

## Introduction to the special issue “Romance Fiction in the International Marketplace”

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In April 2017, a group of romance novelists, bloggers, publisher representatives, and scholars from across three continents met in rural New England at Williams College for a three-day conference titled “Reading for Pleasure: Romance Fiction in the International Marketplace.”[1] The gathering fostered a broad conversation about the ways in which the genre of popular romance has changed to meet the needs of its increasingly diverse and international audience. Panels focused on the translation and marketing of Anglo-American romances internationally, efforts by English-language authors to create protagonists and fictional worlds that better reflect the diversity of the genre’s readership, and indigenous forms of romance emerging in Russia, China, and major Muslim markets in response to Western models. The conference’s panels and more informal discussions allowed participants to integrate academic approaches to understanding romance fiction with the perspectives of practitioners, readers, and publishers, providing a multi-faceted approach to understanding popular romance as a transnational phenomenon.

This special issue of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* presents expanded and revised versions of six of the academic presentations from the conference at Williams College. As co-organizers of “Reading for Pleasure,” we are delighted that these articles are appearing in print together. They explore a variety of authors and texts, most of which have received little attention in romance scholarship, if any at all. The first two articles in the cluster examine efforts by English-language authors to craft novels with more diverse protagonists and thereby to meet the needs of the genre’s increasingly diverse readership. In her article “Cultural Authenticity, the Oppressive Family, and East Asian Romance Novels,” Hsu-Ming Teo considers efforts by authors such as Jade Lee, Jeannie Lin, and Camy Tang to fill an obvious lacuna in the romance market by creating works with Asian protagonists and culturally authentic depictions of Asian culture. Teo notes that, although well-intentioned, many of these efforts suffer from obvious flaws: authors often seem unsure in their depiction of Asianness and frequently resort to either boutique multicultural references (e.g., Asian cuisine) or stereotypes about the supposed tyranny of the East Asian Family. Jayashree Kamblé’s article, “When Wuxia Met Romance: The Pleasures and Politics of Transculturalism

in Sherry Thomas's *My Beautiful Enemy*," examines a more successful effort to create a popular romance with authentically Asian themes. Kamblé shows how, in her novel *My Beautiful Enemy*, Thomas integrates into the Anglo-American genre motifs from the *wuxia* tradition of Chinese martial arts adventures, which are best-known to Western audiences through Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The result, Kamblé argues, is a truly transnational narrative that represents the best of recent attempts at cultural diversity in popular romance and that, in its story of a biracial heroine's search for a sense of identity and belonging, symbolically mirrors the struggles of readers from the Global South against the hegemony of Western culture.

Later articles in the cluster consider indigenous forms of romance that have emerged in China and Russia partly in imitation of Western forms. In her article "Time-Travel to P & P: Web-based Chinese Fanfic of Jane Austen," Jin Feng looks at online examples of Chinese Austeniana and the responses that these texts receive on reader discussion forums. She argues that, in comparison to the English-speaking Jane Austen fans on sites such as "The Republic of Pemberley," Chinese authors of Jane Austen fanfic seem considerably freer in their interactions with Austen's fictional worlds, often changing romantic pairings and the fate of even principle characters. In "A World Without Safe-Words: Fifty Shades of Russian Grey," Julie Cassiday examines three BDSM novels by Alisa Klever that adapt EL James's popular erotic trilogy to Russian tastes. Cassiday suggests that, although Klever clearly borrows an essential storyline and many structural features from James, she also adds much that is new, including language that casts the conflict between the BDSM-obsessed hero and the naive heroine as a clash between traditional Russian and corrupting Western world views. Emily Johnson's "Exploring His/Her Library: Reading and Books in Russian Romance" investigates the patterns of literary references that predominate in Russian romance fiction. She argues that because of proscriptive attitudes to reading from the Soviet period and the still amorphous nature of popular romance in Russia, Russian romance novelists are less likely than their Western counterparts to rely on allusions to the genre itself, preferring instead references to the classical literary canon. Finally, Heather Schell's article "After 'I Do': Turkish Harlequin Readers Re-Imagine the Happy Ending" uses data gathered from a survey of Turkish romance readers to consider whether they expect something different from the genre's requisite happy ending than their American counterparts. The results of Schell's survey suggest that many Turkish readers believe that a romantic pair must reconcile with parents and find acceptance in a larger family network to achieve true happiness.

Together, the articles that comprise this cluster emphasize the extent to which romance fiction in the twenty-first century has moved beyond national concerns and markets to become a truly transnational phenomenon. Around the globe, publishing concerns and subsidiaries select and translate Anglo-American works for local markets, often adapting texts to reflect regional norms and tastes. Accordingly, readers understand and evaluate these translations from their own cultural perspectives, expressing preferences that often differ from those of the "average" American romance fan Janice Radway first described in her influential 1984 study, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Inspired by the success of Western romance fiction in their own local markets, writers in non-English-speaking regions do not merely imitate but more importantly domesticate the imported genre, as well as its many subgenres. In effect, these modifications produce new hybrids of Western generic norms and local literary and cultural tastes, as work by scholars such as Juliet Flesch, Annick Capelle, and Eva Hemmungs Wirtén

demonstrates. Moreover, mass-market English-language romance has developed its own response to this domestication to global tastes by diversifying and drawing on the genre's increasingly transnational reach for inspiration. In addition to the use of *wuxia* cinema discussed by Kamblé in her contribution to this cluster, we would mention Sonali Dev's novels drawing on Bollywood cinema as examples of this trend.

One particularly productive aspect of the conference at Williams College is reflected only indirectly in this cluster of articles: the exchange that took place between academic researchers working in popular romance studies, publishing industry professionals, practicing romance writers, and journalists. Participants in "Reading for Pleasure" included representatives of Harlequin International (Patience Bloom), Bold Strokes Books (Len Barot/Radclyffe), and the website Smart Bitches, Trashy Books (Sarah Wendell), as well as the writers Sonali Dev, Eloisa James (Mary Bly, representing the Romance Writers of America), and Katy Regnery. Scholars at the conference all benefited from the opportunity to exchange ideas and experience intensively with this diverse group. The practical considerations of writing and publishing, as well as the industry's distribution networks, all play powerful roles in shaping the ways in which English-language romance fiction reaches its different audiences, both domestic and international. The articles included in this cluster reflect this larger exchange of ideas and perspectives.

In addition to thanking the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, its executive editor Eric Selinger, and its Managing Editor Erin Young for publishing this cluster, we would like to express our profound gratitude to those who sponsored the original conference that brought us together. These include the Romance Writers of America and, at Williams College, The Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences; The Center for Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Cultures; the Departments of German and Russian, Romance Languages, and English; the Programs in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Leadership Studies; and the Michael Dively '61 Lecture Committee for Human Sexuality and Diversity. We would also like to thank Professor Leyla Rouhi of Williams College for co-organizing "Reading for Pleasure" with us, as well as Lucy Green and Krista Birch for their invaluable logistical support. Without this support and the help of our sponsors, this special issue would not have come into being.

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[1] For more information about the conference at Williams College, visit its website at <http://sites.williams.edu/romance-fiction/>.

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