

María Ramos-García and Laura Vivanco (eds). *Love, Language, Place, and Identity in Popular Culture: Romancing the Other*. Pp. 172. Rowman and Littlefield, 2020. US \$ 90.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-4985-8938-3.

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Published online: September 2021

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in critical questions on the lack of diversity in and the pervasive whiteness of popular romance fiction. The volume, *Love, Language, Place, and Identity in Popular Culture: Romancing the Other*, addresses some of these criticisms by utilizing the concept of “Otherness.” Specifically, how romance is “the most Othered or marginalized of all popular genres of literature” because of its association with women (2). The editors, María Ramos-García and Laura Vivanco, maintain that the overarching aim of this volume is to explore the description of geographical, social, ethnic, and fantastic Other in romances. The essays included in the selection are divided into two parts; the first part investigates the role of place, travel, history, and language in twentieth-century romances while the second, titled “Tensions and Transformations,” explores the variety of Otherness in the romances published in twenty-first-century. Overall, the volume significantly contributes to the extant romance scholarship through its discussion of otherness and romance, and extends to varied studies of space, travel, and language. It traces the history of otherness to colonial theory and draws upon the concept to develop an understanding of the complexity of representation in the romance genre. The editors maintain that “the discourses of Otherness are still strongly moored in colonialist attitudes,” and it largely remains a “feared” unknown (5). My review, though not comprehensive or analytical, includes a few lines on each essay in this volume to signal the richness offered by this discourse on otherness to the popular romance and literary studies scholars.

The first part of the collection encompasses significant discussions on the formation and sustenance of fictional tropes about the Other in romance. The way in which the essays in this collection deal with Spanish and Portuguese locations is very similar to the postcolonial critique, which builds upon the dynamics of the distance between the East and the West. For instance, María del Mar Pérez-Gil argues that romance novels written after the Second World War highlight the “colonial mentality that emphasizes British superiority”

(14). The escapist element of romance intertwines with the underlying, Anglo-centric perception of national superiority. Following a similar strain, Maria Jesus Vera-Cazorla argues that the British romances, selected for her study, view the Canary Islands through preconceived ideas and national images of Spain and Spaniards: “*siesta*, lovely weather, good food, *fiesta* and laziness, *machismo* and pride” (37). She writes that the British heroine in these novels symbolizes the nation’s superiority, and her independence is contrasted with the submissiveness of southern European women. Another essay by Maureen Mulligan in the first part, highlights romantic tropes in travel fiction written by British and American women in the 1980s. The travellers cast themselves in the role of romantic heroines and fall for the dark handsome hero from another culture and assume that they know enough about that culture to evaluate and ultimately reject it (51).

Also, the two essays of by María Isabel González-Cruz and Aline Bazenga in the first part are particularly interesting as they employ a sociolinguistic approach to examine how Spanish and Portuguese language facilitate the construction of Otherness in exotic settings. González-Cruz observes that the inclusion of Spanish words and phrases in the romances set in Canary Islands functions as an identity marker and creates a sense of proximity with the Other (54). In a similar way, Bazenga discusses code-switching in four romances that use Maderia as a setting, but she contends that the authors of these romances have inaccurate and “superficial” knowledge of Portuguese. Her in-depth linguistic analysis reveals that in the English romance novels, written for monolingual Anglophone readers, “the Portuguese switches are not very important in terms of quantity and only a few words are used in each” as cultural markers (75). This language based methodological framework is useful for future inquiries into the construction of the fictional world of romance. The last essay in the first part, by Ramón E. Soto-Crespo, analyses Caribbean romantic historical fiction and claims that they complicate the idea of “whiteness” and challenges the way we read class distinctions in romances.

The second part of this volume investigates individual authors’ responses to the Other and otherness and looks at the way in which talks about diversity have influenced the genre. Here, Johanna Hoorenman writes that the novels of Kathleen Eagle are different from the majority of romances in the “Indian Romance” subgenre because she includes the history of Sioux-Anglo conflicts and foregrounds questions of memory, historiography, and voice (103). Also, in her essay on the steampunk romance, Vivanco explores othering as a gendered process in the novel *Riveted* and discusses how characters are othered because of their sexual orientation, ethnicity, and physical challenges. Interestingly, she analyses the height of the hero as a gendered marker of Otherness and not an emblem of masculinity. Another dimension of othering is, what Ramos-Garcia calls, “the fantastic Other,” which is strategically used by authors of paranormal romances to tackle difficult topics that may make the readers uncomfortable if the setting is realistic. Similarly, Inmaculada Pérez-Casal argues that the otherness of non-Anglocentric elements combines with an essential escapism to create the sense of exotic in the romances. Her critique of the ethnic and socially diverse male protagonists in the novels of Lisa Kleypas incorporates linguistic analysis as well, which links it with the discussions in the first part of the volume.

Love, Language, Place, and Identity in Popular Culture is a valuable addition to extant scholarship on romance, literary, linguistic, and sociological studies. It extrapolates the complicated historical phenomenon of othering to a layered analysis of various subgenres of popular romances. The contributing authors have given readable and insightful approaches

and nuanced theoretical frameworks to study romance, which are especially useful in developing an awareness of the ongoing debates on race, diversity, and inclusion.