March 2014

Liminal eRoticism: Emerging Forms of Gender Identity and Performance in e-Romances and Their Feminist Electronic Communities

Kerrita K. Mayfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Mayfield, K. K. (2017). Liminal eRoticism: Emerging Forms of Gender Identity and Performance in e-Romances and Their Feminist Electronic Communities. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 14 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.14.1.07>

Liminal eRoticism Emerging Forms of Gender Identity and Performance in e-Romances and Their Feminist Electronic Communities

Kerrita K. Mayfield

In the last 20 years of 'women's literature,' romances' content has grown into postmodern stories whose heroines (and male protagonists) are in a wider array than ever before: Asian-American, Latina, multiracial, women who love women, shapeshifters, women with superpowers, and women who explore the boundaries of being sexually submissive or dominant (Ellora's Cave, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2006; Laws, 2007). When women edit, read, and own Internet-based publishing houses, the electronic format proliferates forms of feminism by producing material that subverts the alpha male domination present in traditional brick-and-mortar romance novels. Furthermore, narratives of female desire and performance are disrupted and legitimated; thus creating powerfully disruptive narratives of gender and gender identity from the social periphery.

This article has three contentions about the social feminism in e-romance novels. First, e-romances are postmodern artifacts; a signpost of socio-sexual and technological advancement that is being increasingly consumed by Third and Fourth Wave generations of romance readers. With almost \$6.7 million dollars of revenues in 2006 alone, the trend of e-publishing at houses founded by women such as Man Love Romance, Wicked Women of Color, and Loose Id are growing in popularity and patronage (Fitzgerald, 2006; Henley, 2007; Schoenberger, 2007). Many sources here will reflect and seek to legitimate femmecentric electronic worlds and voices.

Second, this article examines how women who write e-romances create characters that extol feminist and womanist ideals birthed from the Second Wave of American feminism and its concomitant literature forms. The heroine's relational practices contest the traditional roles of women in "women's literature" like romance novels.

Third, I maintain that the performances of gender and sex role expectations in e-romances are no longer hegemonically constrained by heteronormativity and are performed in fluid liminal spaces. An exemplar of the aforementioned three points is the site The Smut Sluts (2010) who describe themselves as,

SMUT SLUT... smut [*smut*] slut [*slut*]

(plural *smuts*) n [15th century. Origin ?]

(plural *sluts*) n

(1) Uninhibited, Mature, Confident, Intelligent Women

(2) A group of women who exude confidence and relish exploring their sexuality through erotic books, conversation, and bonding. Found primarily in every walk of life. They cross all age barriers. They unite women for the purpose of female empowerment. Tearing down boundaries, passé stereotypes, and building self-esteem in its wake. Women who know what they want and aren't ashamed of it...

Neologisms

The lowercase “e” in “e-romance” represents the erotic nature of the protagonists’ relationships and e-romance’s electronic publishing origins; unifying the themes of electronic and erotic as the material and distribution are intertwined. The “e” signifies the genre’s birth as a technology-driven artifact representative of the postmodern era’s most recent wave of feminism; a form of feminism promulgated in Internet communities like Feministe and Feminist Majority Online among many others. Data tracking applications on websites illustrate the global reach of such internet communities when various users around the globe are shown to have accessed the materials therein. Embedded in the use of the lowercase “e” is resistance to gender norming and the power to create and promulgate communal neologisms. Ellora’s Cave (2004) designates “Romantica” as “containing explicit and frank sexual language...that culminates in a monogamous relationship.” The monogamous relationship here does not mean a traditional heterosexual marriage. Although there are websites, weblogs, and organizations that promote forms of feminism via the Internet, and a growing body of work about the interactions of women, adolescent girls, and feminism on the Internet, this article examines the feminist community that has sprung up around e-romantic literature promoted, disseminated, and published via electronic means.

Let me clarify the term e-romance, then I will explicate my use of postmodernism. E-romance has been legitimated, with some contention, as a subgenre by the Romance Writers of America, despite its focus on non-traditional sexual and social relationships (dePre, June 7, 2006; Romance Writers of America, 2005). “Non-traditional” encompasses nonheteronormative relationships, including cross-dressing partners, ciswomen and cismen¹ who are gender queer. E-romances feature gay, lesbian, trans*, bisexual, or *ménage à trois* romantic protagonists, although e-publishers’ stories also include interracial (IR), May/December, and women who are described as “Rubenesque,” or plus-sized (Ellora’s Cave, 2004). E-romance publishers² differ from brick-and-mortar publishers in that the former are progenitors of the genre who push the social and sexual boundaries of readers, authors, and format. This work focuses on novels or short stories available for online purchase, not material freely available on the Internet as fanfiction (fanfic) or in e-zines.

There are also unique ways to denote relationship dynamics. Among them are M/M and F/F, which denote relationships composed of various configurations of men and women.

Postmodernism in this work is a signifier of technological advance and a social and relational theory. Theoretically, postmodernism explores the idea that there is no unitary “truth” to the world of women, and subsequently, their forms of gender expression (Merriam, 2002). Women are indeed intersectional artifacts whose myriad worlds of home, mother, wife, lover intersect with race, class, social systems, and gender hierarchy (Hill Collins, 1993). Further, womens’ truths are contextual, so investigations of the structures that prop up power relationships reveal how women construct their multiple worlds (Anyon, 1994; Fraser, 2005; McRobbie, 2004). Accompanying leaps in technology, women like McRobbie (2004), Lather (1991, 1992), and Mohanty (2003) elucidate that women’s multiple and global sites of identity are a troubling of existing power paradigms (Jackson, 2003). Accommodated by technology, the resulting gender performances are unique in their rejection of gender as irrevocably binary (Butler, 1990). Further, new modalities of reading and reading formats have irrevocably altered the ways text is consumed. Various forms of technology also change a woman’s access to community, which will be discussed further.

Methodology

This work is part of a larger examination of postmodern forms of feminist power and includes a series of semi-structured e-mail interviews with e-romance author and self-identified feminist Jeanne Laws, who has published award winning e-romance novellas and is active in the e-romance community. Reinharz (1992) recommends that with feminist-oriented practices there also needs to be diverse investigative approaches. As such, Laws allowed me access to her website, writing process, weblog posts, and e-book covers under redesign as additional data. Further, Laws member-checked the initial article draft as another form of feminist validity building (DeVault & Gross, 2012). Reinharz (1992) also notes that a case study’s purpose is to illuminate a case; Jeanne Laws is an ethnically diverse, erudite, heterosexual e-romance author, an articulate feminist and a full-time wife and mother.

Additional data were collected from websites, blogs, open and closed message and topic groups, and other forms of electronic broadcasting, such as the texts themselves. I am seeking a normalization of these women’s electronic products as data and voice (Blackman, 2004).

Postmodern Tools Are Re-Shaping Postmodern Feminist Communities

E-romance’s electronic presence promotes an author’s persona(e) in places such

as a weblog (blog), a website, Twitter feed, Facebook Group, membership in writing or reader groups—communities that exist solely on the Internet and which can only be accessed by electronic means. Readers can join the authors' e-newsletter, can e-mail an author or visit and comment upon their blogs or Facebook Groups, all of which usually require membership or at least the submission of one's Internet identifiers or machine's IP (internet protocol) address. The expanding and elastic electronic community is a habitué for women as e-romance consumers and producers. As many researchers and women know, communities of like-minded women are a powerful economic, political, and social force (Fitzgerald, 2007; hooks, 2000).

While it is clear that not all aspects of the Internet are positive for women (see Doring, 2000; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Lewis, 2012; Straumshein, 2014) and have been so for many years, the Internet is also a rich site for a woman's social power and feminist activism. Women have a variety of hardware and software options for consuming e-romances and dismantling sexist practice. For example, e-romances can be downloaded in HTML (HyperText Markup Language), and PDF (Portable Document Files) formats into portable hardware devices like memory sticks, external hard drives, cell phones, and handheld readers (Schoenberger, 2007). Personal portability also makes it easier for men to consume erotic romances without public embarrassment because consumption is not bound by a reader's location or the gendered traditional brick-and-mortar novel cover.

The method of transmission helps contort the author's identity as it delivers her (or his, or their) message, because users of the medium have come to expect that authors will make themselves as accessible as the medium. For example, if a reader follows Laws from her professional website to her blog, there are links to other e-romance sites where she can be found blogging, cross promoting, or publishing newsletters for her local romance writing group. Site visitation data and reference citations are also accessed from an e-romance author's site—the place where their Internet and e-publishing identities reside. Interestingly, Jeanne Laws is a pseudonym, so for all her 'appearances' as a guest on the Authors of Erotic Romance Website, interviews of fellow e-romance authors, links, blogs and cross-references, whomever 'lives' onscreen is subsequently a postmodern and electronic chimera.

Technology encourages an unknowingness of the author's sexuality, communities, and ethnicity. Traditional authors are physically accessible to their readers because of the need to promote paper books via store visits, romance conventions, and other face-to-face activities. By way of contrast, e-romance authors' photographs seldom appear on the back pages of their work, an expectation few brick-and-mortar novelists eschew.

The Internet has fostered a commonality of language Bourdieu (1963, in Swartz, 1998) contends acts like currency when exchanged within a community of like people. My favorite insider acronyms describe the un-emancipated traditional heroine who is TSTL in pursuit of her HEA, or "too stupid to live" in pursuit of her "happily ever after." The TSTL protagonist represents an archetype at odds with

the heroines (when there is one) in Laws' books. The acronym woman embodies the trope of witlessly waiting to be saved by her man and is reviled because her gender performance and subsequent gendered power is the antithesis of a biometal-engineered rescue astronaut.

Laws' 2006 article for the Los Angeles Romance Association comments upon a workshop she attended which stated that pornography is consumed and produced for male pleasure, without the social and interpersonal interactions found in romance novels. The distinction between the erotic and pornography represents a shift from androcentric pleasure to a femmecentric focus upon what female protagonists, and subsequent readers, desire (Knight, June 8, 2006). In Laurenston's (2004, p.102) story *A Pride Christmas in Brooklyn*, the female protagonist is about to have intercourse on her terms, illustrated by this conversation:

"These jeans new?"
 His head snapped forward. "What?"
 Such urgency flooded his voice, it took all her strength not to bust out laughing.
 "I said are these jeans new? They look new."
 He swallowed. "Um... yeah... got them this morning."
 "Locally?"
 His fingers dug into the metal of her island countertop. Even his claws came out. "Yes."
 "The sweater too?" She tugged on it. "It's nice. I like it."
 He glared down at her. "You're killing me, Desiree."
 "I know, baby."
 "What do you want?"
 "I want you to ask me...nicely."

Desiree is a peer participant instead of an erotic object. The nattering discord about erotica versus romance is really about a woman's illicit demand to pursue sexual pleasure.

The creation and maintenance of power, coupled with sexual and romantic freedom, benefits women outside of the hegemonic mainstream who understand the totality of their lived experiences (Lorde, 2000). In the Third and Fourth Wave tradition, this power warrants scholarly inquiry because women benefit from the exploration of new romantic and gendered identities (Brady & Dentith, 2001).

The Evolving Erotic Stories of Our Second Wave Mothers

The second part of this work explicates how e-romances are an evolution of Second Wave erotic literature and are a harbinger of Fourth Wave forms of feminism. Postmodern e-romance authors would not exist without their Second Wave progenitors. Considering the dominance of the masculine over the feminine and the cultural eroticization of heterosexual relationships; in gaze, the proliferation of androcentric stroke material, and in the subordination of women in socio-economic position; the work of women like Brownmiller (1975), Gilligan (1979), Lorde

(2000), and Weissten (1968) was crucial. Second Wave women challenged the politics, relationships, and even the psychiatry underpinning the status of women in the 1970s and 1980s, and claimed erotic power as sexual relationships became politicized as a site of feminist activism (see for example Butler, 1990 or Jong, 1973). Second Wave feminists also articulated the social and structural distinctions between the erotic and the pornographic (Lorde, 2000; Steinem, 1998). E-romance authors perpetuate the positive roles of women in erotica, although Third Wave pro-pornography and sex-positive feminists like Annie Sprinkle and Julie Simone disagree about the depth and social importance of this distinction to postmodern women and to feminism as a social practice (Harris, 2008).

An RWA survey shows that a plurality, 22%, of romance readers are indeed in the age group to be daughters of the Second Wave, ages 34-44 (RWA, 2005). The other 78% of respondents are dispersed among ages 18 to 60+ (RWA, 2005). Age is part of my claim to Third Wave feminism because of a generational shift in the gender representations of classic 1970s feminist romance fiction. E-romances have evolved from my mother's novels to tell a story of female power that is intriguing in its social reflections.

Crain (1974) presents feminist fiction as a bridge between the worldly woman and the world of women; interrogating the worlds of (heterosexual and married) women in seminal literature like Jong's 1973 *Fear of Flying* or Shulman's 1972 *Memoirs of an ex-Prom Queen*. These novels precede the "chick-lit" literary trend. Crain finds fictional women invested in examining and resisting the disappointing doldrums of their socially approved romantic relationships. Indeed, Crain (1974, p. 59) noted that no feminist novel of the time warranted "critical scrutiny" because these novels were:

. . . too steeped in ideology to pay the elementary respect to human complexity that good fiction demands. Still, the ideology itself—the world of attitudes and ideas, the feminist novel projects—is worth looking into, the more so since the books as a group have not only sold extremely well but also have been widely, respectfully, and even enthusiastically reviewed.

Navigating between the constraints of the romance format, while incorporating the powerful feminist point of view, was an elemental conflict for a feminist author before this electronic form.

If an observer follows some e-romance authors' discussion threads (connected conversations) back to their sites and blogs, there are clear declarations of feminist and womanist ideals. For example, Laws' (2007) website states that she writes about "women with moxie," while Laurenston (2007) idealizes female characters "in touch with [their] inner bitch." Reynolds (2006) states that her goal as a writer is to "create romantic adventures," where the reader will encounter no "passive females." Reynolds continues that she does not want to read about women "who want to be rescued" but instead about women who "embrace life." These authors are disrupting the traditional positioning of the women in a romantic story.

Laws (May 15, 2007a), when asked if she considers herself a feminist author, replied, “I think the last point is important: ‘Feminists may disagree over...the extent to which gender and gender based identities should be questioned and critiqued.’” After quoting Wikipedia,³ she continues,

The romance novel tends to get a bad rap from feminists because the genre for the most part embraces traditional gender roles. One of the main reasons I started to write romance was because of my frustration with the typical romance heroine out there. I found the over abundance of heroines needing to be rescued and 50’s style power differentials unappealing.

Laws uses her writing to talk back to the genre of her Second Wave progenitors by expressing what she desires as a reader and feminist. E-romances promote the socio-sexual expression celebrated by postmodern feminists with a variety of significant social results (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Edut, 2000; Karp & Stoller, 1999; Levy, 2005; Walker, 1995).

Traditional romances are invariably marketed to women, and until recently, so-called chick-lit novels were perceived by brick-and-mortar publishing houses to be a robust postmodern and femmecentric literary form (Dammann, 2008). Like chick-lit, romance novels are defined by the RWA (2002) as “books with the love story as part of the novel.” E-romance authors also consider the sexual expressions and lives of the main characters to be vital narrative frames. Understanding that these consummations occur with an HEA free from stylized female angst is important to framing how these authors’ work embodies feminist social ideals (Knight, June 8, 2006; Laws, May 30, 2007). The e-romance format has grown away from chick-lit’s reliance upon the trope of an anxiety-ridden white middle class 30-something female protagonist as an expression of female power and desirability (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). The women in e-romance novels expand beyond the “no means yes” sexual paradigm found in traditional romance novels, whereas the power differentials in chick-lit books does not guarantee a woman’s ultimate relationship prize, an HEA (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). Nor, of course, is her agency guaranteed. The women in Laws’ books do not feign resistance to their desires. There is not a sense in these novel forms, as in the famed *Bridget Jones* archetype, of a woman eagerly anticipating rescue via her “perfect” man.

Converse to insular chick-lit, Mann and Huffman (2005, p. 57) characterize “the diverse feminisms of the third wave” as a force whose “foci on difference, deconstruction, and decentering” promote inclusion. Inherent in the Third and Fourth Wave is a postmodern rejection of gender binaries and a repudiation of the hegemonic structures that characterize a woman’s sexual experience; a stance supported by Second Wave push-back against the insular former forms of feminism. Instead, a woman’s identity is a construct, an amalgamated artifact of social positioning, social influence, performances of gender, cultural practices and engagement with

a variety of discourses (Cameron, 2005; Mann & Huffman, 2005; Walker, 1995). Or, as Rinda (September 27, 2006, Msg 3) notes in her blog,

...I do think the new popularity of the “kick-ass” heroine; some think that a strong heroine needs the balance of a weaker hero. Uh no. I’ve put down many a book because that just doesn’t ring true for me. Now, this is a personal preference, but I love a book with two strong character [sic] finding balance. I love the push and pull of that strong attraction and see nothing wrong with either character going after what they want – or letting them take turns. (g). [g is shorthand for ‘grin’— a cyber smile].

Social tension around intersecting identities is reflected in commentary by Milan (July 5, 2007, Msg 1). This blog post is about racism in romance paperbacks featuring or written by African-Americans, where these novels are physically shelved separately from mainstream romances in brick-and-mortar stores.

Romance is about love and relationships and the building of community. We’re *better* [emphasis hers] than this, or at least we should be. Some higher-ups out there have decided that we need to be shielded from romance that’s “different.” We shouldn’t let them have the satisfaction of being right. And so I have a pledge: At RWA’s (Romance Writers of America) literacy signing event, for every author I approach who I already know because I found her on the shelves of the mainstream romance section, I will buy a book from one author who I don’t know because she doesn’t get shelved with regular romance. I’m planning on buying a lot of books, and I’ll blog about every one.

Social egalitarianism is facilitated by the electronic medium, which is not only a “first adapter” of new technologies, but also allows women to build communities of like-minded individuals across race and other identities because the format physically disembodies the reader and reconstitutes them around the shared identity of a fan.

A trend that reinforces e-romance’s potential social power is the publication of anthologies whose full or partial profits are donated to national or international social justice organizations or causes. These social reconstruction tomes range from books funding re-exploration of 2008’s anti-gay marriage proposal in California, Proposition 8 (*I Do* and *I Do, Two*), to works whose profits benefit Amnesty International’s global human rights work (*Together at Last*, an IR themed book) or aiding the successful repeal of the federal government’s Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Don’t Pursue legislation by funding the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (*Because of the Brave*), to support of global LGBTQ rights (AllOut.org and *Another Place in Time*).

Expanding Gender Roles and the New Language of Gender Performance in e-Romance

While the heading can be perceived as hyperbole, authors of e-romance create three-dimensional female characters engaged in multiracial, even multi-spe-

cies intercourse, to the expansion of the romance oeuvre. These non-traditional relationships encompass women whose sexual expressions include fetishes and consensual bondage discipline dominance/submission sadomasochism (BDSM), relationships with other women, or committed polyamory. While definitely not true of all e-romances, those stories transcend the chick-lit paradigm where the heroine is bound by social tropes of “appropriate” femininity or heteropatriarchal gender normativity. An example of the abandonment of the socially proscribed desires of an idealized female character is a trilogy of shapeshifter⁴ stories by Shelly Laurenston. In the second book of the trilogy, *Go Fetch* (Laurenston, 2007, p. 30), the female protagonist, ruminates upon her friends’ relationship; musing

... Sara and Zack were definitely an interesting couple. Miki was still recovering from Sara’s call five months before when she excitedly told her friend she and Zack had “done the deed.” Miki thought that meant they’d rushed off to get married. But leave it to Sara... they’d both gone to the hospital and gotten sterilized. Perfectly matched shapeshifters who never wanted to breed. It was kind of sweet in a bizarre paranormal kind of way.

The HEA here is a committed partnership free from future children with no marriage plans for the couple at the close of the series.

E-romance authors espouse ideals where women are free to explore their sexuality with peers. Because some of the aforementioned authors are of African-American heritage, their feminism appears in Womanist form in their multiracial characters.

Not only is the ideology of social feminism (choice, power, equality) espoused, but the articulation of the protagonists’ choices has changed the language of romances. Early Third Wave shifts in femmecentric language altered the connotations of common terms into “womyn,” “gynography,” and “herstory” (Reinharz, 1992). The shift of gender and sex roles away from a heterosexual binary is exemplified by e-romance authors like James Buchanan, a genderqueer author who is a founder of online collective, *Liminal Ink*, a site and blog by a community of authors dedicated to exploring the boundaries of gender identity in “writing, art and publishing.” *Liminal Ink*’s (2010) tagline states that they are

... primarily a writers’ group designed to promote our talent, offer a safe community for expression, and break down the gender stereotyping of authors and artists. We are open to ideas of biologically and socially constructed gender identity. We appreciate the broad range of sexuality that exists within the human experience. It doesn’t matter to us where someone decides to live along the gender continuum or by what means they got there.

Buchanan (2011) explores gender along a continuum of performances whose elasticity is reflected in her characters. Shifting the ways gender is expressed in the postmodern feminist e-romance (gender expression as ephemera versus biology, shapeshifting, alpha heroine, etc.) reflects the ways women’s intersectional lives

are valorized. Apparently, it is easier to promote feminist norms when dealing with Laws' shapeshifting or Li's (November 22, 2007) capitalist ninja, than with an actual man with no special abilities in the real world. Liminality is writ large. Such spaces are contentious, as Laws (May 30, 2007) disagreed with other e-romance consumers over her comment that an HEA is a fictional enterprise outside of the e-romance.

The changing relationship expectations of the male counterparts in e-romances are heralded by the presence of what is referred to as the "beta" or even "gamma" male, the anti-alphamale hero who is broadening the male archetypes in e-romance literature (Frantz, July 10, 2007; Ottati, March 15, 2007). The beta or gamma male is the ordinary man whose appeal is embedded in his accessibility. The average guy becomes a heroic figure, codified in language and practice.

Gendered language is explored in Internet romance communities in blogosphere debates about the ways romance novels pervert a woman's power. On *Romancing the Blog: Romance Authors and Readers who Blog*, Diana (July, 10, 2007, Msg 10) responds to the post *No, I am NOT waiting for a Duke* with,

...One of the biggest romance fans I know is a lesbian. So she's clearly not waiting for any man to sweep her off her feet. This, however, is not a new phenomenon. Lecturing women on the dangers of their reading materials is misogyny as old as the idea of literacy for women. The idea that women are materially damaged by reading and by what they read is a couple of centuries old at least.

Similar feminist sentiments are hosted by blogs like *Smart Bitches Who Love Trashy Novels* who featured the thread *Romance, Erotica and Political Correctness* (September 27, 2006). Moreover, *Smart Bitches* and others, like *The Smart Sluts*, have co-opted negative terms for aggressive, sexually adventurous women while rendering pointed cultural critiques about gender hierarchy and patriarchy. I disagree with the use of "bitch" and "slut" as signs of recaptured female liberation. However, the adoption of negative monikers is a tactic adopted by minoritized groups from people of color, the differentially abled, and the queer community in their related struggles for emancipation (see Katz, 1993; Kulik, 2000; Westmoreland, 2001; Zola, 1993, for conversations on reclaiming power by (re)naming oneself).

The language changes of authors honors the ways gender interacts with hierarchal social institutions. However, Mohanty (2003) notes the conflict inherent in any language change because postmodernism's ability to stretch language causes the boundaries that affix terms to become meaningless in its reinterpreted pliancy. Finally, Bloom (1996, p. 178) opines that "an understanding of subjectivity as nonunitary and fragmented is a move toward a more positive acceptance of the complexities of human identity—especially female identity."

Shifting Relationship Spaces

The primary requirement of erotic romance is an HEA or HFN (Happy for Now). While seemingly outdated and counterproductive to a woman's power, the

HEA and the HFN create safety for sexual and relational exploration free from social expectation. Selinger (April 24, 2007) posits that the reader will know how the story will end and the foreshadowed fantasy resolution makes the negotiation of non-traditional gender roles possible.

Contradictorily, the presumption of the HEA can weaken a feminist stance. Women are realists, but the HEA anchors women in a turbulent and often androcentric world, reminiscent of our Second Wave mothers' *Fear of Flying* (1973) and *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970). On the Internet, the line between subjugation and emancipation is murkier for postmodern feminists as e-romance consumers question what Olivia Knight (April 20, 2007) calls women's "power, authority, mastery." The HEA is a source of heated discussion about the ways postmodern (and Third Wave) women desire partnership rules of their own design. Laws (May 30, 2007, Msg 1) started a blogosphere debate on the fantasy of the HEA and the realistic notions of actual romance when she noted,

...I think that romance novels are like fairy tales. We know they're not real but, deep down, we very much wish they were—and I think, to a certain extent, we convince ourselves that they [HEAs] COULD be real. The ideas that the perfect man for you is out there, that there is someone who will love you for exactly who you are, and that you don't have to be alone, are powerful and compelling – no matter how unrealistic. I do think that the romance novels of today are much less "damaging" than the ones of yesterday. The heroes are less than perfect, and fewer and fewer heroines need to be rescued. Still, the fantasy of a HEA is at the core of the genre, and Happily Ever Afters simply don't exist.

What does an HEA mean when a powerful woman is in relationship that explores bondage, discipline, sadism or masochism? Are the boundaries of postmodern sexual freedom elastic enough to support the conflict of a feminist heroine who relishes a subordinate sexual position? E-romance author Claire Thompson (2005) notes on her website that,

...With my BDSM [e-romance] work, I seek not only to tell a story, but also to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. My darker works press the envelope of what is erotic...I strive to write about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the romantic side of the human psyche. Ultimately, my work deals with the human conditions, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

In a BDSM themed e-romance by Alexander (2005, p. 105), the woman aims to ensnare her partner while remaining in control of their sexual encounter, occupying a dominant (D) sexual role. She ponders, "Because Ty had confirmed her suspicions. He thought women were either nice girls or naughty ones, with no in between. It was a shame, but not a surprise. She was crazy about Ty, but he was sometimes a very typical guys guy." Later, in Alexander's (2005, p. 135) story, after their sexual encounter where he was the submissive (s), the man wonders,

Had he done something wrong? Had he not been good enough for her? He'd always felt pretty accomplished at f**king, but... well, this had been new. Maybe he hadn't been submissive enough? After all, that part sure hadn't come naturally. For her, he'd done it—and he'd enjoyed the results—but giving up total control had been difficult.

Both characters explore their sexual relationship while questioning the porous borders of sexual and relational power. Power in conflict becomes magnified, for in the story the (D) woman is the (s) man's subordinate at his workplace, although he does not realize it—increasing the woman's power during their encounters.

Returning to postmodern feminism, McRobbie notes that, “there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralized power blocs (e.g., the state, patriarchy, law) to more dispersed sites, events, and instances of power conceptualized as flows and specific convergences and consolidations...” (2004, p. 4). McRobbie's statement aptly describes the aforementioned D/s romantic encounter. In the closing pages of Laurenston's (2005, p. 215) paranormal story where the African-American Ph.D. resolves her union with her much taller shapeshifting and blond mate her partner muses,

Sure. He could have gone for a nice normal girl. Or at least a girl who could shift into something other than human. But no, he had to fall in love with Miki Kendrick. Hacker. Scientist. Nut case. Great lay.

His Mate.

M/M, F/F, Trans* Fic

When e-romance protagonists consolidate sites where women exercise their female power in concert with an equally powerful partner, Third Wave authors generate a new e-romance trope: the alpha heroine.

Indeed, cisfemale e-romance authors like Laws, Stephanie Vaughan, ZA Maxfield, James Buchanan, Jules Jones, and KJ Charles promote a pro-gay (M/M or F/F) or consciously nonheteronormative socio-political agenda. These female authors' characters are not seeking an HEA that leads to a state sanctioned heteronormative marriage (Frantz, June 5, 2007). Laws (June 5, 2007) posted *Can Romance be Queered?* on the *Authors of Erotic Romance* blog, and discussion ensued about whether the integrity of romance is upheld when there are no women involved. Laws reveals in the same post that her local RWA chapter removed the cover of her M/M book from its member website due to the stockphoto of two men about to kiss.

The academic blog *Teach Me Tonight* had a thread Women Writing Men Doing Men (Frantz, February 7, 2007), and a comment that illustrated why heterosexual women may choose to consume M/M fiction. Raven (February 7, 2007 Msg 9) says that erotic fiction is about,

...the gender I'm attracted to and like to look at - - and not overtly/innately/surprisingly beautiful/sexy woman to wander into things and make me start drawing

negative comparisons. I get to read and enjoy the story and the boys and not have to have my own appearance shortcomings thrown in my face.

An absent heteronormed character may free a woman from the constraints of the narrow social gaze inherent in the dominant paradigms of a standardized female beauty. Or, as Frantz (June 5, 2007) posits, “But is the feminist power we find in romances as reader (and I assume as writers) diminished because there is no heroine? I would assert that the answer is ‘no.’”

Jules Jones (2007, Msg 7) uses the M/M format to address social ills like the British identity card system and to address the necessaryness of an HEA by reframing her stories as “happy for right now” subsequently making the protagonists free from traditional gender outcomes. E-romances are about women and their needs, even as women are excluded from the narratives as a heterosexual object of desire (Jolly, 2002). Raven (February 7, 2007, Msg 13) lists five hegemonic assumptions of female beauty in traditional romances and closes with,

...But they're common enough to have worn me down after having read them since kindergarten. Suffice it to say that I come out on the losing end of any beauty contest between me and a heroine. Every time I read a heroine, I read about someone who makes me look like the ugly stepsister. (Obviously we each, uh, have our own issues. *G*). [*G* is another version of grin].

Although the substitution of a male character for the female's traditional romantic role is paltry gender renorming (Franz June 5, 2007), the presentation of M/M or F/F or Trans* fiction by women for women stretches the boundaries of what women are supposed to desire from an erotic story. More importantly, the e-Romance form represents a postmodern agitation for women's reclamation of an erotic life.

Where trans* people are represented in the shifting relationship spaces when gender roles are renormed is a source of emerging debate in the e-romance community. Much of the consternation has arisen from the failure of bound gender categories; and the reliance upon a single definitive feature (partner preference, genitals, performance, preferred pronoun) to define how gender functions beyond the binary in romantic relationships (see for example James Buchanan's Dec. 11, 2011, and Jeff Pearce's March 28, 2012 entry at Jessewave Reviews, and the related Chicks & Dicks, March 27, 2012). To explore erotic possibilities beyond the destiny of genitals is revolutionary. There are banners for websites that signify allegiance and welcome for trans* readers, characters, and authors (Embrace the Rainbow), but their use is contentious, for allyship must be designated by the liminal, not claimed, or policed. Despite the uncertainty, there are publishers like Riptide Press who welcome submissions of stories with trans* protagonists (2014), and romance stories that feature trans* romantic protagonists (*Song of Oestend*, *Guys Don't Cry*, *Blacker than Black*).

Is e-Romance Postfeminist?

I have chosen to close by responding to the work of Sonnet (1999) who when exploring the field of erotic fiction, finds such material to be “post-feminist.” She purports that sexual entitlement is beyond a feminist agenda while stating that the pursuit of sexual pleasure should be part of a feminist agenda delinked from the patriarchy. Sonnet (1999, p. 170) continues,

The simplest definition suggests that feminism has achieved its major goals and become irrelevant to the lives of young women today. ...with the implicit assumption that its critiques and demands have been accommodated and absorbed far enough to permit ‘return’ to pre-feminist pleasure now transformed in meaning—by a feminist consciousness.

While Sonnet’s (1999) piece initially sounds like a death knell for the movement due to a generational lack of concern, she also signals that feminist pleasure and the attainment of pleasure are intermingled. Women who write e-romances with a feminist agenda know that their form of feminism is neither unmoored from the Second Wave’s work nor is it an extinct historipolitical artifact whose work is complete—in any stage: social, political, sexual or relational.

What I find missing is the distinct Third Wave feminist discourse that is being born from the rapidly evolving interaction of erotic fiction and Internet communities, giving rise to new permutations of feminism. I believe Sonnet (1999) when she contends that the larger point is that erotic fiction repudiates hegemonic ideals about women’s sexuality. Sonnet further states,

... the poststructuralist dissolution of feminism’s reliance on ‘identity politics,’ is underpinned by a narrative that casts post-feminist concern for ‘difference’ (race class, ethnicity, etc.) as liberation from Second Wave feminism retrospectively constructed as a monolithic, homogenous, puritanical and sometimes tyrannical discourse (1999, p. 170).

Postmodern e-romance is about the creation of new, subjective, and multiple versions of a female self, without the desire for modernist and poststructuralist deconstruction. Intersectional aspects of a woman’s identity are welcome in the postmodern by Third Wave feminists regardless of the form of interrogation (Hird, 1998). The postmodern pastiche of possible identities creates what McRobbie (1994, p. 26) calls “the broad interconnections between different media forms.” Haraway (1991) sees technology and womanhood merging into a generative feminine hybrid whose new woman has mastered the intersectional multiplicities of postmodern life. Vivanco’s (November 22, 2006) thread about Second and Third Wave women who read romance addresses how (erotic) romances reconcile their brands of feminism. Ideological unity is not a prerequisite for feminist membership or conceptual longevity.

E-romances are a staging ground for a modern woman’s sexual acceptance and present new ways to perform gender. Moreover, I think that the freedoms of

sexual expression in e-romance reject literary norms of female domesticity. This postmodern expression of feminism is one the Second Wave may never have envisioned, for who is ever ready for a superheroine ninja by night who is also a successful CEO by day?

Notes

¹ Cis denotes people who are biologically female/male and leading lives based upon that biological destiny.

² A complete list of e-romance publishing houses may be found at: <http://www.erecsite.com/2008/11/preditors-comparison.html> (retrieved February 20, 2010).

³ Wikipedia warrents notation because it is an encyclopedic and populist postmodern information sourcec available solely on the Internet: a source that has a vast amount of social authority conveyed upon it by its users and contributors.

⁴ Shapeshifting is an animal/human hybrid and a common plot device in e-romances.

References

- Alexander, L. (2005). Mardi Gras in Elizabeth Lapthorne, Joey W. Hill & Lacey Alexander. *Behind the mask: An anthology*. New York: Ellora's Cave.
- Anyon, J. (1979). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Boston University Journal of Education*, 162(1), 67-92.
- Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11(1), 3-42.
- Anyon, J. (1994). The retreat of Marxism and socialist feminism: Postmodern and poststructural theories in education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 24(2), 115-133.
- Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (2000). *ManifestA: Young women, feminism and the future*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux.
- Blackman, L. (2004). Self-help, media cultures, and the production of female psychopathology. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 219-236.
- Buchanan, J. (Dec. 11, 2011). *Living in someone else's skin*. Retrieved from: <http://www.reviewsbyjessewave.com/2011/12/09/living-in-someone-elses-skin-by-jamesbuchanan/>
- Brady, J., & Dentith, A. (2001). Critical voyage: Postmodern feminist pedagogies as liberatory practices. *Teaching Education*, 12(2), 165-176.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chicks & Dicks. (March 27, 2012). *M/M only by wave*. Retrieved from: <http://www.chick-sanddicksrainbow.com/search?q=m%2Fm+only+by+wave>
- Crain, J. L. (1974). Feminist fiction. *Commentary*, 58-62. <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/feminist-fiction/>
- Dammann, G. (2008). *Chick-lit author on Dream Street with literary prize*. This article was first published on guardian.co.uk, Thursday 19 June 2008.
- dePre, J. (2006). Retrieved from: <http://jodiedupre.blogspot.com/2005/06/erwa-erotic-romancewriters.html>
- DeVault, M. L., & Gross, G. (2012). Feminist qualitative interviewing: Experience, talk & knowledge. In S. Hesse-Biber (ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed.), (pp. 206-236). New York: Sage.
- Diana. (July 10, 2007). *No, I am NOT waiting for a Duke*. [Msg 10]. Retrieved from: <http://www.>

- romancingtheblog.com/blog/index.php?s=no+i%27m+not+waiting+for+a+duke
- Edut, O. (Ed.). (2000). *Body outlaws: Rewriting the rules of body and body image*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Ellora's Cave. (2004). *What is 'Romantica'?* Retrieved from: <http://www.ellorascave.com>.
- Fitzgerald, S. (April 30, 2006). Romance, writ large: A tried-and-true genre of novels expands, and business is booming [Special edition]. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <http://washingtonpost.com>
- Frantz, S. S. G. (June 5, 2007). *Two for the price of one* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://romancingtheblog.com/blog>
- Frantz, S. S. G. (February 7, 2007). *Erotica versus porn* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Frantz, S. S. G. (February 7, 2007). *Women writing men doing men* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Gill, R., & Herdieckerhoff, E. (2006). Re-writing the Romance: Chick-lit after *Bridget Jones*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6(4), 487-504.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Henley, P. L. (January/February, 2007). Not your mother's beach book: Romance novels turn erotic. *Stanford Alumni Magazine* [electronic version]. Retrieved from: <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2007/janfeb/show/romance.html>
- Hill Collins, P. (1993). Toward a new vision: Race, class, and gender as categories of analysis and connection. In T. Ore (Ed.), *The social construction of difference and inequality: race, class, gender, and sexuality* (2nd ed.), (pp. 591- 605). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hird, M. (1998). Theorising student identity as fragmented: Some implications for feminist critical pedagogy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(4), 517-527.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Jackson, A. Y. (2003). Multiple annies: Feminist poststructural theory and the making of a teacher. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52, 386-397.
- Jones, J. (February 7, 2007). *Women writing men doing men* [Msg 7]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Jong, E. (1973). *Fear of flying*. New York: Signet.
- Karp, M., & Stoller, D. (1999). *The bust guide to the new girl order*. New York: Penguin.
- Knight, A. (June, 8, 2006.) *A few words about women's erotica* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://angelaknights.blogspot.com>
- Knight, O. (April 20, 2007). *And so they lived happily ever after* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://lustbites.blogspot.com>
- Kulik, D. (2001). Gay and lesbian language. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29, 243-285.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lather, P. (1992). Critical frames in educational research: Feminist and post-structural perspectives. *Theory into Practice*, 41(2), 87-98.
- Laurenston, S. (2004). *A pride Christmas in Brooklyn*. New York: Triskelion Publishers.
- Laurenston, S. (2007). *Go fetch*. New York: Samhain Publishing.
- Laws, J. (2006). Defining erotic romance: Charting the shades of gray [Newsletter]. *Los Angeles Romance Authors* [January, 2006]. Retrieved from: <http://LARA.com>
- Laws, J. (June, 2007). *Can romance be queered?* Retrieved from: <http://authorsoferoticromance.blogspot.com/>

- Laws, J. (May 30, 2007). *Unrealistic expectations* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://www.authorsoferoticromance.com/?p=603comments>
- Laws, J. (May 23, 2007). E-mail interview.
- Laws, J. (May 22, 2007). E-mail interview.
- Laws, J. (May 15, 2007a). E-mail interview.
- Laws, J. (May 15, 2007b). Retrieved from <http://www.jannelaws.com/>
- Levy, A. (2005). *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press.
- Lewis, H. (2012). *What online harassment looks like*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/internet/2012/07/what-online-harassmentlookslike>
- Li, R. (November 22, 2007). *The romance genre and Second and Third Wave feminism* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com/Liminal Ink>. (2010). Retrieved from: <http://liminalink.angelfire.com/>
- Lorde, A. (2000). *The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power*. Tuscon, AZ: Kore.
- Mann, S. A., & Huffman, D. J. (2005). The decentering of Second Wave feminism and the rise of the Third Wave. *Science and Society*, 69(1), 56-91.
- McRobbie, A. (1994). *Postmodernism and popular culture*. London, UK: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Notes on postfeminism and popular culture: *Bridget Jones* and the new gender regime. In A. Harris (ed.), *All about the girl: Culture, power and identity* (pp 3-14). New York: Routledge.
- Milan, C. (July 5, 2007). *What I'm going to be doing at RWA's literacy signing*. Retrieved from: <http://www.courtneymilan.com/ramblings/2007/07/05/something-everyone-should-bedoing-at-rwa/>
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Morahan-Martin, J. (2000). Women and the Internet: Promises and perils. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 3(5), 683-691.
- Ottati, R. (March, 15, 2007). *The envelope that still needs pushing* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://www.romancingtheblog.com/blog>
- Pearce, J. (March 28, 2012). *The Quixotic stampede that runs over you from all directions*. Retrieved from: <http://www.reviewsbyjessewave.com/2012/03/28/the-quixote-stampede-thatruns-over-you-from-all-directions/>
- Raven. (February 7, 2007). *Women writing men doing men* [Msg 9]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Raven. (February 7, 2007). *Women writing men doing men* [Msg 13]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Reynolds, M. (2006). Retrieved from <http://mayareynolds.com/>
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rinda. (September, 2007). *Romance, erotica and political correctness* [Msg 3]. Retrieved from: <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments>
- Romance Writers of America (RWA). (2003). *Romance authors on the Web*. Retrieved from: <http://authorsontheweb.com/features>
- Romance Writers of America (RWA). (2005). *Market research study on romance readers*. Retrieved from: <http://www.rwa.org/>
- Schoenberger, C. R. (June 18, 2007). *E-bodice ripper*. Retrieved from: <http://www.Forbes.com>
- Selinger, E. (April. 24, 2007). *HEA and HEAngst*. Retrieved from:

- ingtheblog.com/blog
- Smart Bitches. (March, 2, 2006). *Interview with the folks from Ellora's Cave* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com>
- Smart Bitches. (September, 27, 2006). *Romance, erotica, and political correctness* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com>.
- Sonnet, E. (1999). 'Erotic fiction for women': The pleasures of post-feminist heterosexuality. *Sexualities*, 2, 167-187.
- Steinem, G. (1998). *PBS interview. No safe place: Violence against women*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pbs.org/kued/nosafeplace/interv/steinem.html>
- Staumshein, C. (Nov. 11, 2014). #Gamergate and games research. *Inside Higher Ed.com*
- Swartz, D. (1998). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- The Smut Sluts. (2010). Retrieved from: <http://smutsluts.blogspot.com/>
- Thompson, C. (2005). Retrieved from: <http://www.clairerhompson.net>
- Vivanco, L. (March, 14, 2006). *Quality, patriarchy and popularity* [Msg 1]. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>
- Vivanco, L. (November, 22, 2006). *The romance genre and second and third wave feminism*. Retrieved from: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>.
- Westmoreland, K. (2001). "Bitch" and Lilith Fair: Resisting anger, celebrating contradictions. *Popular Music and Society*, 25(1-2), 205-220.
- Zola, I. K. (1993). Self, identity, and the naming question: Reflections on the language of disability. In T. Ore (ed.), *The social construction of difference and inequality: Race, class, gender, and sexuality* (pp. 437-449). New York: McGraw Hill.

Kerrita K. Mayfield is a lecturer in Workplace Learning and Development at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.