To my father—Paul Wood—for teaching me the value of independent thought, providing me with opportunities to see the world, and always encouraging me to pursue my dreams
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In *Radicalizing Romance*, I contend that contemporary media at the margins of the romance industry are driving a counterpublic discourse that works to subvert the genre’s traditionally heteronormative paradigms. In an increasingly digital era, romance is a genre expanding to meet the diverse desires and fantasies of readers of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and ages that challenge the heterosexual assumptions of earlier feminist studies. While previous research generally focused on mass-marketed paperbacks, such as Harlequins, I instead examine subcultural and online texts including romantic lesbian graphic novels, gay men’s romance novels, African-American erotica, and queer Japanese manga. By considering narratives that break out of the traditional format of mass-market paperbacks and present queer visions of love, I show how romance at the margins takes up critical concerns about gender, sexuality, and race that are often ignored or pathologized in popular romance novels and much of the research that has been done on them. Online technology, participatory culture, and media convergence are enabling wide transnational circulation of non-normative romance narratives through both commercial and non-commercial venues. Consequently, we need to conceptualize romance readership in terms of more nebulous discursive publics rather than as a quantifiable and homogenous audience. This project aims to “radicalize” romance by demonstrating how
queer concepts and texts, which have been glaringly absent from most studies of the genre, can shed important light on the current evolution of romance and begin informing new methodological strategies for studying the genre and its readers in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Early critical studies of popular romance, many written by feminist scholars, attempted to explain why women consumed mass-marketed romance novels in such large numbers. These studies characterized mainstream romance fiction as a “feminine” mode of writing by and for women, and typically sought to find redeeming elements in the texts despite their overtly heterosexist tales of conformity. The two most significant feminist works on popular romance, Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, were published in the 1980s and remain the foundational studies on the genre.\(^1\) While both canonical texts remain fundamental to continued feminist research on romance, their increasingly dated material does not adequately address the ways in which the genre and its readership have changed in the last few decades. Although several special journal issues and edited collections have endeavored to remedy this gap in recent years, they have only achieved limited degrees of success. In part, the problem with new work on romance is that it either mimes the arguments of Radway and Modleski with no productive or substantive variation, or it alternatively argues in overarching terms that romance has been liberated from its former heterosexist ideology. As dissatisfying as are both of these tendencies, what is perhaps more worrying is the fact that the majority of romance scholarship has not managed to break out of the confines of its own essentialist and heterosexual frameworks.

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1 As Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce aptly note, Modleski and Radway were not the first feminists to write on the subject of romance, but rather the first to conceive of the genre as something other than clear-cut patriarchal propaganda: “In terms of feminist attempts to theorize romance, then, the work of Modleski and Radway in the 1980s signaled a radical departure from the earlier feminists (deBeauvoir, Millett, Firestone, Greer et al.) who perceived it to be a monolithically pernicious and disabling ideology . . . as a species of ‘false consciousness’ which could, and should, be resisted” (*Romance Revisited* 13).
By and large, scholars persist in studying and defining romance according to heteronormative paradigms that ignore or relegate LGBTQ texts and their readers to the margins as exceptions to the rule. In part, this tendency has been fueled by feminist focus on mass-marketed texts like Harlequins and problematic assumptions about the gender and sexuality of readers. While some of this work on romance provides relevant insights into certain kinds of texts and reader demographics, they consistently ignore queer theoretical possibilities and queer texts themselves. Part of the rationale for not studying LGBTQ romances is the fact that they are far fewer in number than mass-market heterosexual romances. While a scarcity of such texts in the 1970s and 80s might have been true, that is no longer the case in the twenty-first century. The proliferation of independent and digital publishing avenues has enabled authors writing non-traditional romance to circulate and sell their work without having to conform to the regulations of mainstream romance publishers. Continuing to turn a blind eye toward these LGBTQ texts and their readers reveals a scholarly failure to engage with real changes taking place in the realm of romance and its readers. Trying to maintain the heterosexual “feminine” status of romance in our current moment is not only untenable, but also speaks to a clear undercurrent of homophobia at work in the field. This is something that feminist scholars may be uncomfortable and even unwilling to acknowledge, but it manifests on several levels, most notably in definitions of the genre that are predicated on gender binaries of difference to organize the purported heterosexual telos of romance. Radicalizing Romance seeks to interrogate the exclusionary parameters of previous romance scholarship while demonstrating how the textual interests and online discourse of contemporary romance readers reveal a growing receptiveness to and investment in LGBTQ romances.
Although a number of critical articles on lesbian romance have appeared over the years (Hermes; Ehnenn; Juhasz; Foote), broader studies of the genre have not integrated critical engagement with them or other queer texts beyond the occasional footnote or passing reference. Consequently, lesbian romances still remain marginal to the field, and gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer romances are all but invisible in academic discourse on romance even as they gain greater visibility in online and commercial publishing realms. In contrast to previous research, Radicalizing Romance: Subculture, Sex, and Media at the Margins contends that contemporary media at the margins of the romance industry are driving a counterpublic discourse that works to subvert the genre’s traditionally heteronormative paradigms. In an increasingly digital era, romance is a genre expanding to meet the diverse desires and fantasies of readers of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and ages that challenge the heterosexual assumptions of earlier feminist studies. While previous research generally focused on mass-marketed paperbacks, such as Harlequins, I instead examine subcultural and online texts including romantic lesbian graphic novels, gay men’s romance novels, African-American erotica, and queer Japanese manga. By considering narratives that break out of the traditional format of mass-market paperbacks and present queer visions of love, I show how romance at the margins takes up critical concerns about gender, sexuality, and race that are often ignored or pathologized in popular romance novels and much of the research that has been done on them. Online technology, participatory culture, and media convergence are enabling wide transnational circulation of non-normative romance narratives through both commercial and non-commercial venues. Consequently, we need to conceptualize romance readership in terms of more nebulous discursive publics rather than as a quantifiable and homogenous audience.
This project seeks to “radicalize” romance by demonstrating how queer concepts and texts, which have been glaringly absent from most studies of the genre, can shed important light on the current evolution of romance and begin informing new methodological strategies for studying the genre and its readers in the twenty-first century. By presenting the first book-length study of subcultural romance narratives that challenge both the heteronormative framework of mainstream romance fiction and conventional expectations and assumptions regarding readership I show how the future of romance is already being greatly influenced by the margins. While issues of readership remain central to this project, I do not employ an ethnographic methodology. Instead, I examine from a feminist and queer theoretical perspective how the increasing importance of textual circulation and participatory culture in cyberspace require us to rethink romance readership in terms of more nebulous discursive publics rather than as a quantifiable and homogeneous audience. At the same time, I argue that we require a broader understanding of what constitutes romance at present, especially now that the genre is evolving and adapting with the rise of new media.

It has already been noted that in more recent years “subgenres have proliferated, enough so that the generic term ‘romance’ seems even less adequate than before to describe the variety available to readers” (Mussell 3). Indeed, many of the texts I examine resist traditional classifications of romance. In this respect, some scholars will no doubt object to the broadness with which I apply the term romance. As Carol Thurston has noted, “Though often disowned as ‘literature,’ this popular fiction [romance] nonetheless has been relegated largely to literary analysis and criticism, where the focus has been on patterns in texts that demonstrate universality and continuity rather than diversity and chance, and on consensus rather than pluralism” (4). I work against this kind of structuralist approach to romance precisely because I believe it has
reinforced a willful ignorance toward those texts that reside at the margins, most particularly LGBTQ romances, which has reified romance as a “feminine” heterosexual genre. In contrast, I see the genre as constantly adapting, changing, and exceeding any efforts to impose limits on it. Much of the fluidity I would ascribe to romance in the twenty-first century is driven by the desires and demands of increasingly vocal and active romance-reading publics that do not remain static, coherent, or uniform. Thus, I agree with Sandra Booth’s claim in “Paradox in Popular Romances of the 1990s: The Paranormal versus Feminist Humor” that “the increasing fragmentation in the genre is a result not only of readers seeking novelty but of searching for different romance fantasies” (94). I locate specifically queer possibilities in these acts of resistance to heteronormativity as I analyze subcultural texts and counterpublic discourse about them. In order to give appropriate context for my project first, however, it is necessary to consider what feminist research on romance has achieved thus far and to identify the central themes that shape this book.

Modleski and Radway: Feminist Beginnings and Queer Foreclosures

Tania Modleski’s Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women, published in 1982, made the first book-length feminist intervention into the study of popular romance. In this study Modleski skillfully repudiates the historically masculine tendency to denigrate romance and its readership as “silly” or “frivolous.” She relates romance to a patriarchal scholarly tradition that dismisses women’s writing as lacking literary value and thus being unworthy of critical inquiry. Her critique ultimately shows that under patriarchy popular romance is generally depicted as a low art form that appeals to equally devalued female readers.

2 John G. Cawelti’s Adventure, Mystery, and Romance discussed romance as popular genre but not from a specifically feminist standpoint. But like Modleski and Radway, Cawelti viewed romance as a particularly “feminine” genre that appealed primarily to female readers.
Modleski is careful to note, however, that feminist scholars need to be wary of falling into the same rhetorical position that excoriates this popular cultural mode precisely because it is seen as unrealistic, sentimental, and feminine: “In assuming this attitude, we demonstrate not so much our freedom from romantic fantasy as our acceptance of the critical double standard and of the masculine contempt for sentimental (feminine) 'drivel’” (14).³

*Loving with a Vengeance*, instead of devaluing romance, suggests that the genre speaks very powerfully about women’s experiences in culture. Arguing from a position of deliberate ambivalence, Modleski acknowledges the problematic ways in which romance fiction reinforces the gender myths of masculinity and femininity, but simultaneously shows that it is too facile to reduce these narratives to straightforward patriarchal propaganda. Instead, she maintains that while romances generally uphold the gender status quo they tend to depict very rebellious and independent heroines who struggle with their oppression. Indeed, Modleski does not believe that readers passively accept a subservient position in patriarchal culture, but rather that the fantasies presented in romance novels demonstrate the myriad contradictions women face as they attempt to adapt “utopian ideals to existing circumstances” (58). What is perhaps most compelling and enduring about Modleski’s argument is the way she illustrates women’s conflicting and at times very paradoxical relationship with these texts.

Modleski does not study actual readers, but instead uses psychoanalytic theory to “read” the readers of romance fiction through the popular texts they consume. She is interested in the “interaction between feminine readers and texts” (31) and claims that it is “only by taking psychoanalytic insights into account, by understanding how deep-rooted are the anxieties and fantasies contained in (and by) popular narratives for women can we begin to explain why

³My project does not perceive of the feminine as negative, but rather questions how the employment of this terminology has reinforced problematic gender binarisms and reified romance in heterosexual terms.
women are still requiring what Jameson calls the ‘symbolic satisfactions’ of the text instead of looking for ‘real’ satisfactions” (29). Modleski is careful to qualify this notion as one that does not attempt to reinscribe the negatively construed rhetoric of escapism so often used by critics to denigrate romance and various other popular genres. At the same time, Modleski directly tackles what she perceives to be a scholarly failure to acknowledge sufficiently the “complexity of women’s responses to romance” (37). Noting the ambivalent relationship she views at the heart of women’s interest in romance, she argues that “instead of exploring the possibility that romances, while serving to keep women in their place, may at the same time be concerned with real female problems, analysts of women’s romance have generally seen the fantasy embodied in romance fiction either as evidence of female ‘masochism’ or as a simple reflection of dominant masculine ideology” (37-38). In contrast, Modleski explores the female romantic fantasies presented in popular romance in order to “look at the varied and complex strategies women use to adapt to circumscribed lives, and to convince themselves that limitations are really opportunities” (38).

Two years after Loving with a Vengeance was published, Janice Radway’s study Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature followed hot on its heels. Ostensibly another feminist intervention into the study of romance as popular genre, Radway’s book centered around an ethnographic study she had conducted on a group of regular romance readers residing in the Midwestern United States whom she referred to as the “Smithton” women. Radway’s study offered interesting insight into this specific group of women, incorporating direct testimony from actual romance readers about their predilections, habits, and responses to texts. Like Modleski’s work before it, Radway’s text also employs psychoanalytic theoretical perspectives in order to analyze the information gathered from her study of the Smithton
readers. In essence, the larger question framing the study is, why do women enjoy reading popular romances? Radway attempts to answer this, via a psychoanalytic reading of her data, as an unconscious desire on the part of the female reader to be nurtured and mothered by a male hero in order to satisfy a need that she herself often provides to others in her roles as wife and mother, but is not receiving in return. Thus for her, romance is fundamentally a compensatory literature that reflects “the ongoing instability of the heterosexual solution to the oedipal dilemma…as a ritual effort to convince its readers that heterosexuality is both inevitable and natural and that it is necessarily satisfying as well” (14).

While Radway is certainly right to point out the formulaic tendency heterosexual romances have in privileging paradoxically ultra-masculine but nurturing male heroes, her thesis is troubling for several reasons. Firstly, Radway’s readers limited their textual consumption to a specific sub-genre of romance, that of the “long historical,” which necessarily restricted the scope of textual study in a significant manner. Secondly, despite attempts to refrain from doing so, Radway ultimately uses her one small case study to explain the larger phenomenon of female romance readership in general. This ethnographic and psychoanalytic approach, partly a product of the time at which Radway conducted her research, reflects a provocative but limited understanding of readers that attempts to explain their desires and fantasies in totalizing ways. Lastly, although Radway identifies the “instability of the heterosexual solution to the oedipal dilemma” at the heart of romance narratives, she does not question the solution itself as the only viable means for resolution. The psychoanalytic perspective she adopts forecloses queer

Radway is particularly influenced by the psychoanalytic work of Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.*

This claim is reliant upon female compliance with the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality. The readers Radaway studied all identified as straight (many of them also being married and having children), but the Smithton women cannot be used to speak for the gender or sexuality of all readers of romance.
possibilities among readers by reasserting heterosexuality as the primary erotic paradigm of psychic development and of romance itself, thus dismissing LGBTQ romances and their readers in ways that connote pathologization.

Although both Modleski and Radway emphasize the “feminine” qualities of popular romance and the act of reading these narratives, their claims about women’s experiences, fantasies, and desires are always directly or indirectly couched in heterosexual terms. One might argue that this can be reasonably attributed to the fact that both scholars are considering heterosexually-centered texts. However, just because a romance novel produces a heterosexual narrative does not mean that all readers of that text are straight. Nor does it mean that the novel is not open to potential “perverse,” to use Eve Sedgwick’s term, reading strategies that queer it in ways that meet different readers’ needs and fantasies. Describing romance as a “feminine” genre certainly has important feminist ramifications, as Modleski most aptly demonstrates, but it can also enact a particular kind of essentialism that is perhaps not intended yet nonetheless works to foreclose queer possibilities—especially when it reinforces the idea that “the romance form as genre presumes a patriarchal ideology, where heterosexual coupling is the telos and defining logic of women’s experience” (Ehnenn 121).

The Question of Audience: Publics and Queer Methodology

As I have shown thus far, the early feminist studies of popular romance were deeply invested in questions of readership and the motivations behind readers’ interest in texts. While both Modleski and Radway offer provocative ideas about women’s investment in romances, their conclusions tend to represent romance readers in unified and homogeneous terms.  

6 Modleski begins her book by noting that “Harlequin Romances, Gothic novels, and soap operas provide mass(ive) entertainment for countless numbers of women of varying ages, classes, and even educational backgrounds,” but this is the only specific reference to difference among readers that she notes (11). Tellingly, she does not mention possible sexual differences in female readers. In a similar fashion, Radway points out the ways in which mass-
Contemporary advances in online technology, and widespread participatory practices in an era of media convergence, have necessarily opened the genre to readers of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, ages. All of these changes signal the need for new methodologies aimed toward inclusivity rather than exclusivity, that can take into account how the Internet has facilitated discourse about and textual circulation of subcultural non-normative romances among a wide variety of readers who are part of a nebulous public that crosses cultural and transnational boundaries.

*Radicalizing Romance* “reads” readers as parts of publics and counterpublics rather than audiences. Michael Warner’s theorization of these categories in his book *Publics and Counterpublics* plays a central role in my thinking throughout this project as I consider in more detail the online dimensions of publics and counterpublics in the twenty-first century. Warner emphasizes that “a public is always in excess of its known social basis” because the self-organization of a public is “as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse” (74, 86). Consequently, it is texts and discourse about them that establish connections between readers; and in our current digital era, this process of circulation is capable of reaching global dimensions. Warner explains that analyzing, evaluating, and identifying publics can be difficult precisely because they do not possess the more concrete specificity of an audience. He notes that “the idea of a public has a metacultural dimension; it gives form to a tension between general and particular that makes it difficult to analyze from either perspective alone” (11).

Using Warner’s ideas as a foundation, I build my own analysis of romance-reading publics and counterpublics that acknowledges the tensions between the general and the particular, especially

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market paperbacks were produced to be affordable and appealing to a wide range of readers from different economic classes in her chapter “The Institutional Matrix: Publishing Romantic Fiction,” but she does not engage with issues of race or sexuality, the latter of which is always presumed heterosexual.
when examining online processes of textual circulation and other modes of participation in publics. At the same time, because *Radicalizing Romance* focuses specifically on publics and counterpublics in cyberspace it establishes pertinent connections between Warner’s theories and ideas about media convergence put forth by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*.

According to Jenkins, convergence is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). Although one might be inclined to assume initially that convergence is primarily technological in nature, Jenkins disagrees. He claims that “convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others” (3). Not surprisingly for Jenkins, a well-known figure in fandom studies, many of these social interactions occur in online realms. He also emphasizes that the “circulation of media content…depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (3). No longer can consumers be viewed as passive media spectators. In the twenty-first century, they are demonstrably active participants in media convergence in ways that are profoundly changing our understanding of the relationships between consumers and texts, and consumers and producers. In many respects, Jenkins theories intersect with Warner’s notions of publics and counterpublics and his emphasis on textual circulation and participation. Therefore, I frequently put their ideas in dialogue with one another throughout this book to develop a better understanding of publics in online contexts.7 Radway argued in the 1980s that the romance community “is a huge, ill-defined

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7 See Chapter Four in particular
network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other…this female community is mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing,” (97) but in the twenty-first century the same cannot easily be said when distance may be obviated by a few clicks of the mouse.

While Warner identifies similarities and overlaps between publics and counterpublics, he does specify important distinctions that mark the latter category as fundamentally resistant to the status quo. He argues “counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (63). I appropriate this concept when discussing readers involved in the cross-cultural circulation and consumption of queer texts that challenge traditional expectations and assumptions about romance and its readers. While I do identify romance-reading counterpublics as operating in resistance to the heteronormative narratives that dominate the cultural landscape, I do not want to suggest that they are entirely separate from more traditional romance-reading publics. Instead, this project will highlight ways in which they relate to and inform one another in critically discursive ways. Central to my analysis, therefore, are considerations of how counterpublics are influencing textual production in the romance industry at large while simultaneously bringing other romance-reading publics into closer contact with LGBTQ romances through both commercial and non-commercial avenues.

**Exploding Genre and Medium: The Protean Nature of Romance**

One of the most common tendencies in popular romance scholarship is to begin by explaining the difficulty in attempting to historicize and define “romance,” largely because the term itself lacks continuity. As Barbara Fuchs notes in her recent book in the Routledge New Critical Idiom Series, *Romance*, the term “is a notoriously slippery category. Critics disagree about whether it is a genre or a mode, about its origins and history, even about what it encompasses” (1). Within this project, I will be restricting my analysis of romance to its more recent characterizations as a popular genre while addressing how subcultural texts are reshaping
One of my central objectives is to move away from the structuralist approaches that have characterized much of feminist romance research. Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce have already made a significant critique of the limitations of such frameworks in their introductory essay “The Heart of the Matter: Feminists Revisit Romance,” to the 1995 edited collection *Romance Revisited*. In this piece Stacey and Pearce point out that structuralist analyses of romance have “provided us with critical insights into the ‘typicality’ of the emotion [romantic love] and its narrative construction, but they have often failed to point out that typicality is not universality . . . and that the exception often disproves the rule” (27). Thus, *Radicalizing Romance* takes the exceptions to the purported heterosexual rule, those non-normative and queer romance narratives that exist on the margins, as the starting point for its analysis in order to address why romance scholarship needs to begin taking these texts and their readers into account.

On the whole, this book identifies most closely with the recent revised definition of romance promoted by the Romance Writers of America (RWA), which claims that romances have two basic elements—“a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.” Devoid of particular gendered pronouns, this definition remains open to a variety of gender and sexual possibilities, while leaving a certain degree of autonomy in the hands of the reader to determine what constitutes an “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.” The RWA’s definition acts in direct contradiction to those developed by many romance scholars who often label the genre in heterosexual terms. I interrogate this discrepancy in more detail in Chapter Two, while throughout the book I attempt to illustrate how and why queer theoretical interventions are necessary for us to begin understanding romance outside of heteronormative paradigms.
 Another area in which I take issue with earlier feminist scholarship on romance pertains to the studious separation of the genre from pornography, the latter of which was often viewed as a “masculine” genre in direct opposition to the “feminine” form and fantasies of romance. I argue that more recent shifts in both mainstream and subcultural romance trends suggest unacknowledged and provocative connections between these two categories, especially given the increasing popularity of erotica texts among romance readers. Female-authored erotica is now a rapidly growing industry, and these texts often depict explicit sexual relationships that resist traditional representations of desire as being heterosexual and monogamous. In our current moment, readers are not only articulating their interest in romantic narratives that allow for more explicit sexual expression, but also in openly transgressive narratives that question the status quo. The Internet has provided many readers with the means and access to create and circulate such texts among networks of friends and strangers on a growing transnational scale. At the same time, the lack of online regulation has opened the doors to a contemporary generation of technology-savvy adolescents who can access erotic media in ways that they are restricted in the public sphere, which raises critical questions about the boundaries between and policing of adult and child sexuality in our culture.

Previous research on romance has focused primarily on the mass-market paperback and occasionally soap operas and the primary media of the genre. This book begins to assess how new media such as graphic novels, Japanese manga (comics), and e-books are affecting the genre and appealing to a range of digitally conversant readers participating in media convergence. At the same time, *Radicalizing Romance* considers the ways in which the visual attributes of some

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8 See Chapter Four
new media bring to the surface tensions about sexual representation and censorship of narratives that unite pictorial imagery and alphabetic written text.

**The Future of Romance Scholarship: Queering the Margins**

In contrast to earlier studies, this project troubles the normative status of romance by questioning what it means when, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner imagine, “the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (“Sex in Public” 312). Most of the subcultural texts analyzed in *Radicalizing Romance* queer the concept of the couple in ways that challenge and subvert the genre and its overall impact on the romantic cultural imaginary. As a result, a fundamental premise of this project is that queerness in romance narratives, especially in relation to erotic fantasy, is worthy of more intense scrutiny that does not pathologize or render perverse such signification. Although both Modleski and Radway identify fantasy tropes as important elements of the romance genre, their engagement with the representation of sex and sexual fantasy in romance fiction is limited, in some cases by context and in others by content. Modleski, for instance, spends much of her time attempting to refute the masochistic diagnosis attached to romantic tropes of sexual ravishment so frequently presented in Harlequins and Gothics of the 1970s. Radway, on the other hand, asserts that the “Smithton” women she studied generally did not want to discuss sex in romance, perceiving it to be of little importance to the narrative. Later studies addressed the erotics of romance novels in more detail (Mussell, *Fantasy*; Thurston; Cohn; Pearce and Stacey; Mussell, “Where’s Love”) but almost exclusively in heterosexual terms. It is no surprise, therefore, that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner claim “heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy” (317), and the romance genre is no exception. However, by examining non-heteronormative romances that exist at the margins,
Radicalizing Romance begins to imagine what queer intimacies can and do mean to readers and to the romance genre as it evolves in the twenty-first century.

Since the late eighties, there have been few book-length studies on romance and limited assessment as to how the genre has evolved in recent years. In 1997, however, a special issue of Paradoxa entitled “Where’s Love Gone?: Transformations in the Romance Genre” appeared on the relatively quiet scene of romance studies, proclaiming that it was time to once again assess the genre because contemporary mainstream romance novels had changed in significant ways since they were first examined by scholars in the 1970s and 80s. Indeed, at that point Tania Modleski’s Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women and Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, published in 1982 and 1984 respectively, were still the reigning feminist studies on popular romance despite their growing datedness. The Paradoxa special issue on romance therefore endeavored to offer new insight on romance, proclaiming that the genre had shed most of its former ideological baggage, which some feminists argued had worked to “provide women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression” (Loving with a Vengeance 43).

In her introduction to the journal issue, Kay Mussell claims that romances have progressed in many respects with the times, embracing certain feminist politics regarding gender equality, and even goes so far as to imply that these texts have a more queer-friendly vibe now that “a few romances, with both historical and contemporary settings, feature gay men—and, more rarely, lesbians—as secondary characters” (4). Presumably these secondary and arguably

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9 Even now, in 2008, Modleski and Radway’s texts still hold central status in the field despite numerous disagreements with aspects of their findings. They are the most frequently cited references on romance and continue to be the primary critical texts on the subject used in university classes. Pamela Regis’s 2003 A Natural History of the Romance Novel is gaining growing attention but it remains to be seen what impact her study will have on the field as a whole.
token queer characters are represented in a positive light, although Mussell does not specifically say so. In point of fact, queer characters have long appeared on the pages of mass-market romance, but most frequently as pathologized deviants or evil villains who must be killed off or locked up safely behind institutional bars in order to reaffirm heterosexual paradigms of normativity. Rarely, LGBTQ characters are depicted in a positive light in heterosexual romances but this usually depends upon their de-sexualization in the narratives, rendering their queerness acceptable only so long as their sexual desires and actions are concealed or effaced entirely. Mussell’s affirmation, therefore, remains an ambiguous and certainly less than convincing testimony to progressive queer politics in contemporary mainstream romance.

What is perhaps more interesting about Mussell’s brief reference to gay and lesbian characters is that it raises a very obvious question: What about LGBTQ romances themselves? Nowhere is there any mention of, in particular, the many lesbian romance novels that are being published, and have been for many years, by smaller presses like Bella Books, Firebrand Books, Naiad Press,10 New Victoria Publishers, and The Seal Press. Admittedly, the books put out by these presses do not have the same level of distribution as Harlequins and their ilk, but they have long been a part of lesbian print culture and omitting any reference to them is cause for concern, especially given the fact that the Paradoxa special issue purports to look at the feminist progress Mussell perceives in contemporary romance novels. The absence of any substantive discussion of lesbian romances is both glaring and conspicuous.

Although Mussell does briefly note toward the end of her introduction that “we [romance scholars] need to incorporate analysis of lesbian and gay romances into our mostly heterosexual models,” this seems to be suggested as the task of future inquiry into romance because almost

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10 Now defunct, Naiad Press operated from 1973-2003 closing shop when its owners retired. They transferred most of Naiad’s titles to Bella Books.
nowhere else in the special issue of *Paradoxa* are LGBTQ readers or romances further discussed (Mussell 12). Tania Modleski’s contribution to the volume does briefly point out, based on her personal experience with a few gay and lesbian graduate students, that romances can generate cross-gender readings among queers who can re-envision the characters as same sex (27). In a similar fashion, Deborah K. Chappel argues in her essay that the language used to develop sex scenes in romances tends to focus on the female point of view and female bodily response while describing the male body in more ambiguous terms that leave open spaces for lesbian readings of the text (118-119). While these two essays offer some interesting thoughts about the ways in which queer individuals can enact “ perverse” readings of heterosexual romances, they fail to engage with more than cursory references to actual LGBTQ romances.

But Mussell and the other contributors to the *Paradoxa* special issue are not alone in leaving queerness out of the scholarly equation when it comes to re-assessing romance post-1980s. Even Pamela Regis’s more recent 2003 book-length study, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, elides any reference to gay or lesbian romances, and goes so far as to define the romance novel in heterosexual terms as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19). Her definition also emphasizes the idea of narrative resolution in the form of marriage or the expectation of marriage as the end goal of romance, which given the prevailing global efforts to maintain marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution implies that queer romance is not, narratively speaking, possible.

Ironically enough, however, Regis’s definition highlights the centrality of the heroine’s perspective in heterosexual romances, which reinforces a female-centered focus at the heart of this genre that easily raises the specter of same-sex desire. Regis is by no means the first, however, to point out the emphasis on female experience via the heroine’s point-of-view in
romance novels. Mussell also suggests that she, along with many other feminist critics like Modleski and Radway who were tackling the subject of romance in the 1980s, “believed that romance had something to say about women’s experience in culture” (9). Yet these earlier studies, as well as the more recent ones I have mentioned, continue to cast “women’s experience” as exclusively and inherently heterosexual. Such efforts appear contrived at times, as the lesbian lingers on the subconscious periphery of many of these studies despite their glaring absence of direct references to lesbian romance novels and/or readers; apparitional in nature, she “is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night” (Castle 2).

Indeed, both Radway and Modleski’s studies, with their deep investment in psychoanalysis, seem to repress the possibility of lesbian or other queer desires being coded in the fantasies they address. Radicalizing Romance questions the frequency with which this kind of erasure occurs so that we may begin to address what is at stake in making queer desires visible—as I argue the subcultural texts I examine seek to do.

Stephanie Burley notes in her perceptive article “What's a Nice Girl like You Doing in a Book like This?: Homoerotic Reading and Popular Romance,” that while “most studies of romance to date take the heteronormative aspects of popular romance as given” (128) they have failed to notice or consider “the subterranean homoeroticism in the romance industry” (127) at large. For Burley, this homoeroticism underlying what most scholars would class as heterosexual romances allows for female-centered queer reading practices:

Inherent in the female-centered erotic endeavor of popular romance is a homosocial apparatus that allows for, and even depends upon, homoerotic desire while simultaneously

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11 Since the 1980s, several scholars have published short essays on lesbian pulp novels, lesbian regency romances, and contemporary lesbian romance novels, but this research has not been incorporated into discussion of romance in feminist studies of the genre at large.
disguising, suppressing, or surmounting it. That is to say, when we find the heroines irresistible, love our favorite authors, and experience close personal relationships to our fellow readers of erotic literature, we are in fact engaged in a homoerotic practice.” (130)

This is a salient point given the consistent scholarly focus on female experiences in romance narratives that privilege the heroine’s point-of-view. Ignoring obvious possibilities for queer identifications with or desire for the heroine on the part of female readers is a rather telling and problematic omission. I bring up Burley’s ideas at this juncture because I believe they provide a useful starting point from which to consider queer signification in mainstream romance as well as in subcultural texts. Burley does not try to suggest that all romance readers or texts are queer, but instead qualifies her claims by stating:

I do not want to suggest that the difference between queer and straight readings necessarily lies in the sexual identities of readers (whether these identities are self-professed, suppressed, or otherwise). I am not trying to out legions of writers, fans, and critics who participate in this discourse, but rather to point out the importance of homoeroticism to the genre and the recuperative strategies that always seem to drag popular romance back to its heterosexual moorings. (129-130)

Burley allows for nuance and fluidity in the relationships between readers and romance texts, while pointing out the tendency of scholars to reify the heterosexual paradigms of the genre despite obvious queer possibilities and significations to the contrary. Burley’s queer reading of romance remains restricted, nonetheless, to female readers and characters. Radicalizing Romance seeks to take up where she has left off by considering readers who identify with and texts that reflect LGBTQ sexualities.

It is worth noting that there have been some significant critical and methodological disagreements voiced since the publication of the 1997 Paradoxa special journal issue. Tania Modleski, who contributed a personalized essay for the journal that dealt with her experiences as a reader of romances, published a rather scathing response to the edited collection of essays afterwards. Her follow-up piece, entitled “My Life as a Romance Writer,” expresses her
dissatisfaction with the way in which many of the volume’s essays about contemporary romance argue that the genre has become liberated from the chains of its past patriarchal ideology of gender and sexual conformity. As Modleski notes in reference to her original article for the journal issue, “I was exposing myself and making myself vulnerable to my readers as I wrestled with contradictions in the genre, in myself, and in my relation with the genre, these women admitted to nothing but the achievement of a fully developed, absolutely unconflicted feminist sensibility” (134). For Modleski, this kind of celebratory optimism is both highly uncritical of the tensions and paradoxes of the genre and acts as a problematic post-feminist response to romance that no longer wants to explore women’s conflicted relationship to the fantasies these narratives present and the realities in which actual women live. Indeed, although Mussell concludes her introduction to the volume by calling for “a better, more nuanced understanding of the various segments of the romance audience” and argues the “need to incorporate analysis of lesbian and gay romances into our mostly heterosexual models,” it is not something that actually occurs to any great extent in the scholarship presented in the journal issue (13). As a result, it is at the interstices of Modleski’s concerns about uncritical “post-feminist” analyses of romance and the queer theoretical limitations of the Paradoxa issue I have identified that Radicalizing Romance seeks to open a new dialogue on romance that unites feminist and queer theoretical concerns about and approaches to the genre.

**Overview of Chapters**

Chapter Two, “Who Says Men Don’t Read Romance?: The Gay ‘Harlequins’ of Romentics,” addresses the conspicuous absence of male readers and writers of romance in academic studies of the genre. While lesbians are largely invisible in mainstream romance and its attendant scholarship, men seem to appear predominantly as fictional archetypes or patriarchal constructs and rarely as actual readers or writers of romance. Indeed, the major studies on the
genre have glossed over men in terms of their potential roles as readers even though they often note that there are in fact men who write romances for women. This raises pertinent questions about sexuality, as virtually none of the feminist research on romance has considered men as authors and readers of romances for other men. Engaging in more substantive discussion about men as part of romance-reading publics can be a conflicted endeavor—especially when one reflects on the manner in which feminist scholars have typically sought to valorize popular romance as a genre belonging to a “feminine” writing mode that examines women’s (heterosexual) experiences in culture often in, albeit ambivalent, opposition to systemic patriarchy. I argue that while this tactic has played a critical role in reclaiming romance from earlier sexist denigration and making it an accepted area of academic study, it has also constrained the genre in some troubling ways by reifying aspects of the gendered binary feminists sought to resist and critique. By analyzing a new line of gay romances, Romantics, I consider how the online discursive appropriation of the “Harlequin” label subversively challenges current definitions of romance. At first glance, the Harlequin label, with its obvious connotations of formulaic narratives and heterosexual female-centered desires and fantasies, might seem to contradict the very concept of gay romance. However, I argue that it precisely the manner in which Romantics novels queer the notion of the Harlequin—frequently held up by popular critics and scholars alike as the emblematic representation of genre romance—which begins to destabilize in radical ways how romance is currently defined. At the same time, I illustrate how the Internet has played a critical part in the production and consumption of Romantics novels while facilitating cross-over readership with other reading publics, further challenging the notion of a coherent and uniform audience for romance.
My next chapter, “Making the Invisible Visible: Lesbian Romance and Underground Comics for Women,” examines the marginal realm of lesbian romance comics and queer concerns about visibility. The available scholarship on lesbian romance to date, which has focused largely on Naiad Press novels or lesbian pulps, has been invested in exploring the politics of representation and visibility at work in the production and consumption of these novels. I enter this conversation by arguing that, as a visual medium, comics are particularly valuable for scholarly consideration because they can literally make invisible possibilities and desires visible, thus offering significant challenges to queer-eradicating impulses so often reinforced by the mainstream romance and comics industries at large. At the same time, however, these comics must walk a precarious line in their efforts to work against sexist exploitation of lesbian sex in comics created by and for men while trying to take back the lesbian erotic for women. As a result, many female comics artists seek to remake romance by weaving together elements from multiple genres in order to envision lesbian relationships that do not adhere to formulaic expectations and tendencies, while sidestepping the more problematic traps of traditional heteronormative romance.

By way of example, I focus on three contemporary graphic novels—Lea Hernandez’s *Clockwork Angels*, Ariel Schrag’s *Potential*, and Colleen Coover’s *Small Favors*. Hernandez’s *Clockwork Angels* appropriates and refashions tropes common to mainstream romance narratives while couching them in the steampunk genre to present a promising vision of queer love that visually emphasizes the importance of spatial relations, the female gaze, and the politics of revelation and concealment. In contrast, Colleen Coover’s adult comic *Small Favors* establishes a more explicit “girly” porn aesthetic that manipulates the fantasy and pornography genres to subvert hegemonic conventions regarding romance and sexual monogamy while working to
thwart heterosexist appropriations of lesbian sex in mainstream pornography for straight men.

Lastly, Ariel Schrag’s *Potential* explores the tensions between realism and fantasy by employing the autobiographical coming-of-age narrative mode to present a “real” story of lesbian love that questions the primacy of the “happily-ever-after” ending in romance. By introducing comics into the current discourse surrounding lesbian romance I provide insight into an as yet unexamined medium for the genre that unites the visual and the written, making visible what romance novels as a medium keep concealed by virtue of their format. In this regard, I argue that lesbian romance comics confront many of the tensions that exist within mainstream romance fiction; specifically, they disrupt efforts by publishers and scholars to studiously separate romance and pornography as distinctly different, and often gendered, genres. They do not shy away from representing queer female sexual desire in direct and often explicit ways, and they reveal the romantic and sexual possibilities available to women who are not attempting to embody prescribed notions of femininity or female sexuality that operate under heterosexual paradigms.

In my fourth chapter, “Get Your (Fantasy) Freak On: Confessional Discourse, Trauma, and Ambivalent Queer Desires in the Erotica of Zane,” I more directly address the genre slippage between romance and pornography touched on thus far by focusing on erotica as liminal sub-genre to both categories. I center my analysis on the work of contemporary pseudonymous African-American erotica author Zane, whose rise to prominence presents a compelling example of how the circulatory powers of online publics in an age of media convergence can propel texts at the margins into the mainstream. Formerly an amateur erotica author publishing short stories on a personal website, Zane skyrocketed to bestselling status almost overnight as the circulation and demand for her work on the Internet brought her to wide international attention. In this chapter I analyze two of Zane’s novels, *Addicted* and *Nervous*, which are part of an ongoing
series about the patients of fictional psychiatrist, Dr. Marcella Spencer. These novels are particularly interesting for the ways in which they manifest racial and sexual ambivalence toward the “freaky” erotic desires and fantasies that structure the narratives. I locate connections between these novels’ notions of “freakiness” and theoretical concepts of queerness in order to show how non-normative erotic desires and sexual acts, as conceived in Zane’s texts, oscillate between poles of attraction and repulsion as they unconsciously confront discourses that have long conflated the racial and sexual identities of people of African descent with excess, deviance, and abnormality. I argue that Addicted and Nervous try to mediate these conflicting sentiments by employing a confessional framework that simultaneously titillates while working to absolve the main characters’ feelings of guilt for their perceived deviant sexual actions by explaining away their desires as the result of trauma. Although the resolution of each novel attempts to return female characters to the romanticized and “safe” realm of heterosexual monogamy and true love, I argue that “freaky” desires and fantasies cannot be fully contained or dispelled as they still linger to haunt the margins of the texts. Consequently, I maintain that this persistent ambivalence in Zane’s erotica speaks to larger conflict with sexually repressive and assimilationist tendencies within certain black communities and political movements that have not, and still do not, allow for transgressive or queer desires, especially among black women.

My fifth chapter, “‘Straight’ Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic,” explores, on a transnational scale, the growing popularity of “boy-love” manga—Japanese comics that depict homoerotic love stories between beautiful young men. These narratives, written largely by and for teenage girls and women, have long held a devout following in Japan but have only recently begun to come to larger global attention. Several major manga publishers in the United States are now selling English translations of these texts,
which are steadily gaining popularity among adolescent and adult readers. Despite this exciting cross-cultural proliferation of texts, the research that has been done on boy-love manga to date has remained largely confined to a Japanese context. In general, scholars have been perplexed by the phenomenon and have sought to explain why a purportedly “straight” female audience would find pleasure reading homoerotic love stories between men. I argue that the growing transnational readership of boy-love manga requires new ways of thinking about this particular fandom beyond the confines of Japan and outside of traditional heterosexual paradigms. Indeed, the androgynous visual aesthetic and homoerotic content of “boy-love” manga resist coherent classification and instead enable myriad possible “perverse” readings of the texts that speak to a more fluid range of identifications, desires, and fantasies than critics have allowed. I demonstrate how the Internet is already facilitating discourse and textual circulation among fans in different countries, generating a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature. This queerness reveals that the readership is not coherent, monolithic, or singular—as other scholars and popular critics have seemed to suggest—and opens a discursive space for multiple and diverse readings of boy-love manga to be circulated and shared among an intimate network of strangers around the world.

The conclusion takes a broader look at the intersections between media convergence and online publics and counterpublics in order to reiterate how the Internet has expanded discourse about romance and made easier access to non-traditional texts possible. Returning to recent work on “convergence culture” I reflect on the ways online technology in the era of Web 2.0 has provided both the means and the space(s) for cross-cultural and transnational discourse about romance by enabling connections among a wider-reaching global constituency. Ultimately, I re-emphasize how romance is adapting and expanding in the twenty-first century, in large part due
to readers who are becoming active and participatory fans of the genre, and reiterate why it is crucial that we begin conceptualizing new ways of understanding romance and its readers that can better address these rapid and provocative developments.
CHAPTER 2
WHO SAYS MEN DON’T READ ROMANCE?: THE GAY “HARLEQUINS” OF ROMENTICS

The heroine appeals largely to a female audience. The romance is the most female of popular genres. Nearly all of the writers and readers are women (xii).

—Pamela Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel

When Scott and I went into gay bookstores, we could find books on self-help, books about surviving AIDS, books of erotica, but no line of novels celebrating gay relationships. So we started one.

—Scott Pomfret, Romentics author

Two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.

—Romance Writers of America website

To those unfamiliar with the scholarship, a quick examination of the body of academic research on popular romance might lead one to the conclusion that the genre belongs solely to women.¹ The conspicuous absence of male romance readers and writers in these studies would certainly lend strong credibility to such a hypothesis. At the same time, however, immediate questions would undoubtedly arise as to whether men simply do not participate in this genre or have been excluded from the discussion for specific reasons. Taking these issues into consideration, one of the primary objectives of this chapter is to evaluate why studies of popular romance have largely ignored male readers and writers while simultaneously seeking to uphold the genre as one by and for women. While I acknowledge that past researchers have noted that there are in fact men who write romances for women (often under female pseudonyms), I am more concerned here with the ways in which they gloss over the notion of men as potential readers or writers of romances specifically aimed at men. Figuring predominantly as fictional

¹ In particular, the scholarship almost unfailingly positions female writers and readers as heterosexual. Lesbian readers and texts are typically given a marginal status that implies they are simply an exception to the rule. See Chapter Two for a more extensive discussion of these issues.
archetypes or patriarchal constructs in studies of the genre, men rarely factor as actual participants in romance reading and writing. This omission, whether deliberate or unwitting, seems inextricably tied to the essentialist characterization of romance as a “feminine” genre by and for heterosexual women. Initially, this particular stratagem was fundamental to feminist reclamation efforts that attempted not only to validate popular romance as a genre worthy of academic inquiry, but also to expose and challenge the sexist tendencies at work behind critics’ aspersions against romance and its readers. While proving successful on both of these fronts, this approach also had the unfortunate effect of reinscribing and reifying aspects of the gendered binary it sought to resist and critique. At the same time, essentializations about the “feminine” nature of the genre and its readers were couched in almost exclusively heterosexual terms. In part, given the time period in which feminist analyses of popular romance began to emerge, this tendency is undoubtedly connected to some of the limitations of second-wave feminist theory and its emphasis on white middle-class heterosexual women often at the expense of lower-class women, lesbians, and women of color. Romance scholarship has begun addressing and challenging some of these assumptions, but those about the gender and sexuality of readers and their texts continue to persist today.

Indeed, it has become a fairly standard practice to characterize romance and its readers in essentialist terms with very little questioning of the epistemological and methodological constraints this places on our understanding of the genre and its consistent popularity. The implicit assumption in most feminist analyses of romance is that women are the primary

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2 Early feminist studies (Modleski, *Loving*; Radford; Radway; Mussell, *Fantasy*; Thurston) identified the ways in which literary and popular critics typically characterized genre romance in a negatively feminized manner. They linked this debasement of the feminine with a “double critical standard” (Modleski, *Loving* 11) that was inherently exclusionary and sexist. In resistance, they sought to redeem the feminine in romance and locate possibilities for empowerment in these narratives by and for women.
producers and consumers of what is perceived as a heterosexual genre and therefore they must be straight. While it is no doubt true that a large number of romance readers identify as heterosexual, assuming that all do is a logical fallacy that lends credence to Gayle Rubin’s assertion that feminist theory has a tendency “to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other” (32). Collapsing and conflating these two categories to conform to a heterosexual paradigm ignores diversity among readers as well as key distinctions between erotic fantasies and actual sexual behaviors, which are not necessarily synonymous. In a similar fashion, relegating LGBTQ romances, as well as their readers,3 to the margins as mere exceptions to the rule perpetuates a discourse of exclusion based on difference while recursively reifying the genre as heterosexual.

In some regards, mass-market heterosexual romance novels have become the standard for evaluating the genre primarily because they are published and consumed in such large numbers—a fact that has consistently been invoked by feminists as a key justification for romance’s relevance as an area of scholarly inquiry (Snitow; Modleski, *Loving*; Radway; Mussell, *Fantasy*; Thurston; Regis). This rhetorical emphasis on quantity as a marker of significance and value has characterized a great deal of romance research, and has implicitly negated the comparable relevance of studying LGBTQ romances and their readers whose perceived numbers are far fewer and thus seemingly do not warrant the same degree of attention.4 Yet much can be learned from examining romances that do not uphold the traditional

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3 In the same ways I have tried to point out that readers of heterosexual romance are not always female nor heterosexual, I do not want to claim that the identities of LGBTQ romance readers can be universalized about either. Indeed, queer romances, like their mainstream counterparts, achieve a high level of cross-over readership—especially in online spaces.

4 Apart from the small body of work that has been done on lesbian romance, there has been limited engagement with how queer romance affects the genre as a whole. Some scholars make passing reference to queer readers and romances (Modleski, “My Life”; Mussell, “Where’s Love”; Pearce and Stacey) but do not provide detailed
heteronormative framework, regardless of their numbers and perceived (often rather erroneously) lack of popularity. These texts, despite efforts to continually marginalize them, are a valid and vibrant part of the genre. Continually ignoring or dismissing them from research on romance demonstrates how flawed and constructed the efforts to naturalize the genre as feminine and heterosexual are. Although I direct some strong criticisms against feminist research on romance in this chapter, I do not want to wholesale reject or minimize the importance of the work that has been done. Rather, my larger aim in this chapter, and in the project as a whole, is to illustrate how and why queer theoretical perspectives can make valuable interventions in romance scholarship by complicating and deconstructing those reductionist tendencies that have led to universalizations about the genre and its readers which no longer, if they ever did to begin with, hold true.

Using Romantics, a contemporary line of gay men’s romances, as a case study in this chapter I specifically tackle the feminine reification of popular romance, which has played a significant part in constraining feminist scholarship on the subject since the 1980s. In response, I assess how Romantics novels trouble the heteronormative intelligibility of the couple in romance, challenging essentialist notions about gender and sexual roles. At the same time, Romantics novels queer popular romance tropes reliant upon such classifications, aptly illustrating how gender and sexual constraints on definitions of the genre become increasingly unstable and untenable as romance evolves in the twenty-first century. I begin my discussion by examining in greater detail how popular romance has become reified as a feminine genre and then consider the importance of gay pulps as antecedents to contemporary gay romance novels like those published by the Romantics line. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of how
Romantics novels begin to unravel the coherency and stability of the genre’s feminine categorization in fundamental ways.

**The Feminine Reification of Romance: Feminist Precedents and Queer Interventions**

Although scholars have traditionally taken scant interest in men as part of romance readership and authorship, the need to examine their involvement as active participants in the genre is growing ever more obvious. Most persuasive in illustrating this point is the recent Romance Writers of America 2005 Market Research Study on Romance Readers, which reveals that “22% of romance readers are male — a significant increase from the 2002 survey that showed only 7% of readers were male” (RWA). Despite the fact that the complete details behind this study are not publicly available, these statistics are compelling enough to suggest that men are now more actively involved in romance readership than has previously been believed\(^5\) and that this upsurge has occurred very recently.\(^6\) Unfortunately, there is no available public information about whether the sexual identification and romance reading preferences of male participants were addressed in this study, but it is safe to suggest that recent gay romances have had at least some influence in diversifying readership. Indeed, the dramatic increase in the number of gay romances produced and sold in America in the last five years implies that the popularity of these texts is sufficient for publishers to consider them viable products in the current romance market.\(^7\)

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5 While a direct correlation remains suggestive at best, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the first Romantics novel (*Razor Burn*) was published in 2003—a year after the 2002 RWA survey that listed only 7% of romance readers as male. Thereafter, Romantics published several additional novels, garnering wider recognition in the industry and in online circles, before the 2005 RWA survey showed such a dramatic increase in male readers of romance.

6 Although this increase appears to be more recent, it is important to note that in part these results might be due to changes in male survey participants’ willingness to admit to reading romances as well as overall distribution of surveys.

7 In “The Politics of Love in Three Recent U.S. and U.K. Films of Young Gay Romance: A Symptomatic Reading of Beautiful Thing, Get Real, and Edge of Seventeen,” Bob Nowlan notes that in terms of film, “young gay romance”
On the whole, LGBTQ romance texts, especially in the realm of e-publishing, are being circulated through both commercial and non-commercial means among online publics and counterpublics. In using these terms I am drawing from Michael Warner’s theorizations in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*. He argues that “a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed” (67). Additionally, Warner emphasizes that publics lack the concrete specificity of a group or audience and maintain their existence by virtue of the way people are connected, often indirectly, by texts: “Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be” (68).

Romance-reading publics in the twenty-first century, therefore, are also connected through texts and discourse about them in material and online contexts that often cross cultural and national divides. What most interests me about this phenomenon is the way participants in romance-reading publics are beginning to cross paths with LGBTQ texts circulated in romance-reading counterpublics. According to Warner, “counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion” (63). Consequently, I view romance-reading counterpublics as defined in resistance to heteronormative paradigms of mass-market romance texts. This resistance manifests at the level of discourse, texts, and the circulation of texts among readers as romance-reading counterpublics question, challenge, and subvert the meaning of the

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is the largest and most successful contemporary cinematic subgenre (142) of gay film production after pornography (176). Although I do not examine any films in this project, I want to acknowledge the medium’s importance in furthering the transmedia nature of romance as genre.
genre in the present day. As more non-heteronormative romance texts are created and circulated, especially in online spheres that facilitate these processes, readers participating in more traditional romance-reading publics are encountering and reading LGBTQ texts. I will return to this point later as it relates specifically to Romantics novels, but in the meantime I would like to further consider how popular romance and its readers have been perceived and defined.

While the 2005 RWA Survey data speaks to a need for more substantive engagement with men as part of romance-reading publics, such an effort can be a conflicted endeavor—especially when one reflects on the reasons why feminist scholars have typically sought to valorize popular romance as a genre belonging to a “feminine” writing mode that examines women’s (heterosexual) experiences in culture often in, albeit ambivalent, opposition to systemic patriarchy. Tania Modleski’s Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women makes a persuasive case for the ways in which popular critics and scholars alike have reinforced the binary of masculine and feminine texts, aggrandizing the former and viciously devaluing the latter. She concludes that “given this pervasive scorn for all things feminine, it is hardly surprising that since the beginnings of the novel the heroine and the writer of feminine texts have been on the defensive, operating on the constant assumption that men are out to destroy them” (13). Thus, with ample justification, much of the early recuperative feminist scholarship on popular romance takes up the defensive positioning Modleski describes. While I do not believe that we need to do away entirely with tactics of defense, I would like to suggest that opening ourselves to critically queer perspectives can generate relevant and engaging new directions for

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8 I would like to avoid equating patriarchy with men in general. In Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, Bell Hooks explains how patriarchy needs to be viewed as a system of oppression and demonstrates that feminists need to include considerations of the ways in which, “like women, men have been socialized to passively accept sexist ideology. . . . Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it. This suffering should not be ignored (73). Hooks emphasizes that men who become aware of their indoctrination into systems of patriarchy can often act as powerful allies in feminist movement.
feminist study of romance. These directions might be unsettling for some, as queering romance destabilizes the coherency and uniformity of the genre and essentialist claims about it, but they are nonetheless vital to advancing romance scholarship in the twenty-first century.

Reflecting back on a historical level, however, it is certainly understandable why so many feminists have maintained a feminine classification for romance. As Barbara Fuchs notes in her critical idiom guidebook *Romance*, the genre has been associated with the feminine since as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in France when “romance” as literary category became increasingly allied with “a feminine and feminized urban aristocratic culture” in which “some of the most important figures in literary salons at the time, both as authors and as patrons, were women, notably Madame de Rambouillet and Madame de Scudery” (101-102). Feminist scholars writing about romance in the 1980s did not simply invent this signification, which had marked the literary genre for centuries, but rather attempted to subvert and resignify it in empowering ways.9 Adding to her historical literary genealogy of romance, Fuchs also explains that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the abandonment of the pastoral “in favor of what is known as heroic or sentimental romance” led to an increasing “emphasis on the extreme idealization of the heroine” (102). Whereas earlier medieval chivalric romances focused on the quest of a male hero, sentimental romances began to center around the trials and tribulations of female heroines. Jean Radford reiterates this point in “A Certain Latitude: Romance as Genre,” further adding that it is no coincidence that the critical devaluation of the genre began at roughly the same time that romance “moved from being about a male subject to being about a female one” (5). Given this long history of patriarchal devaluation, it is not surprising that early

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9 While Modleski and Radway both envisioned feminist potential in romance, they expressed cautious optimism with regard to the possible effects it might have on readers in terms of making them question and actively resist their positions of subordination under patriarchy.
feminist scholars of popular romance aimed to reject and subvert the negative associations that had been linked with this process of feminization. Discovering exciting possibilities in popular narratives driven by a lead female character, especially in regard to point-of-view and issues of reader identification, feminist scholars attempting to recuperate the genre found much in its feminine classification that could be resignified in potentially empowering ways.

The female-centered core of early Harlequins (as studied by Modleski) and long historicals (as studied by Radway) may have initially justified excluding men from consideration as readers and writers of romance because they were, on the surface at least, antithetical to the supposed raison d’être of this popular genre—namely, to convey female (read as heterosexual) experiences, desires, and fantasies. Both Modleski’s and Radway’s studies operated on the tacit assumption that female readers identified along gender lines when reading romances,10 thus the overwhelming narrative emphasis on the female protagonist’s point-of-view in these mass-marketed romances, which some readers claimed allowed them “to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her surprise and slowly awakening pleasure at being so closely watched by someone who finds her valuable and worthy of love” (Radway 67-68). In keeping with theories on processes of identification popular at the time, scholars assumed readers necessarily identified with characters along gender lines. In the 1970s, the majority of mass-market romances were told from the heroine’s point-of-view, or a third person perspective that gave greater access to the heroine than the hero (Modleski, Loving; Radway). In later years, however, romance readers played a large part in changing this standard in the industry as they articulated interest in male point of view as well. Sarah S.G. Frantz, in her

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10 Modleski does assert, however, that this process of identification is not as simple as some critics would like to argue. For Modleski, identification is very much bound up in what she sees as the contradictory impulses and pleasures of romance reading for women: “Since the reader knows the formula, she is superior in wisdom to the heroine and thus detached from her. The reader then achieves a very close emotional identification with the heroine partly because she is intellectually distanced from her and does not have to suffer the heroine’s confusion” (41).
article “‘Expressing' Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power,” notes that “inclusion of the hero’s perspective in the narrative is the biggest change that romance has undergone” since Modleski and Radway published their studies in the early 80s (18). A change that was the result of fan demand, the introduction of multiple points of view in romances contradicted the original assumptions of the romance industry itself, which often forced writers to stick to the heroine’s perspective because it was believed that female readers would only identify with the lead female character (Frantz 34).

Although more recent scholarship has successfully challenged the notion that identification always occurs along gender lines,\(^\text{11}\) it seems surprising that while newer notions of fluid and cross-gender modes of identification have become accepted concepts in media studies, much of romance scholarship continues to operate under the expectation that there is gender alignment not only on the part of the reader, but the author as well. Barbara Fuchs claims “the female heroine is of central importance, as is the authorial voice implied in the association’s assumption of a female writer. Men may well write romance novels pseudonymously, but they must be published under female names” (125).\(^\text{12}\) In other words, she seems to suggest that if men want to write romance (of the heterosexual variety at least) they must do so through a process of textual passing as female authors. Conversely, Radway’s study of the Smithton women takes this to a further extreme as the women interviewed claimed to actually be able to

\(^{11}\) In particular, Jackie Stacey’s “Desperately Seeking Difference” (1987) and Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender and the Modern Horror Film* (1993) played critical roles in expanding our understanding of how identification can not only oscillate but also work in oppositional and subversive ways.

\(^{12}\) In contrast, it seems that there appears to be little opposition toward female authors writing and selling male/male romance novels, a growing trend especially with independent romance and erotica publishers. Interestingly, many female authors of male/male romance use gender ambiguous pseudonyms, a practice that speaks more to authorial androgyny than an effort to “pass” as male writers. For instance, M.L. Pearson is a woman who writes gay historical romances under a gender ambiguous name. Her first novel, *The Price of Temptation*, was a 2005 Lambda Literary Award Finalist.
“tell the difference between romances written by women and those written by men” (Radway 73) even if pseudonyms were used because they felt “very few men are 'perceptive' or 'sensitive'” (73) enough to write good romances and that this invariably came across in the texts.  

Examining this discourse of authorial passing automatically raises the question—If men have to pass, via their texts, as women in order to write romances, what must they do if they want to read them? To many scholars, however, such a question is moot as they assume men simply do not read romance. A brief survey of the critical literature reveals how deeply entrenched this view has become. Take for instance Bridget Fowler’s *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century*, in which she goes so far as to argue that “Throughout its long history, the romance has both legitimated female subordination and spoken of the needs of women—hence its lack of appeal for men and, to a lesser extent for 'emancipated' women” (7). Fowler’s sweeping generalization makes an implicit connection between male readers and feminists that is deeply troubling not only for its gender essentialism, but also for its implication that ‘emancipated’ feminists are not women. I point out this example because it is characteristic of the kinds of blanket statements made about readers in studies of romance that often try to universalize about them as a cohesive and uniform whole. In her much more recent study *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis employs similar rhetoric when she stakes a gendered claim on the genre: “The heroine appeals largely to a female audience. The romance is the most female of popular genres. Nearly all of the writers and readers are women” (xii). Regis’s subsequent rationale for the genre’s purported lack of appeal to male readers is broadly speculative and essentialist as it presumes a particular kind of gender

13 This level of gender discernment on the part of readers is perhaps not as universal as Radway’s study implies given that a number of male authors writing under female pseudonyms have been incredibly successful in the mainstream. Leigh Greenwood is one of the better known examples, having not only been a successful author but also a former president of the Romance Writers of America.
and sexual coherency: “Men have traditionally controlled which books get reviewed, and the effort that they must make to read across the gender barrier is very great. Women read across this barrier much more readily, the practice having been acquired early on in their reading lives … Thus, romance novels resonate less readily with them [men]” (xii). Regis essentially repeats part of Modleski’s claim about the critical double standard in literary studies and applies it to what she perceives as the “gender barrier,” in this instance in favor of women, to reading romance. Again, however, the underlying definition of romance as a heteronormative feminine genre is the shaky foundation upon which Regis’s argument is built. The possibility that men can and do read romances never enters into consideration. Nowhere does Regis even entertain the notion that perhaps the marginalization of women and the barriers they have often encountered in the realm of literature might resonate with other individuals, such as gay men, who have experienced other forms of marginalization and oppression. Instead, Regis focuses on the gender barriers of patriarchal systems of oppression, but not on the related compulsory heterosexuality that order upholds—a tendency that still marks much of the current literature on romance as genre.

One point upon which critics do tend to agree is the central importance of love in romance narratives. However, views on how love is portrayed in the genre are more contentious. Jan Cohn’s *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women* acknowledges that romantic love was, at one time, more routinely associated with men but that this is no longer the case today: “Love was once suffered by *lovers*, by men entranced, enthralled, held in thrall by the eyes and mouth and hair of unobtainable mistresses. But men are now busy elsewhere, and they have left the field of love to women” (5). Cohn highlights the affective trope most central to romance—love—and designates it as a domain that has become
exclusive to women. Although Cohn glosses over why this change has occurred, what is far more troubling perhaps is the way Cohn’s choice of diction to describe love as ‘suffering’ and ‘enslavement’ seems to echo some of the early second wave criticisms of women’s relationship to the ideology of romance. Well before Modleski or Radway published their recuperative work on romance as genre in the 1980s, other second-wave feminists were assessing broader cultural conceptions of romance and romantic love, and reaching negative conclusions. In particular, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971) examined romantic love as an oppressive ideology geared toward the subordination of women for the benefit of men. In both cases, Firestone and Greer expressed fears about women buying into a culturally constructed fantasy that encouraged their real subjugation under patriarchy. Fundamental to these concerns was an assumption that women could be easily manipulated by this ideology. Similar sentiments were articulated in response to the growing appeal of mass-market romance novels, especially Harlequins. As a result, Ann Barr Snitow suggests that readers of romance were perceived as “passive repositories, empty vessels into which debilitating ideologies are poured” (Snitow 142) rather than critical readers of texts.

Later second- and third-wave feminists complicated this issue and belied certain cultural studies perspectives that deemed mass culture products like romance novels to be reinforcing the dominant status quo for passive consumers. Thus, as book historian Alison M. Scott points out in “Romance in the Stacks; or, Popular Romance Fiction Imperiled,” romances (in particular series romances) “may be, and have been, readily characterized as formulaic narratives of wish fulfillment and their readers viewed as passive consumers of the worst that popular culture can create for a mass audience” (216). Feminist scholars attempting to recuperate romance from these wholly negative characterizations have often argued, to varying degrees, that readers of
romance can in fact be active makers of meaning in the texts they consume. At the same time,
other scholars have tempered this libratory rhetoric with cautionary warnings against readily
assuming that all readers derive subversive meaning from popular culture texts, and have instead
suggested that while “the mass audience may be manipulated in some ways and may be
controlling the market in others it is also and always omnivorous, capable of digesting
contradictory cultural impulses and at the same time resisting suggestion altogether” (Snitow
143). Early recuperative efforts were particularly attuned to the fact that the inherent tensions
and paradoxes of romance production and consumption cannot be easily resolved. In this sense,
critics like Modleski, Radway, and Snitow persuasively highlight the often contradictory and
ambivalent nature of reading practices, which are multiple, varied, and inherently subjective—a
point which perhaps holds even more relevance today and lends strong support to considering
readers in the context of more nebulous and fluid publics rather than static and uniform
audiences.

The notion of the passive, and even mindless, romance consumer nonetheless persists in
the cultural mainstream even as changes in media production and consumption in the twenty-first
century render it an ever more obvious fallacy. As Henry Jenkins demonstrates in his most
recent book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, transformations in media
and technology are occurring in conjunction with and often as a result of changes in media
spectatorship and consumption. For Jenkins, the notion of “participatory culture” better reflects
the ways in which consumers currently engage with the media industry: “Rather than talking
about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as
participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully
understands” (3). As Jenkins makes clear, these changes need to be further investigated because
we do not yet know how extensive an impact they will have on future media. However, in the romance industry it is clear that consumers’ participatory interaction and exchange is affecting how publishers operate, forcing them to cater more directly to the evolving demands of romance-reading publics in ways they never did in the past. As diverse and often transgressive fantasies of romance readers are more openly expressed, especially in online surveys, forums, and blogs, new romance narratives emerge first from independent publishers then from the mainstream companies as they attempt to follow the ever more fluid ebb and flow of transitory trends and the increasing sway of niche markets that often provide more stable and reliable consumer bases in an unsteady commercial environment. As a result, the impact of changing media relations on the romance industry in the era of Web 2.0 seems to be altering a production system that was previously characterized “by a fundamental distance between the originators, producers, and consumers of the fantasies embodied in those romances” that caused many readers to feel their “particular tastes … [were] not adequately addressed by publishers” (Radway 49). With the proliferation of romance sub-genres, as well as the rapid growth in erotica and romantica\textsuperscript{14} texts that depict a wide array of sexualities and fantasies, almost any reader is likely to find narratives that appeal to her/his tastes. Granted, transgressive material is more readily available online than in retail bookstores, but since romance-reading publics in the twenty-first century are already fundamentally connected to and invested in electronic and digital modes of textual circulation this does not pose a significant barrier to those who might be searching for non-traditional texts.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} A relatively new sub-genre classification for texts that have romantic storylines but also contain explicit sex along the lines of that found in erotica, hence the combination of romance and erotica into “romantica.”

\textsuperscript{15} E-publishers in particular are far more willing to push the limits of cultural taboos and cater to niche markets by having a wide variety of specific category romances available to consumers including: gay, lesbian, bisexual, BDSM, interracial, polyamourous, etc.
I have already demonstrated some of the prevailing gender essentialisms at work in romance studies and the sexual assumptions that generally go hand-in-hand with these tendencies; now I would like to take a closer look at how scholars have defined romance in order to further emphasize the ways in which a presumed heterosexual matrix has been institutionalized and upheld. A quick review of the major studies on romance will reveal how entrenched the heterosexual view of romance has become. For instance, Janice Radway’s dated but incredibly influential *Reading the Romance* defines popular romance as a narrative with a “slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine” that leads to a “happy ending” (67). Deborah Chappel’s dissertation *American Romances: Narratives of Culture and Identity*, often cited in early studies, defines the romance as a novel in which “the central conflict is always about the love relationship between the hero and heroine and the hero and heroine always end up together” (7-8). More recently, Pamela Regis’ *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, defines romance as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (22) and emphasizes that “a marriage—promised or actually dramatized—ends every romance novel” (9). Each of these definitions maintains the notion of romance, via the use of gender specific terms like “hero” and “heroine” as well as implied narrative closure in marriage, as an exclusively heterosexual genre. If we are to accept such definitions, then LGBTQ romances cannot even be classed as part of the genre precisely because they oppose the heterosexual matrix maintained by so many scholars’ research. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why queer texts remain conspicuously absent from larger studies of the genre that ignore them entirely or cite them in a brief footnote.

16 I interrogate assumptions about medium and form in relation to romance in chapters Three and Five.

17 Although Regis almost certainly did not intend this statement to connote queer possibilities, as her more extensive definition of the genre continually reiterates gender difference as fundamental to the romantic couple, it nonetheless leaves itself open to potential queer readings or possibilities.
I point out these definitions not only to show how queer texts necessarily disrupt them, but to establish a compelling contrast with the most recent definition of romance promoted by the Romance Writers of America (RWA). Founded in 1980, the RWA is a non-profit genre writer’s association that has long set the standard for romance production in the United States. With over 9000 members (authors) and more than 150 chapters as of 2007, the RWA has a central presence and overwhelming impact on the industry as a whole. Despite its conservative leanings, the RWA actively chose to create a modified and gender-neutral definition of romance at the turn of the millennium to better signify the genre’s evolving nature. As noted in the epigraph to this chapter, the RWA claims that “two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.” By removing gender-specific pronouns, as well as marriage as the final objective of romance narratives, the RWA’s definition opens itself to queer possibilities even as many romance scholars’ definitions have not. Whatever the motives of the RWA might have been, their decision to define romance with an eye toward inclusion rather than exclusion suggests that the industry has its finger more firmly on the pulse of its constituents than perhaps scholars do.

From Queer Pulps to Online Counterpublics: The Politics and Publication of Gay Romance

Started as an independent publishing enterprise, Romantics novels began appearing on the North American market in 2003 with the release of Razor Burn. A collaborative venture by real-life partners Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier (Scott & Scott), Romantics novels set out to

18 A detailed discussion of how the RWA came to reach this new definition can be found on romance author and RWA member Jennifer Crusie’s website at: <http://www.jennycrusie.com/essays/definingromancegenre.php>

19 I admit that one of the key motivations behind these changes is no doubt financial on the part of the RWA and affiliated publishers whose first priority is making a profit. However, the fact that the RWA, an overwhelmingly conservative organization, is becoming attentive to what changing romance reading publics want suggests a degree of adaptability that is promising for the future of queer romance in the mainstream.
celebrate gay romance and provide gay men with narratives about successful love and desire.
The promotional blurb that appears at the beginning of each Romantics novel illustrates this point: “Introducing a line of romance novels written just for gay men. It’s all the steamy passion, crazy excitement and gay drama you’d expect when two men fall for each other—maybe even more. And they’re all written with love by Scott & Scott.” Drawing from their own experiences, and indeed their own real-life romance, Scott & Scott openly stake a claim for gay men’s involvement in the genre, thus challenging the gendered classification scholars have continually ascribed to it.

As original as they may seem given the relative paucity of commercially available non-heterosexual romances, Romantics novels are certainly not the first gay romances to be published in the United States. Much like contemporary lesbian romance novels and comics, which I will discuss in the next chapter, gay romances are indebted to earlier mass-market pulp novels of the 1950s and 60s. In Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback, Susan Styker makes a crucial point, however, when she explains that lesbian pulps had a wider degree of circulation and social acceptability than their more marginal gay counterparts:

What is largely missing from the gay paperback genre is precisely what created and sustained the lesbian genre—a vast middle ground of mass-market books that portrayed issues of sexual diversity in a manner that could attract sexual minority audiences without alienating members of the cultural majority. Lesbian paperbacks flourished in part because they also appealed to men. Women in fiction, even lesbians, remain fantasy objects for heterosexual men’s voyeuristic pleasures. The same is not true for gay men in literature, and the same mass market for gay-themed paperbacks never materialized . . . until legal standards of obscenity changed in the mid-1960s . . . [and] gay paperbacks truly beg[an] to flourish. (97-98)

Pulps dealing with male homosexuality were unable to achieve the same level of cross-over readership as lesbian-themed pulps that could be more easily commercialized to appeal to heterosexist male readers. As Joke Hermes explains in “Sexuality in Lesbian Romance Fiction,” “the 1950s and 1960s lesbian romances were situated in the realm of pornography: forbidden,
unnatural and illegitimate lovers were all the more titillating to their predominantly male readers” (54). Consequently, many of these narratives were not aimed at lesbian liberation but rather deliberate exploitation. Publishers aided these efforts by imposing certain restrictions on authors to ensure that their novels met the criteria of providing titillating fantasies of illicit love between women while ultimately upholding the status quo by ensuring that “the lesbians in many of these novels hate themselves, or think they should . . . [and] often end up dead, drunk, or in psychiatric wards” (Hermes 51). In this respect, lesbian pulps that conformed to these parameters embodied a literary form of “sexploitation” targeted toward the presumed predilections of a heterosexist male public. Despite the troubling politics some of these pulps conveyed, many lesbian readers still found affirmation in them despite often having to read between the lines and make meaning for themselves. Thus, as Stephanie Foote explains in “Deviant Classics: Pulps and the Making of Lesbian Print Culture,” “Although pulp novels about lesbians were sometimes written by men and marketed to them as well, they were discovered by lesbians, and they became some of the earliest mass-market texts in which lesbians could see representations of themselves” (178).

While lesbian pulps achieved wider production and circulation because publishers believed they could appeal to a larger heterosexual male public, gay pulps conversely were not as readily exploitable to a broader public in the past. After the 1960s, the number of gay pulps that presented romantic narratives declined, possibly as a result of changing obscenity laws which Stryker emphasizes allowed for more explicit sexual content thus spurring the production of gay erotica and pornography instead. While I do not want to characterize this shift as a negative one, I do want to draw attention to the paucity of gay romance novels prior to the appearance of
Romantics novels on the publishing scene. Distinguishing between gay erotica and romance is important at this juncture, particularly since Romantics authors Pomfret and Whittier view the two categories as connected but distinct. In a Publisher’s Weekly interview they explain that “in the past, we've written a fair amount of short erotica, and we definitely include some graphic sex scenes in the novels,” but Pomfret and Whittier emphasize that ultimately the novels are about “celebrating gay relationships” (Dahlin). With comparatively few antecedents, Romantics novels stand out as significant contributions to gay print culture, especially as artifacts in gay romance genre fiction.

Early gay pulps served several critical queer functions that I would argue Romantics novels continue to uphold today. As Michael Bronksi explains in the introduction to his book Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps, one of the fundamental merits of these texts is pedagogical. Firstly, he argues that these texts “are records—albeit fictional and reflecting and refracting the tenor and biases of their times—of how gay men lived, desired, loved, and survived” (1). Consequently, they are important cultural artifacts for both scholars and queer readers that provide insight into the tumultuous climate of pre-Stonewall America for gay men. Equally important for us to consider, as Bronski reveals, is how “these books were the maps and the signposts, the etiquette manuals and the foreign-phrase books, for gay men entering the half-hidden world of homosexuality” at the time (9). Indeed, as Bronski adds, “the importance of these novels as educational, self-help, and how-to manuals cannot be underestimated. No one is brought up to be gay, hardly anyone (even now) comes from a 'gay family’” (9). Despite their datedness, these texts still serve as significant cultural objects that act

20 This is not to say that there were no gay romances published, but they certainly did not proliferate in the way that lesbian romance novels did, especially during the 1990s under the direction of Naiad Press. I am also limiting my scope for what constitutes gay romance, for the purposes of this chapter, to texts that focus primarily on the successful development and resolution of a romantic relationship between men as that is the general structure of Romantics novels. In this sense, I construe gay romance as genre fiction and thus distinct from popular fiction.
as what Sedgwick would describe as “prime resource[s] for survival” (“Queer and Now” 3) for both new and old generations of queer readers seeking representations of their lived experiences as well as their fantasies and desires. *Romantics* novels achieve similar pedagogical effects while providing affirming visions of gay life and love in the twenty-first century.

*Romantics* novels straddle both commercial and independent online publishing realms, revealing the fluctuating liminal status of gay romance at present. Like a growing number of non-traditional romances, *Romantics* have relied heavily on Internet marketing and circulation in order to make their texts available to consumers. Most of the novels were originally published independently by Pomfret and Whittier using BookSurge, now a brand of On-Demand Publishing LLC, a subsidiary of Amazon.com® Inc. Thus, the majority of book sales for *Romantics* occur via online purchasing rather than through brick-and-mortar bookstore sales. Pomfret and Whittier understand the importance of the Internet for advertising purposes as well as enabling fan discourse and participation. At the beginning of each *Romantics* novel, directly after their promotional blurb, Scott&Scott include the URL for their website accompanied by the tagline “Log on and fall in love with Romantics.” This invitation encourages readers to become more interactively engaged with *Romantics* novels by visiting the website, which offers consumers a degree of voyeuristic access to the real-life romance of the authors. Upon entering the site, readers will soon discover in addition to promotional and sales information a slew of pictures featuring Pomfret and Whittier in a variety of intimate but not explicit embraces. The site also hosts a section entitled “Our Story” that explains how the couple met and fell in love.


22 Although Amazon.com® is the most popular website where consumers may purchase *Romantics* novels, Pomfret and Whittier also sell their books through the online retailer Lamba Rising®.

23 The most risqué picture on the site depicts the two men in bed together, embracing and playfully smiling at one another. Their upper torsos are bare, hinting that they are naked underneath the covers.
Thus, the site juxtaposes the real-life romance of the *Romantics* authors with the fictional narratives they write and sell to consumers suggesting that gay romance can and does exist as both reality and fantasy.

Although initially aimed at a niche market of gay male readers, *Romantics* novels unexpectedly found the kind of “middle ground” Stryker claims earlier gay pulps lacked by appealing not only to their intended audience but simultaneously gaining a substantial cross-over readership with female consumers who claim interest in heterosexual and male/male romances.24 Consequently, *Romantics* authors Pomfret and Whittier claim that based on email correspondence they estimate thirty percent of their clientele are heterosexual women.25 It is very likely that a significant percentage of these women (whose sexual orientations may be more diverse than Pomfret and Whittier presume) learned about *Romantics* novels through online counterpublic discourse, especially that revolving around slash fan fiction.26 Although many scholars have sought to characterize slash fans as primarily heterosexual women (Penley *NASA/Trek*; Bacon-Smith; Kustritz), I would argue that online discourse indicates such claims about the gender and sexual uniformity of participants in slash fandom are no longer sustainable, if they were ever accurate to begin with. From comments posted in online forums, slash fiction repositories, and fan-created websites, it is clear that, at least in the realm of cyberspace, participants often reject specific gender and sexual identity labels or claim ones not discussed in

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24 I invoke this term, which is used regularly in online discourse, to reflect cross-over between slash and gay narratives. Some readers and authors of both types of texts articulate a stronger queer signification to romances between men that eschew specific sexual labels. This appropriation has also been adopted by many e-publishers, such as Ellora’s Cave, that sometimes refer to their gay texts as (m/m), their lesbian texts as (f/f), and their ménage texts as (m/m/f or f/f/m).


26 Slash fiction refers to narratives written by fans that generally explore romantic and sometimes erotic relationships between male characters in popular media texts (i.e., *Star Trek* pairings of Kirk/Spock). The character of the slash mark itself is a designation of homoerotic pairings. There is also a sub-genre of slash referred to as femslash, which focuses on female/female pairings.
much of the discourse on slash fandom. Since the advent of the Internet, slash narratives have become increasingly digitized as the Web has become the primary place for circulating these texts; thus, most readers of slash fiction would already be familiar with online avenues for obtaining male/male romances and would be very likely to stumble across the Romantics website in the course of their participatory practices. Similarly, some of these readers would no doubt be familiar with a growing number of romance and erotica e-publishers that produce heterosexual and LGBT texts geared toward online readers and would already be conversant with modes of accessing independent and digital publications of this nature.

Romantics novels originated as independent publications, but in 2005 Warner Books published Pomfret and Whittier’s fifth novel Hot Sauce, which brought their work to wider public attention and enabled broader commercial circulation. Considering the past commercial exploitation of lesbian pulps, one might question what is at stake in the mass-market publication of a Romantics novel. Indeed, it is worth heeding Rosemary Hennessy’s cautionary warnings in Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism that “the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification” (111) and that LGBTQ visibility is often “aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but, as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line” (112). Indeed, the objectives behind capitalist commodification of LGBTQ print and visual media should not be ignored, however, in the case of Romantics I would argue that the texts retain an important degree of autonomy by virtue of

27 Of particular interest to me, apart from significant LGBTQ identification, is the fact that a notable number of slash fans claim to be asexual, as frequent comments and discussion threads on the AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) online forum attest.

28 To demonstrate this fact, the Romantics website is the first hit to appear under a Google search for “gay romance”.

29 For instance, Torquere Press, Samhain, Ellora’s Cave, Liquid Silver, Amber Quill, and Loose ID all publish male/male romances, most of which are written by women. Nonetheless, just as Romantics novels have gained cross-over readership with women, online forum postings and independent blogs suggest that many of these male/male romances written by women have a discernable cross-over readership with gay men as well.
their primary positioning within online counterpublics. Online discourse about and circulation of their texts is still the fundamental foundation for Romantics’ expanding base of readers who are often already engaged in other romance-reading publics and LGBTQ counterpublics. Since their first independent release in 2003, the Romantics franchise has paved the way for a growing body of online commercially available gay romances. Many of these texts remain marginal to the mass-market publishing industry but are very prominent among e-publishers that attract a diverse array of readers who are digitally savvy participants in media convergence. Needless to say, the Internet will undoubtedly continue to play a critical role in facilitating the circulation and consumption of LGBTQ romances, especially those that are independently or electronically published, while bringing them into ever closer contact with traditional heterosexual romances and their readers.

Gay Romance and Definitional Arguments: Queering the Harlequin Model in Romantics

The discursive appropriation of the “Harlequin” label to describe Romantics novels is part serious, part campy humor. Authors Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier, who cite their own real-life romance as inspiration for the franchise, admit that they read and assessed a large number of Harlequins before setting out to write their first gay romance novel (Boston Globe). At first glance, the Harlequin label, with its obvious connotations of formulaic narratives and heterosexual female-centered desires and fantasies, might seem to contradict the very concept of gay romance. However, it is precisely the ways in which Romantics novels queer the notion of a Harlequin novel—frequently held up by popular critics and scholars alike as the emblematic

30 Electronic publication options have made it far easier for authors to publish work sometimes rejected by mainstream publishing companies at very little cost to themselves. The texts are usually made available in digital formats (PDF, Word, RTF, etc.) for a downloading fee, and some e-publisher offer print-on-demand options for consumers who want a bound print version.

31 Already a growing array of popular romance-related web sites and blogs, like Smart Bitches who Love Trashy Books and Romancing the Blog, are beginning to review LGBTQ romances and interview their authors.
representation of genre romance in general—which begin to destabilize in radical ways how romance is currently defined.

In this section, I organize my analysis of several *Romantics* novels around the definitional criteria put forth by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. I have chosen to use these criteria as a framework for my discussion for several reasons. First, Regis’s book demonstrates obvious resistance to queer texts and concepts in its stringent mooring in heterosexual and “feminine” classifications of the genre and its readers. In Regis’s formula, LGBTQ narratives and readers are entirely absent from the romance universe. By consistently reiterating gender difference as essential to notions of love and coupling in romance novels, Regis performs an overt erasure of possibilities of sexual difference in her analysis. Secondly, as one of the most recent book-length studies on the romance genre with a specifically definitional bent, Regis’s text is all the more worrying for the ways in which it essentializes romance even more stringently than earlier work on the genre. My analysis aims to demonstrate how *Romantics* novels ironically employ, often via a fine line between seriousness and camp, what Regis describes as the “eight essential elements” of a romance novel, thus troubling the stability of her definition in critically queer ways. While other texts examined in *Radicalizing Romance* do not support Regis’s criteria and instead speak to alternative understandings of what constitutes romance, *Romantics* novels most closely mirror the criteria Regis delineates for the genre making them particularly appropriate for comparison. In the remainder of this chapter, I use the “eight essential elements” as laid out by Regis to show how the structure and content of *Romantics* novels critically question the presumed heterosexual foundation of definitions of romance as inherent. Therefore, while I identify key similarities in *Romantics* novels and Regis’s definitional criteria, I do this primarily to challenge the homophobic and essentialist
sentiments underlying her taxonomy. At the same time, my analysis will suggest that queerness is already present in heterosexual romances, most notably at the level of affect, which I define as a form of “queer emotionality” particular to the genre. This chapter, and Radicalizing Romance as a whole, questions closed-off and exclusionary definitions of romance and instead aims to show that the genre is inherently protean in nature, constantly shifting and adapting with the times to maintain its appeal to readers in new eras. Consequently, this project perceives of romance in a manner that is more closely aligned with the RWA’s current definition, which remains open-ended and receptive to different genders, sexualities, and textual forms.

**Element One: Society Defined**

*Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. The society is in some way flawed: it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and the hero.*

(Regis 31)

Regis’s explanation of how society is defined in romance novels immediately lends itself to a queer reading. In particular, the notion of a “flawed” society that “oppresses” two lovers will no doubt ring familiar to anyone who has felt the brunt of homophobia in heterosexist culture. Characters in a typical Romantics novel encounter varying degrees of disapprobation and oppression from the social worlds in which they live and work; at times, this manifests as a struggle against the heteronormative codes and expectations of mainstream society, while at other moments it becomes more particular to the geographical and cultural dimensions of the communities they inhabit. Consequently, Romantics novels frequently oscillate between the advantages and drawbacks of urban living versus those of more rural or suburban environments as they interrogate what it means for gay men to live and love in different contexts.

In the novel Spare Parts, this dichotomy becomes a pivotal issue for the main protagonists Dan and Trent. Dan, as the back cover description notes, is “a mechanic with a chain of
successful garages and a lonely life.” He runs these garages in the city during the day and returns every night to his quiet home in the heteronormative suburbs where his sexuality has become the subject of gossip and disbelief among his neighbors. Dan has difficulty reconciling what he likes about his hometown with the problems he experiences there:

There was nothing wrong with the suburbs, Dan reminded himself. It’s not so bad, really. Not even the commute. Usually, returning home was an escape for Dan, a journey of freedom away from his hectic business of six bustling garages scattered throughout the large city. But on nights like this, it didn’t seem worth the long drive north to return to the lies and accusations that awaited him in the little bedroom community of Glen Mills. (1)

Dan tries to convince himself that the benefits of having a comfortable home of his own away from the hustle and bustle of the city can outweigh the loneliness and solitude he experiences there. From the beginning of the narrative, Dan struggles to resolve the growing tension between his work and home lives. He is aware of a distinct imbalance between the two, and as a result, in himself:

The real truth about his gayness was something Dan had grown comfortable with over the years. He just didn’t date. His business and his home and his entire life seemed out of sync with urban gay living. He was not the mechanic in the porn video. After three decades of denial, just being honest was enough. (7)

Trying to balance his professional and personal lives, Dan has ultimately privileged the former and sacrificed the latter believing that coming to terms with his sexual identity is enough to bring him happiness even though he subconsciously desires companionship.

Much of Dan’s conflict throughout the novel stems from his blue-collar upbringing, his beliefs, and his identity as a gay man who came out of the closet late in life and does not feel as though he is a part of urban queer culture. This is highlighted for him on a daily basis because although he works in the city he does not feel an affinity with urban lifestyle and instead finds comfort in the home he has built in Glen Mills where he grew up. However, that hometown is also a very straight blue-collar community that cannot understand how a “man’s man” like Dan
could be gay: “Nobody believed it. Well-to-do women from downtown winked and patted his shoulders in a way that wasn’t flirting. They readjusted their hairdos and said, 'How does a catch like you stay single for so long,' or ‘What you need, darling, is a relationship to screw up this perfect life you have’” (8). Thus, despite coming out of the closet after years of denial, Dan still passes as a straight man within the social environment of his home community and as a result often feels he cannot sustain a romantic relationship there with another man. Nonetheless, Dan does not want to leave the place he identifies with as home. This seems to reflect what Judith Halberstam describes in her book In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives when she claims “the condition of ’staying put’” in certain environments is often a part of “the production of complex queer subjectivities” that are not uniform or necessarily urban (27). She explains that as a result, “some queers need to leave home in order to become queer, and others need to stay close to home in order to preserve their difference” (27). For Dan, preserving his difference proves all the more difficult because it is something that he himself was unable to acknowledge for many years, but it is a struggle that he is deeply invested in. Ultimately, however, staying in Glen Mills is not only about personal comfort and familiarity associated with notions of “home,” it is also a testament to Dan’s desire to stop running from his identity and his past.

In direct contrast to Dan, Trent the struggling photographer is a young gay man who has felt the harsher ostracizing attitudes of Glen Mills precisely because he cannot, nor does he wish to attempt to, pass as heterosexual. In particular, Trent is haunted by a traumatic but formative adolescent experience of being called a “stupid fucking fairy” by a slightly older male neighbor (who later turns out to have been Dan during his closeted years—a point to which I will return in a later section); this incident marks the beginning of the homophobic treatment he receives as he
transitions into his teenage years. However, he also recalls this event as a crucial turning point in coming to understand his identity:

It was the first time Trent remembered anyone using homosexuality as a curse. It was the first time someone had ever used it against him . . . Trent wondered if it hurt him more than anyone else because it was true. Honestly, before that day, he had never given his sexual orientation much thought. It was there, but it hadn’t become an issue yet. He ignored it like a birthmark no one ever saw. In the years that followed, Trent heard many choice words about queers and fags and fairies. Sometimes they were directed at him out of hate or humor. . . . Later, he had even heard those same slurs used in friendship—like codenames passed back and forth between members in secret clubs. However, that secrecy was displayed under disco balls; it was announced over loudspeakers with a thumping beat. The words couldn’t hurt if you claimed them for yourself. They were just names, just truth. They weren’t sticks and stones. (15)

Trent, via this experience, learns the value and importance of what Halberstam describes as “queer uses of time and space” which “develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” and “according to other logics of location, movement, and identification” (1). Hence, Trent realizes how the contexts of time and place can go so far as to resignify terms of hatred, turning them into declarations of empowerment. At the same time, for him, leaving Glen Mills and moving to the city is an act of resistance to the heteronormative ideology of the suburbs. In this new urban environment, Trent is able to find a new form of camaraderie and kinship with other gay men who accept and support him in ways the social community of Glen Mills did not.

The rural/urban dichotomy becomes a bigger point of contestation in *Nick of Time*, in which the two main characters embody these two places in polar opposition to one another. Nick has willingly chosen to settle in rural Holmstead County where he works as a stone-layer. Brent is a local boy who, in contrast, escaped to the city and now enjoys gay urban lifestyle to its fullest. Indeed, Brent considers his hometown to be an alienating and fundamentally unlivable place: “To go back permanently to Holmstead County—that would be the death of him. That would signify that Brent had surrendered all he had ever dreamed about since he was a little boy
first beginning to suspect that he was different than all the rest” (4). While Brent associates his
hometown with oppressive heteronormativity and the city with gay liberation, Nick alternatively
views urban society as fickle, untrustworthy, and fake:

Several times that day, the tinny thumping of cars from the city had disturbed Nick. They
drove too fast with the stereo too high. They were outsiders. Unimportant. Transient.
Gone in no time. . . . there was something plastic, something synthetic about these people
from away. They had too much of everything and got bored of it too quickly, and turned
to something new without really having understood or appreciated the old. (12)

For Nick, the transience of urban living is what makes it so undesirable. The tone of his thoughts
in this passage indicates that he regards urbanites as self-absorbed and superficial. For him, they
are “synthetic” and lacking substance, ultimately displaying the worst side of commodity
fetishism in their willingness to treat people and places like objects easily discarded after they
lose their initial luster. In comparison, Nick is attracted to the prospect of building roots in
Holmstead County, where he feels he can create a stronger sense of permanence in a community
of individuals who share more of his values.

The protagonists in both Spare Parts and Nick of Time experience different social forces
that alienate and oppress them, while simultaneously examining the relevance of place and time
in the lives of gay men. More importantly, the narratives never definitively settle on whether
urban or rural/suburban society is more desirable. Instead, the characters typically reach
compromises that allow their lives to mutually extend to both environments in ways that are
meaningful to them. As a result, Romantics novels resist developing a monolithic and
homogeneous notion of where and how gay identity and gay romance exist. Instead, they
suggest that although some places are more welcoming of difference than others, gay men can
still find satisfying ways to live and love in a variety of cultural and geographic contexts. At the
end of each Romantics narrative the gay couple survive, find happiness, and “symbolically
remake” (Regis 31) to a limited extent the society that has oppressed them. While these
characters may not be able to change the views of world at large, highlighting the fact that intolerance and homophobia are not easily eradicated, they are able to gain acceptance and support from those individuals and communities that mean the most to them in these novels—namely, their friends, family, and colleagues.

**Element Two: The Meeting**

_Usually near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes presented in flashback, the heroine and hero meet for the first time. Some hint of conflict to come is often introduced._

(Regis 31-32)

In *Razor Burn* and *Nick of Time*, the protagonists meet at the beginning of the narrative and in both cases the conflict introduced revolves around one of them being “in the closet.” Nonetheless, each novel emphasizes that in their first meeting, the main characters are attracted to each other and the reader knows that it is only a matter of time before the closeted man will have to come to terms with his sexuality after meeting his love interest. By often introducing an element of the humorous in these meeting scenarios, *Romantics* novels play on the expectations of what Modleski has described as the “informed reader” who knows in advance that which is not obvious to the characters, especially in the realm of sexual attraction and desire. Although Modleski deploys this concept in reference to the female reader who is able to decipher such truths about the “heroine” in heterosexual romances, this concept of the “informed reader” can be appropriated to similar ends in queer narrative contexts. Readers of *Romantics* novels already have expectations about the texts by virtue of the fact that they are labeled as gay romances, and consequently know that a closeted character claiming heterosexuality doth protest too much in the face of his obvious homosexual desires. They recognize that it is only a matter of time before this subterfuge will fail, and I would argue that this is one of the inherent pleasures of this and other LGBTQ romances for queer readers precisely because this moment of failure signifies
a collapse of compulsory heterosexuality. I will return to this topic later when I discuss the relevance of “the declaration” and its relationship to rhetoric of coming out.

In *Razor Burn*, the narrative begins when Blayne goes for coffee in a gay section of the city and is hit on by Ben. Feeling uneasy about the situation and his motivation for being there, Blayne tries to turn Ben down by asserting his self-deceptive heterosexual status:

“I’m straight.” Blayne just came out and said it.

Ben didn’t even blink.

“That’s an odd name for this part of town,” Ben had his sights set, and he wasn’t about to be distracted by such a pathetic excuse.

Blayne looked around at the few lone men scattered amongst the tables and couches. He knew what part of town he was in. He knew what went on in places like this on slow afternoons. But couldn’t a heterosexual man relax with [sic] cup of coffee if he wanted one? He looked down at his untouched cup and forced himself to take a sip.

This wasn’t a gay bar, for crying out loud. It wasn’t even sleazy. It was quaint and comfortable, and the coffee wasn’t half bad. After all, most things were nice in the gay section of the city.

“My name is Blayne,” he said. He kept an edge of annoyance in his voice to show he wasn’t impressed by Ben’s joke or his company.

“And you’re straight with a name like Blayne?” Ben scoffed. (*Razor Burn* 2)

As this passage from *Razor Burn* demonstrates, the closeted Blayne tries to make several weak justifications for his propensity to visit the gay section of the city, where he meets Ben, which the informed reader immediately knows are a flimsy pretense for his true desires. The self-reflexive humor of the novel is further revealed when Ben calls Blayne out on his denial and makes a joke about his name.32 Shortly after this introductory meeting, the two men end up having a passionate fling that quickly develops into a turbulent love affair. Of course, Blayne’s gay identity is not something he is able to acknowledge or accept right away and this remains the

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32 This may also reflect a camp awareness of the often exaggerated or flamboyant names used for heterosexual romance heroes and heroines.
primary source of conflict in the narrative, introducing several different barriers which the lovers must overcome—a subject I shall discuss in more detail in the next section.

In *Nick of Time*, the first meeting between Nick and Brent establishes a conflict based on their perceived differences in values:

“Physical attraction is meaningless,” Nick lectured. “I’m looking for something more.”

His weird, philosophical tone had more place in a convent than at a bar.

“I’ll give you something, more, trust me. I’ve never had any complaints in that department,” Brent boasted.

Nick sniffed and turned his body away from Brent.

A sign of denial? Of rejection? Or did he want Brent to get a better view of his fine, muscled ass?

Brent could not decide.

But what he did know was that all the electricity that had passed between them was now charging up his relentless inner bitch. It was not simply the pique of rejection. There was some other pompous, stubborn quality that made Brent want to plague him relentlessly. Get his goat. Raise his ire.

He was beginning to hate this guy. (*Nick of Time* 21)

Again, the informed reader realizes Brent’s feelings toward Ben are not in fact hate, as he suggests, but rather a burgeoning desire that will eventually become a romantic love. Indeed, the first meeting between characters is marked by conflict but also by attraction. Nick is a gay man posing as straight in order to marry an Irish widow who needs a green card in order to remain in the United States. Nick has convinced himself that he will find happiness in a platonic marriage since the widow Una already has children and accepts his sexuality. With her and the children, he believes he can establish roots in Holmstead County. However, his sudden attraction to Brent in their first meeting produces the central conflict in the story as Nick is forced to re-examine what he wants in life and what will bring him the greatest happiness.
Other Romantics novels employ a variety of strategies for representing the first meeting between lead characters. For instance, in *Hot Sauce*, the primary couple, Brad and Troy, are already together at the start of the novel and their first meeting is told in flashback midway through the narrative. In this flashback sequence, the novel emphasizes the mutual attraction between the characters as well as the conflicts that still linger in the present moment—namely, Troy’s trauma over the death of his first true love and the economic disparity in their social backgrounds. *Spare Parts*, on the other hand, appropriates a trope often used in popular romance, the case of mistaken identity, in its gay rewriting of the *Pretty Woman* tale. Successful mechanic and garage owner Dan meets the struggling photographer Trent by the riverfront one night, a place marked as a site of gay male prostitution in the novel, and immediately believes he is a prostitute. This generates the fundamental conflict, or barrier, that drives the rest of the story.

**Element Three: The Barrier**

A series of scenes often scattered through the novel establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. The romance novels’ conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and the hero. The elements of the barrier can be external, a circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or a hero’s mind, or internal, a circumstance that comes from within either or both. . . . The barrier drives the romance novel. It is spread throughout most instances of this literary type, and it encompasses a wide variety of issues. Through this element a writer can examine any situation within the heroine’s mind or in the world itself. Literally any psychological vice, virtue, or problem, any circumstance of life, whether economic, geographical, or familial can be made a part of the barrier and investigated at whatever length the writer sees fit. At stake in the romance novel, then, is more than the marriage. (Regis 32)

Although Regis focuses a large portion of her study around the significance of the romance’s resolution in marriage, at this moment in her analysis the conflict associated with “the barrier” speaks to broader issues of external and internal oppression not simply the specific circumstances prohibiting two lovers from marrying. Her description of this element opens itself to queer interpretation that allows one to view “the barrier” as something that thwarts the union
of two lovers in a romance—a union that is not necessarily predicated on marriage. If we read Regis’s definition through a queer lens it becomes clear that Romantics novels include this “essential element” as well. Indeed, if the main characters were able to achieve a harmonious union and live happily ever after from the beginning there would be little point to the story. Conflict is a standard feature in almost any literary genre precisely because it leads to action. Romantics novels are well aware of common barriers that appear in genre romance fiction (economic disparity, emotional traumas, family or social obligations, misunderstandings, other romantic contenders, etc.) and play up, at times with melodramatic levels of absurdity and camp, the hyperbolic tradition behind many of these barriers. For instance, in Razor Burn the impediments toward Ben and Blayne’s romantic union become increasingly fantastical: first, there is the fact that Blayne is married (albeit in a platonic relationship for business purposes) and is struggling with his homosexual desires and what this means about his identity; at the same time, Ben is suffering from his own identity issues, not in terms of his sexuality but rather his past because he is coping with amnesia caused by a car accident ten years ago. As the narrative progresses, however, the reader discovers that Ben is not the only one suffering from amnesia—so is Blayne! In ever more soap-operatic plot twists, the reader learns that Blayne and Ben were in fact lovers during college, but Blayne’s father disapproved of the relationship and orchestrated an accident to separate them. Thereafter, he, with the aid of a shady psychologist, fabricated a fake trauma for Blayne—and using hypnotherapy, they make him believe that he was raped by a man in order to try and explain away his same-sex fantasies and forcefully “turn him straight.”

In Spare Parts the initial barrier between the two main characters stems from a misunderstanding as well as a secret past. Dan mistakes the younger Trent for a prostitute. This error in perception is perpetuated partly because Trent does not initially try to correct the
misunderstanding and instead decides to play along because he believes it is the only way to hold Dan’s interest. While Trent is keeping this particular secret, Dan is hiding something as well—namely, the fact that he was Trent’s neighbor many years ago, when he was still in the closet, and was actually the one responsible for cruelly antagonizing Trent about his sexuality. Fearful that they will lose one another if they reveal their secrets, both men struggle to overcome this barrier as their love for one another begins to burgeon. Similarly, in *Nick of Time* the main characters have to resolve the two major barriers to their union. First, there is the impending platonic marriage of convenience that Nick is planning to enter into. Burned by a bad relationship with a man in the past, he has decided to give up romance and marry a widowed Irish woman in need of a greencard. Of course, in order to fool the federal government, Nick must masquerade as a straight man; a task that proves increasingly difficult once Brent appears on the scene and arouses desires Nick has tried to forget. At the same time, Brent faces the painful memory of his former infatuation with a straight friend that ultimately led to unhappiness and heartbreak. He is worried about repeating the same mistake with a “closeted” man like Nick as he does not want to become the victim of unrequited love for a man who pretends to be something he is not.

The novel *Hot Sauce* introduces a variety of different impediments to celebrity chef Brad and hip fashion designer Troy’s romantic union. In part, this is due to the fact that they are already a couple at the beginning of the story but their relationship is still missing equal reciprocation of love. Several factors make it difficult for the two lovers to openly share their feelings: first, there is the specter of Troy’s former love Kurt Tamweiler, who was tragically killed in a polo accident; then there is the manipulative and conniving Caroline, Troy’s mother, who does not think Brad is good enough for her son; finally, there are the evil machinations of
the narcissistic “peroxide pretty boy” Aria Shakespeare who is willing to go to great lengths to break up Brad and Troy. As the barriers build, it appears increasingly impossible for the couple to achieve true happiness—a concept to which I shall return when I discuss Regis’s sixth element, “ritual death.”

The barriers in *Romentics* novels are often very similar to those that Regis claims manifest in heterosexual romance novels. However, the key distinction is that *Romentics* novels tend to use these barriers to explore issues pertaining more particularly to gay men. At the end of her description of “the barrier” as one of the eight essential elements in romance, Regis claims: “Removal of the barrier usually involves the heroine’s freedom from societal, civic, or even religious strictures that prevented the union between her and the hero. This release is an important source of the happiness in the romance novel’s happy ending. The barrier’s fall is a liberation for the heroine” (33). *Romentics* novels do not tend to situate this liberation in one specific character, but rather extend it to both. In other words, barriers impede each main character and it is only when they each manage to free themselves or each other from what has been preventing their union that they are able to achieve the happiness they desire. In this respect, *Romentics* novels deviate from Regis’s classification precisely because they attempt to demonstrate shared forms of oppression and emphasize the need for characters to work together in order to overcome the barriers they face. *Romentics* novels do not try to reimagine a hero/heroine opposition within a gay context, nor do they try to claim a universal gender identity for gay men. Instead, by representing a variety of gay relationship possibilities, they work toward queering the concept of the couple in romance narratives.

33 I do acknowledge, however, that *Romentics* novels presume a certain level of gender coherency in the sense that they locate gay identity in characters whose biological sex is male. Thus, although the novels often introduce a range of (somewhat stereotypical) gay side characters (leather daddies, queens, fairies, bears, etc.) there is never any
Element Four: The Attraction

A scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry. The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier. Attraction can be based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society’s expectations, and economic issues. In modern works, these separate motives get lumped together under the rubric of “love.” (Regis 33)

In Romantics novels, attraction typically begins as physical desire before evolving into a more complex romantic love; marriage, however, is generally not the end objective. The initial attraction between characters is established early in the narrative, and places a strong emphasis on mutual appreciation of the male body. Although Romantics novels introduce varied notions of attractive men, they typically privilege male characters with physically fit bodies. For instance, in Nick of Time when Brent goes home to attend his sister’s wedding he is completely surprised to find himself attracted to local man Nick:

The last place Brent Sawyer expected to see beautiful shirtless boys was near his mother’s house. Brent now lived down in New York—and you did not see the City’s clubs, coffee houses, book stores, chic little storefronts crammed with modern design in rural Holmstead County where Brent grew up. You certainly did not see hot trashy Gucci boys and Banana Republicans. And you certainly did never saw [sic] a man like that. . . . The guy was a massive stud. A walking pornographic fantasy—shirtless, lean, his chest carved from stone. He wore a pair of baggy carpenter jeans belted by a loose knot of rope slung low on his waist. He straddled one end of a stone wall at the edge of an open meadow, one boot on either side. (1)

As discussed earlier, the contrast between urban and rural/suburban society is emphasized in this passage as Brent finds an object of desire in a place he least expected. Nick is described in idealized terms, but ironically enough he also sounds very similar to the male image that appears on the covers of many mass-market romances. In this respect, the novel demonstrates its own awareness of conventions of the genre and begins to disrupt them in queer ways. Nick, a

real question as to whether any of these individuals are men. Consequently, Romantics do not openly address other transgender or queer identity possibilities in their conceptualization of gay romance.
physical manifestation of a prototypical male hero one might expect to find in a heterosexual romance, turns out to be a man who desires other men. This representation has symbolic importance as it works to reinforce already existing, or to open a space for readers to begin imagining, queer readings of heterosexual romances. As I noted earlier, gay romances have not been widely available in the past and it is reasonable to assume that some readers may have turned to heterosexual narratives in which they had to employ “perverse readings” (Sedgwick, “Queer and Now”) to make meanings or decode subtext that fit their desires and fantasies. Nick’s character re-imagines the fantasy of the idealized male hero of heterosexual romances, in the context of a gay romance, and begins to engage with notions of idealized masculinity in heteronormative and gay discourse.

Point-of-view in Romentics novels tends to shift between the two main characters with fairly consistent emphasis on both their perspectives, further reinforcing their investment in romance based on equality and mutuality. Shortly after Brent sees Nick while driving home along the highway, the narrative shifts perspectives and the reader is provided with Nick’s point-of-view:

Despite all of Nick’s justified contempt [toward city folk], he could admit that one of them had caught his eye at an unthinking moment—a hottie zipping by in his tiny Miata, sunglasses on his head, hair tousled, chest bared to the summer sun. He had been youthful-looking with a blush of rose in his cheek and a small frame, but his fine bare shoulders had been broad enough to suggest that he was man enough for Nick. (12-13)

While Nick’s earlier description through Brent’s eyes emphasizes his masculinity in relation to his profession, Brent’s appearance is linked more directly with his vehicle. He too is small and agile, and as the reader later learns, he was formerly a well-respected dancer before suffering a

34 In this respect, Romentics novels embody a rhetoric that is more aligned with particular feminist sensibilities than necessarily queer ones. Most notably, mutuality is a fundamental principle behind many of Bell Hooks’s feminist theorizations and especially her ideas about love. These ideas are examined in more detail in Chapter Four.
knee injury. In the realm of the physical, both men cultivate their fit bodies either through work or deliberate design.

Similar body politics operate in *Hot Sauce* and are taken to further lengths because both lead characters work in industries in which appearance and presentation hold high value. Thus, men’s fashion designer Troy creates clothing to accentuate an idealized male body and acts as the poster boy for his own product line. His lover, Brad, is continually amazed by the beauty of Troy’s body:

Troy let the towel on his waist drop. The morning light falling into the room put his abs and pecs [sic] and nipples into perfect relief.

Brad gasped, as if it were the first time he had seen what was hidden beneath. Troy was a magnificent specimen of manhood. At thirty-three, three years older than Brad, he had the firm, hard stomach of a high school athlete. His muscles were naturally lean and ropy; he was strong, but had none of the false bulk of a steroid queen. (2)

This description not only accentuates Troy’s youthful appearance, but also the naturalness of his masculine body. The text emphasizes that Troy’s image is not created with the aid of false enhancements (in this case, steroids) but is the product of his natural body make up. In contrast, Brad tends to feel less confident about his own natural appearance and puts great effort into maintaining his physique through regular exercise and a beauty regimen:

Years in a steamy kitchen had not yet put a line in Brad’s good skin. (The secret was eye cream, applied religiously, morning and night.) He had broad shoulders and Popeye forearms, a powerful wrestler’s build, and a lean-meat body, courtesy of regular torturous workouts with a personal trainer who had interned at a Siberian death camp. (8)

Although Brad sometimes feels insecure about his appearance in contrast to his partner, Troy constantly reaffirms that he finds him incredibly desirable through verbal compliments, playful sexual innuendos, desiring gazes, and physical touches of comfort. Mutual attraction and chemistry are always situated as key elements in the initial meeting of partners in *Romantics*
novels but thereafter they begin to focus on the emotional bonds between lovers that transcend the purely somatic.

Attraction and desire in romance has often been discussed as being connected to the body but ultimately developing around emotional ties between characters. Indeed, this idea has generally been used to maintain a distinction between romance and pornography, the latter of which is believed to manifest a sexual desire grounded entirely in the body. Many romance scholars have focused on romance’s difference from pornography by examining how emotional qualities and characteristics of male heroes operate within heterosexual romance narratives. In *Loving with a Vengeance* Tania Modleski, referencing the work of J.M.S. Tompkins, makes a correlation between eighteenth and nineteenth century English and American sentimental novels and Harlequins of the 1970s. She notes that according to Tompkins, sentimental novels privileged “the hero who exhibited an ’almost feminine sensibility’” (17). In a similar fashion, Modleski asserts that even stoic or brooding alpha heroes in 1970s Harlequins eventually succumb to “sensibility” as “in novel after novel, the man is brought to acknowledge the preeminence of love and the attractions of domesticity at which he has, as a rule, previously scoffed” (17). This idea of a masculine hero with a feminine sensibility was then reinforced by Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, which argued that a nurturing hero who embodied both masculine (physical) and feminine (emotional) characteristics was the fundamental male ideal in romance. Radway also concluded that the Smithton women she studied favored this kind of hero in romance narratives precisely because of the ways in which he responds to the heroine. According to her, the Smithton women indicated that “they prefer to see the heroine desired, needed, and loved by a man who is strong and masculine, but equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness, and concern for her pleasure” (81). This contrast of physical masculinity
and sentimental emotionality parallels Modleski’s earlier claims. However, Radway takes it a step further when she argues that while the hero is important to female readers, ultimately

the focus never shifts for these readers away from the woman at the center of the romance. Moreover, men are rarely valued for their intrinsic characteristics but become remarkable by virtue of the special position they occupy vis-à-vis the heroine. The romantic fantasy is therefore not a fantasy about discovering a uniquely interesting life partner, but a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way. (83)

When we begin to consider this argument in the light of gay romances like *Romantics*, however, it becomes clear that this notion does not apply in the same way. Since the narratives generally alternate between both characters’ perspectives, they do not centralize one character in the same way Radway and Modleski argue heterosexual romances do with the heroine. At the same time, masculinity and affect take on specific queer dimensions when embodied in two men in love with each other.

**Element Five: The Declaration**

*The scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero, can occur anywhere in the narrative. Their variable placement helps create the variety of plots within the set of possibilities open to the romance novel.* (Regis 34)

Fundamental to “the declaration” is an emphasis on the articulation of love as affect. Thus, I would like to begin this section by exploring the larger “emotional resonances” (Jackson 254) of romance, which have consistently been noted as key ingredients of the genre, before considering how these operate in *Romantics* novels. The emotional resonances of romance have long been a central point of interest and key sticking point for feminists because critics have used them to describe the genre as negatively sentimental and feminine. Modleski argues that this rationale for rejecting romance is but one example of the way texts have been gendered in binary terms. To illustrate her point, Modleski explains that there are several distinct ways “in which male texts work to insist implicitly on their difference from the feminine. Sometimes this is
done through language: for instance, through rigorous suppression of ‘flowery’ descriptions or
the tight-lipped refusal to employ any expression of emotion other than anger” (Loving 12).
While Modleski is justified in pointing out how such tendencies reinforce patriarchal hierarchies
of value, she codifies this problematic gender binary, which necessarily excludes or marginalizes
those texts that do not conform to either label, by accepting such terms. In her article “Kitsch,
Romance Fiction and Male Paranoia: Stephen King Meets the Frankfurt School,” Rita Felski
addresses several of the same concerns and insightfully establishes broader connections between
cultural devaluations of that which is associated with “sentimentality” or the “romantic,” arguing
that the

pejorative connotations of sentimentality, defined as “emotional weakness, mawkish
tenderness … nursing of emotions,” (Concise Oxford Dictionary) are of course a modern
phenomenon. Like “romantic,” to which it is closely allied, “sentimental” has come to
denote a range of cultural responses considered embarrassing and outmoded, rendered
anachronistic by the ironic consciousness characteristic of the modern age. (par. 5)

Felski’s claims imply that we culturally view sentimental and romantic feelings as displaying a
level of openness and vulnerability that goes against the “ironic consciousness” we currently
privilege. Consequently, she also identifies how these perspectives on emotional excess tend to
be couched in a negative rhetoric of the feminine. But rather than upholding the opposition
Modleski cites, Felski examines how feminists have typically responded to the “devaluation of a
textual object as a result of its association with a ‘feminine’ sentimentality,” questioning why
there “has been a tendency to accept at face value an opposition between ‘masculine’ and
‘feminine’ modes of perception and reception grounded in reified and ahistorical notions of
sexual difference” (par. 6). Citing melodrama as one of her primary examples, Felski adds that
as a result of such acceptance, “feminist intervention has been largely restricted to a recuperation
of that previously categorized as negative – with melodrama now codified as authentically
feminine and even subversive – rather than a challenging of the terms of the opposition itself”
(par. 6). It is Felski’s latter claim that I would like to take up, as it speaks directly to the challenge *Romantics* novels present to the heterosexual gendered binary that still characterizes much of contemporary academic discourse on romance.

Thus, while emotionality continues to be gendered in essentializing ways, I am far more interested in shifting the discourse to consider how affect operates as a queer system of excess in all romance texts. Linda Williams’s engaging essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” offers important insight on how systems of excess operate in similar ways among the genres of horror, pornography, and melodrama, demonstrating that “alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite” (141). The same could be said about how romance has been criticized, and Ann Douglas’s infamous description of the genre as “soft-core porn for women,” with the obvious function of titillation it implies, is frequently invoked by scholars and popular critics alike to illustrate this point. In an essentializing move, Douglas qualifies her description of romance and brings it to the level of affect, stating that “Harlequins are porn softened to fit the needs of female emotionality. They are located in the female consciousness” (27). As this statement reveals, for Douglas, “emotionality”—at least in the context of Harlequins—is de facto female. A universalizing claim such as this prompts one to ask where texts like *Romantics* novels might fit in her schema. I raise this question because LGBTQ texts inherently create a conundrum for scholars who persist in defining and understanding the genre according to heterosexual paradigms. While *Romantics* novels certainly critique the heteronormativization of romance in the cultural mainstream, they also embrace and resignify common features of prototypical narratives like those found in the Harlequin line. In particular, they maintain a consistent focus on the emotionality of characters in love. Thus,
rather than gendering affect in these texts I believe it is more productive to begin considering how Romantics, and indeed a growing number of non-traditional romances in general, depict a “queer emotionality” that can speak to readers across different genders and sexualities rather than trying to speak for a singular or monolithic conception of the romance reader.

Underlying many of the criticisms about the emotionality of romance is a broader cultural tension between emotion and reason. Sara Ahmed describes this in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* as an “hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason” which “gets displaced, of course, into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness” (3). Despite this tendency to simultaneously valorize and criticize particular emotions, Ahmed emphasizes that

> It is important to indicate here that even if emotions have been subordinated to other faculties, they have still remained at the centre of intellectual history. As a reader of this history, I have been overwhelmed by how much “emotions” have been a “sticking point” for philosophers, cultural theorists, psychologists, sociologists, as well as scholars from a range of other disciplines. This is not surprising: what is relegated to the margins is often, as we know from deconstruction, right at the centre of thought itself. (4)

Although Ahmed’s discussion pertains to interdisciplinary perspectives on emotion, I believe it is useful to consider her final point about that which is “relegated to the margins is often…right at the center of thought itself,” as a starting point from which to begin considering how “queer emotionality” can operate within romance, for the perceived excessive nature of emotionality depicted in romance narratives is already positioned as affect that transgresses accepted bounds of normative expression. The ways emotionality transgresses modes of acceptability by virtue of its excess already marks it as queer in several fundamental ways before one even begins considering it in the context of an LGBTQ narrative.35

35 This obviously extends to melodrama as well, which Linda Williams has noted focuses on the spectacle of emotional excess as it manifests on a bodily level in the uncontrollable weeping of characters.
As with popular romance narratives, Romantics highlight love as the central affect that propels characters and the storyline. Whether protagonists desire it, give it, receive it, repress it, or are frightened by it, love is fundamental to what fuels the romantic fantasies presented within the texts. For instance, in Hot Sauce, Pomfret and Whittier’s first Romantics novel to be published by a mainstream press, the lead protagonists have been in a relationship for several years but open reciprocation of love remains the elusive fantasy of true happiness:

“I love you” was an expression they never used. If Brad had pushed him for a declaration of love, Troy would have gotten all squirrely. Troy spoke eloquently enough with his body and lips and hands. He was quick with a compliment and a reassuring touch. He might have pointed out that actions were more important than three words that were easy to say but hard to mean.

Troy never mentioned love. . . . He was a fortress, absolutely impregnable when it came to his feelings.

This sexy unavailability only made Brad want him all the more. He plotted constantly about how he would taste that forbidden fruit hidden inside the wall that surrounded Troy’s heart. (6)

For Brad there is something simultaneously pleasurable and painful in being unable to extract a declaration from his partner. Troy’s refusal to verbalize his feelings ignites Brad’s desire to be able to emotionally penetrate the final barrier to his lover’s heart. The affect of love is marked in this passage as something taboo, “forbidden fruit,” that Brad wants to taste. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that other forms of affection are not enough to sustain the couple. Sharing declarations of love are necessary to ensure mutuality of feeling and commitment in their relationship.

Thus, as with most romances, the moment of “declaration,” in which characters utter their love for each other, is central to Romantics narratives as well. However, I believe it is relevant to consider here how queering this trope puts previous theories into problematic tension. For instance, Janice Radway argues that at this moment in heterosexual romances the hero’s
declaration of love “permit[s] the heroine to relinquish self-control” (97). She concludes therefore that

Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine. Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than exist at the center of this paragon’s attention. Romantic escape is, therefore, a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers. It is also a figurative journey to a utopia state of total receptiveness where the reader, as a result of her identification with the heroine, feels herself the object of someone else’s attention and solicitude. Ultimately, the romance permits its reader the experience of feeling cared for and the sense of having been reconstituted affectively, even if both are lived only vicariously. (Radway 97)

Radway’s analysis here is entirely dependent on a heterosexual paradigm of identification and desire. For Radway, when the heroine accepts the love of the hero her relative agency and autonomy is subsumed by him as her sole purpose in being is for him. In Romentics novels, characters do not simply reinscribe these roles in a homosexual context. In other words, there is no single hero nor is there a male equivalent of a “woman” in drag. Both protagonists tend to reconfigure masculinity in ways that question idealized heteronormative notions of masculine primacy as well as stereotypes of gay masculinity. Of critical importance then, is the fact that Romentics novels do not display a power hierarchy between characters that mimics Radway’s assessment of mass-market romances.

One of the central ways in which Romentics novels resist the heterosexual paradigms that inform traditional romances and scholarship on them is in their representation of sex within romantic relationships between men. In contrast to the active/male and passive/female roles so often used to describe and characterize heterosexual sex, characters in Romentics novels do not reinforce such power hierarchies. Rather, male protagonists typically alternate as sexual top and bottom in the narratives, without fear of their masculinity being threatened, and are demonstrated as achieving equal pleasure in both roles. For instance, in the novel Spare Parts, the fluidity
with which characters alternate these roles is presented as both erotically pleasurable and empowering:

As Trent peeled the shirt from Dan, pinning arms behind his head, a sudden flash of surrender shot from Dan’s belly to his chest and he submitted to the younger man above him. . . .

Dan released his teeth’s grip on his lip, grasped the buttocks before him, and completed the journey of Trent’s cock. He held and fed Trent into his hot mouth. He tasted him hungrily, famished from the starvation he had imposed on himself. But he didn’t control a thing. He surrendered. He encouraged Trent’s thrusts with gentle hands, but he let the boy above set the pace, the rhythm, the depth. (Spare Parts 66)

Dan, a mechanic idealized by his straight neighbors for his appearance of traditional masculinity, finds pleasure in this eroticized moment of submission to his partner. Importantly, the novel does not present this experience solely from Dan’s point-of-view. After providing access to Dan’s thoughts, the narrative shifts to Trent’s perspective:

Trent was dizzy and unbalanced with the position of power and the pangs of shocking pleasure. He watched Dan below him and reeled from his high point of view. This wasn’t like anything he had experienced before. He’d never been with such a hulk of a man, and he certainly had never expected someone like that to take such a deliciously subordinate role. (Spare Parts 67)

Trent, who has taken a more submissive sexual role up to this point in the story, revels in this moment of reversal. For Trent, the pleasure stems not from dominance over a man who is larger and stronger than himself, but from the fact that Dan is willing to make himself vulnerable and open to him both physically and emotionally.

Not surprisingly, therefore, reversal scenarios often occur at key moments when characters allow their lovers both physical and emotional access to them in ways they have not before. In Pomfret and Whittier’s first Romantics novel Razor Burn, one of the protagonists, Blayne, is still coming to terms with his sexuality. Throughout the novel he has been the top in his burgeoning but secret relationship with Ben. However, he has been fantasizing about what it would be like to take a more submissive role during their lovemaking. It is only once he fully accepts his
desires and his feelings for Ben that he is able to turn this into a reality, much to the surprise and pleasure of his partner:

He [Ben] waited until the moment was right. He knew what was coming. He felt it under him. He felt it pressing along the crack of his ass. And then all his expectations were turned upside-down. Blayne pulled Ben to him. He held him close. And he kissed him. Then Blayne rolled over. He rolled underneath Ben so that Ben was not just on top, he was the top. The hemisphere of Blayne’s firm, round ass rose above the white sheets and the midday sun. And Ben’s hard-on hovered above that smooth globe expectantly. He was in complete disbelief, but he wasn’t about to question his good luck. He glanced up at the muscles of Blayne’s shoulders and the place where his hands disappeared under the pillow. Ben saw the taper of his waist and the tilt of his hips that pushed that perfect ass upwards. . . . Ben knew what this meant, or at least he thought he did. Blayne was making himself completely vulnerable to him. Blayne had already confessed the secrets of his past. Now he was giving up all his fears and reluctance to Ben. And Ben wasn’t going to make him regret it. (Razor Burn 182)

This moment acts as a physical declaration rather than a verbal one in the context of this novel. Blayne has been denying the depth of his feelings for Ben, as well as his own sexuality, throughout much of the story. But at this point he finally releases his inhibitions and opens himself to the emotional excess he has been repressing. He is able to communicate his feelings to Ben even more powerfully by physically making himself vulnerable. Blayne’s body acts as the conduit for his emotional expression and Ben alternates sexual roles with him as he uses his own body to decipher the meaning from his partner’s.

While the declaration can manifest physically in Romantics novels, it is still the verbal declaration of love that tends to triumph over the barriers that have impeded the couple. In several Romantics novels the declaration is also directly linked with coming out. For instance, in Razor Burn, after his pre-amnesia memories have been regained, Blayne declares his love for Ben openly in front of his autocratic and homophobic father near the end of the novel, which acts simultaneously as a coming out declaration:

Blayne didn’t care. It [his father’s resistance] didn’t matter anymore. The only thing that mattered at this moment was the truth of their [his and Ben’s] relationship, the reality of love that stood in front of Garrett [Blayne’s father].
“A mistake,” he scoffed. “It wasn’t a mistake. It was destiny. I fell in love with Ben all over again. And even you can’t control destiny.” (247)

After this private coming out to his father, Blayne publicly comes out at work during an important meeting for the men’s cosmetics company, Mandatory, that his family owns. Blayne is asked about his views on the decision to go forward with the production of a new men’s razor and responds by announcing his sexual orientation to one and all:

“So we’re in agreement on the subject,” another [member of the meeting] concluded. “What’s your position, Blayne?”

“My position,” Blayne said to the room full of bosses and investors. “Sometimes I’m a top, sometimes I’m a bottom. But no matter what, I’m always gay.”

Then he stood and left.

Every single person of importance in Garrett’s life was in that room. Every rich, uptight bastard and frigid, business bitch connected to Mandatory was left in silence around that table. And Garrett just sat there.

He couldn’t change the truth. He couldn’t erase that moment from the memories of everyone there. (257)

Blayne’s public declaration of his gay identity and his love for Ben in open defiance of his homophobic father provides the opportunity to cut ties with the family business and the heteronormative expectations his father imposed on him for many years.

At the same time, Blayne’s public coming out declaration, and those of other characters in other Romantics novels, has the potential to resonate on personal and political levels with many LGBTQ readers. As Michael Warner argues:

Being publicly known as homosexual is never the same as being publicly known as heterosexual; the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries echoes of pathologized visibility. It is perfectly meaningless to “come out” as heterosexual. So it is not true, as common wisdom would have it, that homosexuals live private lives without a secure public identity. They have neither privacy nor publicness, in these normative senses of the term. . . . It is this deformation of public and private that identity politics—and the performative ritual know as coming out—tries to transform. (52-53)
Coming out declarations in Romantics novels work to reject the cultural imperatives of compulsory heterosexuality and imagine empowering moments of resistance and visibility. For Blayne and other “closeted” Romantics characters, coming out and declaring love for another man become climactic moments of liberation that open the promise of an utopian future in which they are finally free to live and love as their true selves. Not all Romantics novels present coming out narratives, however. In narratives that focus on gay couples who are already out and confident in their sexuality, there is often a different barrier that must be overcome to achieve a happy ending. This parallels what Regis describes as a certain moment in the romance narrative that marks the pinnacle of opposition to successful union between characters, which she classifies as her sixth element the “point of ritual death.”

**Element Six: Point of Ritual Death**

*The point of ritual death marks the moment in the narrative when the union between the heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever. The happy ending is most in jeopardy at this point.* (Regis 36)

Marked as a moment of hopelessness and seemingly inevitable failure, the point of ritual death as Regis defines it appears to be a stronger reinforcement of a preexisting, or introduction of a new, barrier that seems insurmountable. For Romantics novels, the point of ritual death often acts as an emotional barrier that manifests the appearance of unequal love between partners. In *Hot Sauce*, the point of ritual death occurs late in the narrative after several barriers have worked to consistently introduce conflict in the already fragile emotional bonds between Brad and Troy. Receiving what appears to be incriminating evidence of Troy’s infidelity, Brad confronts him in a highly emotional moment:

“‘You’ve never said you love me, did you know that?’

There was a long silence. The two of them were poised one against the other, as if they were doing battle.
“I’m sorry,” Troy said finally. “It’s just . . . I just can’t find myself whispering ‘I love you’ into empty space again. Like after Kurt died.”

Brad looked at him and could not forgive him. It was not enough. (201)

As this scene demonstrates, although Brad believes Troy has been unfaithful to him, what remains the biggest internal stumbling block to achieving the happiness he desires is the fact that Troy will not declare his love for Brad. The specter of Troy’s former lover Kurt reappears in this exchange, fueling emotional insecurities and fears Brad has that Troy will never love him more than Kurt. Feeling as though his love will never be equally reciprocated, Brad reaches his breaking point at this moment and ends the relationship.

Similarly, in Nick of Time the point of ritual death occurs after Nick and Brent finally share a passionate night of love-making—although they overcome some of the external barriers to their union, it is the internal emotional barrier that proves most dangerous. When Nick fails to declare his love for Brent the morning after, and shows no signs of ending his upcoming marriage of convenience, Brent leaves with his heart broken and retreats to a cabin in the woods to try coming to terms with what he believes to be the demise of their relationship:

Looking back on the past few weeks, Brent thought he could see with more clarity, too. He realized that he had hoped Nick would be so overpowered by their coupling that love would come pouring out of him, not matter how he tried to stop it. He had been so sure that Nick was capable of love, that he would be unable to stop it.

Brent looked again into the bottom of the lake. He fervently conjured another world among the tangled branches on the lake bottom, a world on the other side of the surface, looking back. It was a much different, fairy tale world, the world he had expected to unfold when he was a boy. The true love he had thought hopeless but had dreamed of endlessly. (172)

As with Hot Sauce, this narrative emphasizes a perceived imbalance of feeling between lovers and a lack of equal reciprocation of love, which prove to be the fundamental barriers to final happiness and romantic resolution. Brent laments the fact that the fantasy of true love cannot become his reality, a point rendered even more poignant because at this moment Brent believes
he has lost out to the allure of marriage in Nick’s eyes. This moment of perceived failure on Brent’s part carries added symbolic weight because it is yet another experience in which the romance fantasy he has always desired is thwarted by the heteronormative world in which he lives. Hence, his allusions to a “fairy tale world” suggest a specifically queer vision of romantic utopia that remains elusive.

In *Spare Parts* the point of ritual death occurs when the secret Dan has been trying to keep from the beginning of his relationship with Trent is revealed. Discovering that Dan is in fact the man who once cruelly taunted Trent for his difference awakens this old emotional trauma and, feeling unable to forgive Dan for his deception, he leaves. Dan tries to search for him and make amends, blaming himself for the fact that what was becoming an emotionally meaningful relationship may never be mended:

Dan couldn’t stand the thought of Trent’s anger or the look of hurt on his face. He couldn’t think about the past—what he had done to Trent back then or how he had lied to him for the past weeks. He couldn’t dwell on these things because he could never make up for them.

If Trent wasn’t a hooker, then Dan had wronged him even more. Trent was completely innocent. They couldn’t compromise and make concessions or forgive each other for their mutual faults and pasts. Trent had done nothing wrong but play along with the situation Dan had created.

Dan had though his acceptance of Trent’s false past had been a gracious and mature decision of logic. But now he saw that he had used it as an excuse for his own deceitful behavior. Now that Trent had no black marks on his record, Dan alone was the bad guy.

Dan figured that maybe he had even treated Trent like a hooker. It wasn’t for any of the deviant reasons Trent and Nathan [Trent’s friend] probably assumed, but it wasn’t really any better. Dan had wanted Trent’s crimes to outweigh his own. He had wanted to be the good guy who could rescue him.

Trent would never be able to forgive Dan for what he’d done. And Dan wasn’t so sure he should. Dan wasn’t sure he could forgive himself. (134-135)

Although both characters have already declared their love for each other, the exposure of their secrets makes them question the truth behind that love. Dan is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt.
and hopelessness caused by the climactic revelation of his true identity, and despairs that he can ever atone for his wrongs.

All of these examples reinforce Regis’s notion of ritual death as they render the hope for happy resolution almost impossible. Once again, however, the informed reader is acutely aware of this stylistic convention and knows that something will happen to bring about the anticipated “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (RWA). Regis refers to this event as “the recognition.”

**Element Seven: The Recognition**

*In a scene or scenes the author represents the new information that will overcome the barrier. . . . If the barrier has been external, these impediments are removed or disregarded. Far more common in contemporary romance novels is an interior barrier, in which case the recognition scene consists of the heroine understanding her own psyche better. In the course of the book she has learned to know herself and to distinguish sound perceptions from unsound. She sees the hero clearly and realizes her love for him.* (Regis 36-37)

As I have already demonstrated, Romantics novels do not tend to focus on the internal psyche of one character over another. Therefore, while “the recognition” still tends to be based on internal barriers it is clear that both characters must overcome their own personal issues in order to reach the desired romantic union. *In Hot Sauce,* Troy is finally able to recognize his feelings and declare his love for Brad, and Brad is able to overcome his own emotional insecurity and doubts when he recognizes that Troy has always loved him despite not being demonstrative in the ways Brad has desired; in *Razor Burn,* Blayne realizes the truth about his feelings and his sexuality, prompting him to publicly declare his love and come out of the closet while Ben, at the same time, regain his lost memories and his trust on his partner; in *Spare Parts,* Dan and Trent recognize that they have been deceptive with one another and are able to work together to overcome their pasts while gaining emotional empathy and understanding for each other’s individual plight in coming to terms with his gay identity; and, in *Nick of Time,* losing
Brent makes Nick conscious of his true feelings and propels him to take action, breaking off the engagement with Una and pursuing the man he truly loves—for Brent, Nick’s declaration of love at the end of the novel is the catalyst that enables him to overcome the emotional uncertainty that has shadowed him throughout the novel and finally realize his romantic dreams. Ultimately, “the recognition” extends to both lovers in Romantics novels, reinforcing their investment in emotional reciprocity as each character learns to share his feelings and desires with his partner. “The recognition,” much like “the declaration,” often becomes an instance in the narrative that reflects the queer emotionality of the text as both characters become overwhelmed with feelings that they cannot control or stop from expressing, regardless of the public or private place of the moment; and, being able to express these sentiments end up creating a sense of liberation and joy in each of the characters that they did not expect.

**Element Eight: The Betrothal**

*In a scene or scenes the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts. In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it is clear that the heroine and hero will end up together.* (Regis 37-38)

Regis’s final element, as defined above, is immediately open to queer interpretation. If marriage is not necessary, the fact that two men “end up together” at the end of the novel seems to fit Regis’s formula albeit with a gendered twist. Not every couple in Romantics novels desires gay marriage, but they do all desire to have their relationships treated with the same level of validity and recognition as heterosexual unions. In keeping with this, the texts are powerfully aware of the fact that the institution of marriage still operates according to heteronormative paradigms and remains exclusionary toward LGBTQ couples. *Hot Sauce* speaks to this issue most powerfully because at the end of the novel Troy and Brad do end up getting married in Massachusetts. Published in 2005, this novel uses the 2004 legalization of same-sex marriage in
Massachusetts as the backdrop for the grand finale of the story. Very much aware of the political climate of the twenty-first century, Romantics novels emphasize in their “happily-ever-after” resolutions the importance of fantasies that give hope and the promise of happiness to gay men.

Although I have shown the ways in which Regis’s definitional criteria for what constitutes romance is susceptible to subversive queer infiltration, it is evident that this was not something her study even considered as possible. In some respects Regis’s book, like those of many scholars before her, is fundamentally uninterested in or completely oblivious to LGBTQ texts and their readers. While some scholars have at least acknowledged them in passing references or footnotes, they do not even enter Regis’s radar or worldview, which is far more frightening because it supports a hermeneutics of romance that wholesale refuses to acknowledge non-heterosexual epistemologies, texts, and readers. This trajectory is not one that we can afford to allow to continue. Indeed, this chapter has shown how romance scholarship that persists in ignoring or rejecting LGBTQ texts and their readers as mere exceptions to the purported heterosexual rule are already losing their grasp on what the genre signifies in the twenty-first century. At the same time, such exclusions, coupled with tendencies toward problematic essentializations and resistance to useful queer theoretical interventions, speak to obvious homophobia in the field that needs to be addressed. Feminist and queer research on romance have a great deal to learn from each other if put into more productive dialogue. This is necessary work that must be done if we are to be able to effectively and accurately assess the current state of romance and its readers in an era of media convergence, participatory culture, and ever expanding possibilities for the circulation of non-normative texts among romance-reading publics and counterpublics in cyberspace.
I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to the current RWA definition of romances as containing two basic elements, “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.” The plurality of possibilities that this definition connotes allow for a wide range of texts that present visions of love and desire that do not necessarily adhere to or reflect heterosexual ideologies to be included in the romance genre. As I argued earlier, this definition in contrast to that of Regis and other scholars seems to have its finger more firmly on the pulse of contemporary romance readers who are expressing pleasure in a diverse range of texts that do not reflect a singular or monolithic notion of love. At the same time, the RWA definition implies, at least in part, that it is up to readers to determine what they find “emotionally satisfying” in a romance. I will take this idea up in more detail in the next chapter, which examines texts that break out of the traditional format and narrative formula of heterosexual romance novels while questioning the “happily-ever-after” ending as the only “emotionally satisfying” possibility for resolution in romances.
CHAPTER 3
MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: LESBIAN ROMANCE AND UNDERGROUND
COMICS FOR WOMEN

This chapter examines the intersections between lesbian romance and the medium of comics in order to assess what occurs when the invisible is made visible. In part, the analysis I present is in response to feminist studies of popular romance, which despite their efforts to recoup the genre as having something meaningful to say about women’s experiences in culture have nonetheless confined themselves to a problematic heterosexual framework with an almost exclusive eye on the mass-market paperback as the epitomizing marker of the genre.\textsuperscript{1} Although these studies have provided considerable insight into popular romance novels targeted toward straight women, they have, perhaps unintentionally, constrained our scholarly understanding of and approach toward the romance genre and its readers. Limiting critical considerations of romance to Harlequins and their ilk imposes exclusionary boundaries that ignore how marginal and subcultural texts challenge the static coherency of the genre that much of the research to date has reinforced. Therefore, my assessment of lesbian romance comics seeks to challenge these limitations while also expanding upon the smaller body of existing research on lesbian romance novels. A great deal of this scholarship has focused on early pulp novels, sometimes connecting them with the myriad lesbian romance novels printed by Naiad Press in the 1990s. Always addressed in these studies, whether directly or indirectly, is the question of visibility. Some authors examine the actual covers of pulp novels (Villarejo; Stryker), while others assess the voyeuristic appeal of lesbian pulps both in terms of their covers and their actual narrative content (Keller “Ab/normal”; Keller “Was it Right”). Visibility continues to be a key point of interest

\textsuperscript{1} Tania Modleski is a notable exception here, as she extends her analysis of mass-produced romance to soap operas.
for those analyzing more contemporary lesbian romance novels, although the focus here tends to be on the representation of lesbian(s) in the narratives (Hermes; Juhasz; Ehnenn).

By introducing comics into the current discourse surrounding lesbian romance, I provide insight into a largely unexamined medium that unites the visual and the written, making visible that which romance novels keep concealed by virtue of their primarily alphabetic text-based format. In this regard, I argue that lesbian romance comics confront many of the tensions between fantasy and reality, especially in the representation of sex, that exist within mainstream romance fiction; and more specifically, they disrupt the binary discourse of early romance scholarship, which studiously separated romance and pornography as distinctly different feminine and masculine genres respectively. 2 The graphic novels that I examine in this chapter do not shy away from representing queer female sexual desire in direct and often explicit ways, and they reveal the romantic and sexual possibilities available to women who resist compulsory heterosexuality. As a visual medium, comics are particularly well suited to exploring this terrain because they can literally “make invisible possibilities and desires visible,” (Sedgwick, “Queer and Now” 3) thus offering significant challenges to queer-eradicating impulses so often reinforced by the mainstream romance and comics industries at large.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this is no simple task; for with visibility comes challenging political concerns about what is at stake in the visual representation of lesbian bodies, desires, fantasies, and lives. As Amy Villarejo cautions in Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire, the impetus toward visibility runs the risk of producing representation that “renders lesbian static, makes lesbian into (an) image, and forestalls any

2 Janice Radway’s discussion of the Smithton women in Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature reinforces this division. Radway, drawing on the work of Beatrice Faust, concludes that the “claim that women are not excited by the kinds of visual displays and explicit description of physical contact that characterize male pornography is at least true of the Smithton readers” (66). Radway then makes some problematic assumptions about female desire and fantasy on a broader scale based on this one not entirely convincing case study.
examination of lesbian within context” (6-7). Lesbian romance comics—especially those that depict explicit sexuality—are well aware of the burdens of somatic and sexual representation, and I would argue create a more nebulous and shifting space within which to consider, as Villarejo suggests, how lesbian works as “a modifier, not as a noun but as an adjective” for people, places, and things (4). In particular, these comics must walk a precarious line in their efforts to work against misogynistic depictions of lesbian sex in comics created by and for men while trying to take back the lesbian erotic for women. As a result, many female comics artists seek to remake romance by weaving together elements from multiple genres in order to envision lesbian relationships that do not adhere to formulaic expectations and tendencies. Their narratives often challenge boundaries that have been imposed on the genre as they begin to offer alternative visions of what might be construed as an “emotionally satisfying” romance with an “optimistic ending” (RWA).

I examine three different lesbian romance graphic novels by women who weave together elements of different genres to develop non-traditional love stories between female characters. I will be focusing exclusively on comics by women in order to better consider how female artists react against male representations of lesbianism in pornographic comics. At the same time, I would like to note that there are a growing number of webcomics that deal with lesbian love and romance, but I have limited my discussion to more traditionally published texts that employ graphic novel format for more efficacious narrative analysis (webcomics tend to run in weekly or monthly strip format, often resulting in storylines that continue in perpetuity). One of the most popular of these comics is Justine Shaw’s Nowhere Girl, available at http://www.nowheregirl.com.

3 Although men have also produced lesbian romance comics, most notably Terry Moore’s series Strangers in Paradise and Jaime Hernandez’ collection Locas: The Maggie and Hopey Stories, I will be focusing exclusively on comics by women in order to better consider how female artists react against male representations of lesbianism in pornographic comics. At the same time, I would like to note that there are a growing number of webcomics that deal with lesbian love and romance, but I have limited my discussion to more traditionally published texts that employ graphic novel format for more efficacious narrative analysis (webcomics tend to run in weekly or monthly strip format, often resulting in storylines that continue in perpetuity). One of the most popular of these comics is Justine Shaw’s Nowhere Girl, available at http://www.nowheregirl.com.
potential of fantasy while visually emphasizing the importance of spatial relations and the female gaze. Next, I examine Colleen Coover’s adult comic Small Favors, illustrating how her “girly” porn aesthetic manipulates the fantasy and pornography genres to subvert hegemonic conventions regarding romance and sexual monogamy while working to thwart heterosexist appropriations of lesbian sex in mainstream pornography for straight men. Finally, I conclude by analyzing Ariel Schrag’s Potential as an example of the autobiographical coming-of-age genre, which is used to present a “real” narrative of lesbian love that questions the primacy of the “happily-ever-after” ending in romance.

**Romance and Early “Love Comics” for Women**

Often believed to be produced primarily by and for men, comics in fact have a significant historical connection to female consumers. As Trina Robbins reveals in *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women’s Comics from Teens to Zines*, at one time girls made up a large segment of the commercial audience for what were once known as “love comics”. Although many of these texts purported to present “real life stories” about young women finding heterosexual romance, they were in fact created largely by men. Originating with the 1947 publication of Simon and Kirby’s Young Romance, “love comics” were instantly popular with female audiences and “by 1950, more than one quarter of the comic books published [in the U.S.] were romance comics” (Robbins 54). Indeed, statistics from the 1950s indicate that “females ages seventeen to twenty-five” were reading more comic books than men (Robbins 54). The popularity of “love comics” held steady until 1964 when suddenly “superheroes returned” and romance, as Robbins puts it, “went out the door” (77).4

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4 This is not to say that there were not any love comics still in circulation, but their numbers and popularity began to dwindle as publishers phased them out of production. The first love comic published, Young Romance, did manage to survive for thirty years before putting out its final issue in 1977 (Robbins 77).
Most “love comics,” much like Harlequin paperback romances of the 1970s, tended to reinforce heterosexist gender roles of conformity. The ideal goal for young girls and women presented within these texts was marriage, and in order to achieve this they were cautioned to remain sexually chaste for the “right” man. Hence, as Philippe Perebinossoff notes in “What does a Kiss Mean? The Love Comic Formula and the Creation of the Ideal Teen-Age Girl,” “The stories emphasize that love is an overwhelming passion, but the passion never becomes overtly sexual. Sexual innuendos in the form of underwater kisses and passionate embraces in the moonlight are plentiful, but the ideal unmarried teen-age girl never goes beyond a kiss” (405). Female characters that were coded as more sexually available than this always met a tragic or bad end, thus reinforcing Tania Modleski’s assertion that “the cost of ‘revolt’ is what [mainstream] romances stress most” (Loving 43).

Despite their popularity with female readers, “love comics” were not satisfying to everyone and with the advent of second wave feminism many female artists found opportunities to create, and outlets to distribute, counter-hegemonic comics that openly rejected earlier sexist representations of gender and sexual conformity. Often operating in resistance to the mainstream comics industry, which generally refused to publish their work, many of these artists began printing their comics in underground feminist newspapers like Off our Backs. These subcultural venues allowed female artists to publish work that openly addressed politicized concerns about sexuality, reproductive rights, and gender roles that other publishers refused to distribute. As underground texts, many of these comics remained in relative obscurity on the margins following the industry shift in the mid-sixties back to superhero comics production. During this time, texts aimed at female consumers became a lower priority to comics publishers; this is not to say that there were no mainstream comics by and for women, but mass publishers focused almost
exclusively on appealing to a straight male demographic with little to no interest in female consumers. It has only been in more recent years, as the popularity of superhero comics has fluctuated, that publishers have begun to reconsider the virtually untapped female market.

Today, attracted in large part by the importation of Japanese comics known as *manga*, female readers are now flocking back to comics in steadily increasing numbers.⁵ Many of the current Western comics and Japanese manga published for girls and women, similar to “love comics,” appropriate narrative and stylistic elements from the romance genre to appeal to readers looking for stories about love and desire. While these contemporary texts have been generally influenced by some of the politics of feminist movement—no longer confining women solely to the domestic sphere and insisting they remain virgins until marriage—many of them nevertheless continue to uphold basic heteronormative paradigms. Consequently, queer women who are returning to comics, or developing an interest in them for the first time, may feel that the narratives available to them offer only one vision of romance and love. Fortunately, the subcultural underground of women’s comics, which has endured and expanded since the 60s and 70s, does offer promising alternatives for queer readers. Although somewhat hidden in the obscurity of the publishing margins, there is a small but growing body of work by female comics artists that engages in politically and personally meaningful ways with romantic relationships between women, while bringing to the forefront critical concerns about visibility.⁶

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⁵ Japanese *manga* (comics) have a specific genre of texts, classified as *shoujo*, which are targeted toward girls and young women. These comics tend to engage with issues deemed to be of interest to female consumers, including: female friendships, social pressures based on gender, family and school life, fantasies and desires, romantic relationships, etc. A more detailed discussion of queer manga appears in Chapter Five.

⁶ While my analysis is limited to discussing lesbian romance comics, it is important to note that there are gay romance comics available as well. In addition, numerous mainstream comics have featured gay and lesbian supporting characters in recent years. However, few of these have focused at length on the romantic and sexual relationships of these characters. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to restrict my focus to comics that feature queer protagonists and center on the development of their romantic relationships.
Lesbian Looks and Spatial Relations: Deciding What to Make Visible

Lea Hernandez’s graphic novel *Clockwork Angels* is often classed as a steampunk romance. A variation on the cyberpunk subgenre of science fiction, “steampunk” as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “science fiction which has a historical setting (esp. based on industrialized, nineteenth-century society) and characteristically features steam-powered, mechanized machinery rather than electronic technology.” Hernandez unites steampunk with fantasy and romance in *Clockwork Angels*, employing a drawing style that is deeply influenced by Japanese manga traditions and blended with a Western sensibility to create a signature look very much her own. Fellow comics writer Warren Ellis, who pens the introduction to *Clockwork Angels*, describes the work as a “Scientific Romance” (2). While the text makes use of common romance idioms, it subverts the decidedly heteronormative genre by creating a love story between two young women that appeals to specifically feminist and queer romantic sensibilities about erotic mutuality while simultaneously engaging with the discourse of lesbian visibility during its deliberate moments of visual revelation and concealment.

Set sometime in a fantastical version of late nineteenth century America, *Clockwork Angels* revolves around the relationship between Temperance (Temper) Bane and her best friend Amelia (Amy). Temper is a young widow earning a living as a parlor magician performing for wealthy socialites with a fashionable interest in the occult. Amy, her companion and closest friend since childhood, is also her partner in these theatrical demonstrations. Both women, by virtue of their tenuous position within the socio-economic hierarchy and their resistance to convention, experience the alterity of existing on the margins from the beginning of the story.

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7 Lea Hernandez’s work anticipated the recent trend toward Original English Language (OEL) manga by Western artists that presses like Tokyopop® and Del Rey are now putting out in response to the popularity of Japanese manga with American audiences. Many online sources class her as the first published female OEL manga artist in America.
As a working widow, Temper does not fit the mold of a “respectable lady” and is often forced to deal with unwanted advances from men who hope to take advantage of her circumstances. Amy—as an unmarried penniless orphan without any standing in the social order—is more deliberately shunned and treated as Other. Both women consciously reject conformity, finding kinship and comfort in their difference and their mutual resistance to social assimilation as their relationship gradually evolves over the course of the narrative from friendship to romantic love.

Visually emphasizing the significance of an oppositional female gaze in establishing intimacy and desire between women, *Clockwork Angels* highlights key moments in which the two women watch one another. A compelling instance of this occurs when Amy and Temper are alone together in a train carriage. The first panel on the page (Figure 3-1) functions as an establishing shot, depicting the full mise-en-scène of the carriage setting with the women seated in chairs on opposite ends of the frame’s composition, and a table positioned between them dividing the space evenly. The literal space between the two characters visually emphasizes the metaphorical distance they are forcibly keeping from one another on an emotional level.

Although Amy loves Temper, she is wary of disrupting or potentially ruining their friendship by revealing feelings she fears will not be reciprocated. Temper, on the other hand, is depicted as much more ambivalent in terms of her emotions, and this sequence of panels illustrates the escalating tension between the two friends. Following the establishing image of Amy and Temper’s spatial separation are four smaller panels that present alternating close-ups of their faces. First the reader sees Amy, casting a furtive glance at Temper, followed by an image of Temper, not returning her gaze but focusing instead on the hat in her hands. The next panel shifts to another close-up of Temper, but this time she is covertly gazing at Amy. Again, the gaze becomes slightly voyeuristic when the next image reveals that Amy is reading her journal.
while unaware that she is now being watched. The final panel on the page returns to a larger panoramic view of the carriage, re-establishing the spatial and emotional distance between the women as they sit apart from one another in awkward silence, their rigid postures and silent faces conveying the tension of the moment.

In accordance with this sequence of images, the first half of the story frequently represents Amy and Temper watching one another secretively. The reader realizes the signification of these longing looks even as the characters themselves do not. Utilizing a common trope from the romance genre, *Clockwork Angels* presents a love that is at first conflicted because it is seemingly one-sided. For instance, early in the story when Temper has finished a theatrical performance as medium for a group of bourgeois clients, a man approaches her in an openly flirtatious manner. Hernandez presents a series of panels that alternate between images of the man talking to Temper and close-ups of Amy’s face as she watches their exchange with a growing look of irritation and displeasure (Figure 3-2). She soon intervenes and quickly dissuades the potential suitor from pursuing Temper. Amy’s protective behavior at this moment is occasioned by a clear feeling of jealousy, which Temper does not seem to notice although the reader recognizes it immediately. In many respects, this echoes one of the dualities Tania Modleski identifies in romance, in the “relation between an ‘informed’ reader and a necessarily innocent heroine” (*Loving* 32). Thus, although Temper is oblivious to Amy’s true feelings toward her, the reader has already easily deciphered the cues in the text that expose them. Temper, as a widow, is already positioned in the text as a sexually experienced woman, but her knowledge is clearly limited by heterosexual expectations. Therefore, she does not immediately read Amy’s feelings in the same way the “informed” reader does—not because of virginal
vacuity, but rather because she has never consciously associated Amy with romantic or sexual possibilities.

At an unconscious level, however, Temper’s actual longstanding desire for Amy comes to the surface via a series of remembrances. Demonstrated most powerfully during a flashback moment rendered in slightly hazy pencil art (Figure 3-3), Temper recalls how her mother rationalized forcing her into marriage to a man she did not love, telling her: “We know how you feel about Amy . . . we tolerated her because she kept you from running wild . . . Your new husband will be able to do the same” (20). Her mother’s veiled but provocative language in this recollection suggests that the marriage was actually arranged in order to dissolve the budding romantic feelings between the young women. In the context of the flashback memory, Temper does not understand the import behind her mother’s words; it is only in looking back from the present moment that she starts to glean some of the undercurrents originally at work in their exchange, as well as the truth about her own feelings for Amy. This personal re-examination of the traumas of her past allows Temper to create a happier future because now that she is a widow she has more freedom and autonomy to pursue her own desires.

While Temper comes to realize and understand her burgeoning queer desires gradually, it is clear that Amy, conversely, has always been aware of her feelings for her friend. The narrative goes so far as to show that others, most especially Temper’s mother, have also recognized Amy’s desire and consider it a dangerous threat. Amy relives the consequence of this when she recalls the events surrounding Temper’s forced marriage. Her recollection is presented in detailed and vivid flashback as this sequence opens with several images of Temper lying asleep dressed in an elaborate wedding dress, arranged in a manner similar to a slumbering fairytale princess waiting to be awoken with a kiss (Figure 3-4). However, the reader learns
from the dialogue surrounding these iconic images that Temper has in fact been drugged by her mother because “she needed something for her nerves” (35) in order to make her go through with the wedding. Temper’s mother tells Amy that her daughter knows “it’s her duty to marry . . . any good woman knows this . . . but you don’t, do you Amelia” (35)? Her language insinuates that Amy is someone who does not know her heterosexual “duty” as a woman, thus questioning whether she is a woman at all. Indeed, Temper’s mother articulates a view of Amy as deviant Other by calling her a “strange little savage,” thus invoking the rhetoric of late nineteenth century sexology which, as Lisa Duggan points out in *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*, often linked homosexuality with primitivist discourse of the time that worked to dehumanize racial minorities and those classed as sexual perverts.

In many ways, this sequence confronts the primary objective of mainstream heterosexual romance—resolution in marriage for the heroine—and strips away its utopian connotations to reveal a much darker reality. The images of Temper in her elaborately detailed wedding dress, lying in repose, make obvious fairytale allusions, but the tone of the sequence is ominous. However, the fact that she has been drugged by her mother in order to forcibly marry her off creates a whole new signification to the images presented, recasting Temper’s unconscious and prone body as an object arranged for sexual barter or exchange to an unknown man. To further emphasize this idea, the narrative cuts to a new panel (Figure 3-5) in which Temper’s mother tells Amy, “You will keep to yourself while the new Mrs. O’Conner [Temper] gets better acquainted with her husband” (36). Her sexually coded language in the context of this scene makes it clear that Amy is expected not to interfere with the post-wedding consummation. At this moment, the panels deliberately conceal Amy from view. Instead, Hernandez depicts the steeple of the church where Temper has been married tilted at an awkward angle surrounded by
dark clouds and rain. The imagery of this sequence recasts the symbolic power of the church as institutional marker of heterosexual hegemony in a foreboding light. At the same time, the positioning of the slanted church steeple surrounded by storm clouds overhead metaphorically reflects the turbulent nature of the moment and Amy’s lack of control over what is happening. In part, this can be attributed in the story to the fact that Amy, as an orphan taken in by Temper’s uncle, lacks the agency to interfere precisely because of her precarious socio-economic position and her indebtedness to the family. Yet, this scene goes even further to emphasize the way that not only Amy’s desires, but also Amy herself, are often forcibly rendered invisible when they threaten the heterosexual institution of marriage. Hernandez later subverts this painful moment of powerlessness and erasure when she depicts Amy and Temper sharing a sexually intimate moment that walks a deliberate line between revelation and concealment.

Indeed, Clockwork Angels demonstrates that many of the obstacles to Amy and Temper’s love are relics of the past, while in the present they are now free from the constraints of marriage and family that prohibited them from pursuing their romantic feelings for one another. Consequently, after breaking down lingering emotional barriers Clockwork Angels, as with most popular romances, ensures that the two lovers mutually acknowledge their desire and consummate their relationship. In a passionate, poignant, and slightly playful sequence of panels, Hernandez chooses carefully what to make visible and what to leave to the reader’s imagination (Figure 3-6). At first, the two women are presented sitting together on a bed. In contrast to the earlier series of panels in which they were spatially removed from one another in the train car, here they are represented as physically and emotionally close. When Amy begins unpinning Temper’s hair it seems evident where this sensual and intimate moment is leading, however, the text delays and withholds full visual disclosure. Instead, the next panel shifts to a
view of both women’s boots removed and placed side by side on a wooden chest, symbolizing that they have clearly broached the self-imposed distance they had maintained in the past. The following frame reveals Temper from behind as she begins removing her shirt, making visible a brief but erotic glimpse of her bare shoulder. Hernandez deliberately disrupts temporal flow and teases the reader visually with the play between expected revelation and suggestive concealment. The final panel on the page is a less clearly defined outline of the two women’s faces in close-up just before their lips are about to meet. Although it seems at this point as though the narrative might leave it unclear as to whether to they share more than a kiss, the following page eliminates such ambiguity by presenting an enlarged and provocative image of Temper with her head thrown back in ecstasy (Figure 3-7). Hernandez thwarts potential pornographic expectations by refusing to make fully visible Amy and Temper’s sexual interlude. At the same time, she gives enough visual cues to make it clear that they do in fact have sex and that this consummation of their relationship eradicates the last emotional and physical boundaries keeping them apart. Ultimately, it seems that Amy and Temper have control in this moment—achieving narrative power and agency by only offering the reader a certain level of visual access to their bodies and their lives.

In the end, *Clockwork Angels* concludes with a “happily-ever-after” scenario for Amy and Temper, but it is one that holds a different political valence in the context of a lesbian romance. Indeed, a long literary history of lesbian relationships that end in tragedy or a return to heterosexual conformity—as most specifically seen in many early lesbian pulps—has established a pathologizing discourse about lesbian love. As Joke Hermes explains in “Sexuality in Lesbian Romance Fiction,” “The most objectionable characteristic of 1950s pulp novels is that the lesbians in many of these novels hate themselves, or think they should. Protagonists have
recourse to alcoholism, suicide and violence. They often end up dead, drunk, or in psychiatric wards” (51). Although more recent texts have made significant strides in dispelling such homophobic discourse, there is still a need for affirming representations of lesbian love that do not shy away from making that love both visible and possible. Hernandez’s graphic novel supports this aim while skillfully demonstrating the ways in which visibility and invisibility can be paradoxically enabling and disenfranchising in different contexts. The final page of the story leaves the reader with an optimistic image of Temper and Amy lying together on a hillside under the night sky (Figure 3-8). Each panel reveals the two women touching and gazing at one another intimately. While earlier in the narrative they had largely been depicted as gazing covertly at one another, now they are able to meet one another’s gaze with reciprocal desire and love. These images suggest that the two women are ready to face the future together as equal partners willing and able to share their feelings, dreams, and desires. Rather than closing with an institutionally sanctioned marriage and consolidation within the domestic space of the home, the status quo of many heterosexual romances, *Clockwork Angels*’s final image reflects a decidedly queer vision of romantic happiness as the women lie together under a vast starry sky that metaphorically reflects the wide vista of possibilities and new adventures awaiting them.

**Possibilities for Pretty Pussies: Fantasy, Play, and Sex in “Girly” Porn for Women**

Colleen Coover’s *Small Favors: Girly Porno Comic Collection* develops a sexually explicit lesbian romance narrative that lives up to its evocative subtitle, employing pornographic imagery and humorous fantasy to present a playful erotic view of lesbian love and desire while conceiving of sex as both fun and full of limitless possibilities for pleasure. Coover’s text is by no means the first comic to address lesbian sexuality. Indeed, lesbian-themed pornographic comics abound, but the majority of them are written by and for straight men as a form of sexist titillation. Coover’s series, in comparison, is aimed primarily at women. In her introduction to
Book One, she states “Small Favors is a book through which I (a very shy person, honestly!) celebrate sex and the pretty girls who enjoy sex. To make it the way I wanted, it had to be funny, cute, erotic and romantic. It had to be the kind of porno comic that women would enjoy, that anyone would enjoy” (4). Coover clearly establishes her woman-centered focus from the beginning, and although she expands the audience to include “anyone,” I would argue that Small Favors is primarily geared toward the pleasures of a queer female audience. In other words, it differentiates itself from comics that cater to straight male fantasies of “hot” lesbian sex by creating a fantasy aesthetic for women, which Coover coins “girly” porn.

The humorous and self-reflexively kinky approach to sex that Coover uses to develop a “girly” porn aesthetic is reflected in the slightly absurd but amusing premise of Small Favors, which establishes the overall playful tone of the series as well as its investment in the possibilities fantasy can offer. The story opens with the main character, Annie, fantasizing about having sex with her beautiful neighbor Yuriko as she masturbates in her garden one day. In a pseudo-Alice in Wonderland moment, Annie falls through the ground into a subterranean fantasy world ruled over by the autocratic and matronly Queen of Conscience (an obvious tongue-in-cheek parody of Queen Victoria) who informs Annie that she has “been found to be shameless” and that she, at the age of twenty-one, has already used up her “entire lifetime allotment of masturbation” (14). This ridiculous but funny accusation is then followed with “proof” in the form of pictures that expose Annie unabashedly masturbating in a number of different public and private locations (Figure 3-9). The full comedic import of this scene comes when the Queen of Conscience claims that all of these pictures were in fact taken on the same day, which, given the number of photos, emphasizes the hyperbolic nature of Annie’s autoerotic tendencies. The Queen decides to punish her by assigning a cosmic keeper of her conscience, a pint-sized blonde
fairy named Nibbil, who will supposedly repress Annie’s “masturbation-crazy little nympho” ways (16). This arrangement proves incredibly ironic because Nibbil turns out to be an ineffectual guard over Annie’s purportedly excessive sexuality, and instead becomes her enthusiastic lover.

One thing is made perfectly clear from the outset—Annie and Nibbil love sex, but more importantly, they love sex with women. Perhaps the most compelling and radical facet of Coover’s “girly” porn aesthetic is that there are no men in this comic. Annie only fantasizes about and desires other women, as do Nibbil and the various other female side-characters that appear later in the series. These are not women simply seeking erotic stimulation with another woman until a man appears to give them “real” fulfillment, as Linda Williams notes is often the premise of pornography aimed at straight men (Hard Core). Instead, Small Favors visually reinforces its woman-centered interest by giving pride of place to images of “pretty pussies” that become aestheticized erotic objects of desire between women. Coover highlights the beauty of the vagina with extreme close-up images, drawn in loving detail, of engorged clitorises, quivering labia, and wet vaginal orifices.

In keeping with the fantasy tropes of the text, the sexual scenarios in Small Favors are incredibly varied and run the gamut of erotic possibilities from bondage, to spanking, to sex toys, to voyeurism, and even group sex. These various sexual vignettes attempt to present a broader perspective on the myriad ways in which women can achieve sexual gratification and pleasure with other women. Indeed, Coover’s comic resists representing one static definition for lesbian sex and instead embraces a plurality of pleasures. Central to this agenda is a clear emphasis on fantasy as a stimulant that can enhance one’s sex life. Because Nibbil is an otherworldly fantasy character of pint-sized proportions, the mechanics of sex between her and Annie are often
intriguing and inventive, and both characters take great delight in exploring different sexual possibilities between them. Nibbil certainly lives up to her name and frequently performs oral sex on Annie, but this is not the limit of their sexual repertoire. For instance, when they first meet, Nibbil is so turned on by the photographic evidence that the Queen has amassed to demonstrate Annie’s deviant masturbatory ways, that she fucks herself on one of Annie’s nipples (Figure 3-10). In another scenario, Nibbil manages to slip her entire body into Annie’s vagina, giving a whole new meaning to the idea of penetrative sex (Figure 3-11).

Throughout the series, Small Favors continually plays with the visual and symbolic politics behind penetration in cultural understandings of sex, especially as represented via mainstream pornography. In one particular sequence, Nibbil demonstrates her magical ability to morph into human-sized “big” form and appears wearing a strap-on dildo, which she proceeds to use on Annie orally, vaginally, and anally in a spate of frenzied love-making. While there has been much debate among lesbian feminist critics about the use of dildos in lesbian sex, I would suggest that Small Favors does not equate the dildo with a penis and the heterosexual significations assigned to it. Instead, it is positioned in the text as merely one object that can be used to create or enhance sexual pleasure between women in different erotic scenarios. In point of fact, there are many other objects that Annie and Nibbil use to play out different fantasies during their erotic escapades, including a wooden spoon, a carrot, dry spaghetti, a hairbrush, a riding crop, and a vibrator. Sometimes these objects are used for vaginal or anal penetration, but they are also used variously for clitoral and breast stimulation as well as spanking. In other instances, Annie and Nibbil require no objects to achieve sexual pleasure with one another. Therefore, I would argue that although Small Favors presents sexual scenarios in which the lovers use sex toys, it does not privilege a phallocentric understanding of female pleasure being
dependent upon vaginal penetration and instead complicates the sexual concept of penetration itself. As Ann Cvetkovich argues in “Recasting Receptivity: Femme Sexualities,”

different kinds of penetration mean different things, a complexity sometimes effaced in a phallocentric culture that assumes that only penises do the penetrating, or that only vaginas are meant to be penetrated (thus, for example, rendering the anus/asshole a suspect orifice). . . . Lesbian sexuality requires a language for penetration with dildos, fingers, or fists, and it faces the challenge of expanding the erotics of penetrating objects or body parts, which is too often limited to a focus on penises or phallic substitutes. By the same token, an erotics of how different orifices, such as anuses, vaginas, mouths, get fucked would be useful in order to reveal the wide range of ways that getting penetrated is experienced, both physically and symbolically. (133)

In this regard, Small Favors visually articulates an erotics that admires the complexities of lesbian sexuality and desire while embracing hard-core representation that explores the different kinds of pleasure to be found in a wide array of penetrative and non-penetrative sex acts. Indeed, Coover’s “girly porno” comic claims sex between women as a site for polyvalent pleasures that often intersect stimulation of the mind, in the form of fantasy play, with stimulation of the body.

Fantasy play is central to the storyline, and many of the sexual scenarios in Coover’s comic self-reflexively poke fun at certain pornographic tropes with obvious self-awareness, while simultaneously subverting those tropes to achieve queer ends. For instance, in one episode titled “A Bondage Tale,” Nibbil appears in her tiny form strapped naked to a hairbrush, melodramatically railing against her current predicament (Figure 3-12). Here Nibbil hams up the romanticized role of sexually vulnerable damsel in distress awaiting the rescue of a hero[ine], as her over-the-top role-playing cues the reader to the obviously staged nature of the scene. On the following page, this fantasy is humorously deconstructed when Nibbil is left waiting impatiently for someone to appear and ravish her, a clock ticking loudly in the background (Figure 3-13). When Annie finally appears as “Alpha” Annie, clad only in a cape and boots, she presents a visual mockery of superhero machismo in mainstream comics. Annie and Nibbil clearly recognize the slightly ridiculous nature of this kind of fantasy and are cognizant that they are
playing roles within it. Rather than devolving into a violent display of non-consensual sexual aggression, or reinforcing the notion that such abuse is pleasurable, Nibbil is instead presented as deriving pleasure in her vulnerability because she trusts her partner. Annie rewards this trust by fulfilling Nibbil’s fantasy and giving her pleasure rather than taking it for herself.

As a pornographic text, Small Favors places sex center stage in the narrative and thus appropriates romance in some unconventional and inventive ways. On the one hand, Annie and Nibbil have been “bonded together irrevocably” by the Queen of Conscience. This establishes a special relationship between them from the beginning. Although there is no deep narrative development of their relationship on anything other than a sexual level, their behavior toward one another during sex always demonstrates their mutual affection. In addition, when they kiss tiny heart icons often appear, surrounding the couple to visually emphasize their love for each other. Significantly, however, Annie and Nibbil do not keep their relationship restricted to sexual monogamy. In Book Two, they meet another young woman, Sage, who soon joins them in their erotic endeavors. Annie and Nibbil spend the majority of the volume exploring the pleasures that can be had from sex with more than one partner, revealing that their relationship is clearly open to erotic experiences that include other women. Because most mainstream romances, as well as many lesbian romance novels, still tend to operate within a paradigm that privileges monogamy, Small Favors presents a rather radical perspective on romantic relationships that suggests love and sexual desire are not the same thing. Indeed, while Annie and Nibbil are open to exploring their sexual fantasies with other women, their love for one another is something more exclusive. As Annie tells Nibbil when they finally sneak off to be alone, “Nibbil, sex is fun. I really enjoy it. But sometimes I just want to be alone with the girl I love” [emphasis in the original] (82). Following this declaration is a panel that reveals them
sharing a passionate kiss surrounded by a flurry of heart icons in the background once again (Figure 3-14). This conclusion suggests that sexual and romantic monogamy are not necessarily the same thing, nor do they have to go hand in hand; indeed, Coover’s comic demonstrates that desire and love can be interconnected affects, but they are not necessarily co-dependent and can thus function separately.

**Autobiography, Coming-of-Age, and “Real” Lesbian Love**

*Potential*, a 244-page queer bildungsroman in graphic novel format, recounts the junior year of high school for creator Ariel Schrag. Although loaded with teen angst and the social melodramas of everyday high school experience, it is more than just another teenage soap opera. On the one hand a coming-of-age story, it is also a coming-out narrative as Ariel tries to make sense of her increasingly persistent fantasies about and desires for other girls. The autobiographical tale takes readers through a confessional and often highly voyeuristic account of Ariel’s life that is engaging, embarrassing, and moving as Schrag makes herself vulnerable to readers by sharing some of the most personal and painful experiences of her teenage years. *Potential* presents a candid examination of the difficulties Schrag faced as an adolescent in understanding and owning her queer identity and sexuality, offering direct testimony to a specifically lesbian experience in culture that has been ignored in most analyses of the romance genre. In this sense, *Potential* eschews metaphor and suggestion in its depiction of lesbian(s) and emphasizes literalness instead; readers do not to “have to ‘read between the lines’” but instead “encounter lines in which lesbians are there: *out* rather than *between*” (Juhasz 68). At the same time, however, the realism of Schrag’s text operates in conflict and tension with the fantasies Ariel’s character experiences. In the end, *Potential* exposes what the fantasy of romance often conceals in its utopian idealism—that relationships do not always end with a “happily-ever-after,” nor is this always the desirable outcome.
As a graphic novel, *Potential* is able to visually explore with humor and nuance the challenges of coming out as a queer youth. In Ariel’s case, the first difficulty she faces is the discrepancy between her public heterosexual persona and her private/internal erotic self. Caught up in the imperative of what Adrienne Rich has identified as “compulsory heterosexuality,” Ariel begins dating Darren, “the nicest boy imaginable,” (1) despite being constantly bombarded with erotic fantasies about girls. This is illustrated in a humorous panel in which Ariel stands in front of several lockers in her high school, surrounded by naked girls giving her come-hither looks and openly sexual invitations (Figure 3-15). Ariel is confused by these fantasies, anxiously asserting to herself: “I had thought I’d dealt with this problem last year by after much anxiety and disturbance proclaiming myself . . . bi” [emphasis in the original] (2). Her statement here implies that although identifying herself as bisexual, Ariel is really trying to perceive of her sexual identity as “mainly” straight but with an interest in girls she deems to be a “problem” that needs to be solved. Her stream-of-consciousness reflection is comically interrupted when she walks straight into a naked fantasy girl in the next panel (Figure 3-16) who presses her bare breasts in Ariel’s face with a happy smile, proudly exclaiming “I only like girls” [emphasis in the original] (3). As this example shows, her attempts to maintain a straight persona fail when she finds that her fantasies thwart her at every turn—troubling the borders between the real and the imaginary as she understands them.

The persistence of Ariel’s queer erotic fantasies ultimately impels her to embrace her desires for other girls in real life. After a sexually charged encounter with another girl at her school, Ariel finds herself unwilling to ignore her desires any longer. Drawing from the thematic significance of the graphic novel’s title, she muses that “the potential for what more could come was too much to resist” (9). In this instance, the arousal she experiences from an embrace with
another girl is so compelling that she wants to discover where a relationship might take her. Indeed, the “potential” this encounter causes Ariel to fantasize about allows her to embrace her sexuality with enthusiasm, humorously proclaiming “Dykedom here I come! (no pun intended!)” (9). Visually depicted shedding her former self by altering her physical appearance (Figure 3-17), Ariel cuts her hair and dyes it black. This is a powerful gesture in the narrative because it not only marks Ariel’s mental coming out, but also her public coming out. By altering her appearance in a manner she believes will visually reflect her newfound status as a dyke, Ariel demonstrates that she wants her sexuality to be visible to others.

In many respects, Potential locates a provocative tension between the visible and the speakable as it raises epistemological questions about sex. Although Ariel embraces her dyke identity, the narrative illustrates a number of sexual conflicts that arise for her because she is still grounded in a heteronormative view of what constitutes “real” sex—namely, penetrative vaginal intercourse. When she begins dating Sally Jults, Ariel questions her art teacher and “dyke role model,” Ms. Salt, about sex with a tentative and confused—“but two girls can’t have . . . sex . . . ?” [emphasis in the original] (61). Ms. Salt explains that “sex can be lots of things, it can be whatever you want” (62). But Ariel remains unsatisfied, arguing “no, see that’s exactly what I don’t want, there has to be a definition. It’s not fair that straight people get a definition and . . . we . . . don’t!” [emphasis in the original] (62). Ariel seeks out a teacher, as institutional figure of authority, to give her a definition for lesbian sex. At the same time, because Ms. Salt is viewed as a queer adult role model, Ariel hopes to gain the kind of knowledge about sex between women that continues to elude her. However, rather than offering a definitive answer, Ms. Salt’s response reflects a queer understanding of sex that is heterogeneous and open to many different possibilities. This proves frustrating for Ariel, who wants a definition that parallels the
specificity of the institutionally-sanctioned understanding of heterosexual sex. As Rachel P. Maines makes clear in *The Technology of Orgasm*, there is a cultural and institutional tendency to define sex in phallocentric terms that privilege penetrative intercourse: “The androcentric definition of sex as an activity recognizes three essential steps: preparation for penetration (‘foreplay’), penetration, and male orgasm. Sexual activity that does not involve at least the last two has not been popularly or medically (and for that matter legally) regarded as ‘the real thing’” (5). Erotic acts that fall outside these parameters are often treated and perceived as less sexually authentic. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ariel initially has trouble viewing sex between women as “the real thing.” Even though Ms. Salt helpfully tries to explain different ways that women can have sex with other women, Ariel remains skeptical about the authenticity of these acts.

Ariel’s confusion about lesbian sex continues throughout the narrative, revolving more specifically around her knowledge and understanding of her and Sally’s differing sexual needs. During their conversation with Ms. Salt about lesbian sex, Ariel and Sally both demonstrate the limits of their knowledge about one another. In this scene (Figure 3-18), Schrag produces a noticeable tension between the speakable and the visible when Ms. Salt asks the girls, “Well don’t you guys know when other has come or not?” In response to this question, both Ariel and Sally are illustrated looking away from one another in guilty silence. Schrag effectively reveals the tension of this moment by highlighting the girls’ apprehensive body language and the momentary break in conversation. The knowing and embarrassed look they share demonstrates that that they cannot tell whether they are helping each other achieve orgasm during sex. However, their awkward silence shows that despite this awareness both girls are unable or unwilling to put their dissatisfaction into words.
As her relationship with Sally progresses, Ariel finds it increasingly difficult to speak her desires. Although Ariel has decided she is only attracted to girls, Sally expresses fluctuating interest in both men and women. This consequently gives Ariel considerable anxiety about whether she is adequately pleasing her. Lying alone in bed one night, she recalls a passionate kiss she and Sally shared, fantasizing about it as she leisurely begins to masturbate (Figure 3-19). However, her fantasy is suddenly disrupted when she realizes that while she is perfectly satisfied with the erotic gratification she experiences just from sharing a kiss, she is not sure if that is enough for Sally. Ariel believes that if Sally likes having sex with boys then “this would mean, no matter how good the kiss was or how much she [Sally] enjoyed it there was still that ultimate potential she could fulfill with boys and no way she could get there with me” (112). Ariel’s feelings of sexual inferiority make her strive even harder to “to get [Sally] off” for fear that if she does not then she will lose her (112). However, in large part, Ariel seems to think that her inability to bring Sally to orgasm is due to the fact that she does not have a penis. This is most clearly illustrated in the panel in which Ariel imagines, via mental thought balloon, Sally having sex with her previous boyfriend. She even goes so far as to imagine his penis inside Sally’s vagina, which is represented in a crude drawing of disembodied genitals framed by the words “perfect fit” (Figure 3-20). In this scene, Schrag effectively conveys the cultural primacy of the penis as symbol of (hetero)sexual power and agency that works to negate the vagina as a passive organ waiting for penetration. The following panel reinforces this notion as Ariel’s mental fantasy is removed from the frame and her face is highlighted instead—her features grotesquely distorted as she agonizes over what Sally’s interest in boys might mean. She tries to rationalize Sally’s possible desires for sex with a man, telling herself “. . . and she should want it because that’s really what is natural and biology says so . . . and if she thinks about his hard dick between
her legs than [sic] that’s just natural and natural selection is the production and I can’t do that at all!” [emphasis in the original] (111). As this inner dialogue reveals, Ariel still attributes the ability to achieve orgasm with the penis and, since she does not have one, remains convinced that she cannot give Sally the same level of gratification she mythically ascribes to the penis. At the same time, Ariel mimes heteronormative discourse about the “naturalness” of heterosexual desire, seeming to imply that at least unconsciously she associates her queer desires with “unnaturalness.”

Although she attempts to initiate sex with Sally on numerous occasions, Ariel’s efforts become increasingly unsuccessful as Sally starts to rebuff her advances with obvious disinterest. The disintegration of their relationship begins to manifest itself metaphorically in Ariel’s sudden preoccupation with what she calls her “clothes imbalance” (131) when she starts to feel as if none of her attire fits or coordinates properly. Unable and unsure how to directly face the problems she and Sally are having, Ariel becomes obsessed with what she perceives to be an imbalance in her clothing (Figure 3-21), spending a lot of time and energy trying to “fix” the problem. Her misdirected behavior acts as a cover for the problems in her relationship with Sally that she is afraid to address. As she explains, the “attainment of balance had become not only a priority but a necessity that intruded on all else, without it, casualty [sic] and productivity were a joke” (131). Fixing the balance of her attire, however, does not prove to be helpful in solving her bigger relationship problems. In part, Ariel’s inability to confront problems in her relationship stems from her overly dependent need for Sally. As a queer youth living in an increasingly dysfunctional family, Ariel seeks to escape the tension her parents’ impending divorce has created in their household by turning to Sally for comfort and reassurance. Unfortunately, Sally has her own problems, most specifically her consistent sexual confusion and
erotic disinterestedness, and is unable to fulfill Ariel’s fantasy for an idealized and harmonious relationship.

_Potential_ does not end with a “happily-ever-after” scenario. Instead, the conclusion of the narrative intersects with the end of Ariel and Sally’s relationship. For Ariel, this ending is marked by ambivalence. While sad that there is “no more potential” for her and Sally, Ariel also feels a sense of freedom and liberation from the emotional trauma their relationship created (224). In this sense, _Potential_ suggests idealized visions of romantic love obscure the often painful actualities of “real” relationships, which do not always succeed. Although the “potential” between her and Sally has ended, the narrative seems to suggest that there is more potential awaiting Ariel in the future as she continues to pursue the desires she no longer feels conflicted or guilty about. Indeed, at the end, Ariel finally comes to the realization that she is the only one who is capable of finding and achieving happiness for herself—and that happiness, Schrag suggests, is one that is not necessarily dependent upon another person.

**Conclusion**

While the three graphic novels examined in this chapter represent lesbian life and love in very different ways, they are part of a growing and diverse body of lesbian comics that provide queer perspectives on love that resist romantic normativity. At the same time, these texts reflect the creative approaches female comics artists are taking to explore the sexual and somatic politics of representation at the interstices of romance and other genres. The subjective realities and fantasies at the heart of these comics hold even more potency for the ways in which they confront issues of lesbian visibility in the medium of comics and in the romance genre at large. The visibility of lesbian bodies, desires, and lives in these comics works to counter the ways in which they are, as Terry Castle puts it, “‘ghosted’—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself” (Castle 4). Hernandez demonstrates the power of an oppositional female gaze in the visual
representation of lesbian desire, while simultaneously emphasizing the political and sexual agency at stake in the tension between revealing and concealing lesbian bodies. Coover’s contrastingly explicit text presents vivid images of lesbian bodies and lesbian sex in order to deliberately deconstruct heterosexist assumptions about female sexuality and offer an alternative view of lesbian sexuality that is more interested in woman-centered pleasurable possibilities than circumscribed and often phallic erotic limitations. Schrag’s autobiographical narrative pushes at the boundaries between fantasy and reality in order to consider the dangers of utopian romantic visions that privilege the “happily-ever-after” ending, ultimately suggesting that happiness is much more dependent upon achieving subjective understanding of and autonomy over one’s own self than in being with another person. All three texts open up new and exciting terrain for expanding romance scholarship in order to begin conceptualizing and assessing queer women’s experiences in culture in ways that do not render them invisible as romantic desiring subjects and as readers and writers of queer romance.
Figure 3-1. Amy and Temper in the train car. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 37.
Figure 3-3. Temper’s flashback conversations with her mother. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 15.
Figure 3-4. Temper lying drugged and unconscious in her wedding dress. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 30.
Figure 3-6. Temper and Amy become sexually intimate. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 82.
Figure 3-7. Temper experiencing sexual pleasure. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 83.
Figure 3-8. Temper and Amy share a kiss under the night sky. *Clockwork Angels*. Image Comics. © 1999 Lea Hernandez. Page 101.
Figure 3-12. Nibbil hams up the role of the romance heroine in distress. Small Favors Girly Porno Comic Collection: Book One. EROS Comix. © 2002 Colleen Coover & Paul Tobin. Page 51.
Figure 3-16. Ariel starts to wonder if she is only attracted to girls. Potential. Slave Labor Graphics. ©1997 Ariel Schrag. Page 3.
I do believe, that's one of the nicest things I've ever felt....

the potential for what more could come was too much to resist.

I suppose this pretty much finalizes it....

well it's not like being bi was some prize to hold onto!

so with a final fling-

DYKEDOM HERE I COME!

reality reared forth

no pun intended.

CHAPTER 4
GET YOUR (FANTASY) FREAK ON: CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE, TRAUMA, AND AMBIVALENT DESIRES IN THE EROTICA OF ZANE

For both women and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as ‘freaks’ of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent. (27)

—Patricia Hill Collins, Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism

The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex. (63)

—Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume One

As one of the top-selling authors of African-American erotica, the pseudonymous Zane is a compelling example of a writer at the margins who broke into the mainstream via the circulatory powers of online publics. Originally writing erotica stories as a leisure activity, Zane decided to make her work available on the Web in order to share her stories more easily with a network of personal friends. Almost overnight, and quite unexpectedly, her website had received thousands of hits and countless requests for more stories from readers she had never met or expected.¹

Zane’s experience is a clear example of what Henry Jenkins has labeled “convergence culture” at work in the twenty-first century. Media convergence, according to Jenkins, means “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Convergence Culture 2). Jenkins is careful to

¹ In the “Acknowledgements” section of The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth, Zane explains this occurrence: “I wrote my first erotic story in November 1997 and never intended for more than two or three people to ever read it. The exact opposite happened. Everybody read it! Before I knew it, I began to receive numerous e-mails from people wondering if I had written anything else. Within a few days, I completed three other stories and placed them all the Web. Within three weeks after that, my site had accumulated more than eight thousand hits. Needless to say, I was shocked.” (xi)
emphasize that much of this convergence is predicated first and foremost on consumers’ active participation rather than on old models of passive media spectatorship (3). Zane’s rapid transition from obscurity as amateur erotica writer to mainstream, best-selling author occurred in large part due to the processes of convergence that Jenkins describes. Accordingly, when Zane first published her stories on her website, they quickly circulated beyond the intended private space of an intimate circle of friends to a wider amorphous public of unknown online readers as a result of the rapid exchange of online information through non-commercial viral marketing\(^2\) and textual circulation.

One of Zane’s professed objectives is to promote, via her writing, a sexual politics that enables a woman to “do whatever she wants [sexually] as long as it is not illegal and does not harm or infringe on the rights of someone else” (*The Sex Chronicles* xii). I would argue, however, that her erotica has a difficult time negotiating a radical sexual politics. As one might expect, promiscuity and hyperbolic sexuality, as keystones of the erotica genre, are central to Zane’s work. In many respects, these narrative conventions serve as the obligatory motivation for myriad sexual encounters between characters in the novels. At the same time, however, hypersexual desire and sexual excess—although portrayed as “hot” fantasies in the context of the sex scenes themselves—ultimately become pathologized in the resolution of the narratives as a whole. Consequently, Zane’s erotica exhibits a marked ambivalence toward its ideal of sexual liberation and its desire to demythologize longstanding cultural discourse that conflates blackness with deviant sexual excess. In order to examine these inherent tensions within Zane’s erotica, this chapter focuses on two of her novels—*Addicted* and *Nervous*—that encapsulate

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\(^2\) Jenkins defines viral marketing as “forms of promotion that depend on consumers passing information or materials on to their friends and families” (*Convergence Culture* 294).
these conflicting attitudes in their discourse about the sex that female characters want, and the sex they think they should be having.

*Addicted* and *Nervous* locate a vision of black female desire that allows for erotic transgression in the realm of fantasy but cautions black women against *acting* upon desires that threaten the heteronormative paradigms of monogamy, family, and true love in their real lives. Those sexual desires that trouble such paradigms are marked by the texts as “freaky”—a term that comes to connote both fear and desire, and which in my reading becomes closely aligned with the theoretical conception of “queer.” Paradoxically positioned as both desirable and loathsome, “freaky” sexuality becomes the nexus around which the narratives build their unresolvable ambivalence toward sexual transgression. Ultimately, the novels try to mediate these contradictory sentiments by employing a confessional framework that simultaneously titillates while working to absolve the main characters’ feelings of guilt for their perceived deviant sexual actions by explaining away their desires and actions as the result of trauma. In this regard, the fantasy of black female desire located in these two novels is one that attempts to reconcile the transgressive with the normative by psychologizing deviancy as a “sickness” that can be “cured” with the help of a medical professional—and for the main characters of these novels, the desire to be cured eventually overwhelms the transient pleasures achieved through their “freaky” sexual escapades because it promises them entrance into or return to the romanticized realm of heterosexual monogamy and true love. As a result, although classified as erotica, these two novels follow a trajectory akin to that of popular romance fiction by privileging sexual fantasies and desires that remain confined to monogamous heterosexual lovers.

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In the context of this chapter, I am invoking Judith Halberstam’s articulation of “queer” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* as referring to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). For Halberstam, thinking about concepts of queer time allow for “new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but non essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects” (6).
and pathologizing those desires and acts which occur outside of the socially acceptable confines of normativity.

Thus, although the novels certainly branch out from the romance genre’s generally tame sexual allowances to explore the more taboo pleasures of masturbation, oral and anal sex, as well as bondage and submission—they still try to argue that these experiences are most gratifying, “safe,” and socially acceptable when had with a monogamous and loving heterosexual partner. However, I would argue that the consistent ambivalence toward the “freaky” within these novels does not completely disappear in the final resolution of the narratives, but lingers to haunt the margins of the texts as a source of continued if vexed desire. Consequently, the confessional framework that organizes *Addicted* and *Nervous* paradoxically works to uphold taboos while never managing to eradicate the desire to transgress such boundaries, even if only at the level of discourse or fantasy. In a demonstrable instance of media convergence, however, the sexual discourse of Zane’s novels does not remain confined to the texts but instead spills over into online spaces, most specifically on Zane’s blog where she dispenses sexual advice to many of her readers. Thus, the final section of this chapter will consider how Zane employs a confessional framework similar to that depicted in her novels and wrestles with many of the same ambivalences toward non-normative transgression in her online (and public) communication with readers.

**Romance, Pornography, and Black Sexual Politics**

Before analyzing Zane’s novels, it is necessary to first consider their positioning as erotica texts in the oppositional spectrum of romance and pornography. While I have already addressed several specific ways in which the boundaries between romance and pornography are
and have always been constructed and notional,⁴ I have not yet considered where erotica fits in this dialectic. Often viewed as a more explicit sub-genre of romance, and alternately as a more artistically acceptable version of pornography, erotica’s liminal position reveals many of the paradoxes behind rigidly separating such genres. As discussed in the Introduction, some romance scholars have argued the ways in which female readers voice a gendered distinction between romance as feminine genre and pornography as masculine genre (Radway 83). In part, this stance was adopted by some romance readers to distinguish between the emotional emphases on love and mutuality believed to be essential to romance, versus the male-centered fantasies of female sexual subordination perceived as hallmarks of mainstream pornography. In this respect, pornography became the obscene genre from which romance tried to separate itself in an effort to resist similar cultural debasement and gain stronger academic and popular legitimization. Similar articulations reappear in the categorical debates surrounding erotica and pornography. In *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* Jane Juffer sums up how the erotica/porn distinction remains partially based on aesthetic claims that “erotica is complex, concerned with developing characters and plots in a manner that shows the struggle between mind and body, eventually resolving it; pornography is predictable, stock, concerned solely with bodies and penetration” (114). On the one hand, this classificatory distinction is also fundamentally tied to a persistent social and cultural legitimization of “the literary—broadly defined—as juxtaposed to the threat of the image” (Juffer 104). The printed word can be artistic, even when describing explicit sex, but the pornographic image is far more threatening and worrisome.⁵ While this has severely limited access and distribution of sexually explicit images, it

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⁴ See Chapter Three

⁵ See chapters Three and Five
has alternatively enabled print literature to push the boundaries of social acceptability in a medium that remains widely available to most readers.\(^6\) As a liminal genre, erotica often incorporates elements attributed to romance and to pornography in ways that illustrate how problematic separating such categories proves to be.

The production of erotica by and for black women, however, necessarily faces a history of racist and primitivist discourse that has constructed negative stereotypes about black hypersexuality. Indeed, as Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, “black people carry the stigma of promiscuity or excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire. This is the sexual deviancy that has both been assigned to Black people and used to construct racism” (97). Attempting to re-imagine black sexuality within the genre of erotica may seem like something of a Catch-22. As a literary medium predicated on sexual excess there is no real way to escape such tropes and still meet the general expectations of the genre. Yet erotica, by virtue of its anticipated content, can become a space in which to explore, question, and conceptualize sexual fantasies, desires, and identities in radical and innovative ways. Hill Collins argues that reclaiming black sexuality is not only necessary to subvert mainstream cultural representations, but also to interrogate some of the internalized racism within the political sphere:

> Sexualized Black bodies seem to be everywhere in contemporary mass media, yet within African American communities, a comprehensive understanding of sexual politics remains elusive. In a social context that routinely depicts men and women of African descent as the embodiment of deviant sexuality, African American politics has remained curiously silent on issues of gender and sexuality. (35)

\(^6\) My assessment remains limited to the context of the United States, in which many books with sexually explicit content are available to readers for purchase in major retail bookstores or loan through extensive public library systems.
Zane’s work registers a palpable awareness of this silence, especially as it relates to African American women, and struggles to challenge imposed boundaries of normativity while also resisting racial stereotypes. However, it is in the tension between reality and fantasy that Zane’s work expresses its deepest ambivalence on these issues. Thus, although Jane Juffer argues that “literary erotica has provided a way for women to explore, under the legitimating auspices of aesthetic discourse, the many different ways to reconcile reality and fantasy, the everyday and the erotic” (105), the ambivalent resolution of Zane’s erotica novels demonstrates the impossibility of regulating reality and fantasy, instead implying that “freaky” desires in particular refuse to be wholly contained or eradicated.

I wish to take up this concept of the “freaky” at this point because it becomes the crux of Zane’s characters’ internalized conflict about what they perceive to be their own deviant sexuality. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, the terms “freak” and “freaky” have had a long and rather vexed history in black culture, their sexual signification explored most commonly in music from Rick James’s “Superfreak” to the more recent “Get Ur Freak On” by Missy Elliot. According to Hill Collins,

the term freak came to permeate popular culture to the point at which it is now intertwined with ideas about sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices. “Freaky” sex now consists of sex outside the boundaries of normality—the kind of ‘kinky’ sexuality invoked by Rick James and other popular artists. As boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality shift, so do the meanings of freaky as well as the practices and people thought to engage in them. The term initially invoked a sexual promiscuity associated with Blackness, but being freaky is no longer restricted to Black people” (120-121).

In Zane’s novels, “freaky” becomes synonymous with the transgressive and non-normative—and hence, in my reading, the queer. Yet, the texts are not entirely comfortable with the queer signification of “freakiness,” as they constantly distance themselves from and are drawn back to the pleasures “freakiness” offers while trying to resist longstanding discourses that conflate
blackness with primitivism and sexual deviance. In the end, Zane’s texts use the framework of trauma and recovery to ultimately reject freakiness, albeit with lingering ambivalence.

Sexual repression, but more particularly the sexual repression of black women and the conflicting attitudes surrounding this issue, is at the heart of Zane’s erotica. African American cultural critic Cheryl Clarke has identified sexual repression as a feature of American culture that takes on a different political and historical dimension for people of color:

Like all Americans, black Americans live in a sexually repressive culture. And we have made all manner of compromise regarding our sexuality in order to live here. We have expended much energy trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved. Unfortunately, many of us have overcompensated and assimilated the Puritan value that sex is for procreation, occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage. . . . Like everyone else in America who is ambivalent in these respects, black folk have to live with the contradictions of this limited sexual system by repressing or closeting any other sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires. (“The Failure to Transform” 199)

Clarke powerfully demonstrates the bind that is created when trying to achieve political and personal legitimization by resisting stereotypes that dehumanize, which in turn engenders a repression of desires or behaviors that might reinforce such racist mythology. Clarke’s invocation of “closeting” any non-heteronormative “sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires” (199) speaks very clearly to the history behind intertwined discourses of race and homosexuality in the United States.

As Siobhan B. Somerville explains in Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture, “the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies” (4). Somerville’s articulation

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7 The first page of The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth opens with a dedication that speaks to female sexual inhibitions: “Dedicated to all of the sexually uninhibited women in the world that are sick of being judged. People always lash out at that which they don’t understand. Do not allow their fears to dictate the choices you make in your life. If we can free our bodies, then we can also free our minds.”
underscores related claims made by both Hill Collins and Clarke—that black political focus on upholding and conforming to heteronormative ideals has long been an effort to distance blackness from deviance and its sexual significations of abnormality and excess. The psychic as well as physical traumas that racist discourse about sexuality has wrought continue haunt black sexual politics, reinforcing Ann Cvetkovich’s idea in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* that “as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion” (3).

The need for more sustained and substantive exploration of black eroticism, although a subject of great disagreement in black nationalist politics, is something upon which most black feminists agree. Significantly, many of these feminist scholars argue that black sexuality and black eroticism should be approached and conceptualized with clear connections to romance. In “The Black Romance,” Belinda Edmondson identifies a political connection with notions of community upliftment expressed in black romance that can foster intersecting discourse about erotic liberation, stating that “romantic stories in the black community have always been about community uplift in their own way . . . navigat[ing] the historic schism between agape and eros, social upliftment and sexuality” (194). For Edmondson, this literary tendency has often tried to separate sexuality from the political aims of equality. She goes on to suggest that, in fact, the erotic has often been treated as taboo and deleterious to the political efforts of black nationalism. Therefore, much like Clarke, she argues the need to break out of this self-imposed taboo in order to reclaim the erotic, and she considers romance as one of the most obvious and effective means of achieving this: “Black eroticism must be legitimated and mainstreamed in the black community by containing it within the black romantic tradition, by wedding it—so to speak—to the social ambitions of the black romance” (194). On the whole, Edmondson sees productive
ways in which articulations of social upliftment and sexual liberation need not be mutually exclusive. In her reading, romance becomes a genre in which to better examine these ideas in dialogue with one another precisely because the erotic has always already been present, if only at a subtextual level. Edmonson’s argument intersects with Cvetkovich’s ideas about the connection between politics and emotion that manifest in the affects of trauma and responses to it. Here, the traumas of racism affect not only black nationalist politics but also black sexual politics. Efforts to sanitize black sexuality that Hill Collins, Clarke, and Edmonson all discuss seem to reflect how the traumas of externalized as well as internalized racism and homophobia continue to affect visions of and possibilities for black eroticism.

One might wonder, however, what particular appeal romance has over other genres or modes, especially since it has often been associated with upholding the gender status quo; I would posit, however, that in most feminist explanations it is the direct emphasis on affect in romance that becomes the focal point of interest and possibility. Coming at these issues from a slightly different angle, Bell Hooks also argues the need for more representations of black sexuality as expressed through romance, but her rationale focuses more specifically on combating the problematic objectification of black women.8 In “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” Hooks implies that one way to reject the “wild woman pornographic myth of black female sexuality created by men in

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8 Hill Collins also discusses the objectification of black bodies, but does not directly suggest that romance may have a politically effective impact on changing these tendencies. The history of she provides, however, is incredibly important in delineating the specifically sexual traumas of objectification that women of African descent experienced. She notes: “The West African slave trade and Southern auction blocks treated both Black women’s and men’s bodies as objects for sale, yet women participated in sexual spectacles to a greater degree than did men, because Western ideas about women and femininity itself have long been more tightly wedded to ideas about women’s physical beauty and sexual attractiveness. . . . Like all women, Black women were objects to be seen, enjoyed, purchased, and used, primarily by White men with money. African women’s sexuality may have piqued the prurient interest of Western audiences, but African men’s sexuality was seen as dangerous and in need of control. Live expressions of Black male sexuality needed to be hidden from White spectators, especially audiences that might contain White women” (30-31).
white supremacist patriarchy” (69) is to connect sexual pleasure with romantic love. She illustrates her point most clearly in a comparative analysis of Tina Turner’s song “What’s Love Go To Do With It” and the music of Aretha Franklin and Anita Baker. Hooks explains:

“What’s Love Got To Do With It” sung by Turner evokes images of the strong bitchified black woman who is on the make. Subordinating the idea of romantic love and praising the use of sex for pleasure as commodity exchange, the song had great appeal for contemporary postmodern culture. It equates pleasure with materiality, making it an object to be sought after, taken, acquired by any means necessary. (69)

Hooks suggests that affect, in the form of romantic love, has a more subversive potential because it resists commodifying sex. Pleasure, instead of centering on the wants of the individual, is far more invested in egalitarian ideals of mutual exchange. Hooks’s ideas echo earlier iterations from Audre Lorde’s famous essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in which Lorde distinguishes between the erotic and the pornographic by arguing that “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (54). While Lorde does not specifically engage with romance or erotica as genres in her discussion, it is clear that she views affect as a fundamental dimension of the erotic and part of its subversive power.

Lorde’s association between the erotic and affect re-emerges in Hooks’s discourse about black sexuality with a stronger emphasis on resisting primitivist views of people of color. Hooks makes this most evident when she compares Tina Turner’s song with the music of Aretha Franklin and Anita Baker:

Contrasted with the representations of wild animalistic sexuality, black female singers like Aretha Franklin and younger contemporaries like Anita Baker fundamentally link romance and sexual pleasure. Aretha, though seen as a victim of nogood men, the classic “woman who loves too much” and leaves the lyrics to prove it, also sang songs of resistance. “Respect” was heard by many black folks, especially black women as a song of challenging black male sexism and female victimization while evoking notions of mutual care and support. (69)
Hooks locates subversive possibilities in these songs that link sexual pleasure with romance, even if the romance does not last, because they critique oppressive forces (often as the cause of romantic failure) and evoke egalitarian and feminist sentiments about love and desire predicated on “mutual care and support.” I bring up these two examples from Hooks because I think they appropriately reflect the competing sentiments toward the erotic that are at stake in Zane’s novels. On the one hand, many of the sexual scenarios depicted in the narratives evoke the rhetoric Hooks sees at work in Tina Turner’s song by “subordinating the idea of romantic love and praising the use of sex for pleasure as commodity exchange” (69). Female characters often seek out sex for libidinal gratification and specifically avoid romantic and emotional attachment for different personal reasons. At the same time, however, as the narratives develop these characters are revealed to still be yearning for mutuality that establishes a direct connection between romance and affect as leading to the ultimate fulfillment of erotic pleasure.

**The Confession, Trauma, and Mediating Queerness**

*Addicted* is the first novel in Zane’s ongoing series that revolves around the different patients of the fictional African American psychiatrist Marcella Spencer.9 The narrative uses a first person point-of-view, which allows the main character, Zoe Reynard, to relate her problems with sexual addiction to Dr. Spencer. The confessional mode, as employed in this novel, functions on two levels. On the one hand, Zoe is confessing to Dr. Spencer within the diegesis of the text so that she may decipher the truth behind Zoe’s addiction and help her overcome it. At the same time, as narrator, Zoe is also confessing to the reader who becomes a privileged listener because she is, at least initially, allowed complete access to Zoe’s actions—not all of which are related to Dr. Spencer. In this sense, the novel is self-reflexively aware in the way it

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9 In the introduction to *Nervous*, Zane tells readers that this the second “in a planned five-book series that features the psychiatrist, Dr. Marcella Spencer” (xiv).
establishes a more intimate address to the reader who, in turn, receives the confession in a slightly different manner—a point to which I shall return shortly. First, however, I would like to consider what Foucault says about the act of confession in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* in order to better understand its function in Zane’s novels. Foucault states:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile . . . a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (62)

In *Addicted*, Dr. Spencer is the authority—read as institutionally sanctioned psychiatric professional—and interlocutor for Zoe’s confession. Zoe achieves a degree of relief in the telling of her story because she believes it will be followed by psychiatric salvation—namely, a “cure” to her self-defined “sex addiction.” Significantly, this ritual of discourse escapes the confines of the exchange between doctor and patient, as the reader also participates in the experience of confessional transmission as a “virtual presence” like that which Foucault describes.

The confessional mode is by no means a new technique to be used in erotic texts. In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* Linda Williams illustrates that the confessional style has long been an integral part of pornographic literature: “In eighteenth-century ‘pornographic’ works as diverse as *Les bijoux indescrêts*, Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*, confessions of sexual pleasure are described with varying degrees of explicitness, but in every case the confession of the woman’s pleasure carries a special, socially satiric or socially subversive, charge” (30-31). Such concentrated emphasis on woman’s confession of pleasure is significant, for as Williams later notes, “in all forms of
pornography the vast majority of speaking has been by men. . . . anyone who looked closely could always tell that these confessions [of female bodies] were written by men for men” (229). Although Zane’s *Addicted* also focuses on the woman’s confession, it is necessary to consider how it produces a more complicated meaning when written by a woman for women. Zane is not the first female erotica author to make use of the confession, but the manner in which it structures the narratives of her novels, *Addicted* and *Nervous*, takes on a reflexive dimension that questions narrative conventions and social norms surrounding the articulation and pursuit of female sexual desires.

Confession, especially of a sexual nature, is typically predicated on particular understandings of taboos and transgression. Let us first consider how this works in the double presence of both the fictional authority figure and the actual reader as recipients of the confession. The reader, who has purchased the text in all likelihood for the expected titillating pleasures it will provide as an erotica novel, is not readily disposed to hear the confession in the same manner as the psychiatrist in the narrative. In point of fact, the text’s first person point-of-view, coupled with the primary function of the text as part of the erotica genre, seeks to position the reader to identify with Zoe, not Dr. Spencer. Yet, in the process of reading the confession, readers are also able to shift identification—enjoying the titillating accounts of sexual transgression while also upholding the regulatory function of the institutional authority that Dr. Spencer embodies. In many respects, deriving pleasure from the confession presented in a text relies upon an understanding of transgression similar to that which Bataille presents in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* when he argues:

We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo, especially at the moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no
longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it. The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. (38-39)

In other words, Bataille establishes a fundamental link between pain, guilt, and pleasure in the process of transgression. One must know and feel that they are doing wrong, even as they cannot resist the transgression, in order to derive a masochistic pleasure from it that also works to uphold the validity of the taboo that has been infringed upon. In Zane’s novels, the confession seems to deliberately set itself up to appeal to the fantasies and desires of the reader herself. At the same time, however, they address potential anxieties and uncertainties about such desires and the pleasures they afford, especially if they require transgressing that which one believes to be prohibited or taboo.

Similar paradoxical functions have been attributed to the popular (heterosexual) romance genre, which erotica often overlaps and intersects with, in regard to the satisfactions it provides for readers. For instance, Modleski argues that “female romantic fantasies” presented in the genre can reveal “the varied and complex strategies women use to adapt to circumscribed lives and to convince themselves that limitations are really opportunities” (Loving 38). For Modleski, interrogating the psychoanalytic import behind anxieties and fantasies in romance is required in order to explain “why women are still requiring what Jameson calls the ‘symbolic satisfactions’ of the texts instead of looking for ‘real’ satisfactions” (29). While I am less inclined to universalize about what such symbolic satisfactions might be or mean, I am far more interested in considering what is at stake when a genre like erotica, which straddles the divide between romance and pornography, can blur the lines between real and symbolic satisfactions.
For instance, Jane Juffer identifies the material ways in which many women seek out erotic texts for educational reasons—looking to them to explain what is sexually acceptable, as well as for more practical strategies for approaching sex—and illustrates where tensions between reality and fantasy emerge: “This negotiation between fantasy and reality becomes particularly complicated given the fact that many women readers of erotica turn to this fictional genre for information about sex, indicating the historical investment in the sexological discourse of the 1970s” (139). At the same time, erotica is often used as masturbatory aid for readers, something that occurs with romance narratives as well, although the prevailing tendency is to avoid discussing this. Stephanie Burley makes this clear in “What's a Nice Girl like You Doing in a Book like This?: Homoerotic Reading and Popular Romance,” when she illuminates the fraught connection between romance reading and physical self-pleasure:

Even when specific physical effects are described by readers, as in pounding hearts and stomachs full of butterflies, the tendency is to turn a demurring eye away from the narrative of embodied physical pleasure. Thus, while every issue of Romantic Times, every romance web site, every cover of every book is laden with sexual content, one important aspect of the sexual experience of reading romance, masturbation, is never mentioned overtly, except by critics of the genre who want to cast romance reading as an illicit, frivolous, or “dirty” activity. (136)

Reluctance to discuss material sexual uses of romance texts suggests a certain scholarly discomfort with the overlap between real and symbolic pleasures that can be derived from texts. Zane’s erotica attempts to reconcile some of the cultural tension surrounding women’s pursuit of real and symbolic sexual satisfactions in its use of the confessional mode to examine fantasy and reality.

Zoe’s confession begins in a manner that sets out to titillate. She meets with Dr. Spencer for the first time claiming that she suffers from sex addiction/nymphomania, already a cliché of pornography, which is threatening to ruin her marriage and her life. From the outset, the narrative sets up the expectation of transgression in the form of adultery. Yet, these expectations
are temporarily thwarted when Zoe is asked to relate her story from the beginning and recounts how she first met and fell in love with her childhood friend and eventual husband, Jason, rather than chronicling her adulterous escapades. This love story, which frames the first part of the novel, is one that does not fit conventional romance expectations. Zoe is the heroine but she is also the sexual aggressor, while Jason instead tries to resist such temptations, wanting to wait until marriage before becoming sexually active. Although she and Jason discover the pleasures of heavy petting as teenagers, Zoe’s confession is largely marked by feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction as well as fears of abnormality.

Zoe’s anxiety revolves primarily around the fact that, from the beginning, her sexual desires are more pronounced than her husband’s. She is the one who always initiates erotic play and soon begins to feel insecure about her sexual desires when she finds it difficult to gain reciprocation from Jason. After a long and fairly chaste adolescent courtship, Zoe is able to orchestrate their first experience with intercourse after the high school prom. Her account of this event is marked by a sharp contrast between fantasy and reality:

The anticipation of making love for hours on end was overwhelming. I had waited so long for the moment to arrive and had envisioned it thousands of times—no, make that millions of times—in my mind. I was expecting us to explore every inch of one another with our hands and tongues, make love in every position known to man, and pass out from pure exhaustion. (82)

Zoe’s mental fantasies about sex are characterized by the excess often attributed to pornography, but at the same time they illustrate a desire for mutuality in achieving erotic pleasure. She is immediately jarred out of the realm of fantasy, however, by a far less pleasurable reality when she and Jason have intercourse for the first time. Rather than providing a titillating pornographic account, her narration resists pleasure for the reader in its visceral description of displeasure and disappointment: “He stuck it in, and it hurt like all hell when my hymen broke. Two minutes and about thirty pumps later, he pulled it out, and I wanted to scream. I lay there, thinking to
myself, 'Is this all I get?"' (83). Although Zoe is able to fulfill her wish to have sex with the man she loves, she ends up being completely dissatisfied and sexually unfulfilled by the experience. She and Jason marry a short time later when Zoe unexpectedly finds herself pregnant as a result of their night together. The novel begins, therefore, after the traditional point of closure in the romance and suggests that what happens after marriage in not always a utopian “happily-ever-after.”

While Zoe constantly reiterates to herself, and to Dr. Spencer, that she is in love with her husband and views him as “the only man” for her, she nevertheless spends many years experiencing a lackluster sex life because Jason cannot bring her to orgasm. Although she tries to get her husband to be more adventurous in the bedroom, Jason refuses to experiment and Zoe begins secretly using sex toys and masturbating in private. Eventually, however, compelled by sexual urges that are never quite fully satisfied, Zoe finds herself embroiled in three simultaneous affairs. As Zoe’s confession continues and moves into the present moment, it becomes clear that the disappointment and frustration of her first sexual experience become recurring sentiments in her dysfunctional sex life with her husband; and the narrative suggests that these dissatisfactions are part of what fuel Zoe’s growing obsession with sex, propelling her into extramarital affairs.

Over the course of the novel, Zoe has several sessions with Dr. Spencer during which the details about two of her affairs come to light. Told in explicit detail, Zoe’s confessed sexual escapades with the auto mechanic, Tyson, and the artist, Quinton, have the fantastical improbability of the pornographic to them insofar as the characters coincidentally meet, are immediately sexually attracted, and cannot resist giving into their uncontrollable desires. Zoe’s style of narration mirrors what Foucault describes in the terms of the confessional exchange
between patient and psychoanalyst: “It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing it, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it” (63). This is the kind of confession that the reader is expecting and which Dr. Spencer urges Zoe to give, frequently requesting more detail and description about the events she recounts, and consequently its purpose in the novel is twofold. Intratextually, it provides the psychiatrist with the information she claims to need in order to understand and decipher the “truth” behind Zoe’s behavior so that she may be “cured.” Extratextually, it provides the reader with detailed pornographic accounts of Zoe’s sexual transgressions, which in this context are not so much meant to be deciphered as enjoyed for their transient erotic appeal.

With Quinton and Tyson, Zoe is free to indulge in every sexual fantasy and desire she has ever had—and more to the point, she is able to achieve orgasm with them because they are willing to focus on her pleasure and experiment in ways her husband refuses. Early on, Zoe explains Jason’s aversion to experimentation in bed during one of her sessions with Dr. Spencer:

He’s very old-fashioned and thinks a man should have total control in the bedroom. Jason believes in very little foreplay. He’ll only have sex with me in the missionary position. He’ll only have sex with the lights off, and he’s totally against oral sex. I brought up the subject of anal sex once, and he almost had a heart attack. (115)

Jason’s sexual prudery reflects a dystopian vision of the heterosexual and patriarchal procreative imperative. In contrast, it is only in her affairs that Zoe is able to act on and fulfill the sexual desires that her repressed husband had previously denigrated as slutty and “freaky.”

*Addicted* takes an ambivalent perspective on freakiness in relation to sexual fantasies and acts. On the one hand, when Zoe embraces her freaky side with her lovers she is able to achieve pleasure she never receives from the regimented sex she has with her husband. With the artist
Quinton, for instance, she experiences the joys of oral sex for the first time. She confides to Dr. Spencer: “I let that man feast on me for a good hour, and unfortunately, I loved every minute of it . . . I couldn’t imagine cumming as many times back to back as I did. I lost count somewhere after twenty. Every time I tried to pull away, he would pull me back down toward him, whispering things like, 'Give me my pussy!' and 'Damn, you taste delicious!'” (132). Zoe is mesmerized not only by the immense polyvalent pleasure of the sexual act itself, but the full reciprocation of her desire by a man who does not see her interest in oral sex as abnormal. In a similar fashion, in her relationship with the auto mechanic Tyson, she learns that she enjoys rough sex with elements of dominance and submission:

I grabbed his face with my hands and slipped him the tongue. It was a brief, rough kiss, but I was in the mood for something rough for a change. When he came up for air, I instructed him, “Rip my panties off!” . . . He spread my legs open and went to work on my pussy. Tyson’s technique was different than Quinton’s. He bit on my clit, and while it was painful, it made me cum almost immediately. I was discovering yet another part of my sexual desires I never knew existed. I discovered I liked it rough. (177)

Although the affairs allow her to explore these desires, which her husband previously labeled as “freaky,” Zoe’s pleasure is disrupted by guilt and fear about the consequences of her actions.

“Freaky” takes on a signification synonymous with theoretical conceptions of “queer,” denoting transgression as Hill Collins suggests, “outside the boundaries of normality” (120). *Addicted* displays a clear tension between a desire to embrace “freakiness” and fulfill sexual fantasies that transgress the norm, and the desire to conform to a romanticized vision of love, monogamy, and adult responsibility.

While Zoe experiences great pleasure during her “freaky” sexual escapades, which are rendered in a manner seeking to titillate the reader as well, she nonetheless always feels guilt and anxiety over her actions after the fact because they threaten the stability of her marriage.
Describing her conflicting feelings after becoming sexually involved with Quinton, Zoe emphasizes pleasure and fear about her sexual excess:

The next six months were filled with confusion, guilt, and a newfound sexual freedom. Quinton took me to heights I had never known physically, and frankly, I became a nymphomaniac. There weren’t enough hours in the day to have sex, and when I wasn’t with Quinton and Jason was ignoring me as usual, I began to masturbate ten times more than usual. . . . My obsession with sex was getting way out of hand, but it was beyond my control. (154)

Zoe’s hyperbolic insatiability tips over into the realm of excess and makes it difficult for her to reconcile her roles as wife and mother with her ever-present and increasingly dominant libido. Consequently, she tries to separate these roles and live two lives at once—the chaste wife and mother at home, and the sexually adventurous “freak” in secret: “I had endured a rough day at the office, and I figured a round or two of hellified sex was just what the doctor ordered. My game plan was to swing by the loft, get my freak on with quickness, and head on home for a night of videos and microwave popcorn with the gang” (169). These efforts at separation, however, prove impossible to uphold indefinitely and Zoe’s fears about her husband discovering her infidelity become more pronounced.

At the same time, despite her frenzied extramarital affairs, Zoe’s feelings of love toward her husband do not change; if anything, they become even more pronounced. As Zoe explains to Dr. Spencer and the reader numerous times, “I still loved my husband more than life itself, and he was the only man I ever truly wanted” (188). However, she painfully admits that her sexual desire for him never seems to be equally reciprocated, stating: “All I ever wanted was for one man to love me, and he does love me. He has loved me all my life. Whenever Jason and I make love, it is like winning the lottery to me, but at the same time, it almost feels like he is just doing me a fuckin’ favor” (194). What Zoe truly wants, as expressed here, is a unification of romantic love and sexual desire in her relationship with her husband. Love as affect is not enough. She
realizes that she also needs bodily affection and the fulfillment of sexual pleasure. Even while having sex with her lovers, she fantasizes about achieving this with her husband, explaining: “I would keep my eyes closed the majority of the time I was with any of them, imagining that their hands and tongues and dicks and other body parts really belonged to Jason, the only true love I had ever known” (226-227). Zoe’s confession to Dr. Spencer at this moment tries to absolve the guilt she experiences in transgressing the bounds of marital fidelity by claiming that even though she was having sex outside of marriage, in truth she really wanted to be having sex with her husband. This explanation, however, falters to some extent when the reader learns about Zoe’s hidden third affair.

While Zoe’s confessions regarding her sexual relationships with Jason, Tyson, and Quinton are told in explicit detail, one of her affairs remains secretive and never fully explained. Although Dr. Spencer and the reader are aware that Zoe has one other lover, the novel does not reveal this individual’s identity until near the end. At this point, the reader learns that Zoe has in fact been having another affair with a neighbor of Quinton’s, a woman named Diamond. What is so intriguing and infinitely problematic about this affair is the fact that it is the only one that is never fully disclosed to the reader, who up to this point has had more intimate access to Zoe’s life than Dr. Spencer. The revelation about Zoe’s third affair becomes the moment at which the queerly signified “freaky” sex that has been a continually vexed site of pleasure, fear, and guilt in the novel transgresses into the realm of same-sex desire. Although it is clear that Zoe tells Dr. Spencer the details about the affair, that actual confession is the only one not presented in the novel. Instead, Zoe merely summarizes what she tells Dr. Spencer in a reflective summary:

I told her about the sexual experiences I had with Diamond after her continual insistence that I try bumping coochies. I told her how I didn’t like it at all and never even touched Diamond but just let her touch me. I told her how my need for affection had gone over the
edge and that I regretted that situation most of all, because I was not and had never been attracted to women (226).

As this hasty explanation seems to imply, Zoe considers having sex with a woman to be the ultimate transgression of “freakiness”—an erotic encounter that finally tips over into the realm of displeasure. More to the point, the fact that this affair unlike the others is not illustrated for the reader with a corresponding sex scene, suggests that when queer desire manifests as same-sex desire it is not even viable as fantasy. Instead, the novel uses the revelation of Zoe’s involvement with Diamond as a pivotal turning point at which to begin the process of returning her character to the realm of normative sexuality ascribed to the domestic space of the home and marriage.

In order to achieve this, Zoe must first confess her actions to Jason and then undergo hypnosis with Dr. Spencer and her colleague Dr. Graham in order to uncover the root or “truth” behind her compulsive sexual behavior. It seems that her precocious sexuality and transgressive longings cannot be an inherent part of her erotic identity, but must instead stem from a trauma that has produced her “freaky” inclinations. In other words, the novel tries to contain Zoe’s desires under the guise of an abnormality that can be medically deciphered and treated. Thus, it is only once Dr. Spencer explains Zoe’s actions to Jason that he is able to accept what has happened. Dr. Spencer convinces him that Zoe must be absolved of wrongdoing because she

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10 I find this rejection of lesbian desire a salient point to consider in relation to the documented homophobia of much African American media and culture (Clarke; Hill Collins; Hooks; Lorde; West). Black lesbian erotica is far less commercial than black heterosexual erotica. However, mainstream authors like Zane have the ability to change these circumstances. Indeed, although _Addicted_ presents a far from supportive stance of same-sex desires, Zane recently edited and published the black lesbian erotica anthology _Purple Panties_ in which she also contributes a story. This anthology has already sparked a great deal of online and public controversy. As Zane indicates in a bulletin on her Myspace page, several African American and other bookstores that have carried her books in the past would not stock or hold book signings for _Purple Panties_. This rejection seems to be primarily due to the lesbian content of the anthology, and the corresponding images of two partially nude black women embracing on the cover. Zane has voiced strong opposition about this homophobia in her online writing, arguing that love and desire are universal whatever a person’s sexual orientation. It remains to be seen how much of an impact this publication will have on expanding the variety of black erotica that is commercially available, but it is at least generating discussion among consumers as well as publishers.
had no control over her actions, which were fueled by psychic “illness.” He tells Zoe afterwards: “We can get past this because I realize you didn’t do it to hurt me, you didn’t do it because you didn’t love me, and I know you never loved any of them. When you told me you were sick that night, I didn’t believe you. Now, after talking to the doctor, I do think you did all of those things for reasons beyond your control” (246-247). This statement seems to echo Foucault’s notion about the function of the authority to whom one confesses, namely the psychoanalyst: “. . . his was a hermeneutic function. With regard to the confession, his power was . . . to constitute a discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment” (67). As Jason’s earlier statement demonstrates, Zoe’s own confession to her husband remains suspect until Dr. Spencer (with the support of a male colleague) deciphers it in medicalized terms as the “truth.”

Truth, however, takes on a troubling valence in the novel’s use of trauma to explain Zoe’s “freaky” desires. Toward the end of *Addicted*, Zoe is made to go through regression hypnosis to uncover the root of her sexual problems. When she comes out of the hypnosis she learns that she has revealed a repressed memory of a time during her childhood when she was molested by several neighborhood teenagers. Once this “truth” has been excavated from Zoe’s mind, Dr. Spencer believes that Zoe is finally able to begin the healing process necessary to recover from her sexual addiction and be reunited with her husband, who in turn resolves to deal with his own sexual hang-ups so that they may both begin developing a sexual partnership based on mutual pleasure. Foucault’s explanation of the medicalization of the effects of confession, seems to be at work here: “Spoken in time, to the proper party, and by the person who was both the bearer of it and the one responsible for it, the truth healed” (67). While I do not want to discount the very real ways in which sexual trauma affects individual sexuality, and how therapy can assist survivors in dealing with its effects, I do want to question how and why trauma is
invoked at the end of this novel to explain and pathologize non-normative desires. The experience of trauma is hastily introduced and then quickly dropped as Zoe and her husband reunite and work on fixing their marriage. At the end of the narrative, Zoe reveals that she is continuing her therapy and has joined a Sex Addicts Anonymous program to deal with her sexual addiction. Zoe’s “freaky” desires do not simply go away, but she tries to regulate and contain them through psychiatric counseling and a changing sexual partnership with her husband. Now that Jason is willing to experiment with her in bed, Zoe is supposedly able to relegate her sexual activity to the domestic confines of monogamous marriage once again. Yet, “freaky” desires and fantasies that question such paradigms still linger in the margins of the novel in what it leaves concealed—most especially Zoe’s affair with Diamond. On the surface, this storyline might appear to be nothing more than a means of exploiting readers’ homophobia to create a crisis point that moves the narrative toward resolution. However, for a novel so invested in uncovering secrets and revealing truths the omission of any concrete details relating to Zoe’s affair with Diamond implies an instance of queerness that is not entirely subsumed within the narrative return to the status quo. Although this affair is ultimately pathologized in the novel’s resolution, it does open a space for readers to begin imagining their own queer “truths” about what this affair could mean.

_Nervous_, the second novel in Zane’s ongoing series about the patients of Dr. Marcella Spencer, continues in the confessional mode although under a slightly different narrative structure. The fluctuating ambivalence toward “freakiness” and normativity expressed in _Addicted_ takes on an even more self-reflexive dimension in _Nervous_, which embodies these opposing desires in the characters of Jonquinette and Jude. The novel opens with two epigraphs that encapsulate this dichotomy:
Life has never been what I expected. I only hope that one day I can live a normal one.

--Jonquinette

Life is a bitch and then you die. What more do you want, heifer?

--Jude

Jonquinette desires and aspires toward achieving normativity in her life, which the novel later demonstrates she associates with heterosexual paradigms of monogamy and marriage, while Jude conversely exhibits a nihilistic view of life as she seeks out whatever transient pleasures she can find. Following these telling epigraphs, the novel opens with a chapter previously published as a short story in *The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth* that inspired the longer novel, and which sets up the provocative context surrounding Jonquinette and Jude for the reader—namely, the fact that they are both in fact the same person. Jonquinette, the main protagonist, is a woman suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). While the reader is aware of that Jonquinette and Jude are the same person, Jonquinette is not immediately conscious of this fact. Although she has always been plagued by disturbing and unexplainable phenomena in her life, such as experiencing mysterious blackouts and being accused of alarming behavior she does not recall, Jonquinette so strongly desires normativity that she fears acknowledging problems she deems abnormal. Eventually, however, she can no longer deny that she needs help and seeks the medical assistance of Dr. Marcella Spencer.

*Nervous* situates the Jonquinette/Jude split as, on one level, an internalized struggle with the virgin/whore dichotomy. Jonquinette, with her rather essentialist desires for heteronormativity, is depicted as a very shy and awkward woman who is extremely “nervous” about almost everything, including men. Jude is her alter-ego, a confident woman who knows what she wants and always gets it. As the reprinted short story that opens the novel demonstrates in its reflective flashback, Jonquinette and Jude share an uneasy coexistence:
I [Jonquinette] had managed to make it all the way through my high school and college years without a single boyfriend. But I was not a virgin by far. The weekends were her time. They were the times that SHE came out into the light. SHE was my wild side, the one who craved to be fucked. SHE was one who felt conversation was never needed, nor were games, because SHE knew within five minutes after SHE laid eyes on a man whether SHE wanted to fuck him or not... I wanted to wait and give my virginity to the man I would ultimately marry. SHE, though, could not wait. (2)

Jude rules Jonquinette’s libido, enacting any and all fantasies or desires she has and ultimately treating sex with a level of calculating self-interest and emotional detachment. Consequently, while Jonquinette dreams of romantic idealizations of courtship and marriage predicated on love, Jude seeks the transient erotic pleasures of anonymous sex with strangers. Jude is always in control in these scenarios, as she chooses the men she wants and seduces them, making them fulfill her desires.

The sexualized opposition between Jonquinette and Jude hearkens back to the work of the most famous literary pornographer, the Marquis de Sade. In her brief, witty study The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History, Angela Carter makes clear how the famous fictional sisters Justine and Juliette function in Sade’s work. Justine is a “gratuitious victim” who clings to a notion of virtue that fails to do her any good:

For Justine’s conception of virtue is a specifically feminine one in that sexual abstinence plays a large part in it. In common speech, a “bad boy” may be a thief, or a drunkard, or a liar, and not necessarily just a womaniser. But a “bad girl” always contains the meaning of a sexually active girl and Justine knows she is good because she does not fuck. When, against her will, she is fucked, she knows she remains good because she does not feel pleasure. (Carter 47-48)

In contrast, Justine’s sister Juliette uses “sexuality as terrorism” in furthering her own personal agenda: “She is rationality personified and leaves no single cell of her brain unused. She will never obey the fallacious promptings of her heart. Her mind functions like a computer programmed to produce two results for herself—financial profit and libidinal gratification” (Carter 79).
Much like Sade’s Justine and Juliette, Jonquinette and her alter-ego Jude embody similarly contrary views of sex. Jonquinette believes in her own personal chastity, still considering herself a virgin who has never so much as dated a man, despite the fact that she somehow “managed to break [her] hymen and even contract one venereal disease” (*Nervous* 50) while in college. Like Sade’s Justine, Jonquinette retains her own sense of virtue because she has no control over Jude’s actions, never remembers these sexual activities, and thus derives no pleasure out of them. Jude, on the other hand, revels in her sexuality and how it can be used to achieve personal satisfaction. Similarly, like Juliette, she is calculating. Jude is driven primarily by the desire for “libidinal gratification” and the desire for control, which become inextricably linked to her sexual needs. From the beginning, the novel sets up Jude as a strong, independent, and tantalizingly irreverent woman.

Although Jonquinette is the one who performs the more conventional confession throughout the novel in her sessions with Dr. Spencer, it is Jude who makes more direct appeals to the audience as she chronicles her sexual adventures and her overall irritation with Jonquinette. For instance, the novel sets up early on the fact that Jonquinette is a reclusive and socially awkward woman who lacks confidence in herself. After rejecting an offer from a female co-worker to go out to a club after work one night, Jonquinette goes home and follows a static routine of eating a healthy dinner, watching TV, showering, and reading a book in bed. The next section opens with the words “Two Hours Later,” followed by an italicized sub-heading indicating that Jude is now the narrator. The reader’s first direct introduction to Jude showcases her personality with catty humor and energy:

What kind of boring sista falls asleep at ten-thirty on a Saturday night? Jon really needed to wake up and smell some strong-ass coffee. We were young, educated, and beautiful. But the way Jon dressed, which I hated, deterred people from figuring out the beautiful
part. I was sick and tired of the ugly-ass, wire-rimmed glasses. I’d broken three pairs and Jon still hadn’t taken the damn hint. (17)

Jude critiques what she perceives as Jonquinette’s frumpy style and general lack of a social life. Her rant functions like a warped version of a pep talk as she identifies those attributes she believes Jonquinette should flaunt and feel confident about. Whenever Jude takes over the psychic reigns of control, she takes pleasure in being seductively dressed, physically poised, and confident as she goes out into the world and pursues her desires.

In her erotic adventures, Jude embraces being a “freak” and promotes this as her primary sexual platform. She explains her philosophy to one of the men she accosts early in the novel:

“Yes, adventure. I enjoy sex in unusual places. The possibility of getting caught, the thrill of someone else watching, just does something to me.”

He grinned. “Sounds kinky.”

“I’m not kinky. Being kinky ain’t shit.”

“Then what are you?”


For Jude, being a “freak” is synonymous with hyperbolic sexual excess as well as with transgressive pleasure. She enjoys the thrill of having sex in public, of being of watched, and the danger of possibly being caught in the act. Behind these articulations, of course, is a level of narrative self-reflexivity that displays the novel’s awareness of the reader who is already “watching” as a voyeur drawn in by the lure of the confession’s incitement to discourse and the vicarious pleasure afforded in receiving “description of the respective postures assumed, gestures, places touched, caresses, the precise moment of pleasure—an entire painstaking review of the sexual act in its very unfolding” (Foucault 19).

Jude’s sexual agency revolves around taking control and wielding erotic power in a systemic heterosexist patriarchal world. For Jude, her sexuality becomes a weapon to use against
or manipulate men for her own gains. Her attitude mirrors, in part, what Angela Carter suggests is fundamental to the success of Sade’s Juliette: “The life of Juliette proposes a method of profane mastery of the instruments of power. She is a woman who acts according to the precepts and also the practice of a man’s world and she does not suffer. Instead, she causes suffering” (79). While Carter would no doubt argue that Sade’s politics are far more radical than Zane’s, there is still a provocative similarity between how both authors’ characters operate. Jude is always in control of the sex that she has. Keenly aware of the heterosexist pornographic imaginary, Jude entices men with sexual provocations that speak to these trite fantasies. Yet, once she has lured them into a liaison, she is always the one who dominates and controls the encounter. In her quest for sexual gratification, Jude displays an almost clinical level of emotional detachment with her partners, as she has no interest in romance, love, or coupledom. Consequently, she allows men temporal access to her body but never to her mind. Jude prefers to keep her sex as anonymous as possible, always withholding her name from the men she fucks. She is driven purely by her libidinal desires and has no interest in what she deems to be useless, “bullshit” conversation:

“Do you want to fuck or talk?” I asked nastily.

“Oh, I definitely want to fuck.”

“Then shut the hell up!”

I took two steps back, released the button on my blazer, and let it fall to the ground. After I was topless, I inched my skirt up and slid my panties down over my hips. I couldn’t see Campbell’s eyes but I could make out his silhouette.

He came closer and tried to kiss me, but I stuffed my panties into his mouth. “Maybe now you’ll be quiet.” I undid his belt and yanked it out of the loops of his pants, ran the end of it over his torso, and walked around him. “Put your hands behind your back.”

Campbell followed my orders and I bound his wrists with the belt. I walked back around to face him, undid his zipper, and lowered his pants around his ankles. . . . I ran my fingers over his chest and pinched his nipple, damn near drawing blood. “You ready for this?”
He nodded and let out a muffled, “Yes.”

“Better be.” (21-22)

As this passage demonstrates, perhaps more than the sex itself, Jude derives satisfaction from being in control. The underlying tone of erotic domination that marks this scene showcases Jude’s power and agency as she forces her partner into submission to her. Campbell is rendered physically vulnerable as Jude gags and binds him. At the same time, by lowering his pants around his ankles, Jude enhances the physicality of his vulnerability by exposing his genitals to her gaze and ultimately her sexual control.

After having sex with Campbell, as with her many other conquests, Jude discards him with palpable disinterestedness. When she refuses to see him again, he cannot understand why:

“Why not?” Campbell wanted to know.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.” I laughed in his face and started for my car. “I felt like doing it, you looked enticing at the moment, you served your purpose, and now it’s over. Get a life!”

Campbell stopped in his tracks and yelled out, “Bitch!”

I turned and leered at him. “I’m not your bitch. If I were you, I’d just walk away before you make me angry. Trust me. You won’t like me when I’m angry.”

He must have taken my threat to heart because he started speed-walking in the opposite direction. Good for him because I was serious as shit about it. I took no drama from anyone. Not even Jon, and if she really started tripping, she would have to find that out the hard way. (24)

Jude’s indifference borders on contempt as she rejects Campbell, articulating a view of him as nothing more than a disposable commodity that she can discard once it has served its purpose. When Campbell responds in anger, she becomes confrontational, threatening him with retaliation, and ultimately retains her position of control in the situation when he is the first to back down and leave. Jude is a character filled with a great deal of rage, which this scene suggests is simmering just below the surface and ready to erupt at any moment. It is noteworthy
that, after this argument with Campbell, the narrative reveals just how well Jude can make good on her threats when it presents a flashback of Jude’s violent retaliation against a group of second grade girls who cruelly bullied Jonquinette in school. In this flashback, Jude takes over to protect and avenge Jonquinette in a moment of extreme rage and violence when she corners the bullies in a bathroom and attacks them with a ceramic toilet top. This flashback is followed by several others in which Jude takes over at critical moments in the past when Jonquinette was threatened or mistreated by others. The reader quickly learns that despite her harsh criticisms against Jonquinette, Jude in fact acts as a protector personality.

Jude is well aware of Jonquinette’s aspirations toward a heteronormative romance, however, she refuses to allow Jonquinette to pursue a monogamous relationship. In the past, Jonquinette’s overall timidity and insecurity created an effective barricade to such possibilities, but early in the novel Jude’s security is threatened when Mason, Jonquinette’s new neighbor, arrives on the scene and begins courting her. Jude ponders this scenario, weighing Mason’s physical attractiveness against the problematic consequences of allowing Jonquinette to become involved with him:

Granted, the man looked good. Damn good. If I saw a brotha with honey-almond skin, hazel eyes, and dreads, someplace inconspicuous, it would definitely be on. But this Mason, hunk or not, lived right below us and that shit was out of the question. No serious relationships. Just sex and I was the only one entitled to that. Jon was really tripping lately. First calling up that shrink bitch’s office. Now she was holding actual conversations with men. Something had to be done. Something would be done. I’d worked too hard for control and I’d do whatever it took to keep things just as they were. (45)

For Jude, the fact that Mason lives in the same building is a threat to the anonymous distance she always imposes between herself and her sexual partners. Similarly, the fact that Mason is interested in Jonquinette and begins trying to woo her signals a threatening encroachment on physical and psychic terrain that she believes herself to be in control of.
Not surprisingly, therefore, Jude begins plotting ways in which to sabotage their budding romance. When Mason comes to Jonquinette’s apartment one night, Jude appears and regales Mason with her myriad tales of promiscuity and sexual excess until he leaves in anger and disgust. Jonquinette learns soon after the fact what Jude has done and tries to salvage the relationship by confessing her problem. Rigidly separating herself from Jude’s inclinations, Jonquinette explains that she was not the one who confronted Mason and that she wants to tell him the truth because of her feelings toward him: “I’m very serious. I’m going to say what I have to say and then I’m going to leave you alone. I’m only confessing to all of this because I don’t want you to misconstrue my actual feelings or think you did something to make me act as I have” (180). Jonquinette’s emphasis on affect, her desire that her feelings be understood and that Mason knows she was not trying to hurt his feelings, illustrates her notion of romance as tied to emotion. Her confessional disclosure, however, cannot seem to extricate itself from voyeuristic and libidinal signification. Toward the end of her story, Mason tells Jonquinette “Even though you were acting raunchy and told me about fucking everything that moved, it was strange because I still wanted to be with you. It went against everything I’ve ever believed in, but I still craved you” (182). At this moment, Mason implies a contradictory attraction and repulsion toward the sexually uninhibited Jude who functions as alter-ego to Jonquinette’s more stereotypical embodiment of chaste femininity. Mason asserts that he is going to help Jonquinette deal with her MPD, but his desire to do so does not seem entirely altruistic:

We sat there in Mason’s car for a good while and I started telling him about all the childhood memories, or lack thereof, that I had. He was mesmerized and so was I. To think that he was still talking to me after what Jude had done was all I needed to know to make a final decision. Mason was the man for me. The only man for me. (182)

Mason’s fascination with her story, in addition to his earlier claims of desire despite being repelled by Jude’s “raunchy” behavior, suggest that he has an emotional attraction to
Jonquinette, as an essentialized feminine figure, and a guilty libidinal attraction to Jude, as a wanton self-proclaimed “freak.” Mason claims he is willing to accept this duality, but his almost voyeuristic mesmerization by Jonquinette’s confession brings into question his motives for doing so. Jonquinette, however, is so overwhelmed by his acceptance that she regards it as the ultimate signal that he is “the one” she has been waiting for—someone she can share her life and her self with.

Shortly after this event, Jonquinette and Mason consummate their love for the first time in a scenario that moves away from the transgressive sex depicted in Jude’s adventures and instead returns to the conventions of popular romance. In an extremely clichéd moment, Mason wines and dines Jonquinette before taking her back to his place. As the culmination of his many romantic gestures that evening, he declares his love for her before they share a lengthy session of foreplay. Finally, after Mason has orally pleasured Jonquinette several times, they prepare to have intercourse:

“Are you ready?” he asked me, positioning his dick between my legs.

“I’ve waited all my life for this,” I whispered in his ear. “But I need to say something to you first.”

“What’s that?”

I caressed his cheek. “I’m in love with you also.”

“Do you really mean that, Jonquinette?”

“Yes, I do. I really mean it. I never thought I would find love after all these years. I’d given up. You’ve made me believe that anything is possible.”

He kissed me on the lips. “Anything is possible.”

Without saying another word to each other, Mason entered me and we made love for the first time. I prayed it wouldn’t be the last. (235-236)

In contrast to the other sex scenes in this novel, which all revolve around Jude, this scene ends with a fade to black as it conceals the details of the experience. The confessional re-telling of
this moment romanticizes “making love” with feeling by rendering the rest of this experience private, thus setting it apart from the other more pornographic scenes in the novel. At the same time, however, the rather conventional and clichéd description of Mason and Jonquinette’s romantic dinner date and after-sex lacks the same impact that the full disclosure of Jude’s “freaky” escapades conveys, and thwarts the more obvious expectations of pornographic titillation. Once again, as in *Addicted*, the narrative ambivalence toward normativity and freakiness remains apparent and unresolved in this contrast.

The novel concludes with a grand reveal confessional session, which uncovers the final “truth” of an underlying trauma that Jonquinette has repressed. Since Jonquinette’s blackouts began in childhood, Dr. Spencer determines that her divorced parents must also be present at this session despite the tense relationship Jonquinette shares with them. In contrast to *Addicted*, *Nervous* presents this final confession from Dr. Spencer’s point of view. Dr. Spencer feels certain that if she digs deep enough, she will be able to find and explain the cause of Jonquinette’s Multiple Personality Disorder: “It was time. I was determined not to let Jonquinette and her parents leave my office until I exposed the truth” (263). Dr. Spencer makes good on this promise as she eventually draws out a third personality from Jonquinette’s psyche, who refers to herself as Jetta. When Jetta appears, she reveals that Jonquinette’s father molested her as a child, and that she and Jude came into being in order to safeguard and protect Jonquinette from harm. In the office, her father breaks down and admits that he did molest Jonquinette, and that he too had been molested as a child. When Jonquinette regains control after Jetta returns to the recesses of her psyche, she has difficulty believing that she was abused because she still does not consciously recall this trauma:

Marcella, Momma, and I listened intently as he [her father] described everything he had been through. He said it was a vicious cycle because his father, my grandfather, had been
molested by his own uncle as a child. I still couldn’t imagine not remembering the things my father related in that therapy session. How he would do things to me when Momma wasn’t around, mostly when she was out spending money on things we didn’t need. (273)

The exposure of a hidden trauma at the end of this novel generates many of the same questions I posed earlier in regard to _Addicted_. After being revealed as the “truth” behind Jonquinette’s MPD, the trauma of her molestation is once more pushed to the margins. Jonquinette’s response to learning about her past is one marked by distance. She does not remember what happened and finds it difficult to believe the veracity of Jetta’s utterance as well as her father’s own confession. She does come to acknowledge the “truth” of her trauma, which has been transformed into the discourse of others (Jetta and her father), and tries to forgive her father for what he has done.

The rhetoric of forgiveness, in this context, becomes fundamentally associated with both the religious dimensions of confession and penance, and the medicalized understandings of confession and healing. By confessing his transgressions, Jonquinette’s father gains a certain degree of absolution from his daughter as well as from Dr. Spencer. In part, the novel suggests that his guilt is mediated by the fact that he too was a child victim of the kind of molestation he later perpetuated as an adult. Following his confession, Jonquinette’s father asks for forgiveness and seeks psychiatric counseling. The abrupt manner in which _Nervous_ introduces and tries to resolve Jonquinette’s trauma at the end of the narrative is very similar to _Addicted_, as it pathologizes Jude’s non-normative “freaky” desires and behavior by implying that they are an effect of trauma. Again, I do not wish to trivialize trauma but rather to question how its use in this novel, like the previous one, serves to argue that “freaky” desires are only acceptable when they are the result of psychic “illness” and can be “cured.” In this respect, the novels locate a problematic correlation between trauma and sexual perversity. I am inclined to agree with Ann Cvetkovich when she argues: “I am especially wary of the pathologization of trauma because of its similarity to the pathologization of sexual perversity and sexual identities in the name of
constructing normative identities. The shared origins of trauma and sexual identity in discourses of psychoanalysis suggest the link between the two” (44-45). Zane’s novels reinforce this link in troublesome ways, suggesting a natural inclination toward “freaky” sex on the part of characters would carry a more marked signification of abnormality. However, the abrupt resolution of the recovered trauma and the “cure” to Jonquinette’s MPD leave the reader with more questions than convincing answers. Indeed, Jonquinette ends the novel by alluding to her gradual but successful integration of her personalities. Given Jude’s dominant and compelling presence throughout the narrative, it is difficult to believe that she has been so easily subsumed by the normative personality of Jonquinette. Consequently, her specter still lingers, haunting the psychic margins of the text and posing a significant roadblock to complete resolution of the narrative tension between reality and fantasy, and the normative and queer.

Jane Juffer suggests that normativizing tendencies, such as those in *Addicted* and *Nervous*, are prevalent in women’s erotica, particularly of the heterosexual variety, and that “the seeds of essentialism that characterizes some contemporary women’s literary erotica . . . derive not from the emphasis on the body but from the attempt to ‘normalize’ desire” (72). Juffer demonstrates that a great deal of erotica is characterized by a tendency to try to universalize what desires are acceptable for women, often relying upon essentialist views of what these categories in fact mean. By normalizing certain desires, erotica can also work to pathologize desires that do no fall in the same boundaries. *Addicted* and *Nervous* exhibit this propensity, but with notable moments of ambivalence. As Rana A. Emerson argues in “‘Where My Girls At?’: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos,” such perspectives are common in representations of black female sexuality:

Every day, young Black women face conflicting messages about their sexuality and femininity, as well as their status both in the Black community and society at large. They
must figure out how they should construct and assert their identity as Black women. Therefore, it is not surprising that within the cultural productions of young Black women, themes of contradiction and ambivalence would emerge. (128)

Although Emerson situates her discussion primarily in the medium of music videos, the same argument could indeed be made regarding black women’s erotica. Zane’s novels try to negotiate these tensions by reaching a middle-ground between sexual transgression and normative desire that allows black women to explore diverse erotic desires within the textual realm of fantasy, but not in the real world.11

As a result, “freakiness” outside of monogamous relationships is typically pathologized and punished in Zane’s texts. In Addicted, Zoe’s lovers are eventually marked as dangerous and deviant individuals who threaten the safety of her and her family when she tries to end her affairs. Tyson turns out to be a convicted felon and Quinton a deranged murderer. Even Diamond is punished at the end of the narrative when Quinton murders her. By killing off or incarcerating Zoe’s former lovers and reuniting her with her husband so that she may return to the normative domestic space of home and family, the novel rejects the viability of “freakiness” that refuses to be contained in heterosexual monogamous relationships. At the same time, it suggests that those who reject such paradigms will inevitably meet a bad end—a fate that has long been assigned to queer characters in literature. Nervous, on the other hand, does not need to punish and remove Jude’s lovers because they were always anonymous and distanced to begin with; they never infringed upon the private borders of Jonquinette’s life. However, the fact that Jude is made to (supposedly) disappear at the end once she is integrated into Jonquinette’s normative personality implies that she, at least, has been punished for her “freakiness”. As a

11 Although Zane’s novels rarely mention concerns relating to safe-sex practices, it is possible that some of their cautionary rhetoric about acting upon certain “freaky” desires speaks to real world concerns about the spread of HIV among African American women in recent years.
result, Zane’s novels are far from radical in their sexual politics. However, their moments of ambivalence and contradiction suggest that the novels’ relationship to queerness/“freakiness” is complicated and far from resolved.

Zane’s erotica leaves spaces in which “freakiness” refuses to be expunged or subsumed by the dominant heterosexual paradigms. These spaces provide valuable insight into the ways, as Bell Hooks explains in “Revolutionary Black Women,” that “the black women who speak the most about love and sisterhood are deeply attached to essentialist notions of black female identity that promote a ‘policing’ of anyone who does not conform” (58). The “freaky” fantasies and desires, and the fears and anxieties about them, expressed in Zane’s erotica present a useful site to begin interrogating the sexual traumas of racism and imagining new possibilities of radical sexual subjectivity for black women who are conflicted about a status quo based on the perpetual subordination of their erotic pleasure.

**Sexual Politics and Confessional Discourse in Cyberspace**

As one of the top-selling authors of African American erotica today, Zane rose to fame after discovering an unexpected online public for her work that quickly propelled her into self-publishing her first collection of short stories, *The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth*, in 2000. After selling over 100,000 copies on her own, Zane attracted the interest of mainstream publishers and eventually landed an extremely lucrative publishing contract with Simon and Schuster’s Atria Books. More than a passing fad, Zane’s work has moved from the online margins to the media mainstream in a big way. Warner suggests that “public reflexivity and market reflexivity have been interarticulated in a variety of ways from the beginning” and that the “consciousness of a public” can create “a new and expansive circulation for text commodities” (101). Hence, the commodification of Zane’s erotica stories from free electronic texts to disposable print goods can easily be read as part of this reflexivity at work since it was
primarily due to online circulation that Zane developed such a large following of readers, and thus garnered the interest of commercial publishers. To date Zane’s novels, short stories collections, and edited anthologies have sold more than 2.5 million copies, with many of her titles frequently topping Essence magazine best seller lists for African American literature (Bellafante 9.1). Her work is even extending into other media realms now that Cinemax® has announced plans to produce an erotic television series based on Zane’s novels, which is set to debut September 2008.12 As a specialty television network, Cinemax® caters to a niche market that is likely to intersect with the public Zane’s erotica addresses, inasmuch as it is particularly well known for its softcore adult-themed films produced for adult cable and hotel entertainment channels. Despite the increased commodification and transmedia expansion of her work, public discourse about and circulation of Zane’s erotica still depends on non-commercial as well as commercial reflexivity and exchange. Zane seems acutely aware of this and has not distanced herself or her work from their origins in the online public sphere. In point of fact, Zane has worked to sustain and expand her public of readers with a keen eye toward Internet technology in a Web 2.0 era. She maintains several websites13 that include free links to her first erotica stories and occasional new pieces, a blog in which she dispenses free sex advice to readers14 (which I will discuss shortly), and a social networking site15 that has tens of thousands of listed “friends.”16

12 The show is tentatively titled Zane’s Sex Chronicles. It remains to be seen, however, as to how explicit the show’s content will be given the limitations of television broadcasting.

13 The largest and most popular sites are EroticaNoir.com and BlackGentlemen.com.


16 Social networking sites facilitate circulation at an exponential rate as they foster immediacy as well as direct and indirect interactions between ever-expanding networks of online strangers. Levels of online engagement can vary from mere voyeuristic lurking to email, chat, or even online phoning via applications like Truphone’s Call Me
When I speak of Zane’s readership as an online public, I am drawing from Michael Warner’s conceptualization of publics as I envision them functioning within cyberspace(s). In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner explains that “a public is understood as an ongoing space of encounter for discourse . . . [yet] only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public” (90). Zane’s texts address a public already engaged in intersecting discourse about African American media, pornography, and romance. Her short stories and the website in which they first appeared enabled “an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” (Warner 90) by allowing readers to interact not only with Zane’s erotica but with each other as well via email, message posting, chat rooms, and the sharing of readers’ amateur erotica stories. This proliferation of discourse extends far beyond Zane’s individual texts, speaking to Warner’s idea that “it’s the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration” (97). I would add that media convergence facilitates this process to a growing extent in the online realm.

I want to bring Jenkins’s ideas about convergence, especially his emphasis on participatory culture, into dialogue with Warner here in order to better begin thinking about the discourse dynamics of online publics—a necessary endeavor, because although Warner acknowledges that the Internet may play a role in the continued development or demise of different publics in the twenty-first century, his analysis remains limited and speculative at best. Yet, many of the claims Jenkins makes about convergence culture, with a keener eye toward Internet technology and digital media, seem to echo Warner’s thoughts about publics,

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application on Facebook. Zane’s site features blogtalkradio™ in which she has streaming commentary about her work, her politics, and promotional information about various online chat and call-in discussions she has scheduled to interact with her readers.

17 See *Publics and Counterpublics* pp.97-98
suggesting that Warner’s notions are not antithetical to online adaptation. In particular, just as Jenkins stresses that the circulation of media content “depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (3), so to does Warner argue that “belonging to a public seems to require at least minimal participation, even if it is patient or notional, rather than a permanent state of being. Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member” (71). These articulations are incredibly similar, although Jenkins definitely places more emphasis on the consumptive elements of convergence. However, online public discourse is not separate from this either, and often oscillates between and shows allegiance to both commercial and non-commercial modes of textual circulation and consumption.

Zane’s erotica, although open and accessible to a wide array of readers, consciously positions itself to first address a black heterosexual female audience. Much like early mass-market romances, the narratives are told from the female protagonist’s point-of-view and emphasize black women’s fantasies about and desires for black men.18 As Jane Juffer explains, most erotica written specifically by women for women functions “within a broader genre of what we might call ‘identity erotica’” which creates “a kind of imagined community based on sexual desire and race” (6, 121). Juffer’s notion of an “imagined community” to which texts like Zane’s are inherently positioned as addressing, gains added significance when one considers how readers become aligned around the discourses of sexual desire, gender, and race in the nebulous realm of cyberspace, which is also already “imagined” due to its intrinsically virtual nature. The virtual is also a primary characteristic of publics, which “lacking any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and

18 Although Zane has edited a number of interracial erotica anthologies (such as Caramel Flava, Chocolate Flava, Honey Flava, etc.), these books tend to present narratives about sexual adventures among African American, Latino/a, and Asian characters. Ideals of whiteness, and white characters, do not figure as concepts or objects of desire in the texts.
cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated. They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations” (Warner 88). Warner’s emphasis on transience, fluidity, and the virtual parallel Jenkins’s assertions that participatory culture often relies upon shifting and fluctuating allegiance to different media. Consequently, I would argue that online publics are already enmeshed in modes of media convergence that rely upon participatory culture to sustain their existence. Texts, like “identity erotica” as Juffer defines them, can work to renew and maintain attention in the publics they address. Indeed, as Warner suggests “writing to a public helps to make a world insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it” (91). Zane’s erotica, in its myriad addresses to African American readers, already begins to bring a public into being.

Zane’s multimedia addresses to her public of readers emphasize participatory and interactive online exchange. This is most evident in Zane’s blog, where readers can find a place to engage in their own confessional discourse or enjoy the voyeuristic pleasures of receiving the confessions of others. Unlike many author blogs that function as diaries chronicling their daily lives and writing experiences, Zane’s blog is a rather intriguing sex advice column. Although not a licensed psychotherapist, Zane takes up the mantle of her fictional character Dr. Spencer as she evaluates her fans’ emails soliciting sexual advice. Zane publicly publishes readers’ personal queries, which tend to read as brief confessional texts about relationship and sex problems. Additionally, she responds to these confessions, parsing through the readers’ problems and offering a nugget of wisdom or advice for how to proceed. Much like her novels, this blog produces a voyeuristic space in which to access private confessions made public, this time in the online blogosphere rather than on the printed page. However, there is a new dimension added to this confessional space precisely because the narratives are supposedly based on “real” people
and “real” circumstances. Online readers can interface with these confessions, as well, by posting comments and responses to individual entries/logs, adding to existing, and generating new, discursive threads. Although many of the emails Zane elects to respond to present queries commonly found in sex advice columns, a significant proportion of them take up the discourse of “freakiness” as they articulate transgressive impulses and actions while questioning what constitutes normative sexuality.

The ambivalence I have identified in Zane’s erotica manifests in her blog as well, but there is noticeable room for negotiation as readers are allowed the opportunity to agree or disagree with the advice Zane publishes.19 In this blog, Zane articulates a more outspoken support for LGBTQ equality and often answers emails from readers who are not heterosexual. Take for instance this recent October 7, 2008 entry:

Dear Zane,

I just read something of yours on how to please your man. Unfortunately, that doesn't apply to me in that matter because I am a lesbian. So I have a few questions for you and I hope that maybe you can help me out. First off, my lover and I have been together for four years now and the sex is slowly drifting away. We are not really turned on by each other, or should I say, we can't please each other like we used to. When I give her oral sex, I put my all into it. Sometimes she says that it was the bomb and then other times she would say that it was okay. The same goes for me. For some reason, when she is pleasing me while I am on my back or my stomach, it feels really great but I can't have an orgasm! But when I ride her face, it’s all over, because I have the hardest orgasms and it is out of this world. Now my question is, is there something wrong with my body, that I can only have an orgasm while I ride her face? Is there something that I can do to please her better, like try another technique? Also, when we try and use a dildo, (she is the male in the relationship) I can't do it. I believe it is because I have not been with a man in four years. Is there something that I can use or do to make that happen, because she likes to use it? Please help me if you can. I would really appreciate it.

Signed,

The Orgasmic Face Rider (Zane’s Blog)

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19 While Zane seems to have locked the comment function on her main blog site, it is also published through her MySpace page which does allow readers to respond.
This reader’s query directly confronts the limitations of Zane’s erotica in providing educational/practical advice on how women can satisfy their partner and be satisfied in return when that individual is not a man. The blog, therefore, offers readers like this one the chance to challenge the boundaries of Zane’s texts in ways that open the discourse to queerness. Zane’s response, as well, demonstrates a more direct engagement with this issue:

Dear Orgasmic Face Rider,

Believe it or not, this is not the first time that I have received a question like this. Another female emailed me a while back with a similar situation. She could only climax while she was riding her female lover’s face. I do not believe that there is something wrong with you. That is simply what turns you on and it could be because you feel more powerful in that position or because her tongue is able to penetrate you better.

As far as spicing up your sex life, be adventurous. Meet her at the door in fishnets, heels and nothing else. Do role-playing. Experiment with edible products. Ask her what fantasies you can fulfill for her.

In regards to the dildo... if it is uncomfortable for you—if anything is uncomfortable to you when it comes to intimacy—you should not feel forced to engage in it. She will have to understand unless you can find a smaller one that does not hurt you or come up with an alternative solution to a dildo.

Blessings,

Zane (Zane’s Blog)

As this response illustrates, Zane stresses the importance of accepting and not repressing what turns one on, of ensuring that sexual activities are mutual and done with the consent of the parties involved, and of experimenting with one’s fantasies and with those of one’s partner.

Zane does not profess to be an expert about lesbian sex, but instead refers to past inquiries from lesbian readers for guidance in adapting her own heterosexually-informed knowledge of sex.

While Zane appears engaged with and supportive of LGBTQ readers, her blog still promotes monogamy as the only acceptable paradigm for coupling. This is demonstrated in another October 7, 2008 query and response:
Dear Zane,

First, I would like to say that I love your books. I have a situation. I have been married a year in September. I am madly in love with my husband and the sex is great. But, for the past year, I have been craving to be with a woman. I have experienced another woman before, years ago. She wanted a relationship and I did not. We are best friends now and ever since then, this urge has been driving me crazy. Every time I cross paths with an attractive woman, something comes over me. I am in love with nice, rounded breasts and a nice ass. Is something wrong with me? Now most people would ask, what’s the problem? The problem is that my husband is a deacon and we attend church faithfully. I know that it’s wrong but I cannot help the way I feel. My husband jokes about my bisexuality all the time, but he has no idea how I feel. I can’t tell him because he talks about how wrong same sex relationships are. Can you please give me some advice?

Signed,

Wanting to Go Both Ways (Zane’s Blog)

This reader articulates a strong conflict between her desires and the reality of her circumstances. At the same time, she alludes to both internalized and social repression of homosexuality in her life and in her community. Her question, “Is something wrong with me?,” expresses anxiety over possible abnormality and also solicits an answer from Zane who is receiving her confession.

Zane’s response is an ambivalent one:

Dear Wanting to Go Both Ways,

My advice has to be the only advice in this situation but not because I believe that bisexuality or homosexuality is wrong. People are who they are and they should love who they love. I am going to tell you to leave the situation alone because you are a married woman and you have taken vows to be faithful. There is nothing wrong with fantasizing; all normal people do it. However, cheating is never acceptable and even though you are talking about cheating with a woman instead of a man, it is still wrong and the ramifications can be long-standing and harmful. Thus [sic] I would suggest that you confine your sexual activity to being with your husband, unless or until your marriage ends for other reasons.

Blessings,

Zane (Zane’s Blog)

Zane is unequivocal in her stance that cheating is unacceptable, and encourages this reader to only engage in sex with her husband “unless or until” the marriage ends. At the same time, Zane
leaves the possibility open for the reader to pursue her desires should her relationship with her husband end, thus reinforcing her emphasis on monogamy in regards to sex. While Zane does not suggest that the reader’s desires are abnormal, and encourages fantasizing about them, she does argue that transgression, in the form of cheating, is morally wrong. As a result, this response oscillates between the same ambivalent sentiments expressed in Zane’s erotica. Fantasizing about transgressive desires is fine, but acting on them is another story.

I would like to conclude with this example because what is most compelling about it is not Zane’s response, but rather the responses of other readers. Indeed, most of the sixteen comments posted in response to this blog entry disagree with Zane and encourage the reader to explore her desires. Most of the readers, interestingly enough, also expresses an idea that experiencing desire for the same-sex is both common and normal. One poster, who goes by the name “S.D. Denny,” astutely identifies the bigger issues at stake in the query sent by “Wanting to Go Both Ways”: “I feel that she is living a lie because she obviously wants something different. And how long can she continue to live a lie” (Zane’s Blog)? This idea, that Zane’s reader is living a lie in conforming to compulsory heterosexuality, is never directly addressed in Zane’s reply, but S.D. Denny intervenes in the discourse exchange to identify this very real possibility of closeting.

Another commenter, whose handle name is “I Am Me-Beautiful Me,” builds off of S.D. Denny’s response and offers a personal confession/testimony about her own similar experience. She writes:

I was married for 15 years and just recently divorced a year ago. I too had been with a woman prior to our marriage but once I got married I suppressed every urge I had and was a faithful wife. My husband to was in the church, the musician. And although he cheated on me several times I never did in return. . . . I would cry during sex and he [sic] not even know. (Zane’s Blog)

After relating a tale of unsatisfying conformity to compulsory heterosexuality that mirrors the original query, “I Am Me-Beautiful Me” explains that she has now found the happiness and
sexual satisfaction that was elusive to her before by ending her marriage and finding another woman to love. This response more strongly argues the need to be honest about one’s desires, while demonstrating that happiness may lie outside the confines of marriage and heteronormativity. On the whole, as these examples suggest, Zane’s readers often vocalize a stronger understanding of queer concerns and what is at stake in repressing desires that do not adhere to the status quo. Consequently, online spaces like this blog allow for much needed queer counterpublic discourse to begin entering conversations about black sexuality and introducing possibilities for pleasure and personal happiness that have been ignored or rejected in other spaces of discourse.
CHAPTER 5
“STRAIGHT” WOMEN, QUEER TEXTS: BOY-LOVE MANGA AND THE RISE OF A GLOBAL COUNTERPUBLIC

In recent years Japanese manga (comics) have exploded onto the North American comics market, rapidly taking over the graphic novel sections of book and comic stores and generating fans among adolescent audiences.¹ Most comics being translated and published in the U.S. are aimed at this age group and along clear gender lines. “Shonen” comics are considered to be primarily for boys and tend to focus on action and adventure narratives, while “shojo” comics for girls typically present more romantically oriented stories. More than a passing fad, manga have become a firmly established segment of the U.S. publishing industry, and in 2004 total manga sales for the U.S. and Canada were up to $207 million (Memmott 04d). The manga industry in Japan is even larger, with “gross revenues totaling 531 billion yen ($5 billion)” in 2001 (Thorn 169).

Japanese manga are flourishing in North America, but the majority of texts translated and sold are heterosexually oriented despite the fact that there is a wide array of more sexually transgressive manga being published in Japan. Therefore, when Tokyopop, a U.S. publisher of Japanese manga, released several new queer series in the fall of 2003 they took a brave leap in introducing what I will be referring to as “boy-love manga” to the U.S. comics market. As the name suggests, boy-love manga present romantic narratives that visually depict homoerotic love between male protagonists. By and large, these comics are created by and for women. They have a well-established history in Japan and have generated a huge following of female readers, particularly teenage girls. It is their recent emergence on the North American manga market that raises several interesting questions. In particular, how does the transnational circulation of these

¹ Manga are also being published widely in Western Europe, but for the sake of scope I am confining my discussion to North America only.
comics require us to consider their popularity in new ways? And how do boy-love manga, by
virtue of their queer content, work subversively within a more global context?

To clarify my terms, in this chapter I will be using “boy-love manga” as a larger all-
compassing genre term, while distinguishing between the two separate categories of “shonen-
ai” and “yaoi” that fall under it.² Shonen-ai manga tend to emphasize elaborate romances that
contain imagery more suggestive than sexually explicit. A palpable thread of erotic tension is,
however, present and maintained, predominantly through visual cues such as sudden longing
looks, unexpected caresses, suggestive body language, and intimate kissing scenes. Typical
panels are often erotically charged as readers catch a glimpse of tongue here and a wandering
hand there, ultimately leaving more to the imagination than meets the eye. In contrast, the often
pornographically explicit boy-love manga known as yaoi generally forgo coherent plot
development in favor of using every available opportunity to get the beautiful male characters in
bed together. In fact, “yaoi” is an acronym in Japanese that ironically translates as “no climax,
no punchline, no meaning” (Schodt 37).

Despite the steadily growing publishing market for boy-love manga outside of Japan,
current scholarship has not focused at great length on the increasingly global nature of the
readership or the function and effect of such widespread textual circulation. Mark McLelland

² One of the difficulties with terminology lies in the fact that these words are constantly changing signification in
Japan, and new terms are rapidly being coined to replace old ones. In point of fact, the term ‘shonen-ai’ has
apparently become obsolete in Japan, while ‘yaoi’ has been replaced with ‘Boys’ Love,’ also referred to as ‘BL’.
Internet fan communities appear to be more up to date on these changes than the academic print world, and
Aestheticism.com provides one of the more detailed breakdowns of terms at: http://www.aestheticism.com. For the
purposes of this paper, I will refer to the texts currently published by TokyoPop and their competitors as shonen-ai,
in line with their own advertisement of them as such, and retain yaoi as a contrasting term for more sexually explicit
manga which presses like CPM, Digital Manga, and Kitty Media are all using. This is partly necessary as well
because of the time gap in publication of titles in English speaking countries versus those in Japan, as ours are
generally several years behind. Various English spellings of the term “shonen-ai” exist, but I have chosen to use the
version employed by Tokyopop.
argues that there is a clear distinction between how Japanese and western audiences receive homosexual texts, which necessitates a restricted cultural analysis. He suggests that:

Although Japanese society is no more tolerant of men or women expressing a gay or lesbian identity in real life than many western societies, as a fantasy trope for women male homosexuality is understood to be a beautiful and pure form of romance. Hence, it is possible in Japan for mainstream bookstores to carry many boy-love manga titles (among them classics such as *June* and *B-boy*) that depict stories about love between teenage boys often featuring illustrations of anal sex and fellatio, which can be purchased freely by anyone, including their intended audience of high school girls. Japanese society clearly responds to depictions of male homosexuality in ways very different from societies in the west. (“No Climax” 287-288)

While McLelland is right to point out the fact that Japan has a long artistic tradition of aestheticizing certain male homoerotic relationships as representative of a “beautiful and pure form of romance,” it is also pertinent to consider the ways in which different cultural contexts may actually provide new readings of texts. Indeed, the growing popularity of boy-love manga in the United States suggests that the differences between Japanese and Western readers are not prohibitive to accessing and enjoying these comics.

Our current moment, therefore, seems ripe for a new assessment of boy-love manga and the increasingly global nature of their circulation and readership for several reasons. On the one hand, assessments of the genre have frequently invoked as a key factor in female readers’ interest in these texts the patriarchally oppressive environment in which Japanese women live, and the ways in which female sexuality in Japanese culture is confined to the reproductive function within the sanctioned space of marriage (Aoyama; Behr; Kinsella; McLelland, “The Love”). While this information offers insight into the culturally specific context of Japanese female readers, it can also risk oversimplifying the situation and Japanese women’s responses to it. Nor

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3 Although, I would note here that Joshua Mostow suggests in “The Gender of Wakashu and the Grammar of Desire” that male sexual behavior in earlier periods of Japanese history and artistic production cannot be properly contained within the binary of heterosexual and homosexual, and consequently we “need studies that look critically at the whole range of sexual activity and desire” (70) in previous time periods.
does this cultural information provide an equally accessible frame of reference when considering other readers and other contexts. I would argue, therefore, that the transnational readership of boy-love manga requires new ways of thinking about this phenomenon beyond the confines of Japan. The Internet is already facilitating discourse and textual circulation among fans in different countries, generating what I perceive to be a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature. I will show how this queerness both demonstrates that the readership is not coherent, monolithic, or singular, and opens a discursive space for multiple and fluid readings of boy-love manga to be circulated and shared among an intimate network of strangers around the world.

Despite what I perceive to be the markedly queer content of these comics, U.S. publishers of boy-love manga, like their Japanese counterparts, market and advertise to an audience that is generally characterized as both female and straight. Consequently, when popular media critics investigate this new publishing trend they reach very normative conclusions about boy-love manga. Such is the case with a 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article that concludes with the very safe assurance that these comics, because they are romantic narratives aimed at women, must “portray relationships that are heterosexual at their foundation” (Solomon E3). Not surprisingly, therefore, most considerations of the phenomenon continue to categorize readers of boy-love manga as a group of “straight” women. While some scholars have been quick to point out that readers’ sexual orientation is difficult if not impossible to accurately ascertain, and undoubtedly more complex than publishers believe, there is still a general tendency to refer to the readership as heterosexual (Behr, 25; Kinsella, 117; Mizoguchi, 56; Thorn, 172). Although some have acknowledged the limitations of assessing these texts and their popularity within heterosexual paradigms (Behr; Mizoguchi; McLelland, “No Climax”; Nagaike) there has not been a sustained
discussion of how concepts of queerness might help us to consider how these manga function in a global context. I would like to consider this idea in more detail, by first assessing some of the visual characteristics of boy-love manga and questions of identification and interpretation they necessarily raise.

The gender representations and sexuality visualized in boy-love manga challenge and trouble the belief that these categories are ontologically coherent, contained, and one-dimensional—something that is at the very heart of queerness. For as Eve Sedgewick argues “queer” involves “the open mess of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). In other words, boy-love manga are not simply queer because they depict homoerotic love stories between men, but rather because they ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity. At the same time, erotic fantasies about love between beautiful and often androgynous young men, as depicted in these comics, transgress and queer how and what their supposedly “straight” female readers are expected to fantasize about sexually.

The gender and sexual ambiguities of characters in boy-love manga are rendered visually, generating myriad possibilities for fluid and shifting identifications and interpretations among readers. Lead characters are often highly stylized and drawn to emphasize their beauty and sensuality, which departs from more traditional romance narratives that tend to focus on describing the uber-macho and phallic masculinity of male heroes. While I do acknowledge that this tendency is more particularly a Western one, it is relevant to note that many Japanese manga by and for men reinforce the notion of an idealized man being ultra-masculine and phallic in nature. Female manga artists have been characterized as reacting against this by producing more
androgynous and aesthetically beautiful men (Allison; McLelland, “The Love”). Thus, one might see a “bishonen” (beautiful boy) in a typical boy-love manga with long flowing hair and rather androgynous facial features, wearing stylish clothing that can best be described by contemporary Western standards as metrosexual. As McLelland notes, “characters in these stories are drawn in a style typical of women’s comics: they are androgynous, tall, slim, elfin figures with big eyes, long hair, high cheekbones, and pointed chins” (“No Climax” 277). For example, in Figure 5-1 we see the protagonist (Shuichi Shindo) of Maki Murakami’s *Gravitation* meeting the man he will fall in love with (Yuki Eiri) for the first time. Two entire pages are devoted to this moment, highlighting its significance to the narrative, and the point of view is predominantly from Shuichi’s perspective as he gazes at Yuki. Both characters have delicate facial features that emphasize their large eyes and artfully coiffed hair. No language is necessary here as the images are left to convey the eroticized nature of the moment by themselves. Yuki is highlighted as the central object of desire and we see Shuichi gazing on him with open awe. Indeed, bishonen are often posed in a deliberate manner to engage the viewer’s gaze. This is frequently achieved by taking up an entire page to draw a character in a very carefully staged manner that maximizes his sex appeal. Often flower imagery is drawn in the background or around the border surrounding the framed bishonen to emphasize his beauty. Consequently, although bishonen are superficially gendered male, their very androgynous appearance allows for them to be read inside a variety of different gender and sexual paradigms.

Most notably, there is the very obvious possibility of lesbian desire being encoded within these characters.4 In Figure 5-2, we see the lead characters of Sanami Matoh’s series *Fake*

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4 There is a corresponding genre of girl-love manga in Japan that is often referred to as “shojo-ai” or, for more sexually explicit texts, “yuri.” However, the genre is much smaller and has fewer publications in Japan. Interest in these texts is growing though and in the U.S. AniLesboCon (ALC) Publishing is currently releasing some yuri anthologies with manga from Japanese artists as well as other Western amateur manga artists.
standing in front of a fictionalized New York City backdrop. Dee, the dark haired character, almost appears to be wearing lipstick and has a feminine profile coupled with a more butch haircut. His light haired partner Ryo shares a similar melding of butch-femme/femme-butche physiognomy that upon closer inspection gives the impression that their faces are mirrors of one another. At the same time, the bodies of both characters are obscured by the bulky clothing that they wear and by the segmentation of panels that focus in on their androgynous faces and leave the viewer with great latitude for somatic interpretation. This kind of gender indeterminacy opens up ample space for “perverse” readings (Sedgwick) of these characters that speak not only to possible lesbian desires and fantasies, but also other queer, transgender, and transsexual ones. Shonen-ai manga showcase these possibilities most powerfully, because they do not reveal genital imagery.

Although most shonen-ai manga are more focused on the development of a romantic plot line between male protagonists, sexual desire is not simply “slight or incidental” (Thompson 43) as some popular critics suggest. A successful series like Gravitation relies on sexual innuendo, comedic double entendres, and coded visual references in order to maintain an erotic undercurrent that is not sexually explicit in nature. Such strategies can often be found in traditional romance fiction as well, and readers become familiar with these kinds of tropes and are able to read beyond the surface in order to glean the sexually charged interactions between characters that might otherwise seem innocent. Part of the pleasure in this kind of reading is based precisely on the fact that sex is not in plain view. The visual nature of manga makes this even more powerfully felt, by establishing heightened sexual tension between characters imaginistically. As shown in the images of Shuichi and Yuki kissing (Figure 5-3), bodies are fragmented in each panel deliberately concealing the entirety of what is happening. We do
momentarily catch a glimpse of Yuki’s wandering hand, but in other panels we are only privy to the sight of their faces as they’re kissing while the rest of their bodies remain obscured or hidden. This tantalizing and suggestive imagery leaves a lot to the reader’s imagination, allowing for many different readings, identifications, and stimuli for fantasies.

In contrast, yaoi manga have no qualms about depicting hard-core sex between bishonen that reveal genitalia in explicit detail. These comics raise different questions about the fantasies presented therein and issues of reader identification. On the one hand, the possibility that female readers find voyeuristic pleasure in scenes of anal sex and fellatio between beautiful men challenges the desirability of heteronormative constructs of masculinity, which negatively perceive a male desire to be sexually penetrated, as “a voluntary abandonment of the culturally constructed masculine identity in favor of the culturally constructed feminine one” (Halperin 422). Consequently, sex scenes in yaoi manga have the potential to catalyze certain homophobic fears. Heterosexist understandings of gender generally affirm that being penetrated is de facto disempowering and ultimately feminizing, and that as a result penetration must be performed as an act that asserts power and masculine primacy. Boy-love manga, however, tend to argue visually for the pleasure of both penetrating and being penetrated, and relationships between male characters display equality and mutuality on an emotional level, especially in their erotic moments together.5

Although the narratives emphasize the need for lovers to develop an equal romantic partnership, they do tend to clearly position characters in roles of sexual “top” and “bottom.”

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5 While some sexual power play occurs in certain boy-love manga it is generally playful, and erotic encounters between the main characters are still overwhelmingly marked by tenderness and a mutuality that emphasize the equal importance of both characters’ sexual and emotional needs. However, I must note here that there is a sub-genre of BDSM yaoi for women in Japan. CPM recently brought out the first yaoi manga containing BDSM tendencies in North America when it released Ayano Yamane’s *Finder Series 1: Target in the Finder* in September 2005.
The older male character is usually the sexual instigator and “top” known as the “seme,” while his often younger partner is the “bottom” or “uke” (“No Climax,” 279-280). What I find particularly interesting about the seme-uke dichotomy in boy-love manga is the fact that the possibility of changing roles often serves as a point of teasing humor and even sexual excitement between partners, suggesting that these comics are much more cognizant of the performative nature of such roles than one might first imagine. For instance, in the third volume of Kazuma Kodaka’s *Kizuna* series, which is being published in North America by Be Beautiful, there is a comical erotic moment when Ranmaru initiates sex with his partner Kei, who is the seme. The visually comedic nature of this moment is reflected in the fact that Kei has been unwittingly forced into the position of uke (Figure 5-4). As Ranmaru (the light haired character) becomes more sexually aggressive, the panels humorously focus on Kei’s facial expressions, which range from confusion, mock fear, and disbelief as he mentally questions what is happening with increasing anxiety. Just when it appears that Ranmaru is going to reverse the roles for real, he instead enacts his own penetration and the two exchange teasing banter before proceeding to make love. This particular scenario highlights the culturally constructed nature of sex roles, managing to find humor in them while questioning them at the same time. While *Kizuna* merely plays with the notion of switching sex roles, there is a sub-genre of yaoi in Japan categorized as “reversible” that actually presents reversible couples “who never draw borders between *uke* and *seme* sexualities” (Nagaike 88). But as of yet, only one “reversible” series, Youka Nitta’s *Embracing Love (Haru wo Daiteita)*, is being published in the U.S.6

Despite the fact that the more rigidly upheld seme-uke dichotomy tends to reinforce notions of active/passive sex roles, it is important to emphasize that in general these comics do

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6 The first volume in this series was released by Be Beautiful in September 2005.
not *visually* infuse the role of uke with negative or disempowering connotations. Instead, the uke is often depicted in a state of ecstasy, while his partner is more focused on *giving* him pleasure than simply taking it for himself. In Figure 5-5 from You Asagiri’s *Golden Cain* the uke Shun’s pleasure is highlighted, as we see his head thrown back, eyes closed, and mouth open in a moment of ecstasy. His partner Cain, the seme in the relationship, is revealed in profile only. We cannot see his facial response, only that his eyes are focused on gazing at Shun, watching his pleasure and thus implying that this is important and perhaps necessary for his own sexual gratification. Therefore, in opposition to a one-sided visualization of pleasure that emphasizes the importance of the penetrating partner’s orgasm, a mainstay of heterosexual pornography, yaoi manga are more interested in illustrating both partners’ erotic fulfillment and gratification.

There have been a wide array of approaches to and conclusions about reader/viewer identification with boy-love manga, but they have nonetheless remained focused primarily within a Japanese context. One of my aims here, therefore, is to suggest that the increasingly transnational readership for boy-love manga stymies efforts to make universalizing claims about processes of identification. More particularly, I would argue that one of the fundamentally queer facets of boy-love manga is that they can be read quite differently depending on the subjective lense through which they are viewed. The gender ambiguity and sexual fluidity that I have located at the heart of the visual aesthetics of these comics express a queerness that refuses complete coherence. While these images may be read or perceived quite differently in diverse cultural and artistic contexts, the erotic nature of their content seems to speak intimately to the many desires and fantasies of different women on an increasingly global scale.⁷ For as Akiko

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⁷ McLelland has noted that there are already numerous yaoi websites “in Chinese, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Spanish, although they are vastly outnumbered by those in English” (“No Climax,” 283). This is one compelling example of the increasing transnational popularity of these comics.
Mizoguchi has noted, “fantasies, realities, and representations are always related in yaoi texts, but their relationships are never transparent” (65).

At the same time, transnational readers’ shared investment in queer subcultural texts establishes them as part of a resistant counterpublic, and one that subverts the accustomed expectation of a “romance reading” public of women as only being interested in heterosexist narratives deemed acceptable because they are believed to reinforce the gender status quo. As Michael Warner argues, the discursive exchange of a counterpublic is “structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” (56-57). Perceived by and large as “straight” women, and thus coded as part of a larger “mass” normative public, female readers’ engagement with boy-love manga concurrently positions them as part of a counterpublic resistant to blithely consuming idealized heteronormative media. Referring to the complex and transnational network of readers of boy-love manga as part of a public or, in my view, counterpublic is more efficacious than describing them as an audience. My reasoning here is partly due to the fact that readers often lack the clear specificity of a concrete audience, especially now that these comics are being read across different countries, genders, sexualities, and age groups. Indeed, “a public is always in excess of its known social basis” because the self-organization of a public is “as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse” (Warner 2002, 74; 86). This of course makes it difficult to then quantify and assess a public as social scientists would like to.

Because boy-love manga are erotic in content, they necessarily speak to intimate desires and fantasies, both conscious and unconscious, among readers. How does one quantitatively

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8 As Janice Radway notes in her revised introduction to Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature: “Even the most progressive of recent romance continues to bind female desire to a heterosexuality constructed as the only natural sexual alliance, and thus continue to prescribe patriarchal marriage as the ultimate route to the realization of a mature female subjectivity” (16).
assess individuals’ sexual desires and fantasies? The very intangible and often unconscious nature of such things makes this nigh on impossible, most especially because researchers’ interpretations of such information often affect how it is presented or read. In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam elucidates this point when she paraphrases R.C. Lewontin’s suggestion that “people tend not to be truthful when it comes to reporting on their own sexual behavior (men exaggerate and women downplay, for example), and there are no ways to make allowances for personal distortion within social science methods” (11). While surveys can provide important insight on small groups of individuals, they can never adequately represent the entirety of a large and nebulous public; nor can they ascertain definitive or collective truths about fluid and indistinct fantasies and desires, especially across multiple cultural, linguistic, and national divides. It is my contention therefore that a more productive methodological avenue lies in considering the growing global readership for boy-love manga as a counterpublic that establishes discursive connections between strangers, reflecting their intimate engagements with texts and their differing subjective and cultural contexts for reading boy-love manga. Indeed, not everyone has to read boy-love manga in the same way in order to be part of this counterpublic.

Publics come into being “only in relation to texts and their circulation,” (Warner 66) which is the foundation of boy-love manga readership and fandom. Those who read boy-love manga do not remain passive receivers of the texts. Instead, these comics often act as a gateway to a “concatenation of texts” (Warner 90). Fans begin to create their own doujinshi (fan manga), write their own fiction stories, participate in related areas like slash fandom, ⁹ establish their own

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⁹ Slash fiction is a form of fan fiction writing that originated in the 1970s among female *Star Trek* fans who began writing homoerotic love stories about Kirk and Spock. The term ‘slash’ itself was coined in relation to the tendency to refer to pairings between male characters with a stroke or slash; for example, Kirk/Spock or K/S.
websites, begin their own translation and scanlation projects,
attend anime and manga
corporations, chat in online forums, and so on. The discourse of this rather varied and
increasingly web-based counterpublic relies on shared circuits of textual circulation that often
transcend even the rather obvious constraints of language barriers. Because so much of boy-love
manga requires imagistic reading practices, discourse often happens at the level of shared images
that do not require words. At the same time, the concatenation of texts has also established a
certain degree of shared terminology among all language groups. Words like “yaoi,” “shonen-
ai,” “doujinshi,” “uke,” “seme,” and “bishonen” become part of the collective jargon of this
particular counterpublic discourse, regardless of an individual’s native language.

A great deal of boy-love manga, especially doujinshi created by amateur fans, focuses on
parody—frequently taking prominent male characters from other manga or anime and
developing romantic and sexual relationships between them. This is very similar to the practice
of slash writing, a cross-over area of fandom for many Western readers, although more emphasis
is placed on the visual images than the written content. In boy-love manga narratives the love
between male characters often transcends concerns about gender and sexuality, which tend to be
seen as irrelevant or beside the point. Some critics have noted similar tendencies in slash fiction,
or more particularly the propensity to leave the sexuality of characters open or unresolved and
thus allow for “a much greater range of identification and desire” for readers (Penley,
“Feminism” 488). Although I see boy-love manga narratives as containing radical queer
potential, I do not want to universalize them or suggest that they are queerly or otherwise utopian
and free of problems in their articulations of same-sex desire. Most stories contain moments in

10 “Scanlation” refers to the fan-based practice of translating manga texts into another language (in this case
English) and scanning them online with the translations inserted into the necessary frames and dialogue bubbles of
the comic.
which lead characters express fears or concerns about revealing their relationships, and being labeled as gay and thus socially perceived as feminine in negative ways. What I do want to emphasize here is that characters generally overcome these fears and embrace their love for one another despite what society may think of them, which in my mind is a significant fantasy of resistance.

Unlike slash fiction, a great deal of boy-love manga is commercially published. Many prominent yaoi mangaka (manga artists) began their careers as amateur doujinshi artists who gained enough popularity to begin producing and commercially distributing their own original manga. It is also worth noting here that independently produced doujinshi is frequently sold non-commercially at fan conventions in Japan like the annual Comiket, and that the internet has provided a space for amateur artists in Japan and other countries to share their work with other fans often free of charge. Similarly, “the activity/productivity of dojinshi groups occurs outside the mainstream of Japanese society and economy, rendering it invisible to those studying more conventional forms of production” (Orbaugh 112). Therefore, although the publishing industry for boy-love manga flourishes in Japan and is growing in the United States, non-commercial production and circulation of texts still plays a predominant role in the development of this counterpublic discourse. The Internet has become an incredibly valuable tool for sharing, sometimes illegally, scanlations and images from both published and fan-produced manga. This then allows for a greater concatenation of texts across cultural boundaries so that, for instance, western fans are now producing their own doujinshi narratives in English, some of which are

11 As Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins, and Henry Jenkins articulate in “Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking,” “Slash stories circulate within the private realm of fandom, are published in zines, distributed through the mails, through email, or passed hand to hand among enthusiasts. The noncommercial nature of slash publishing is necessitated by the fact that these stories make unauthorized use of media characters” (10).

12 There are many examples of this, but one of the more popular figures is Ayano Yamane whose work is currently under license to CPM for U.S. publication.
being published by the very newly established Yaoi Press. Similarly, Japanese doujinshi artists are creating boy-love manga for popular English texts like the Harry Potter franchise, demonstrating the artististic and textual appropriations and fusions occurring cross-culturally among fans. These connections also reinforce the crucial importance of technology in broadening the network of fans and their discourse.

Without a doubt, publishers are already aware of this fact. For instance, Tokyopop makes many of its publication decisions based on the desires of the English-speaking fan community. They conduct online surveys regularly on their website to allow fans to vote for and offer suggestions for titles they want published. This requires that fans already be aware of titles currently circulating in Japan, but not yet translated and commercially sold in North America—something they can usually best achieve via internet communication and file sharing. In fact, there are numerous websites in which fans offer up amateur translations, and even scanlations, of texts not yet available in English. Outside of the world-wide web, fans may also participate in various conventions for boy-love manga in Japan; and in the United States there is now an established Yaoi-Con, which takes place each year in San Francisco and offers the chance for fans to meet and share their fan fiction and manga. The Yaoi-Con fosters international relations between fans by inviting a boy-love mangaka as their special guest each year, as well as welcoming attendees from all over the world.

At present, many of the bigger U.S. publishers like Tokyopop have been aggressively marketing all of their manga, shonen-ai titles included, at major bookstores like Barnes and

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14 Other publishers are following Tokyopop’s lead, and most of their websites now have surveys and forms for visitors to fill out that usually ask about what titles they would like to see in future.

15 Yaoi-Con keeps fans updated on upcoming conventions and archives information and pictures from previous years at http://www.yaoicon.com.
Noble, Borders, and Waldenbooks, bringing these comics out of the realm of the internet underground and into the mainstream. Even the more sexually explicit yaoi titles are becoming more widely published and readily available in mainstream bookstores. Central Park Media has launched its very own yaoi publishing line of manga for those 18 and over called “Be Beautiful Manga.” Other publishers like Digital Manga, Kitty Media, Viz, and Dark Horse are quickly leaping on the bandwagon as they become more attuned to the demand among readers. U.S. consumers are evidently buying these texts and in a quantity sufficient to propel other publishers into the foray of boy-love manga at an increasingly rapid rate.

Tokyopop claims that their overall manga readership is about 60% female and, as in Japan, this percentage for their shonen-ai readership is presumably higher given that they are being marketed primarily toward teenage girls (Reid par. 7). However, in the United States strong efforts have been made to restrict teenagers from being able to purchase the more explicit yaoi texts. All of the publishers have not only been shrink-wrapping these graphic novels, but also putting clear warnings on the covers that indicate they are “for adults only” and adding

16 It is significant to note that thus far, the shonen-ai titles have not been separated from other titles, but rather integrated with them. Bookstores are organizing all manga titles together alphabetically in their graphic novels sections.

17 Be Beautiful’s main advertising tagline is “Romantic graphic novels by women…for women.” Information about this line is available at their website: http://www.bebeautifulmanga.com

18 At the time that this article was being prepared for publication several new companies, DramaQueen and Blu Manga, emerged online indicating that they are planning to release a slew of yaoi titles in late fall 2005.

19 According to a recent article in Publisher’s Weekly, boy-love manga titles are indeed selling well. The most recent volume in Viz’s shonen-ai series Descendants of Darkness by Yoko Matsushita, has sold 10, 000 copies a few months after its publication. Digital Manga’s yaoi graphic novel Only the Ring Finger Knows by Satoru Kannagi and Hotaru Odagiri is now in its third printing and has sold more than 12,000 copies. Other Digital Manga titles are also selling in the thousands according to this report, and more titles are set to be released soon (Cha).

20 It is important to note here that Tokyopop also publishes heterosexual manga. Therefore, the overall readership is somewhat more divided. As of yet, the company has not released any statistics specifically about their boy-love manga readership.

21 Not surprisingly, heterosexual romance novels are not policed in the same manner, even though they often contain explicit descriptions of sexual acts.
disclaimers emphasizing that none of the characters depicted are under the age of 18. This is particularly interesting because many characters, due to the androgynous aesthetic of boy-love manga, often appear to be rather young, rendering the distinction between adolescent and adult murky at best save for the reassurance of the publisher’s note. As numerous English-language fan-based yaoi websites and conventions attest, teens are still a large part of this market although they often have to employ covert means of getting copies of more racy texts. As a result, many of them are downloading free boy-love manga scanlations from the internet. The fact that young girls as well as women are reading boy-love manga, challenges Western efforts to maintain a rigid distinction between adult and child sexuality, the latter of which is often denied or strictly policed in order to protect a mythologized ideal of erotic innocence (Kincaid). In contrast, I find it somewhat ironic that teenage girls in Japan can readily buy yaoi manga without the same kind of social constraint. Indeed, “Japanese society has not traditionally made as severe a distinction between adult and child sexuality as has the west” (McLelland, “No Climax” 284).

Precisely because the targeted readership for these comics, especially shonen-ai titles, consists largely of girls who are at a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, they powerfully showcase certain cultural anxieties about sexual control surrounding bodies, and specifically female ones, that do not satisfactorily fit into the child or adult category. Indeed, the counterpublic itself queers such understandings, troubling the lines between adolescent and adult in much the same way it complicates gender and sexual identity among readers and characters in the texts themselves. This in itself is what is presumably so worrying to those who want to enforce these distinctions in order to restrict access to erotic media. As Gayle Rubin has argued, “rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young and attempting to provide for it in a caring and responsible manner, our culture [America] denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by
anyone under the local age of consent . . . [minors] are forbidden to see books, movies, or television in which sexuality is ‘too’ graphically portrayed” (20). In light of such attitudes, technology can become a gateway for shared communication between teens who are part of the boy-love manga counterpublic, while at the same time serving as a restrictive barrier to their parents and other adults who are often unfamiliar with such methods of textual circulation and networking, and who seemingly remain largely unaware of the phenomenon itself. The Internet provides the means for teens to not only access such erotic media as well as the opportunity to create and distribute their own erotic fan fiction and art to others. It also allows them the freedom of anonymity and the potential to construct or present an online identity resistant to social constraints surrounding age, gender, race, class, and sexuality. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that important shifts in how these readers conceptualize and fantasize about love and sex can be observed through their participation in internet communication, discourse, and textual circulation that mark them as part of a global counterpublic.

While U.S. media has begun to take more notice of the popularity of manga among children and teenagers, those texts that belong to the boy-love genre have largely remained below the radar of the more conservative mainstream as yet. Women’s investment in boy-love manga, both here and in other countries, already suggests certain dissatisfactions with the fantasies offered by mainstream media and traditional heteronormative romance. Instead, these comics and the circulation of fan discourse surrounding them seem to project a more promising queer vision of love and desire. For as Judith Butler makes clear in *Undoing Gender*, “in the same way that queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist
that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization” (7). I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this chapter that the cross-cultural and global intersections of the boy-love manga counterpublic make it problematic to theorize about the popularity of these texts by segregating communities of readers along cultural lines. When this occurs, we run the risk of falling into troubling universalizations of those communities of readers that not only ignore their differences within those cultural contexts, but also attempt to explain their individual desires and fantasies in totalizing ways. Examining this phenomenon at the level of counterpublic discourse can offer us new perspective into how boy-love manga has become a compelling site for transnational readership and communication among a growing network of intimate and diverse strangers. It is my contention that the global nature of this counterpublic in fact facilitates subversive queer identifications and desires by generating productive tensions between heterogeneous and incoherent transcultural contexts and the intimate fantasies and engagements of readers that are never fully explicit, accessible, or quantifiable.
Figure 5-1. Shuichi sees Yuki for the first time. *Gravitation*. Vol. 1. TOKYOPOP Inc. © 2002 Maki Murakami. Pages 26-27.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

As media production and consumption continue to evolve and change in convergence culture, so too do the relationships between readers and their texts. Consequently, modes of production, circulation, and consumption of texts must also adapt to meet the fluctuating needs and demands of consumers. Henry Jenkins asserts in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* that

Convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public. (18-19)

Contemporary consumers of romance media are already demonstrating the tendencies Jenkins ascribes to “new” consumers in convergence culture. Migratory behavior and participatory involvement, especially in online spaces, is providing romance readers with access to a variety of media texts that conceive of romance outside of traditional heteronormative bounds. Just as Jenkins argues media producers need to take changes in consumer behavior into consideration if they hope to survive, so too would I argue that romance scholars must examine how “new” romance readers relate the genre and its proliferating media texts in the twenty-first century. Romance readers, as I have demonstrated throughout this project, are often involved in both traditional modes of commercial consumption as well as a variety of non-commercial (and sometimes illegal) types of textual circulation and exchange that are enabled by digital and online technologies. Romance scholars need to branch outside of old epistemological paradigms if they wish to remain attuned to the genre and its readers in our current moment.
Some scholars are becoming more engaged with the cultural shifts I have identified and are opening the discourse in promising ways. It is significant that in 2008 when Tania Modleski published a second edition of her landmark study on romance, *Loving with a Veneange: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, she included a new introduction that directly speaks to some of the critical ways romance has changed since she first published her book in 1982. She notes that the present moment is one that signals the need for new approaches to the genre and its multimedia global dimensions: “. . . I look at a future that is already underway, although I do little more than gesture to the enormous changes that necessitate ever more sophisticated, challenging, and wide-ranging approaches to popular culture in the mass-mediated global economy” (xii). Citing the importance of new media and participatory practices, especially those related to fandom, Modleski calls for critical methodologies that can address these connections between cultural and media changes. *Radicalizing Romance* has attempted to provide one of the first academic interventions into the genre that considers these issues. Although this project’s genesis occurred several years before Modleski’s second edition to *Loving with a Vengeance* appeared, its completion following on the heels of Modleski’s updated edition of her canonical study appears to be extremely timely.\(^1\) While I concur with a number of Modleski’s recent sentiments about the genre and the future of romance scholarship, I deviate from her more heavily psychoanalytic framework in favor of queer theoretical perspectives, which I have argued are fundamental to the future progress of romance scholarship. Queer concepts and texts can enhance feminist research while forcing us to interrogate and question how we define and

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\(^1\) Modleski cites the article version of Chapter Five of this project as an example of relevant scholarship on contemporary changes in romance that takes into account texts as well as readers, while employing a queer perspective that opens new ideas about the pleasures of romance texts.
study the genre and its readers.\(^2\) These issues have been at the heart of this project’s efforts to “radicalize romance” in ways that productively open the discourse by challenging its longstanding heteronormative paradigms. While this book has not been able to cover every instance of romance’s evolution and queering in the twenty-first century, it has located several compelling examples that speak powerfully to the limitations of past research and the necessary directions we must take now and in the future.

In addition to Modleski, a number of current romance scholars have acknowledged the impact of new media on the genre and have even gone so far as to appropriate and utilize some of these forms to conduct and promote their research. In particular, the academic blog *Teach Me Tonight: Musings on Romance Fiction from an Academic Perspective* is run by several contemporary scholars (Sarah S.G. Frantz, Pamela Regis, E.M. Selinger, Laura Vivanco, etc.) who publish regular posts on their research and responses to the work of other academics in the field. The blog site is public and thus accessible to not only scholars but also general readers of romance, many of whom would quickly find this site if they were already regular participants or lurkers\(^3\) in the romance blogosphere.\(^4\) Expanding their resources and allowing for more interactive input, the contributors to the *Teach me Tonight* blog set up the online *Romance Wiki* which has a specific bibliography section on all the major articles and books that have been written about popular romance.\(^5\) By virtue of its format as a wiki, this site enables anyone who

\(^2\) Even Modleski notes that were she to write her book today she “would have to acknowledge the possibility of cross-gender and cross-sexuality identifications” (xviii) in romance reading practices.

\(^3\) A lurker is generally someone who visits and reads blogs, forums, message boards, etc., but rarely participates in the discussions.

\(^4\) As I mentioned in earlier chapters, there are a slew of romance-related blogs run by individual authors, groups of authors, readers and book reviewers, romance literary agents, publishers, and other individuals involved or interested in the genre.

accesses it to contribute and edit content contained therein, including participants in romance-reading publics as well as academics. Other scholars who are conducting social science based ethnographic research are also turning to the web as a space in which to conduct their studies.\(^6\) One advantage of such online or “virtual” ethnography is the ability to study subjects from a variety of different countries by obviating the constraints of geographical boundaries when communicating with them in cyberspace. It is likely that more research of this nature will appear in romance studies in the future. While it remains to be seen if this newer mode of ethnography can overcome some of the limitations I have identified in past methodologies, I believe that there is potential for some of this work to offer relevant contributions to the field by making heard voices previously ignored or marginalized.

As I have tried to show throughout this project, the future of romance does not lead in one finite direction but instead branches out in a growing network of heterogenous possibilities that remain open-ended and variable. Modleski’s new introduction to *Loving with a Vengeance* concludes on a similarly optimistic, albeit cautionary, note when she writes:

We have arrived at a moment in time where, on the one hand, globalization permits the dissemination of mass-produced fantasies to and from far reaches of the planet and where, on the other hand, new media allows the individual to rework a fantasy so it more closely meets her own psychic needs and desires and to send it out into the world to join up and intermingle with fantasies fashioned by others. . . . with so much activity occurring on and between both the micro and macro levels, the possibilities for forging political alliances and for effecting social change seem to be proliferating. It is hoped that scholars will not entirely abandon their analytical skills and political commitments at a time when the future holds such promise. (xxxii)

Modleski’s hope for the unification of critical analysis and political commitment, which she implies marked the early work of feminist scholars of romance, speaks back to her earlier

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\(^6\) For instance, communication studies scholar Dru Pagliossoti recently set up a website (*Yaoi Research*) and wiki to conduct online ethnographic research about yaoi readers across the globe. She has presented on her research findings at several conferences and is currently working toward publishing them.
criticisms against the 1997 Paradoxa special issue on changes in the genre. As the introduction of Radicalizing Romance notes, Modleski critiqued many of the articles in the issue for their utopian idealizations of the genre and lack of scholarly ambivalence or conflict. I think Modleski’s criticisms of that journal issue and her more recent comments are relevant. While I have identified some promising ways in which queer romances and modes of counterpublic participation signal progress toward what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner might describe as the “radical aspirations of queer culture building,” (312) there are still many ways in which non-normative romance texts and their readers display ambivalence, contradiction, and conformity. As we adopt queer methodologies and texts into our studies of romance we must keep in mind Modleski’s warnings lest we presume too much subversive power and effect from romances that resist to varying degrees the heteronormative paradigms of the genre. Nevertheless, like Modleski, I remain optimistic about the future of romance and romance scholarship as I see the genre and its readers expressing fantasies and desires for narratives that present more diverse and ultimately queer visions of sex and love in the twenty-first century.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrea Wood holds a Bachelor of Arts in English literature from McGill University (2000), and an MSc with distinction in English literature from the University of Edinburgh (2001). Her primary research interests are in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) literature and film, transnational visual and new media, popular genres, and feminist and queer theory.