

**Gleason, William A., and Eric Murphy Selinger, editors. *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* Pp. xvi, 437. New York: Routledge, 2016. US \$50.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781472431530.**

**Review by Victoria Kennedy**

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William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger's collection *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* came out of a 2009 conference at Princeton. The title of the collection (and of the conference) comes from bell hooks' "Love as the Practice of Freedom" (1994). In her essay, hooks argues that "the moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others" (298). *Romance Fiction and American Culture* takes up this argument to interrogate whether and how this freedom through love can be seen in the creation and consumption of romance narratives in American culture. The collection consists of twenty essays and is divided into four parts: (i) Popular Romance and American History, (ii) Romance and Race, (iii) Art and Commerce, and (iv) Happy Endings. The book promises to consider romance narratives in a specifically American cultural context from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century. While I question the extent to which the collection achieves its goal of situating romance criticism in an American context, the essays Gleason and Selinger have selected are diverse in a way that is both refreshing and invigorating in romance studies. Topics explored include: transatlantic romance reading; lesbian romance fiction; black romances; romance in the context of HIV/AIDS; erotica; Orientalism; romance cover art; Christian and Evangelical romance; BDSM; queer romance; and polyamory. The editors stake the originality of the collection on three areas: its national focus on romance and American cultural history, its consideration "at length" (3) of race and romance in six out of the twenty essays, and its exploration of the often overlooked topic of "business" in romance—both as a theme of romance novels and as the business of selling romance novels.

Noting the ways in which critics like Pamela Regis and Catherine Roach have defined the genre in terms of essential components—the foremost of which is the happy ending—Gleason and Selinger open their collection by observing that "there is nothing eternal, universal, or inevitable about the idea that the 'romance novel' is or should be a distinct, readily definable genre" (8). While Regis' *Natural History of the Romance* (2003) proposes defining the romance novel so rigidly that *Rebecca* (du Maurier, 1938) and *Gone with the*

*Wind* (Mitchell, 1936) could not be called romance novels (Regis 48), Gleason and Selinger point to the fact that the British Romantic Novelists Association takes a wider view of the romance novel, considering Mills & Boon novels alongside Russian classics like *Anna Karenina* (Gleason and Selinger 8)—which, notably, does not adhere to the Happily Ever After (HEA) rule that Regis argues is essential to the definition of the romance novel. Gleason and Selinger’s ruminations on how to define the romance novel, however, are anything but pedantic. By challenging existing critical frameworks for classifying and defining romance fiction, they pave the way to consider romance narratives that have previously not been given much attention within the critical discourse surrounding the romance novel. By adhering to strict definitions of the genre—literally checking off whether the “essential” components are present—critics like Regis and Roach have, perhaps unwittingly, excluded many queer and all polyamorous romance narratives from their considerations of the romance genre. By opening up their definition of romance, Gleason and Selinger thus make space for previously excluded texts. *Romance Fiction and American Culture* is also acutely aware that genres evolve and that consequently “the romance novel” cannot always be defined and classified according to rigid criteria because of the way genres change and blend with one another (think, for instance, of Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander* (1991), which blends romance with historical drama and time-travel fantasy—and breaks many of the “rules” of the traditional romance novel).

The collection is positioned as spearheading a “third wave of romance criticism” (10). Gleason and Selinger characterize the previous waves as being concerned first with “texts, readers, and publishing trends with little attention to romance novelists as theorists of, or deliberate artists within, their chosen genre” (11) and secondly as novelists “writing back” (13). The third wave that *Romance Fiction and American Culture* works towards is characterized by a blurring of roles, bringing together critics, authors, editors, professors, and publishers—many of whom occupy several positions within literary culture, like contributor Len Barot: novelist, editor, reviewer, publisher, and theorist. By recognizing the fluidity of positions writers take up with regard to romance narratives, Gleason and Selinger propose to propel the discourse forward into new territory. One area not thoroughly covered by the collection but signalled in the introduction as a topic for future investigation is the romance blog/review site where academic and non-academic discourses surrounding romance novels often intermingle.

The essays that make up this collection are welcome not only for their thematic range but also for their self-reflexive considerations of romance publishing and romance scholarship. In “Postbellum, Pre-Harlequin: American Romance Publishing in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century,” William Gleason discusses the way digital archives have a crucial role in making available sources that allow us a fuller picture of late nineteenth-century literary culture in America. He calls for such digital archives to include sources often discounted, such as dime novels and romance weeklies. Near the end of the collection, Len Barot’s “Queer Romance in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century America: Snapshots of a Revolution” points out the importance of queer publishers to the availability of queer texts, demonstrating that queer visibility in literature first requires social visibility and freedom for queer people. The Internet, in particular, is considered as key to the availability of queer texts, since online book retailers have “made it possible for readers worldwide to access queer titles” (398). Moreover, in the collection’s final chapter, Ann Herendeen, the author of *Phyllida and the Brotherhood of Philander*, discusses the context in

which she wrote the 'bisexual Regency romance' in 2004, her desire to create "a revolutionary work of (genre) fiction, and the reactions to the novel. In addition to extending Barot's emphasis on the difficulty getting queer texts published by traditional, mainstream presses, Herendeen's essay invites consideration of the divide between books that are shelved as "literature" and books that are shelved as "romance" within bookstores.

The consideration of romance in the context of racial social politics is a highlight of the collection, even if the racial contexts examined are somewhat limited. Several essays consider how romance narratives about African Americans have to contend with "the stereotype of the oversexed black woman" (178). For instance, Consuela Francis's "Flipping the Script: Romancing Zane's Urban Erotica" argues that mononymous author Zane's *Addicted* (1998) contains a plot "rarely seen before in contemporary African American literary fiction"—"the story of a black woman's successful search for an *emotionally satisfying* sexual relationship" (169; emphasis mine). Similarly, Julie E. Moody-Freeman's "Scripting Black Love in the 1990s: Pleasure, Respectability, and Responsibility in an Era of HIV/AIDS" reads Brenda Jackson's *Tonight and Forever* (1995) as a didactic project, teaching safe sex to her readers and offering a counter-image to the "stereotypes of blacks as hypersexual, irresponsible, and deviant" (112). Perhaps the most striking consideration of race in American romance is Catherine Roach's analysis of Beverly Jenkins' *Indigo* (1996) in her essay "Love as the Practice of Bondage." Here, Roach puts romance, African American history, and the question of freedom centre stage, since *Indigo* is the story of a man "literally giving himself into slavery in order to be with the woman he loves" (370). In a different racial context, Hsu-Ming Teo, who has published extensively about Orientalism, contributes a chapter in which she argues that Orientalist romance narratives of the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the discourse of America's "War on Terror."

Still, despite many strengths, the collection also features some essays that fall somewhat short of the promises made by the collection's introduction. For instance, Sarah Frantz Lyons and Eric Murphy Selinger's "Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: *The Flame and the Flower*, *Sweet Savage Love*, and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance" aims to exemplify the collection's "third wave" critical stance, blurring the distinctions between author, critic, and theorist. Opening with a reading of *The Flame and the Flower* that notes linguistic echoes of *The Feminine Mystique*, the authors argue that "it is long past time for scholars of popular romance fiction, and of American culture more generally, to take seriously the work of Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers and the other original "Avon Ladies" ... and to read their novels as situated within and responding to the same historical moment as foundational feminist thinkers" like Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and others. Yet, this methodology is not carried throughout the chapter. The bulk of the chapter considers the way *The Flame and the Flower* and *Sweet Savage Love* represent rape, but with little reference to the "foundational feminist thinkers" previously mentioned. It would have been interesting to put the consideration of rape in these female-authored romances against, say, Kate Millett's analysis of coitus and sexual violence in male-authored novels in the opening section of *Sexual Politics*. There are also a few essays that seem out of place in a collection almost exclusively focused on romance *fiction*, such as Rebecca Peabody's "Kara Walker: American Romance in Black and White," which considers Walker's silhouette art installation, and Amelia Serafine's "'He Filled My Heart with Doubt': The Southern Belle's Love and Duty in the Civil War" which examines the diaries, journals, and letters of Southern women who lived during the Civil War.

If there is a flaw in the collection, it is that America and American culture seem to be afterthoughts in at least a quarter of the essays. Instead, they present reflections that could just as easily be about romance narratives in any national context. Most curiously, some of the essays are explicitly about other nations' publishing industries. Jayashree Kamblé's "Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art" focuses on the merger of Mills & Boon (a British company) and Harlequin (a Canadian company). The essay is positioned as being about American romances because Harlequin "sold its reprints across the United States in increasing volume, and its influence on American romance fiction is immense, which even now leads to the impression that Harlequin is an American company" (251). I find this claim that Harlequin may as well be American to be strangely superficial, ignoring socio-political and ideological differences that exist between the United States and Canada when it comes to the subjects of romance and sexuality. In a similar vein to Kamblé's essay, Jessica Taylor's "Love the Market: Discourses of Passion and Professionalism in Romance Writing Communities" features a section titled "Romance Writing in Canada" where she draws on "a larger project on the romance writing and publishing community in a major Canadian city" (277). One wonders at the inclusion of such essays in a collection that aims to rectify the absence of "detailed coverage of the American tradition" (3). Thus, as a collection of essays on romance narratives and social politics in general, this collection is a most welcome addition. However, in terms of considering romance narratives in the national context of the Land of the Free, much more theoretical and critical work is still needed.

### Works Cited

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