to escape another complexity.

While international romantic stories share similar paradoxes, the local media environment nurtures specific characteristics familiar to its audience and media users. The Chinese media environment needs and sustains abundant depictions of romance in soap operas and idol dramas, the genres attuned to romantic love and relationships. Meanwhile, reality TV shows, detective and criminal shows, game shows, news programs, and many other genres often integrate romantic relationships in family-building-and-management representations to cater to all generations of TV audiences. The abundance provides rich raw materials for scholars' and public intellectuals' research and commentary. Nonetheless, the cultural environment circumscribes academic and general media users' attention to Chinese media. In general, scholars outside China stress censorship and surveillance, and scholars living in China, especially those trained and working in Chinese colleges and institutions, are more interested in building a harmonious media environment.

The constrained attention ignores the ways in which specific genres, particularly romance, nurture and sustain the visibility and voices of people and communities repressed in mainstream media. Two opportunities are thereby lost – to communicate the individual celebrities' and media personas' tacit strategies in navigating their visibility and influencing the Chinese audience; and to recognize, guide, and suggest user agency to discover users' learning path and create knowledge about the repressed topics and related people, communities, and cultures.

Huike Wen views romance as a medium in studying Chinese media as an ecological discourse. She combines established theory and one concrete example to elaborate her view: Popular romance creates discursive spaces for media users to apply their agency; with the agency, the users can discover that the seemingly absent topics are in fact present amid the abundance of the contemporary Chinese media environment.

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## Session 3

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### A) Paranormal Romance

**Death and the posthuman/ posthumous female body in paranormal romance**  
Evvie Valiou

**Monster Romance: Potential, Pitfalls, and New Materialist Feminism**  
Sanjana Basker

**Metafiction in the My So-Called Mystical Midlife series (2021-2022) by**  
**Robyn Peterman**  
Maria Ramos-Garcia

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Room

DRW

### B) Narrative and Genre

**Practices of attachment: the pleasures of rereading popular romance fiction**  
Nattie Golubov

**Autographic transfocalization in the romance: the case of Midnight Sun**  
Katie Deane

**Possessiveness of hockey players through their jersey number in erotic**  
**romance books**  
Louise Schulmann-Darsy



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## Session 4

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### A) Young Adult Romance

**Mattering and Belonging Across 30 Years of Sapphic Young Adult Romance**

Carly Bennett

**“You look cool in that outfit”: Clothing and identity in Indian American teen romances**

Sreepurna Datta

**The YA romance as a tool for social transformation: the case of Ismée Williams’ *This Train is Being Held***

Inmaculada Pérez-Casal

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Room

DRW

### B) Reading and Writing Romance

**Love and Romance in the City: An examination of cultural texts in public library displays during celebrations of love in London and Sydney**

Vassiliki Veros & Benjamin Hanckel

**“Words, words, words”: The role of foreign languages in romance novels**

María-Isabel González-Cruz

**Bad Romance Data: Contextualizing the Popular Romance Fiction Market**

Andrea Martucci

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## Session 5

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### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 2

Vivian Stephens, American Romance, and Institution Building

Julie Moody-Freeman

The Own Voices Social Media Project: Teaching Diverse Romance Novels in a Gen Ed Literature and Popular Culture Course

Justina Clayburn

Beverly Jenkins as a Contemporary Chronicler – Black Historical Romance and the Religious Work of Black History

Jeania Ree Moore

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### B) Queer Romance

The female gaze on the body in queer romance novels

Lucy Hargrave

Skewed femininity in Simona Ahrnstedt's Allt eller inget

Elin Abrahamsson

Where does the love go? Representations of romance and relationships in current life-writing by trans men, transmasculine and butch people

Michael Gratzke

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## Session 6

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### A) Love Studies and Romance

**A Heart Needs a Home: Ontological Rootedness, Simon May, and Popular Romance Studies**

Eric Murphy Selinger

**Who Has the Right to Write the City: Understanding the Transgressive Potential of Public Romance in India**

Meghna Bohidar

**The Soft Life: A Political Economy of Love among Young Women in South Africa**

Lebohang Masango

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### B) Form and Trope

**Waifus, Husbandos, and Lesbian Wizards: Otome games, visual novels, and digital romance media cultures**

Joseph Crawford

**Unforgettably in Love: Uses of the Amnesia Trope in Contemporary Romance**

Gaja Kolodziej

**Imploding fireworks: Love and self-knowledge in the contemporary Italian sentimental novel**

Francesca Pierini

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## Keynote 2

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### **The Birmingham Romance Research Group, *Carly Bennett, Katie Deane, Lucy Hargrave, Charlotte Ireland, Katrina Jan, Evdokia Valiou***

Established in 2020, as a way of staying connected during the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Birmingham Romance Research Group was formed as a collective of early career researchers working in and around popular romance studies. The group undertakes a variety of activities, including but not limited to: sharing research resources, providing peer review on work in progress, reading and discussing critical work and generally supporting each other as emerging scholars.

Most current PhDs in popular romance are conducted in isolation – while scholars may be connected nationally and internationally (through organisations like IASPR), but are generally not working alongside other romance scholars within the same institution. The Birmingham Romance Research Group thus offers a new model for carrying out and supporting research of popular romance.

In this roundtable discussion, chaired by the group's founder Dr Amy Burge, the Birmingham Romance Research Group share their experiences and expertise, reflecting on researching romance as a cohort and providing an insight into how this model functions.

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## Session 7

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### A) m/m Romance

**"He looked like the kind of country youth they wrote ballads about": Queer Robin Hood Romance in K.J. Charles' The Gentle Art of Fortune Hunting**  
Kristin Noone

**"Gayappropriation?": Gay and bisexual men's perspectives on women who produce and consume m/m sexually explicit texts**  
Lucy Neville

**Folklore, Trauma, and Healing in The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal and Spectred Isle by KJ Charles**  
Monika Markéta Šmídová

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### B) Romance Bodies

**"Skinny Is the New Fat": Traditional and Modern Nigerian Beauty in Skinny Girl in Transit**  
Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez

**Reading "Plus Size" Romantic Narratives Intersectionally: Lani Young's Scarlet Series**  
Paloma Fresno Calleja

**Analysing contemporary romance covers to uncover readers' desires**  
Ellen Carter

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## Roundtables

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### A) Romantic fiction in the UK, USA, and Australia

The RNA is a professional body, founded in 1960, that exists to raise the prestige of romantic fiction, and to encourage romantic authorship in the UK. Jean Fullerton (current RNA Chair) and Sue Merritt (RNA Event Coordinator) join us to discuss the work of the RNA and its role in supporting British popular romance authors. They will share their experiences working as authors transnationally, discuss the popular romance publishing industry as simultaneously local and global, and the ways in which the RNA champions romance writing in the UK.

Sue Merritt and Jean Fullerton; Chair: Jodi McAlister

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### B) Teaching Popular Romance Fiction

One of IASPR's core missions is to encourage the teaching of popular romance media, including popular romance fiction. Once rare, such teaching now occurs around the world, in a variety of disciplinary, institutional, and para-academic contexts. What do courses on popular romance fiction try to accomplish, and how do faculty integrate romance novels into courses on other topics? How do we choose which novels to teach, and what assignments and activities—in class or out of school—have emerged as forms of popular romance pedagogy? How can IASPR better support the teaching of popular romance fiction, and what resources are already available to those who would like to give it a try? This roundtable—the first of its kind—gathers faculty to discuss the challenges and rewards of teaching popular romance fiction in a variety of institutional and disciplinary contexts, and to offer advice to anyone hoping to teach romance novels.

Amy Burge, Joseph Crawford, Maria DeBlassie, Samantha George, Sam Hirst, Julie Moody-Freeman, Francesca Pierini, and Catherine Roach.

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## Session 8

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### A) Erotics of Romance

**Reverse Harem Romance: Power and the Shift in Women's Erotic Imagination**  
Heather Schell

**Let Me Take Care of You: Romanticised Domestic Fantasy in Audio Erotica**  
Athena Bellas & Jodi McAlister

**The Sacred and the Profane: Romance, Sexuality and 'Girlboss Cannibalism'**  
Nicola Welsh-Burke

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### B) Strange, Familiar Romance

**Romance Regency of Regency Romance**  
Veera Mäkelä

**Domestic Love in 21st-Century Speculative Fiction**  
Esko Suoranta

**Weirdly Romantic: Compersion, Relationship Anarchy, and the Beautiful  
Weird**  
Matt Hayler

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## Session 9

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### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 1

Reading Historical Popular Romance in 21st-Century Pakistan

Javaria Farooqui

Fictional Technology Meets Real History in Jeannie Lin's 'Gunpowder Chronicles'

Sarah Ficke

Is It or Isn't It Romantic? A Case Study of a Gothic Romance Film in Taiwan

Fang-Mei Lin

The Australian Convict Prostitute Romance: Narrating Social and Sexual Justice for "Damned Whores"

Hsu-Ming Teo

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Room

DRW

### B) Feminism and Politics in Romance

Pro-choice activism in Marian Keyes Watermelon

Maria Butler

Mammy Walsh's Daughters: Irish feminism and the novels of Marian Keyes

Rosalind Haslett

Suffragette Historical Romances: Re-Purposing Women's Suffrage in a Postfeminist Context

Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar

The Homefront of "The War on Christmas": Great American Family's Holiday Romance Films, Domesticity, and the Rise of Christo-Fascism

Hannah Scupham



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## Session 10

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### A) Love Across the Atlantic: A Professional Development Roundtable in International and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Join us for a discussion about the multi-modal “Love Across the Atlantic” project (2014-2020). We present this project as a case study of how IASPR serves not only as a place to present research but as a space for professional development. Our story highlights opportunities to use IASPR to create collegial networks, host funded residencies and conferences, promote institutional ties, and publish collaborative research. We’ll share examples of impact and lessons to be learned, with the goal to inspire other such international and interdisciplinary partnerships.

Catherine M. Roach, Ted Trost, Veera Mäkelä, Inmaculada (Inma) Pérez Casal

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DRW

### B) Teaching Popular Romance Fiction: A Workshop

One of IASPR’s core missions is to encourage the teaching of popular romance media, including popular romance fiction. Once rare, such teaching now occurs around the world, in a variety of disciplinary, institutional, and para-academic contexts. This workshop gathers faculty who teach romance to discuss the institutional, theoretical, and disciplinary contexts of their teaching, to explore the thinking that goes into picking books and designing a romance fiction syllabus (or a syllabus including romance fiction), and to share the questions, assignments, and activities—in class or out of school—that they have found most helpful and rewarding in their own classroom practice.

Kirsty Bunting, Kaja Franck, Margo Hendricks, Nicole M. Jackson, Emerald King, Maria Nilson, and Maria Ramos-Garcia.

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## Session 11

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### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 2

**A Romantic History of Newgate Prison: Theories of Punishment in Historical Romance, 1977 to Present**

Emma Kearney

**"The opportunities that Harriette Wilson wast'd:" L.A. Hall's 'The Comfortable Courtesan', women's culture, and Regency romance**

Johanna Hoorenman

**"Too Much Love, Not Enough Men: The Excess of Women in Carola Dunn's Superfluous Women"**

Bonnie J. White

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Room

DRW

### B) Heroes

**Heroes and the Procreative Realm**

Jonathan Allan

**Tired/ Wired: The Byronic Hero Becomes Nice**

Emma McNamara

**"What will you do with yourself when you grasp that your mind is only different, not deranged?": Isolation, Madness, and Neurodivergent Heroes in Historical Romance Novels**

Veronika Vargova

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## Session 1

### A) BookTok and Publishing

#### Screaming, Crying, Throwing Up: BookTok and the Romance Industry

Chels Upton

This paper would examine the influence BookTok has on romance book sales and romance industry trends. According to trend pieces by NPR, Wired, and The Guardian, BookTok is responsible for a romance novel boom among Gen Z readers, who are not hindered by the stigma that comes with reading romance novels. Similarly, Barnes & Noble, Waterstones, and other booksellers have capitalized on BookTok by creating BookTok tables in their stores.

Using statistics from data analytics companies, research on traditional publishing, and interviews with James Daunt, the CEO of Barnes & Noble and Managing Director of Waterstones, I would argue that BookTok is not an organic taste-making authority, but a source of free labor for publishers to exploit in order to sell books they've pre-selected. Algorithmic bias and traditional marketing methods such as the mass distribution of advanced reader copies for lead titles impact what's popular on BookTok.

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## Session 1

### A) BookTok and Publishing

#### #QueerBookTok's Reading Networks: Who gets to read and write LGBTQ+ Romance?

Katie Morrissey

On social media platforms like TikTok, algorithms and hashtags bring disparate audiences for queer romance into contact and erase the contexts users bring to these debates. As queer romance genres become more popular, hashtags like #mmromance and #sapphicreads have become contact zones for different kinds of queer pleasure. Fanfiction creators have crossed into publishing. LGBTQ+ authors call for more stories about LGBTQ+ characters. Readers increasingly expect LGBTQ+ lives and desires to be represented in popular media. This paper uses three controversial #booktok posts from 2021 and 2022 to examine how TikTok is bringing different networks of romance readers into contact. The platform's algorithms obfuscate the reality that there are many different types of queer romance, each with their own aesthetic traditions, dominant cultural concerns, and traditions of stigma. These contexts limit TikTok users' abilities to understand one another. As a result, various types of queer content are weaponized against one another within larger struggles for queer representation.

As queer romance genres proliferate and become more profitable, debates about who should be creating and enjoying this content have returned. Today, debates around queer romance are unfolding online-- spread across different platforms and user networks, connected by hashtags, and shaped by algorithms. To understand recent #booktok conflicts we need to identify the various networks of readers and writers participating in these debates and account for the different contexts informing these user networks. As I will demonstrate, while #queer #booktok users may be connected by queer pleasures, they are not aligned in their understandings of LGBTQ+ politics or representation.

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## Session 1

### A) BookTok and Publishing

#### **"Our Queen, Colleen": Exploring Affect, Reading Communities, and the Power of BookTok in Colleen Hoover's It Ends With Us Duology**

Lucy Rouse

It has been widely theorised that way that we consume and circulate romance fiction has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. The rise of "BookTok" subcommunities on video-sharing app, Tiktok has been one key example of these changes. In this paper, I propose that BookTok has brought discussions of romance fiction to the forefront of digital book culture, providing romance publicity through algorithmic recommendation systems. By analysing this surge in popularity, I reinforce how Booktok's influence has had a flow-on effect to commercial platforms, such as GoodReads or Amazon. Finally, I argue that the increased, social media presence of romance — a genre built upon the expression of emotion — highlights how the genre has always fostered intimate, affective connections between readers, authors, and communities.

I elaborate these central claims by way of close analysis of Colleen Hoover's new adult duology It Ends With Us and It Starts With Us in the context of its social media reception on Goodreads and Tiktok. I propose that readerly reception of these tonally different novels mirrors their content and purpose. By contrasting the language used in recommendations and reviews of the melancholic It Ends With Us against the lighthearted "fanservice" of It Starts With Us, we can understand how language is shared symbiotically between author, text, and community. By exploring the crossover between the language used in the text and that of online discussion, we can analyse how this relationship generates and strengthens the affective dynamics that emerge from romance production and consumption.

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### B) Fandom

#### Ship Has Not Sunk, Romance is Not Dead: 'Clowning' as the Fandom's Mode to Revitalizing Romance

Andrea Anne Trinidad

The pandemic massively introduced Boys' Love (BL) as a romantic genre to the Filipino audience. The accessibility of form and comfort of narrative that was seen in the Thai BL show *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020) provided an unexpected emotional coping mechanism where physical tenderness between the protagonists combatted the harsh realities viewers are in. With Filipinos developing a fascination with the genre, earlier Thai BL media products were re-discovered in hopes of continuously generating *kilig* in Filipino and *fin* in Thai as words that both encapsulate the overall affective state brought by the consumption of something romantic.

One of the re-discovered Thai BL material where some Filipino fans flocked to is *SOTUS: The Series* (Samajarn, 2016) that continue to persist with the support of its transcultural fandom called *Peraya*— a portmanteau of the names *Perawat* "Krist" Sangpotirat and *Prachaya* "Singto" Ruangroj who starred as engineering senior and junior couple in the hate to love college romance novel that was later turned into a television show. Despite having their idols' last on-screen couple project in 2018 and a few brand ambassadorship occasionally, the fandom survived, sailed through the pandemic, and welcomed eager fans who recently came across the shared object of fandom. Central in their endurance as a community is their inclination to 'clowning' as a fannish activity where fans jokingly read into signs in order to articulate interpretations and make-believe scenarios that romantically relates the pair in real life. In using clowning as a mode to materialize their collective desire of seeing moments between *KristSingto* as 'boyfriends in love' beyond their couple work on screen, the fandom is able to revitalize its own community through the habitual and informal creation of simple and scattered romantic narratives that could keep the romance of their ship alive especially when newer shows, fresher couples, and bigger fandoms start to dominate the BL scene.

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## B) Fandom

### Queer readings of Jane Eyre

Lucy Sheerman

Various critics have considered the way in which Charlotte Brontë's iconic novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) interrogates the patriarchal norms of courtship and romantic love. The figure of Jane, the book's unreliable and rebellious 'author', challenges Victorian narrative conventions of desire and the female gaze. Claire O'Callaghan has also argued that the figure of Rochester himself interrogates the idea of male subjectivity and sexuality in her essay "'He is rather peculiar, perhaps': Reading Mr Rochester's Coarseness Queerly". It is evidence, she argues, of 'the flexible ways with which Brontë conceived of male subjectivity'.

There are a number of critical assessments that explore how works of the Victorian period subvert normative modes of sexuality and identity but there have been very few queer critical readings of the works of the Brontës. However, there are significant numbers of queer fan fictions of *Jane Eyre* in which its characters and the fluid attractions and repulsions between them permit the complex knitting together of relationships which Brontë was at pains to unravel at the end of her novel. Such retellings have permitted a shifting understanding and reinvention of the tropes of romantic love and a happy ever after which were woven by the original work.

In my paper I will briefly survey critical readings of *Jane Eyre* as a queer text. I will then explore and analyse the creation of non-canonical relationships ('shipping') that originate in online fan fiction of *Jane Eyre*. Finally, I will consider the extent to which their protagonists echo the transgressive desires and subjectivities of Rochester and Jane.

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## Session 1

### B) Fandom

#### A Love Enshrined in Time: Material Culture's Role in Nostalgic Romance in Netflix/tvN's *Twenty-Five, Twenty-One* and its Impact on Creative Digital Fan Cultures

Emily Mohabir

Despite an unexpected ending that defied happily-ever-after expectations of the romance genre, Netflix/tvN's 1990s-set 2022 romantic coming-of-age Korean drama ("K-drama"), *Twenty-Five, Twenty-One* held a surprising international popularity, with around 171 million hours of viewing time on Netflix (Kim, para. 3). A significant aspect of this series is how nostalgic material media objects (e.g., diaries, pagers, tape recorders) play a key role in how romance is narratively developed and reflected on by characters. Similarly, the series has been highly generative within online K-drama fandoms, especially surrounding fans' reflexive acknowledgement of how their online creative activities (e.g., thematic social media posts, visual journalling, and so forth) allow for deeper engagement with the series in connection to their own lives, as well as a method of preserving a part of their consumption and lived histories materially in the otherwise ephemeral space of the Internet. This supports the notion that material culture is a "central part" of individuals' production of their subjectivities and identities, especially in the sense of self-documentation (Dussel 429) and that despite social media's common conception as ephemeral, it is often treated by users as a site of reflective identity-making and documentation of self (Livingstone 393-394). This presentation explores the series' textual depiction of romance narrative through a lens of nostalgic reflection and its connection to material media objects and their surrounding cultures. Particularly, it examines the uptake of emotional response to the series through fan-created texts that reflect the larger importance of material/visual histories and narratives in fan-created digital media.

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## Session 2

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 2

#### Rapping Black Romance: Sex and Empowerment

Rita B. Dandridge

This essay employs a substantial number of contemporary Black rap songs to establish and substantiate the hypothesis that opposing patterns appear in black male and female rap lyrics and vary from the typical romance model in literature in which man and woman meet, fall in love, marry, and live happily ever after. Much of rap music omits marriage and, instead, prioritizes sex, having originated from the “dirty blues” dominated by Black men with songs such as Bo Carter’s “Please Warm my Weiner” (1935) and The Swallows’ “It Ain’t the Meat; It’s the Motion” (1952). A close reading will be given to rap lyrics about romantic love (sex) by high profile black male and female rappers (i.e. Outkast, Slick Rick, Salt-N-Pepper, Foxy Brown, MC Lyte, Common, Lauryn Hill). I will proceed to utilize cultural studies and Black feminist theory to establish and analyze romance patterns that exclude marriage in rap music and that appear to vary depending on the rapper’s gender.

Using cultural studies about the Black male’s sexual double standard and “sexual partner concurrency” (Adler et al. and Cary et al.), I will argue that a dominating pattern in Black males’ rap lyrics seems to encompass the following components: find an unsuspecting Black female, deceive her, sex her, and leave her to resolve the consequences of Black male sexual conquests. Black feminist theory will be used to explain how Black female rappers’ lyrics counter Black male misogyny and stereotypes with an empowering pattern of liberation (Collins, hooks, and Pough). The pattern appears to have the following components: the Black woman chooses her mate, rather than the man choosing her; she establishes a truthful relationship with her mate; she engages in self-love and protected sex; and she acknowledges reality. Neither pattern endorses marriage, but this mode of analysis broadens scholarship and understanding of romance in Black rap lyrics purposed to strike a moral consciousness in African American popular culture.

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## Session 2

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 2

#### **Black Love, Society, and Subject Status in Britain: Dell's Entwined Destinies (1980) as a Milestone in Category Romance**

Jayashree Kamblé

At the end of the 1970s, contemporary category romance publishing saw a new entrant—African American editor Vivian Stephens at Dell Candlelight, a New York-based imprint. Stephens soon persuaded a friend, Black journalist Elsie B. Washington, to pen a novel. As Rosalind Welles, Washington wrote *Entwined Destinies* (1980), a romance with Black characters, the first of its kind in the genre. But what is more interesting is what Washington did with her characters: she cast her Black American hero and heroine as white-collar expats in London and foregrounded a Britain populated by people with African ancestry or citizenship and whose cultural imaginary and self-presentation testifies to those ties. Additionally, the romantic protagonists' professional lives serve to spotlight the Global South (often former European colonies), while other characters represent different constituencies within that larger group. In this respect, the novel breaks with the tradition developed by Harlequin Mills & Boon of placing white Britons in the center of an Anglo society or sensibility, even in contemporary romances set outside Britain. In that structure, people of color are homogenous and largely background scenery or tools for the white protagonists' character development. *Entwined Destinies* can therefore be regarded as a post-colonial milestone in the genre, with a Black American writer and editor inscribing Britain's (and Europe's) colonial history into the text but flipping the metropole inside out to assert the romantic and transnational subject status of once-colonized subjects.

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## Session 2

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 2

**Black British Love Matters: Revitalising Contemporary Romantic Narratives**  
Irene Pérez-Fernández

Romance, as a genre, has been justifiably criticized for its predominant depiction of white protagonists and its limited and stereotyped representation of ethnic and racial diversity (Ali, 2017, 2018; Beckett, 2019; Young, 2020). As Sareeta Domingo argues: “those of us residing in the intersections of identity and seeking to find refuge in a love story might struggle to feel truly represented. (...) early on in my life I was resigned to the notion that I’d have to filter that feeling through a lens of whiteness” (2020). In this paper, I shall trace the ever increasing number of Black British authors who are addressing this significant gap in the British publishing industry, partially filled in the North American context with the creation of specific series by specialized romance publishing houses such as Harlequin Kimani. I shall pay particular attention to Bolu Babalola’s debut *Love in Colour* (2020) and to Francis Mensah Williams’ *From Pasta to Pigfoot* (2015) and its sequel, *From Pasta to Pigfoot: Second Helpings* (2016) as a celebration of the transformative power of love (hooks, 2016). *Love in Colour* is an innovative collection of short stories which questions the universality of Western tales of love and Mensah Williams, through the character of Faye Bonsu, celebrates black love and diasporic heritage. Babalola and Mensah Williams’ works not only evince that contemporary Black British Writing, characterised by aesthetic and formal innovations, continues to unsettle literary conventions and “test simple generic categories” (Scafe, 2015: 226), but also that Black love matters and that “there is something utterly transformative about being exposed to Black Love” (Pryde, 2022: xviii).

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## B) The contemporaneity of Jane Austen

### Writing With and Against Romance: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Anne Besnault

Every Austen scholar would probably dismiss the romanticised version of Jane Austen that still influences public perception of her person and of her work. Were she alive, the author of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* would surely dismiss the creation of this Jane Austen "brand" that participates in the actual consumption of her novels and of their filmic adaptations. Didn't she write against the very genre of romance, clearly stating on April 1st 1816: "I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my life, & if it were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter"? As we read this excerpt from a letter to James Stanier Clarke, an enthusiastic admirer of romances, alongside with her novels, we cannot help but imagining Austen's Augustan self-winking at her other, more Romantic, early nineteenth-century self: Austen constantly used romance and romanticism as questions put to the patriarchal ideology of her time. Nowhere is this tension (to write "with" and "against") more palpable, if not problematic, than in *Mansfield Park*, the novel whose merciless satire and unromantic heroine seem to debunk the least intimation of romance, and the very possibility of an erotic subtext. It is this tension that this paper will be exploring.

BIO: Anne Besnault is Senior Lecturer in British literature (Victorian and modernist) at the University of Rouen – Normandy. She is the author of *Katherine Mansfield: La voix du Moment* (Paris: Messène, 1997), and of *Virginia Woolf's Unwritten Histories: Conversations with the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2022). With Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, she is also co-editor of *Beyond the Victorian and Modernist Divide: Remapping the Turn-of-the-Century Break in Literature, Culture and the Visual Arts* (Routledge, 2018). Her current fields of interest are modernist fiction and criticism, Gothic modernisms, literary history, feminist criticism, gender studies, along with the link between historiography and fiction.

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### B) The contemporaneity of Jane Austen

#### After Jane Austen: "Regency" Romance Today

Myriam Boussahba

A large part of historical romance production worldwide is grounded in British history, mostly in English Regency (1811-1820, often 1790-1837) when Jane Austen wrote her contemporary fiction and aristocratic families dominated economically, politically and socially a society built on class, sex and race inequalities. The fictional potential of Regency remains as strong as ever; plots and characters have changed in the 1980s and since 2000 (1) just as readers and writers have, thanks to ongoing gender emancipation. My goal here is to show through the case study of 'Regency' how the writing of historical romance has been 'historiographical': it offers readers snapshots of current western societies and cultures in historically credible narratives. Built for the consumers of the moment by much-alike authors, romance entertains with past histories; whereas it is mostly without historical ambition, it opens up windows of historical knowledge. Regency teases readers' interest while marketing-wise on Amazon US, it stands as a category in itself and not as the European 'Historical romance' group. This integrated 'historiographical' characteristic of Regency, and above all of romance writing makes it an essential component of popular romance and of economic success; it has shown its efficacy in time and, so far, in space.

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### B) The contemporaneity of Jane Austen

#### Transnationalising Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Florence Cabaret

Over the past twenty years, readers of Jane Austen have witnessed an impressive proliferation of prequels, sequels and spin-offs written by English-speaking female novelists and fan fiction writers catering to a simultaneous appetite for “chick lit” (as a 21st-century version of the romance), for postmodern transtextuality, for connected and participatory fiction as well as for retromania in film and TV productions. Still, in the aftermath of Gurinder Chadha's humorous British Asian film adaptation *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), some writers also appear to try and use the Austenian hypotext to offer transnational versions of her most rewritten novel (*Pride and Prejudice*) by transposing it into postcolonial, diasporic and Muslim contexts. The romance genre thus appears to cross geographical, cultural and time boundaries to reroot itself in contemporary situations where a social institution such as arranged marriages is still quite relevant to stage and question gender, social and ethnic relations in a fictional world. This case study will focus on three texts (Laaleen Sukhera ed., *Austenistan*, 2018; Sonali Dev, *Pride, Prejudice, and Other Flavors*, 2019; Soniah Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, 2019) to show how they revive some of Jane Austen's paradoxical attitudes to the romance (adapting it rather than strictly adopting it) so as to offer unusual viewpoints of supposedly conservative environments. Such Muslim romances thus address the complex intricacy of feminism, moral values and gender issues for a variety of readers to reflect on the counter-narratives they actually provide.

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## Session 3

### A) Paranormal Romance

**Death and the posthuman/ posthumous female body in paranormal romance**  
Evvie Valiou

In paranormal romance, death is the heroine's constant companion. She repeatedly experiences death, or near-death; death may even form part of her nature: she may be deadly, un-dead or undying. For Pamela Regis (2003), the "point of ritual death" (p.35) is one the eight essential elements of romance: a mythic narrative element that symbolizes the restoration of the heroine's fecundity -death as enemy to life - and triumph over the barrier to her union with the hero - death as obstacle to love. But does death retain this symbolic meaning when the heroine falls in love with Death? When her body cannot die? Or, when there are multiple experiences of death or near-death? That is, what is the significance of death when the heroine's body is more than human?

In paranormal romance, the centrality of death and near-death has the potential to challenge traditional conceptualizations of the relationship between life and death. Posthumanist work on death and the posthumous body is used in this paper as a framework to help explore this potential, and contribute to our understanding of the function of death vis-a-vis the heroine's body in paranormal romance.

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## Session 3

### A) Paranormal Romance

#### Monster Romance: Potential, Pitfalls, and New Materialist Feminism

Sanjana Basker

As documented in the widespread journalistic coverage and social media popularity of independently published works like the Ice Planet Barbarians series by Ruby Dixon or Morning Glory Milking Farm by C. M. Nacosta, recent years have seen increased interest among romance readers in a paranormal-romance-adjacent subgenre dubbed “monster romance,” generally featuring love stories between humans and markedly less human creatures, such as gargoyles, dragons, minotaurs, and more. This nascent subgenre appears, on the surface, to attend to longstanding genre fascination with the taming of the hero-beast, but little current scholarship exists to coherently characterize or understand this frequently quaintly domestic, often creatively sexual space of romance fiction.

In this paper presentation, I attempt to contribute in small part to this gap by discussing the ways that monster romance paradoxically reproduces *and* uniquely subverts gender and sexuality norms in a way unseen in other romance subgenres. Critique of the racially problematic and bioessentialist messages in popular monster romance will be shared. Additionally, this presentation takes inspiration from Tanja Kubes 2019 article “New Materialist Perspectives on Sex Robots. A Feminist Dystopia/Utopia?” to articulate the queer and feminist potential of monster romance as understood in dialogue with the work of new materialist feminists like Donna Haraway and Karen Barad.

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## Session 3

### A) Paranormal Romance

**Metafiction in the My So-Called Mystical Midlife series (2021-2022) by  
Robyn Peterman**  
Maria Ramos-Garcia

Robyn Peterman is a prolific author of contemporary and paranormal comic serial romance novels active since 2013. Her work is an extreme example of the carnivalesque in paranormal as described by Jayashree Kamble, with humor based on outrageous and transgressive behavior (mostly by women), puns, double-entendres, and other basic comedic strategies. In the series My So-Called Mystical Midlife, which starts with The Write Hook, the main character is a mid-forties paranormal romance writer in the process of divorcing her cheating husband, when some of her paranormal characters start to visit her in real life. This is her magical power (triggered by the divorce) and the protagonist becomes immersed in a world in which reality and fiction intersect, and the author can force an outcome by writing it first. In the process, the author discusses tropes, character and fictional world development, and the process of writing itself. This paper will discuss some of the metafictional threats and the embedded critique on the paranormal genre and romance writing.

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## Session 3

### B) Narrative and Genre

#### Practices of attachment: the pleasures of rereading popular romance fiction

Nattie Golubov

This paper is a theoretical reflection based upon information about reading habits provided by women in Argentina, Mexico and Spain. I propose that the experience of reading popular romance fiction may be theorized as an act of rereading prompted by the “paradox of genre fiction”, a concept adapted from film critic Noel Carroll. Drawing on work by Rita Felski and Sara Ahmed, I will argue that romance novels are in themselves happy objects, with a materiality that engages readers’ bodies, as well as conduits in an economy of objects that elicit affective attachments (rather than identifications) associated with happiness. Thus, two practices come together when the romance novel is interpreted as an affective technology activated by the desire for pleasure: (re)reading is an embodied event that occurs at a particular time and place deliberately orchestrated by readers who are in a disposition to be moved in particular directions by the text’s affordances, while they simultaneously become active participants in the circulation of social goods with positive affective value, thus suggesting that this is not an “escapist” type of passive aesthetic engagement but, to the contrary, one that forges a variety of ties.

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### B) Narrative and Genre

#### Autographic transfocalization in the romance: the case of *Midnight Sun*

Katie Deane

Given their divergent approaches to narrative closure, seriality and the romance would appear to be curious bedfellows. In recent decades, romance authors have experimented with various forms of narrative continuation and expansion that preserve the genre's happily concluded courtships while building out narrative worlds and continuing to follow the lives of successful characters. In both fan- and professionally published texts, the practice of literary transfocalization – retelling an existing work's known events through another character's perspective – is understood by scholars as an intervention made into another author's work for the purposes of revision. Contemporary romance authors, however, have found this form to suit their own purposes of narrative revitalization: furnishing the love interest's perspective in a successive text, when absent in an initial romantic work, provides devoted readers with “more of” a charismatic pairing without significantly altering the original plot or compromising its established happy ending. Understanding how Stephenie Meyer mobilizes this form in her *Twilight* retelling, *Midnight Sun*, reveals not only the unique results of transfocalization's intersection with the romance genre, but the form's consistent revisionary affordances even for a work's original author – something which has been largely overlooked (when not categorically excluded) by existing scholarship. In Meyer's case, revisiting her divisive first novel serves as both a serial re-engagement of her fan base and an opportunity to shift the meanings of already narrated events. *Midnight Sun* thus engages in an interpretive battle with critical audiences, excavating frameworks of romance reading to instruct readers on “right readings” of her text.

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## Session 3

### B) Form and Trope

#### **Possessiveness of hockey players through their jersey number in erotic romance books**

Louise Schulmann-Darsy

Erotic sport romances are a very popular subgenre of contemporary popular romance. Hockey romances are popular, especially on BookTok (a hashtag on TikTok focused on books, where romance occupies a prominent place). In this conference poster, I've decided to focus on the possessiveness of hockey players through their jersey numbers in erotic romances. By reading five of the most popular hockey romances: *Mile High* (by Liz Tomford), *Consider Me* (by Becca Mack), *Icebreaker* (by Hannah Grace), *The Deal* (by Elle Kennedy) and *Pucked* (by Helena Hunting), I noticed that all of the hockey players were insisting on having their love interest wearing their jersey with their name and number on it, even offering it to her.

Wearing the jersey in a public setting is making the woman a possession for everyone to see. That possessiveness of the hockey player often reflects in the bedroom, leading to sexual scenes where the woman only wears the jersey. Wearing someone else's number leads to the player being very jealous, showing the fact that the woman becomes the possession of number that she is wearing. Something that is interesting is that all of the books, whether in a campus or professional team setting, ends up with a "traditional" happy ending for the couple. In the professional setting, the couple is married and expecting/ having children, and in the campus setting, the player is getting selected to play in a professional team.

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## Session 4

### A) Young Adult Romance

#### Mattering and Belonging Across 30 Years of Sapphic Young Adult Romance

Carly Bennett

What roles do mattering and belonging play in sapphic young adult (YA) romance literature? How have these concepts (and their importance) changed over the past three decades? My paper uses sapphic as an inclusive umbrella term that describes romantic relationships between women, and examines the concepts of mattering, belonging and community in the thirty Lambda award nominated sapphic YA romance texts published between 1990-2020. Key texts explored include *Good Moon Rising* by Nancy Garden (1996), *Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Anne Peters (2007) and *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson (2020).

Since the 1982 publication of the first sapphic YA romance, Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, stories of sapphic characters in YA literature have continued to grow and evolve: from tragic, cautionary tales in the 1990s; to stories of assimilation and acceptance in the 2000s; to the queerness and diversity of narratives in the 2010s. While the genres and themes of these stories are as diverse as the characters themselves, mattering and the search for belonging remain dominant themes.

Through this paper I will explore how the desire to matter as part of a queer couple impacts sapphic characters in three spaces: the home, where the focus is on family bonds; the community, including educational and religious organisations; and the wider world, including the political landscape of each decade. I will look at both the positive impact belonging has on these characters and their romantic relationships, as well as at how the human drive to matter can be weaponised against sapphic characters. Finally, I will look to the future: what do trends in sapphic romance tell us about what might come next?

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## Session 4

### A) Young Adult Romance

#### **"You look cool in that outfit": Clothing and identity in Indian American teen romances**

Sreepurna Datta

Discussing how romance novels highlight "the material details" of the world they are set in, Janice Radway had marked "the genre's careful attention to the style, color, and detail of women's fashions" (1984). In multicultural romance narratives today, this attention remains, and in some ways heightens to accommodate the presentation of 'diverse' cultural identities and the conflicts regarding the same. This paper examines the role of clothing and fashion in 21st century popular media featuring Indian American protagonists and their love lives: the Netflix series *Never Have I Ever* (2020-) created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher; Nisha Sharma's young adult novel *My So-Called Bollywood Life* (2018); and Sandhya Menon's bestseller *When Dimple Met Rishi* (2017), also adapted on screen into Hindi-language series *Mismatched* by Netflix India (2020-). Each of these portrayals of intra- and inter-racial love contains episodes that explicitly focus on how clothing such as saris, half-saris, salwar suits, etc., might function as a marker of their 'Indianness.' Alternatively, the paper also observes the descriptions of clothing ('Indian' or otherwise) that are woven into the background of the narratives outside of distinct episodes, including those on book covers and posters. The chosen texts also allow a look into the interaction between fashion choices and romantic (in these cases, male) approval in teen-oriented media. Drawing on contemporary theorizations on South Asian, youth and fashion studies, this paper delves into the juncture where contemporary romance narratives for a primarily female audience intersect with representations of diasporic youth and beauty.

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## Session 4

### A) Young Adult Romance

#### **The YA romance as a tool for social transformation: the case of Ismée Williams' This Train is Being Held**

Inmaculada Pérez-Casal

While the success of authors like Alexis Daria and Mia Sosa suggests that more and more Latinx authors are carving up a space for themselves in mainstream romance, the big romance publishers largely continue to address the white, English-speaking consumer by publishing books that center on white, English-speaking characters. Meanwhile, many Latinxs voices have found a place in the thriving industry of Young Adult (romance), in which authors use romance plots to reflect on issues as varied as gender, love, (internalized) racism, cultural and linguistic identity, and their multiple intersections. This paper deploys a close reading methodology and analyses Ismée Williams' *This Train is Being Held* (2020) as an example of a YA romance that provides adolescent Latinx readers with a safe space to dissect the stereotypes surrounding Latinxs. The text features Isa and Alex, two Latinx teenagers from very different backgrounds who experience the problems and concerns typically associated with adolescence (e.g. friendships, studies). At the same time, the protagonists' struggles with race and class differences, colorism, parental expectations, gender roles and gang membership, among other issues, add depth to the narrative. Ultimately, the love plot serves the purpose of helping the protagonists achieve their voice and establish their own individual identity. In this regard, Williams' novel vindicates that every individual is worthy of (self-)love and (self-)respect, thus demonstrating the suitability of the romance novel as a tool for social transformation.

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## Session 4

### B) Reading and Writing Romance

#### **Love and Romance in the City: An examination of cultural texts in public library displays during celebrations of love in London and Sydney**

Vassiliki Veros & Benjamin Hanckel

There have been increasing shifts in policy and discourse in both Australia and the United Kingdom as it relates to love, intimacy and sexuality. A critical question is how such changes get incorporated into public informational spaces, and what are the ways that these changes manifest. This paper draws on library data 5 years after changes to the marriage acts of each of these countries. We examine the cultural texts, romance fiction, literary fiction, memoirs and history books as well as other ephemera, selected and displayed in public libraries at key moments of love celebrations (i.e. Valentine's day, LGBT pride) in the major cities of London and Sydney. Our work extends Ferfolja and Ullman's (2020) concept of 'Culture of limitation', and brings it into conversation with Jenkins (2014) work on 'convergence culture [and] democratic participation' in public spaces. Through the use of duoethnography and the physical enactment of spatial research paired with digital discourses, we conducted research on the displays of public libraries, across multiple sites in the two cities. Our findings point to the ways that libraries (re)create normative space through display architecture and the displayed texts, often demarcating space between queerness and love, drawing limitations around the possibilities of love. We show how love gets re-produced in these public settings, and how the impact of competing tensions and institutional directives can shift community dialogues. This makes (im)possible certain narratives which re-produce cultural understandings of love through the use of romance fiction.

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## Session 4

### B) Reading and Writing Romance

#### **“Words, words, words”: The role of foreign languages in romance novels**

María-Isabel González-Cruz

Hamlets’s well-known reply to Polonius’ question (“What do you read, my lord?”) has been interpreted variously by literary critics, claiming that Hamlet seems to suggest that words are meaningless, and showing at the same time the importance of the repeated word and the unimportance of words themselves. However, as many linguists have underlined, “words are what we have, our tools at hand”; in fact, lexical choices can be highly significant, so much so that words often work as “symbolic vehicles” through which speakers can construct their social and ethnolinguistic identity (Child & Mallison, 2006). This and other functions are crucially performed by the words we daily use in speech.

Similarly, because “language is the writer’s raw material” (Chapman, 1990:36), when studying literary texts, we cannot but agree with David Lodge (2002: xiii) that a novelist or a poet is expected to be a verbal artist whose representation of fictional speech aspires “to a special kind of realism, a special kind of authenticity”. Thus, through words writers can effectively provide local colour to their narrative or contribute to the characterization of their protagonists, marking their geographical origin, their educational and social status as well as revealing their attitudes to other characters.

Following this line of thought, this presentation will illustrate the use of Spanish, French, Dutch and/or Arabic in a sample of romance novels taken from the corpus compiled for Research Project FFI2014-53962-P, and the functions they play in them.

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## Session 4

### B) Reading and Writing Romance

#### Bad Romance Data: Contextualizing the Popular Romance Fiction Market

Andrea Martucci

It's a truth universally acknowledged, that a writer with the intention of discussing the popular romance genre, must be in want of romance market data.

But where does one find this data? And, in the absence of reliable sources of data, does bad romance data (or at least, outdated to the point of irrelevant data) dominate the discourse about the current market, distorting foundational context?

Romance Writers of America began commissioning annual third-party market and consumer research on the romance novel industry in the 1990s, however the most recently published report was published in 2017. RWA's statistics, presented to promote the importance and value of the genre in business terms and identify reader demographics, had a clear agenda but were consistent, allowing for some ability to track year over year trends.

Over the past 6 years, the external business environment impacting the market for popular romance fiction has shifted rapidly, yet new data is scarce, incomplete, and often misrepresented or decontextualized when relied upon as a source.

I will survey historical data and incorporate newer sources of data on the romance market, cataloging critical attributes and known methodologies and limitations. The primary goal of this project is to identify bad romance data and outdated statistics, and properly contextualize updated statistics. My analysis will also explore the micro and macro environmental market trends impacting the popular romance fiction market.

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## Session 5

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 1

#### Vivian Stephens, American Romance, and Institution Building

Julie Moody-Freeman

This paper documents Vivian Stephens' influence on the production and institutionalization of American romance since the 1970's. Using oral history interviews, newspaper articles, newsletters, letters, and other ephemera, I study three periods of Stephens' influence. First, I focus on Stephens in the late 1970's and early 1980's at Dell and Harlequin. I look at her impact on the industry in terms of shaping the romance genre as well as the media value she added to these two companies through marketing campaigns. Second, I examine her work in the 1990's co-founding the "Writers of Color" group and her work as a writing coach in New York, which produced a pioneering core of established Black romance writers who continue to publish today.

I conclude with a study of Stephens who today, at ninety years old, continues to influence American romance through her mentorship and coaching of young Black writers, agents, and influencers.

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## Session 5

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 1

#### The Own Voices Social Media Project: Teaching Diverse Romance Novels in a Gen Ed Literature and Popular Culture Course

Justina Clayburn

The inclusion of texts with diverse authorship, characters, and experiences is a vital component to literature courses. Reading about the experiences of others and reflecting on the ways that

other peoples' lives differ from our own is an important part of building empathy and learning to see the world from other perspectives. Own Voices romance novels are one way to do this in a general education course themed on romance.

Integrating Own Voices romance novels into a gen ed literature and popular culture class can prove challenging, because there is only so much time to try to cover such a broad and vibrant set of texts within a fifteen-week semester. In this presentation I will offer an example of one way to integrate "Own Voices" romance novels into this sort of class using a multi-modal approach focused on genre and audience.

In addition to discussing the specifics of the assignment itself, I will discuss the preparation I do with students in terms of lectures on romance novels in general, and their tropes and features as well as the problematic history of diversity and representation of people of color in romance novels and publishing as a whole. I will also discuss the primary and supplementary resources I use for the assignment, as well as a general description of the things that have worked well in the past alongside the things I would change teaching the assignment in the future.

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## Session 5

### A) Black Romance in Britain and America 1

#### Beverly Jenkins as a Contemporary Chronicler – Black Historical Romance and the Religious Work of Black History

Jeania Ree Moore

When heralded for her groundbreaking role in Black and multicultural historical romance, author Beverly Jenkins routinely locates herself in a lineage of African American literary and historical activism dating back to the early nineteenth century. As stated in her 2016 RWA keynote address and more recent interviews and essays, Jenkins cites writers such as David Walker, Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Carter G. Woodson, and others as precursors. In this paper, I show how critically analyzing Jenkins relative to her chosen antecedents situates her among recent studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Black historiography, which illumines her romances' historical work and highlights its latent religious character.

In offering this analysis, I shift and expand how popular romance scholars analyze the meeting of romance and religion. Scholars have variously approached the intersections of these two categories, but have yet to zero in on the difference race makes to religious deployments of historical and literary work. By attending to Black traditions, I show how Jenkins's popular romances are a contemporary innovation in established religio-historical African American work. I join Jenkins's novels, her statements about her work, and Black women readers' affective responses with scholarship from historians like Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Pero G. Dagbovie to cast a new light on Black popular romance. I spotlight the uses to which Black love is put for larger, sacred claims about Black history, and vice versa—the uses to which Black history is put for transcendent, sacred claims about Black being and Black love.

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## Session 5

### B) Queer Romance

#### The female gaze on the body in queer romance novels

Lucy Hargrave

Although the male gaze is more well-known and debated in society, in romance novels – both heterosexual and queer – it is the female gaze that dominates. The female-led nature of the romance genre is not a secret and is often lauded by authors and publishers as one of the genre's unique selling points. That romance is a genre written for women, by women is not a new phrase in romance circles. Yet the impact of this female gaze is still being explored. The male gaze as an extension of the patriarchy has long been criticised for its narrow scrutiny of female bodies (Mulvey, 1975), yet in romance novels, some critics argue that it is "male bodies [that] are literally and figuratively consumed" (Allan, 2019).

Given the large percentage of female readers consuming queer romance featuring male leads, it is not surprising that critics like Allan have looked at the impact the female gaze has on the male body. This paper wishes to go a step further and explore how the female gaze has impacted male, female and trans\* bodies in queer romances (Halberstam, 2018). This topic shall be explored by focusing on how bodies are being described, depicted, and used in the Captive Prince Trilogy by C.S. Pacat (2013 – 2017), One Last Stop by Casey McQuiston (2021), Peter Darling by Austin Chant (2017) and A Lady for a Duke by Alexis Hall (2022).

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## Session 5

### B) Queer Romance

#### Skewed femininity in Simona Ahrnstedt's *Allt eller inget*

Elin Abrahamsson

For this paper, I want to suggest the concept *skewed*, a translation of the Swedish concept *skev*, as useful for exploring popular romance and the ambivalent femininities of many romance heroines, by analyzing the Swedish novel *Allt eller inget* [All or Nothing] (Simona Ahrnstedt 2017). The concept *skev*, similarly to *queer*, refers to the strange, warped, odd, or peculiar (Maria Margareta Österholm 2022). As an analytical term first suggested in the early 2000's, it has developed as both a synonym and an alternative to *queer* with the purpose of complementing it. *Skev* is used for describing deviations from the norm that include, but are not limited to, gender and sexuality, and deviations from heteronormativity that may still be heterosexual (Österholm, Hilda Jakobsson 2019/2020). The spatial connotations of the word (another way of translating *skev* that Jakobsson suggests is *bent*) connect it to other queer theories of time and space.

Romance heroines are often both idealized and maladjusted, described as exemplary versions of heteronormative femininity and as odd and out of synch with their environment (or at least feeling like they are). In *Allt eller inget*, this paradoxical representation of the heroine is prominent and she is described as both failing and excelling at being a (heterosexual) woman. My analysis of the heroine's "skewness" puts focus on her fundamental and complex relation to femininity, feminine attributes and practices, and to other women. This analysis, I will further argue, interferes with (or rather skews) what could otherwise be interpreted as a straightforward narrative of individualistic and postfeminist success by lingering on the novel's representations of trauma and on the necessity of female support systems.

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## Session 5

### B) Queer Romance

**Where does the love go? Representations of romance and relationships in current life-writing by trans men, transmasculine and butch people**

Michael Gratzke

Lived experiences with the complexities of transsexual, transgender and non-binary identities are well represented in life writing in the Anglophone and German-language spheres which are the focus of my research. Working with a corpus of fourteen monographs of life writing in English and German and a small number of anthologies focussing on happiness and love as main topics, I explore the sometimes less visible lived experiences of trans men as well as transmasculine and butch people as expressed under the conditions of largely transphobic societies and standardised expectations towards transition narratives. The corpus falls into two broad categories by the way the writers (and in some incidents ghost writers) engage with standardised transition narratives and their commonly associated tropes such as having been born in the wrong body. Those autobiographers who are sceptical towards the wrong-body trope tend to align more readily with queer communities and a more political stance of trans-as-movement against a wrong society.

What most examples of trans life writing have in common is the relative absence of romantic love and romance from their accounts. In this paper, I will discuss this feature on the backdrop of wrong-body and wrong-society trans narratives.

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## Session 6

### A) Love Studies and Romance

#### A Heart Needs a Home: Ontological Rootedness, Simon May, and Popular Romance Studies

Eric Murphy Selinger

Although philosophical readings of popular romance media are not unheard of—think, for example, of Stanley Cavell’s readings of Hollywood film—such attention has rarely been paid to popular romance fiction. With few exceptions (Lutz, 2006; Pearce 2007, Toscano, 2012, Ali 2017), romance novels’ representations of love, ethics, and the good life have been more commonly and more productively analyzed with help from history and the social sciences, even when terms such as Eros and Agape are also being deployed (see, e.g., Dandridge 2016). In this talk, I will explore how British philosopher Simon May’s phenomenological account of love as a response to those persons, places, and things that inspire in us a “promise of ontological rootedness”—a theory introduced in *Love: a History* (2011) and elaborated in *Love: a New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion* (2020)—illuminates the vision of intertwined romantic, familial, and communal love implicit in Beverly Jenkins’s Henry Adams novels (three historical, eleven contemporary), Katrina Jackson’s Bay Area Blues duology, and one or more texts by trans romance author E. E. Ottoman (*Documenting Light* and / or *The Companion*). A contribution to the study of each of these authors and to the study of setting in popular romance, this talk also aims to expand the range of theorists and disciplines drawn upon by scholars of the romance novel. By extension, it will demonstrate that the popular romance archive can reward the kind of attention from philosophers of love that literary fiction and popular film already enjoy.

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## Session 6

### A) Love Studies and Romance

#### Who Has the Right to Write the City: Understanding the Transgressive Potential of Public Romance in India

Meghna Bohidar

Eros (passionate love) is considered to disrupt the stranglehold of the familial and patriarchal system of arranged, endogamous marriages in India. Commodification of romance has provided 'away-from-home' spaces for public romance in marketized spaces (cafes, malls). These spaces, unlike heterogenous-public spaces (parks, promenades), often tolerate or even encourage public romance. I analyse three instances that use visual art/performance art to challenge the dominant norms of public spaces. The first is a wall-painting in Mumbai of a famous protagonist, symbolic of love in cinema and Indian folklore – Anarkali. The second "instance" refers to "events" that assert the right to romance in the city, organized by liberal groups. These movements invite people to perform romance in public in the form of holding hands or kissing. The third is not an event, but part of the everyday lived experience of lovers in open-public spaces who inscribe their names or love-notes onto public surfaces such as monuments or walls. This act, often construed as vandalism, is seen as "tacky" and "distasteful" by elite and upper-middle-class couples who can afford privatized-public spaces. These descriptors are also used to symbolize couples' presence as they are seen as inappropriate users of open-public spaces. Juxtaposing these three instances allows us to critically examine how art is defined and who has the means to articulate the right to the city aligned with the ideals of beautification and marketization. It also helps us understand how different actors make sense of public spaces that are fluid and hold several contradictory meanings simultaneously within their sociocultural limits. Finally, reading lovers act of writing as "presencing" their bodies and asserting the right to the city, even though it is not a conscious move for visibility allows us to remove the burden of intentionality and knowing from transgressive acts that reveal the "normal" code of conduct.

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## Session 6

### A) Love Studies and Romance

#### The Soft Life: A Political Economy of Love among Young Women in South Africa

Lebohang Masango

Historically and as recently as the 2016 – 2018 period, South African media has engaged the topic of young, black women's romantic lives in a reductive and sensationalist manner with the constant production of articles and other news media highlighting the issue of "transactional sex" such as the "blesser and blessee" phenomenon of recent years (Masango, 2019). Dosekun (2020) notes that "transactional sex" is an often relied upon as "an explanatory repertoire to account for the appearance and possibility of urban consuming women" in Africa. This paper is based on qualitative research and interviews with five women between 27 – 33 years old. It draws upon the conceptual framework of the political economy of love (Padilla et al., 2007) to depart from the cliché of desperation in the face of unrelenting African poverty and provide a more balanced view of the romantic lives of young South African women. I explore how they give meaning to aspiration, romance and love in their pursuit of the soft life; a life free of hardship. I discuss some of the considerations, anxieties and choices that women make in pursuit of this ideal amidst the precariousness that engulfs the majority of our population. I also suggest that South Africa's economic climate, coupled with rapidly evolving digital technologies such as social media, have ensured that such aspirations will not be a passing phenomenon.

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## Session 6

### B) Form and Trope

#### Waifus, Husbandos, and Lesbian Wizards: Otome games, visual novels, and digital romance media cultures

Joseph Crawford

Originally arising in 1980s Japan as a means of circumventing the limited storage space of early video game media, visual novels – which combine still images with branching text-based narratives – have gone on to become one of the primary forms in which video games and romance media intersect. Generally scorned by Western gamers because of their lack of traditional gameplay and their associations with pornography, visual novels have more recently established a dedicated following among Anglophone gamers and game designers interested in exploring romance narratives within a video game format. Because the barriers of entry to visual novel design are low, the form has had particular appeal to female and queer game designers, who have historically been marginalized within Anglophone gaming culture: however, the heavy overlap of visual novels with anime and video game culture has also led to the rise of forms of digital romance media whose audience is primarily composed of heterosexual men, which is otherwise extremely unusual within the genre. In this paper I shall briefly explain the history of the visual novel romance form, including subtypes such as Boys Love, yuri, moege, and otome games, before discussing some recent examples of the ways in which the unique qualities of the form have been used to facilitate innovative romance narratives, especially in relation to queer romance. Works that I propose to discuss include *Empty Horizons*, *The House in Fata Morgana*, *Perfect Gold*, and *Monster Prom*.

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### B) Form and Trope

#### Unforgettably in Love: Uses of the Amnesia Trope in Contemporary Romance

Gaja Kolodziej

The amnesia trope allows authors to explore a variety of issues, such as matters of identity and the nature of human existence. It touches on deception and morality, as well as extreme vulnerability on the part of the heroine or hero due to lack of social context. It is no surprise, therefore, that the trope has existed in literature since ancient times. In fact, it has been growing in popularity in the last hundred years resulting in a variety of usages across popular genres.

In this lecture, Gaja Kołodziej explains the meaning and usages of memory loss, with a particular focus on medical amnesia resulting from external trauma, and reveals its potential for both plot development and protagonists' personal transformation. While describing ways in which contemporary romance employs the amnesia trope, Gaja Kołodziej identifies three frequently occurring approaches: amnesia as an ultimate proof that love conquers all; amnesia as an extreme vulnerability which transforms strangers into lovers; and amnesia as inner drive for reinvention, which heals emotional wounds and fosters the lovers' personal development. Such overview of popular employments and implications of literary amnesia demonstrates a spectrum of possibilities available to authors.

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## Session 6

### B) Narrative and Genre

#### **Imploding fireworks: Love and self-knowledge in the contemporary Italian sentimental novel**

Francesca Pierini

This paper explores a cluster of narrative and discursive tropes recurring in the romanzo sentimentale, a literary genre that emerged within the Italian panorama of contemporary literature at the very end of the last century and has produced narratives that have met a remarkable commercial success, within national borders as well as internationally. Associated to female authors such as Margaret Mazzantini (Il catino di zinco [The Zinc Basin] 1994; Non ti muovere 2001 – Don't Move 2004) and Susanna Tamaro (Va' dove ti porta il cuore 1994; Ascolta la mia voce 2006 – Follow your Heart 1995; Listen to my Voice 2008), the genre has often been criticized and dismissed as excessively sentimental. Labelled and feminized as soppy and hopeful, these narratives have only sparsely been the object of a rigorous critique and their specific traits, literary as well as discursive, have been largely overlooked. In this essay, I contend that these texts offer much more than expectant and superficial sentimentality. Weaved around the theme of lack of understanding across generations, they are saturated with deep personal disquiet, all-consuming sense of guilt, and the attempt to tame and order emotive chaos by giving it shape through narrative. Underlying these traits, is a painful but honest recognition of a strong connection between emotional incompetence, its highly damaging and far-reaching power, and gratuitous cruelty, one of its most frequent outcomes. In these stories, ineptitude in dealing with human emotions often presents itself disguised as modesty, decorum, and is frequently entangled with familial histories of abuse within a patriarchal economy of relationships harmful to women as well as to men.

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## Session 7

### A) Romance Bodies

#### **“Skinny Is the New Fat”: Traditional and Modern Nigerian Beauty in Skinny Girl in Transit**

Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez

Although Africans have historically been reputed for appreciating large body size, the increasing influence western beauty standards has changed the social construction of plus-size bodies (Fausat and Ayodele 2017). In light of debates regarding the representations of non-normative bodies in contemporary romantic narratives, this paper explores the tension between customary and contemporary perceptions of large bodies by exploring the predicaments of the “plus sized” heroine of the Nigerian romantic web series *Skinny Girl in Transit* (2015-present). Tiwa’s efforts to lose weight reflect her quest for romantic stability, as she negotiates contradictory constructions of body size which, I argue, stem from the increasing presence of western media in Nigeria (Amazue 2014).

Tiwa embodies these tensions by struggling to lose weight while respecting traditional practices with regards cooking and exchange of food. When single, she follows a strict diet, but this changes whenever she has a partner, since in Nigeria “it is traditionally an expectation that a woman who is well taken care of should be growing in size” (Fausat and Ayodele 2017, 7). Tiwa’s boyfriends constantly treat her with food as part of their courtship. She is also expected to learn to cook rich traditional dishes for her future husband. Tiwa strives to maintain the fragile equilibrium between following customary laws and fulfilling new expectations regarding beauty to keep a man by her side. *Skinny Girl in Transit* engages its viewers in this discussion through direct interpellations and, indirectly, through Tiwa’s radio program, *The Gist*, where she discusses work, family and love.

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## Session 7

### A) Romance Bodies

#### Reading “Plus Size” Romantic Narratives Intersectionally: Lani Young’s Scarlet Series

Paloma Fresno Calleja

In the last years, popular romantic narratives have responded to calls for size diversity by featuring fat (and mostly white) heroines in works variously defined as “plus size” romances or “Bigger Girl” Lit. Critical appraisals of these novels have largely focused on whether they manage to promote truly transformative messages of self-acceptance, body positivity and physical diversity (Frater 2009, Younger 2009, Brown 2011, McDavis-Conway 2022, Nankervis 2022) or, on the contrary, simply depict heroines “who diet their way to HEA” (Brown 2011, 4) and thus contribute to calcify the links between thinness and romantic fulfilment. Debates on fat representation in romance fiction, however, must complicate this question by placing discussions on body size “in [...] dialogue with other identity markers and materializations” (Rinaldi et al 2020, 2). This paper considers the representation of fat bodies in popular romance fiction from an intersectional perspective by focusing on Scarlet Johnson, the “plus sized” heroine of the Scarlet Series (2015-2019) by Samoan author Lani Young. Young’s heroine struggles to overcome neo/colonial stereotypes of the exoticised Polynesian female body while putting up with family pressures to lose weight in order to secure a husband. The novels dismantle common associations between physical appearance, consumption, and individual choice by putting on hold moralising discourses on fatness and transplanting discussions of body weight and dietary choices to a context marked by specific cultural protocols and pervading gastrocolonial structures (Santos Perez 2013), which still condition the eating habits and health of Samoan peoples.

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## Session 7

### A) Romance Bodies

#### **Analysing contemporary romance covers to uncover readers' desires**

Ellen Carter

This corpus study analyses the main cover image of contemporary romance novels in several sub-genres. Such images encode information about physical attributes desired by readers both in potential mates and for themselves.

Romance fiction offers the fantasy of finding one true love. However, evolutionary biology suggests different drivers exist depending on whether this perfect mate is being selected based on a short-term assessment of their superior genetics for procreation or as a long-term social and financial provider. By identifying recurring tropes in cover images, this study examines visual signals for divergent evolutionary incentives.

It also discusses how cover images illuminate readers' desires for their own corporeal selves. Most romance novel heroines have no body image anxiety: an idealized attitude at odds with the lived experience of most readers since three-quarters of American women report that body image worries interfere with their happiness.

Overall, this paper seeks to engage with a broader discussion about cultural, societal, and evolutionary perspectives associated with body image and body size diversity. In doing so, it explores differences by comparing mainstream contemporary MF romance novels covers against other contemporary romance sub-genres, including MM, erotic, clean, and BBW/BBM.

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## Session 7

### B) m/m Romance

**“He looked like the kind of country youth they wrote ballads about”: Queer Robin Hood Romance in K.J. Charles’ *The Gentle Art of Fortune Hunting***  
Kristin Noone

Sarah H. Ficke, reading LGBTQIA historical romance, notes the ways in which these authors work to reconcile the generic need for a happy ending with the challenges faced by LGBTQIA people in various historical settings. K.J. Charles’ m/m Regency romance *The Gentle Art of Fortune Hunting* performs this work while engaging in multitemporal folkloric play involving the Robin Hood storyworld. Similarly, Lesley Coote reads Robin Hood tales as negotiations of authority, centered around personal encounters, emotion, and community, in which the deserving are saved and the powerful learn a lesson. *Gentle Art* exemplifies this reparative function of popular medievalism in combination with that of popular romance. As Monika Markéta Šmídová observes, Charles’ novels often queer folklore itself, combining folkloric play with the romance narrative to highlight issues of (im)morality and (in)justice, power, and privilege—in Coote’s terms, negotiations of authority. *Gentle Art* transplants the medieval greenwood to a Regency ballroom, where sibling con artists Robin and Marianne Loxleigh (from Nottinghamshire) engage in traditional Robin Hood acts of disguise, trickery, and various means of separating the wealthy London elite from their money—while Robin falls for a burly baronet named Sir John. Charles’ novel combines examination of historical class tensions and negotiations, Robin Hood folklore, queerness, and the romance-novel happy ending in a performance of popular medievalism that emphasizes the role of the outlaw as disruptive, but ultimately reparative.

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## Session 7

### B) m/m Romance

**“Gayappropriation?”: Gay and bisexual men’s perspectives on women who produce and consume m/m sexually explicit texts**

Lucy Neville

Drawing on a piece of wide-scale mixed-methods research (n=170) that examines what MSM [men who have sex with men] think about women who produce or consume m/m SEM [sexually explicit media], this paper looks at MSM’s perceptions of, and willingness to engage with, female-authored m/m romance, slashfic, and erotica. Historically, much criticism has been levelled at women (particularly, though not exclusively, cishet women) who can be regarded as exploiting m/m sexual culture in order to achieve sexual satisfaction. Many of concerns raised with ‘girl-on-girl’ pornography created for the heterosexual male consumer can be directed at m/m content created for/by women – that it is produced for the voyeuristic ‘other’ gaze to the detriment of LGBTQ+ folks, and involves fetishizing gay sexuality. Despite this, little work has been carried out asking MSM what they think about women who write and read sexually explicit m/m content. Using thematic analysis, this paper explores how MSM view female-authored m/m romance and erotic texts, as well as how they personally engage with them. The results of this study show that the majority of MSM in this sample were broadly supportive of women’s engagement with m/m, even if they wouldn’t personally read a story written by a woman. While mention was often made of the fetishization issue, it was generally regarded as (relatively) minor, in comparison to an overarching belief both that everyone should be free to explore what they enjoy in SEM, and that women’s engagement m/m content offers potential for both ‘normalisation’ of queer culture and allyship.

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## Session 7

### B) m/m Romance

#### Folklore, Trauma, and Healing in *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* and *Spectred Isle* by KJ Charles

Monika Markéta Šmídová

When depicting trauma and its aftermath, the romance genre with its requirement of an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending is well suited to devote significant attention not only to the trauma itself but also to the detailed exploration of the healing phase. In the subgenre of fantasy/paranormal romance, the presence of supernatural elements and the permeability of the barrier between the living and the dead allows for a specific portrayal of trauma and healing. This paper analyzes the interplay of folklore and the theme of trauma and healing in two m/m paranormal romance novels by KJ Charles, *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* (2015) and *Spectred Isle* (2017), arguing that the author's use of folklore elements and beliefs as a real part of the novels' world draws attention to both positive and negative role of human society and community in trauma infliction and subsequent healing.

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## Session 8

### A) Erotics of Romance

#### Reverse Harem Romance: Power and the Shift in Women's Erotic Imagination Heather Schell

Reverse harem, a term borrowed from Japanese manga and anime, is a romance trope that imagines a central heroine (usually) being courted by multiple men. Anita Blake and other heroines enjoyed erotic adventures with multiple partners in fiction at least as far back as the 1990s, but the self-identified “reverse harem” novels didn’t emerge in English-language romance until the 2010s. Since then, it has become a wildly popular trope, with nearly 13,000 books on Amazon.com; Tessa Bailey’s *Happenstance* (2022) suggests that this subgenre may on the verge of emerging from the fringes. But where is the “harem” in reverse harem romance, and what work is it doing? *Happenstance* ends with Elisa and her three lovers buying a house together in Queens, but the harem here is no separate space in their household. Instead, I argue, the term harem signals erotic exoticism and a lifestyle that violates Western social norms. I’ll examine this in several classic reverse harem stories, including *Ghost Bird*, *Happenstance*, and *Their Virgin Concubine*, a reverse harem sheikh romance. These stories import fantasy versions of Middle Eastern sexuality to push back against the limited imagination of a traditional Western heteronormative romance, in which women’s agency is still often confined to choosing whether to accept a proposal, accede to a sexual proposition, or sign a contract. Reverse harem asks its readers, “Why choose?”

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## Session 8

### A) Erotics of Romance

#### **Let Me Take Care of You: Romanticised Domestic Fantasy in Audio Erotica** Athena Bellas & Jodi McAlister

Audio erotica is an increasingly significant sector of the porn industry, and yet it has heretofore been given little scholarly attention. This paper will present research aimed at bridging this gap in the literature, examining the ways in which romance and romantic conventions play a role in their storytelling. We explore some of the unique affordances of audio erotica through an analysis of Dipsea and Quinn, two of the most popular contemporary apps that host this content. In particular, we present a reading of one of audio erotica's most popular genres: the male-for-female (M4F) Boyfriend Experience (BFE). The BFE's codes and conventions immerse the implied female listener in an eroticised and romanticised domestic fantasy in which she is being taken care of by a man. Through direct address, binaural recording technologies, and the warm sounds of cosy domestic scenes, the BFE cocoons listeners in an intimate audio encounter with a fantasy man who is defined by his capacity to engage in eroticised and romanticised caretaking practices. We argue that these sonic scenes of eroticised masculine care and domesticity present an opportunity to understand contemporary notions of (and trends in) 'porn for women,' particularly in regards to the role romance plays. More broadly, drawing from research on porn, erotica, romance, the audio medium and headphone technology, we offer a framework for understanding some of the alternative pleasures and intimacies specific to audio erotica.

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## Session 8

### A) Erotics of Romance

**The Sacred and the Profane: Romance, Sexuality and 'Girlboss Cannibalism'**  
Nicola Welsh-Burke

In contemporary attitudes to women and female sexuality, the conflation of sexual and gustatory appetite is common. Within mainstream media and literature, women's consumption of food is frequently monitored, sexualised, and critiqued. Those who deviate from the restricted ideals surrounding female beauty, body size and food consumption are frequently represented as monstrous, grotesque, and inappropriate. In this paper, I examine the ways in which contemporary literature has both subverted and celebrated this monstrosity via scenes of eroticised, and romanticised, cannibalism. I explore how these representations critique the contemporary, restrictive norms of femininity and politeness, and act as ways to depict and explore sexual desire, as well as sacred and visceral expressions of all-encompassing romantic love. Jennifer Maher (2001, p. 64) argues that overeating, and the reading of romance novels, should be considered as 'compensatory activities engaged in by women in response to the dominant culture'. I contend that the increase in popularity of representations of female monstrosity, specifically female cannibalism, particularly in stories that feature romances, is a continuation of this idea, revealing a reclamation of indulgence, an exploration of sensory and sensual pleasure, and the interrogation of contemporary romantic relationships. Simultaneously, I explore how this 'incorrect eating' both reveals the corporeality and vulnerability of the human body, while subverting cultural representations of the female body as 'edible'.

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## Session 8

### B) Strange, Familiar Romance

#### Romance Regency of Regency Romance

Veera Mäkelä

Regency romance has traditionally been regarded as historically accurate, and writers and readers alike still take pride in this feature, citing it as a defence of their reading preferences. As is becoming more obvious by the day, however, is that historical accuracy is a more elusive concept than one might think. Features we are quick to take as factual may not be so, as noted recently by, for example, Laura Vivanco (2022).

While the features have morphed into tropes, many of them remain persistent, such as certain aspects of etiquette and details of dress. But as these details turn into standards, they lose their original role as educational details and become symbols and shorthand instead. In this presentation, I will compare the use of the tropes of Regency romance in the works of Georgette Heyer, Mary Balogh, and Eva Leigh. By using studies of historical fiction and that of historical romance, mainly Helen Hughes (1993), Roger Sales (1994), and a number of articles on the works of Heyer, I endeavour to show how the historical world of Regency romance has turned into a fictional, even fantasy world, with its own rules: a romance Regency.

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## Session 8

### B) Strange, Familiar Romance

#### Domestic Love in 21st-Century Speculative Fiction

Esko Suoranta

Speculative fiction (SF) is traditionally not lauded for its representation of romance or domestic relationships. Twenty-first-century authors, however, are transforming the genre landscape as writers of speculative fiction like Aliette de Bodard, Annalee Newitz, and K. J. Charles engage in deliberate borrowing across genres, foregrounding romance in their stories. Additionally, speculative fiction is marketed more and more through its romance elements with characterizations such as “sapphic fantasy” or “gays in space.” However, certain SF authors are showing a focus on relationships past the courtship phase and, so, in my paper for the 2023 IASPR conference, I analyze contemporary speculative fiction that does not foreground romance elements as such, but nevertheless makes them part and parcel of their world- and character-building. Namely, Malka Older's *The Centenal Cycle* novels (2016-2018), William Gibson's *Agency* (2020), and James S. A. Corey's *The Expanse* (2011-2021) depict romantic love as an everyday occurrence, exploring varieties of love in domestic situations and over time in lieu of science-fictional courtship plots. I show how these works are invested in making romantic relationships a cornerstone for achieving a realist veneer for speculative storytelling in futures near and far.

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## Session 8

### B) Strange, Familiar Romance

#### **Weirdly Romantic: Compersion, Relationship Anarchy, and the Beautiful Weird**

Matt Hayler

Weirdness has been pressing at the walls. Weird (Lovecraft) and New Weird fiction (Miéville; Vandermeer), the weird and the eerie as aesthetic categories (Fisher 2016), and the philosophies of “weird realism” (Harman 2012), each address our relationship with a feeling which is far more than frightening. Weirdness is a kind of vertigo, a realisation of unfathomable size, age, implication, or strangeness that is often unsayable, its effects felt only as frictions, glimpses, and subtle determinations. For Lovecraft, the only way the vast, alien Old Ones (such as Cthulhu) make themselves known is through the sudden madness of the people who come too close.

This paper will argue, however, that we can further refine this idea, and that the experiences and representations of romance and love, so often freighted with normative assumptions and fears of deviation, might be a particularly significant arena for embracing and exploring weird encounters. I theorise two kinds of weirdness (sublime and beautiful), and discuss how the latter can be beneficially cultivated at the expense of the former with implications for both political change and the cultivation of speculative imagination. With this in mind, I look to representations of ethical non-monogamy, feelings of “compersion,” and Andie Nordgren’s “The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy” (2006) as explorations of, and deliberate struggles with, the beautiful weird, i.e. a weird, not of maddening elder gods, but of awe and grace; an inverting and maintaining of the classical weird feeling: “Fuck me, I didn’t know the world could be like this.”

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## Session 9

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 1

#### Reading Historical Popular Romance in 21st-Century Pakistan

Javaria Farooqui

This research examines a distinctive culture of reading Anglophone historical romance novels in Pakistan. The focus of this research is the reading community of elite and upper-middle-class Pakistani women who share a strong taste for one subgenre of popular historical romance fiction. Their reading preferences are anchored in drawing parallels between fictional representations of Regency-era England and the present-day reality of their lives. Focus-groups conducted in four cities in Pakistan revealed that romance readers enjoy a sense of confident ownership of the subgenre and acknowledge that their reception of the textual settings is complicated by their specific context. I utilize the collected responses of a non-Anglophone community of readers to create a close reading model for the analysis of the fictional setting in one specific subgenre of popular romance. My reader-centric model foregrounds the significance of romance readers as experts of the genre and approaches the texts through their lens. It reveals the connection of Pakistani readers to the element of setting in the novels and suggests that taking seriously the views and practices of a distinct national readership, geographically and culturally distant from the original place of publication, offers a new method for close textual analysis of romance genre fiction. This study evaluates the transnational reception of Anglophone romance genre to explore the extent to which books published for a Western popular market lose, or retain, their original coding upon reaching a former British colony in South Asia.

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## Session 9

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 1

#### Fictional Technology Meets Real History in Jeannie Lin's *Gunpowder Chronicles*

Sarah Ficke

In 2021 Jeannie Lin published *The Rebellion Engines*, the final book in her *Gunpowder Chronicles* series, a steampunk historical fiction set in China between 1850 and 1854. Steampunk, though it's often characterized by its aesthetic elements, operates as a form of historiographic metafiction that draws attention to the way historical knowledge is contingent and constructed. Like other alternate histories, steampunk features a divergence point (what Karen Hellekson called a "nexus event") where something – often in the case of steampunk, a new technology – opens up an alternative course of "historical" events for the author to explore. As Margaret Rose notes in "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation" the divergence is typically what creates space for authors to critique received notions of the past. Lin's series is interesting in this respect. It is undoubtedly steampunk: there are automatons, airships, and adventure. However, its actual divergence from historical events is limited. Lin notes on her website that "As I researched the Opium war period, I found the elements for conflict and intrigue already in place. Surprisingly little was altered in the historical record in order to allow the world of *Gunpowder Alchemy* to emerge." While this may seem to set the series apart from other steampunk works and limit its scope for critique, I argue that this similarity enhances the series' exploration of nationalism, imperialism, technological innovation, and the bonds of care through Lin's creative use of steampunk technology and the romantic arc followed by her protagonists.

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## Session 9

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 1

#### Is It or Isn't It Romantic? A Case Study of a Gothic Romance Film in Taiwan Fang-Mei Lin

This paper intends to analyze a film made in Taiwan in 1965. The film is entitled 'The Bride Who Has Return From Hell,' which was an adaptation of the famous English Gothic romance, 'The Mystress of Mellyn,' published in 1961 and then translated into Mandarin Chinese in the same year. Mandarin is the official language in Taiwan, whereas Taiyu—one of the many dialects in Taiwan-- was regarded as 'vulgar' through the Sino-centric ideology of the state. Therefore, Taiyu films had the stereotype of being local, backward, and with low quality.

However, 'The Bride Who Has Returned From Hell,' demonstrated a combination of Western fashionable life style such as dance parties and Jazz music, along with a Gothic style of the uncanny and horror. This film has been criticized as not romantic enough, as the main theme centering on the heroine's ability to be a good mother. In my paper, I want to compare the differences between the English gothic romance and the film. I attempt to analyze why was it that a pure romance genre was not possible in Taiwan in the 1960s. The paper will conclude with remarks about how the film can strike a balance between representation of exotic imagination and local taste.

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## Session 9

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 1

#### The Australian Convict Prostitute Romance: Narrating Social and Sexual Justice for “Damned Whores”

Hsu-Ming Teo

The Australian female convict romance novel emerged around the same time as the #MeToo movement. This paper analyses how #MeToo issues resonate within and shape Dowling’s Convict Wives Trilogy – *The Convict’s Bounty Bride* (2013), *His Convict Wife* (2013) and *Convict Heart* (2017) – because they have been longstanding concerns in Australian history and society. Contemporary Australian women’s lack of economic opportunity and vulnerability to sexual abuse and domestic violence are explored through the convict prostitute heroines of the latter two novels, and directly connected to modern Australia’s founding history of patriarchal convictism. Dowling’s trilogy is also noteworthy because she critiques the Regency romance and provides a revisionist interpretation of this subgenre by connecting it to the contemporaneous history of convictism in Britain and Australia. The Regency romance’s assumptions about aristocratic and attractive male sexual privilege are challenged and the popular figure of the “reformed rake” hero is revealed as a sexual predator and an enabler of the system that sexualizes and exploits women’s labour. The legitimization of women’s sexual desire and behaviour throughout the trilogy is accompanied by a challenge to male sexual privilege and a problematizing of consent that has become characteristic of #MeToo activism.

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## Session 9

### B) Feminism and Politics in Romance

#### Pro-choice activism in Marian Keyes *Watermelon*

Maria Butler

Marian Keyes published her first novel *Watermelon* in 1995 over twenty years before the legalisation of abortion in the Republic of Ireland. *Watermelon* tells the story of Claire Walsh, a London based Irish woman whose husband leaves her on the day she gives birth to their first child. Following this abandonment, she returns to her parent's home in Dublin to grieve her marriage and to decide on her next steps. The novel is perhaps Keyes most conventional romance novel and consequently Claire falls in love with Adam, her sister's friend, while she is in Dublin. Nevertheless, despite the taboos associated with abortion in the Republic of Ireland and Keyes positioning as a popular romance novelist, Keyes immediately signalled her stance as a pro-choice author with the inclusion of an abortion narrative in the text. This paper explores the treatment of abortion in *Watermelon* and how its inclusion in the novel signalled Keyes positioning as a social activist writer.

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## Session 9

### B) Feminism and Politics in Romance

**Mammy Walsh's Daughters: Irish feminism and the novels of Marian Keyes**  
Rosalind Haslett

The 2018 Irish abortion referendum was a landmark moment for Irish feminists. Not only did the result of this referendum overturn the repressive eighth amendment of the constitution and restore Irish women's bodily autonomy, it also permanently changed the nature of political discourse because of the emphasis it placed upon the personal testimony of ordinary Irish women. In this paper, I will situate Marian Keyes's popular fictions within the context of this shifting political landscape. Focusing on the 6 of Keyes's novels that deal with the 5 Walsh sisters (*Watermelon*, 1995; *Rachel's Holiday*, 1997; *Angels*, 2002; *Anybody Out There?*, 2006; *The Mystery of Mercy Close*, 2012; and *Again, Rachel*, 2022) I argue that these works both reflected socio-political developments and modelled the first-person, confessional voice that became a central political strategy in 2018. The novels are usually categorised as Women's literature — or 'Chick lit' — but I argue here that it is the romance elements of their plots that have given them political weight. During a period in which Irish women were fighting for basic human rights (e.g. legalisation of divorce, 1996; abortion referendums of 2002 and 2018; publication of the final report into mother and baby homes, 2021) Keyes's Walsh family novels have depicted Irish women protagonists as desiring subjects (rather than objects of desire) and, crucially, allowed them to have their HEA.

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## Session 9

### B) Feminism and Politics in Romance

#### Suffragette Historical Romances: Re-Purposing Women's Suffrage in a Postfeminist Context

Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar

The last couple of decades have seen the publication of multiple romance novels with suffragettes or suffragists as their protagonists. Most of these novels have been marketed as feminist texts encouraging empowerment, fearlessness, and independence as traits associated with the suffragettes, but appear to be written in tune with a postfeminist sensibility which undermines the radical potential of this figure (Gil 2007, 148). My paper focuses on two of these novels, Katie MacAlister's *Suffragette in the City* (2011) and Courtney Milan's *The Suffragette Scandal* (2014), and their ab/use of this transgressive figure, and pays attention to how they articulate the topic of suffrage. These novels feature an apparently liberated and autonomous protagonist who is often anachronistically depicted, but whose choices eventually reinforce gender values more akin to the context in which the story develops. Considering the postfeminist vein in which the novels are written, I attempt to prove that the heroine's devotion to the fight for women's rights is presented as an obstacle for the development of her romantic relationship. Rather than seeing the barrier (Regis 2003) as a step that arises once hero and heroine have already met and felt attracted to each other, the barrier is presented as stemming from the heroine's commitment to the Cause, an inherent flaw which must be overcome by her decision to abandon the fight and devote her energies to love and marriage.

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## Session 9

### B) Feminism and Politics in Romance

#### The Homefront of "The War on Christmas": Great American Family's Holiday Romance Films, Domesticity, and the Rise of Christo-Fascism

Hannah Scupham

In the winter of 2001, the newly minted Hallmark Channel released their first ever Christmas film. Over twenty years later, the holiday romance films produced by Hallmark and its various competitors have become pop culture staples (and the subject of many a meme). In particular, I explore the Christmas films from the newly launched Great American Family (GAF) channel, which positions itself not merely as corporate competitor to Hallmark but also as a moral and ethical competitor for conservative and "family-friendly" viewers, with an explicit mission to "celebrate faith, family and country" (Great American Media).

By examining the 2021 and 2022 Christmas releases from GAF, I analyze how the company uses the holiday romance film genre to promote their far-right wing ideologies, particularly related to gender, sexuality, and race. A major area of discussion is how GAF represents domesticity and femininity within their films, particularly films such as *The Crown Prince of Christmas* (2022), *Love at the Christmas Contest* (2022), *Aisle Be Home For Christmas* (2022) and *A Hot Cocoa Christmas* (2021). Another area of focus will be the newly launched GAF film series, "Candace Cameron Bure Presents," an inspirational romance film series which explicitly unites the holiday romance genre with Christian evangelicalism. Drawing on the works of theologians and religious studies scholars, such as Anthea Butler and Dorothee Sölle, I discuss how this series, and GAF's productions in general, seek to reshape American nationalism and Christian identity into right wing (and even fascist) politics. In examining these oft-dismissed seasonal films, I hope to show how the holiday movie genre seeks to both emotionally and politically affect viewers.

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## Session 10

### A) Love Across the Atlantic: A Roundtable

Join us for a discussion about the multi-modal “Love Across the Atlantic” project (2014-2020). We present this project as a case study of how IASPR serves not only as a place to present research but as a space for professional development. Our story highlights opportunities to use IASPR to create collegial networks, host funded residencies and conferences, promote institutional ties, and publish collaborative research. We’ll share examples of impact and lessons to be learned, with the goal to inspire other such international and interdisciplinary partnerships.

Catherine M. Roach, Ted Trost, Veera Mäkelä, and Inmaculada (Inma) Pérez Casal

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## Session 10

### B) Teaching Popular Romance Fiction: A Workshop

One of IASPR's core missions is to encourage the teaching of popular romance media, including popular romance fiction. Once rare, such teaching now occurs around the world, in a variety of disciplinary, institutional, and para-academic contexts. This workshop gathers faculty who teach romance to discuss the institutional, theoretical, and disciplinary contexts of their teaching, to explore the thinking that goes into picking books and designing a romance fiction syllabus (or a syllabus including romance fiction), and to share the questions, assignments, and activities—in class or out of school—that they have found most helpful and rewarding in their own classroom practice.

Kirsty Bunting, Kaja Franck, Margo Hendricks, Nicole M. Jackson, Emerald King, Maria Nilson, and Maria Ramos-Garcia.

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## Session 11

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 2

#### A Romantic History of Newgate Prison: Theories of Punishment in Historical Romance, 1977 to Present

Emma Kearney

Newgate Prison in London captured so much of the Victorian imagination that an entire sub genre of novels took up the biographies and misdeeds of its inhabitants and spun them into fiction. Hero-villains like Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard could be reviled and glamorized in the same sweep. Historical romance novels of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to invoke Newgate as a symbol of terror and grime, particularly for wrongly accused individuals, but also they may take up the glamor and intrigue associated with those who escaped the prison or just the notorious crimes of which they are accused. The most popular period of historical romance settings lines up with the modern iteration of the prison (1782-1902) and its most widespread cultural and literary impact. Incarceration within Newgate Prison has been used as a plot device in popular historical romance books from Shanna (Kathleen E. Woodwiss, 1977) to The Highwayman (Kerrigan Byrne, 2015). Newgate as a symbol has changed over this half-century of romance novels to match theories of punishment that are used to justify carceral punishment. Through these modern books with historical settings, parallel conceptions of incarceration as an avenue for punishment can be tracked. Mass incarceration in the United States can make current retributive justifications for carceral punishment feel like an accepted cultural given, but these parallel narratives, one historical and one the fiction depicting that history, can complicate this carceral logic.

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## Session 11

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 2

**"The opportunities that Harriette Wilson wast'd:" L.A. Hall's *The Comfortable Courtesan*, women's culture, and Regency romance.**

Johanna Hoorenman

Harriette Wilson's 1825 memoirs of her life as a courtesan are one of the most well-known examples of courtesan memoirs of the long eighteenth century. They also mark the life of the last great courtesan of the Regency and paint a lively picture of a demi-monde that had petered out at the dawn of the Victorian Age. Wilson's memoirs are a key inspiration for the 2017 fictional courtesan memoir series *The Comfortable Courtesan*, a multi-media project by historian of gender and sexuality L.A. Hall, which offers a narrative of the exploits of a courtesan working under similar circumstances and in the same period as Wilson. The series can be categorized loosely as a romance series, in the sense that its plots center on love, sex and intimacy. However, the love life of protagonist Clorinda Cathcart is never resolved in a traditional HEA both because of her profession as courtesan as well as her personal preference for polyamory. Moreover, the web-based format of the series allows for a dynamic overlap between the formula of Regency Romance and academic research into the history of gender, sexuality and medicine.

Drawing on Lauren Berlant's work on the political possibilities of sentimentality (2008) I read Hall's *Comfortable Courtesan* series both as a variant on Regency Romance and as a form of Harriette Wilson's literary afterlife, with an eye to the new potential of (re)writing women's private and public lives, and their negotiation of embodied connections with a contemporary readership.

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## Session 11

### A) Perspectives on Historical Romance 2

#### **"Too Much Love, Not Enough Men: The Excess of Women in Carola Dunn's Superfluous Women"**

Bonnie J White

Set in 1920s Britain when the devastating losses of the First World War made an estimated one million women 'superfluous' because they were unlikely to find husbands, Carola Dunn's *Superfluous Women: A Daisy Dalrymple Mystery* (2015) follows a murder investigation set in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, a small parish that is defined by its conservatism and paternalism. Although the main characters, Alec and Daisy, are central to solving the crime mystery, the story exposes the lived experiences of three women who are continually defined by their single status, making them not only a burden on the state and society, but also prime suspects in the murder of another woman. Although the women are financially independent, their status as single women makes them threatening in a variety of ways whether as potential murderers, or members of a polyamorous harem, or as lesbian housemates. Ultimately, the absence of easily defined heterosexual romance makes them threatening figures of social disorder. At the same time, however, heterosexual romance threatens to break up this "mob of spinsters," as one of the three makes a potential love match. This paper examines Dunn's interpretation of a culture a fear that permeated English society, a fear that was grounded in women's supposed lack of romantic prospects at a time when husband-hunting notices appeared in the newspapers, maternal matchmaking was recommended so men would avoid making bad matches for themselves, and arrangements were made to jettison the surplus of unwanted women to the empire.

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## Session 11

### B) Heroes

#### Heroes and the Procreative Realm

Jonathan Allan

This paper considers the role heroes play in the procreative realm, which has long been studied in terms of women's roles. Drawing on recent work on infertile heroes, this paper considers the hero who seeks his own infertility. In Jessica Scott's short story, *Anything for You* (2013), readers are (re)introduced to Sergeant First Class Shane Garrison, who has been recovering from injuries, and Jen, a breast cancer survivor. The two do not need to fall in love in the story because this has already happened in the novel, *Because of You* (2018 [2011])—the first novel in the *Coming Home* series—and so it focuses on a particular facet of their relationship, namely, Shane's fear that Jen's breast cancer will come back. As the description of the book reads, "as their loves grows, so does the risk of Jen's life. And Shane must make the toughest decision any man can make to save the woman he loves." The "toughest decision" that Shane must make is about their future together as a couple, and more particularly, vasectomy as a safeguard to protecting her. He fears that if she becomes pregnant, she will once more endure cancer. In this essay, I consider how masculinity and vasectomy intersect in the construction of heroic masculinity in the popular romance novel. Finally, I provide brief observations about popular romance novels in the post-Dobbs Era, recalling that Justice Thomas specifically set his sight on *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which afforded married couples the right to contraceptives, a case that informed the expansion of access to contraceptives. The goal of this paper is to think carefully and critically about the roles men, and more particularly heroes, play in the procreative realm.

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## Session 11

### B) Heroes

#### Tired/ Wired: The Byronic Hero Becomes Nice

Emma McNamara

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw a resurgence of the Byronic hero: Lucas in *One Tree Hill*, Jess in *Gilmore Girls*, Ryan in *the OC*, Augustus in *the Fault in Our Stars*, etc. Lately, though, young- and new adult media has once again shifted away from the Byronic hero in favor of the nice boy: Connell in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, Peter in Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, Courtney in Nic Stone's *Odd One Out*, Adam in SK Ali's *Love From A to Z*. These boys want to openly love, and do not shy away from transparency or vulnerability. Using Day, Nikolajeva, Tolentino, and others, this essay will explore how the boys in young- and new adult media are positioned. When girls consume these novels, television programs, and films, they metabolize what kind of girls get the boy that is swooned over, what kind of treatment they should be content to put up with, and harmful narratives that love should emerge from hard-earned struggle. This essay will discuss how consumers crave the nice boy character, as *Normal People* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* have garnered television and film adaptations, and cult followings. Additionally, consumers want romance to be focalized through both love interests. The alternating perspectives, I believe, greatly contributed to *Normal People*'s success—indeed, Connell is just as important to the narrative as Marianne is. This essay will attempt to fill the hole in young adult scholarship regarding male love interests.

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## Session 11

### B) Heroes

**“What will you do with yourself when you grasp that your mind is only different, not deranged?”: Isolation, Madness, and Neurodivergent Heroes in Historical Romance Novels**

Veronica Vargova

While there has been a noticeable increase in contemporary romance novels with autism representation, historical romance novels with autistic-coded characters should not be overlooked. This paper aims to discuss the representation of neurodiversity in two historical romance novels: *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* by Jennifer Ashley and *The Lawrence Browne Affaire* by Cat Sebastian, arguing that today, the “madness” of the protagonists would be recognised as neurodiversity, specifically autism. Both Ian and Lawrence are savants with an exceptional memory and high intelligence. They are very passionate about their respective special interests and they both share several common autistic traits, such as hypersensitivity, bluntness, and difficulty with social interactions. In addition, Lawrence is convinced that his homosexuality is caused by his madness, and Ian is suspected of murder, since being a known madman makes him the ideal suspect. Because of their madness, they do not consider themselves capable of love and emotional intimacy, which further contributes to their self-imposed isolation. The novels offer four contrasting forms of isolation – voluntary vs. involuntary and emotional vs. physical – as a consequence of the protagonists’ madness, which they believe to have inherited from their abusive fathers. The love interests consistently disagree with the claim that the protagonists are mad, arguing instead that their minds are simply different, and they encourage the protagonists to embrace these differences and their unique expression of emotions. Consequently, the novels offer a historical perspective on the ongoing debate on whether autism should be considered a disability, or a form of neurodiversity.

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