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Cant and Canonicity

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Is there a popular romance canon? If any, then many, though maybe's there's none (though we all know, deep down, that there is): *that*, my friends, in a nutshell muddle, was the answer collectively given by Len Barot/Radclyffe, Beverly Jenkins, Nicole Peeler, Susan Ostrov Weisser, and myself at the February 2015 conference "What is Love? Popular Romance in the Digital Age." Organized by filmmaker Laurie Kahn and romance scholar Pamela Regis, this gathering at the Library of Congress featured a sneak preview of Kahn's documentary *Love Between the Covers* and a day-long series of panel conversations, of which our discussion of "What Belongs in the Romance Canon?" was the first. Our audience was a laughing and curious crowd of least two hundred authors, librarians, publishers, and readers, as the *Washington Post* would breathlessly **report** a few days later. Questions and comments peppered each session, and Kahn's moderators did their best to keep things lively. ("Let's make the romance community one where the academics listen to *you*!" Mary Bly/Eloisa James exhorted the audience as one panel began.)

To watch this conference in 2022 is mostly a chance to see how much things have changed in popular romance studies.[1] The session on the "Science and History of Love," for example, seems dedicated first and foremost to busting myths that no longer surface in our scholarship, from the romantic "archetypes" mentioned by Jayne Ann Krentz in Kahn's film (historians Stephanie Coontz and William Reddy shake their heads in disbelief) to the evolutionary just-so stories that used to circulate in discussions of the Alpha Male. ("There's a dominant perspective coming from the animal literature but extended to humans in the late 1980s," relationship scientist Eli Finkel observes about this topic, "and we have, I would like to say, systematically destroyed that.") By contrast, issues of race and historiography surface only briefly, raised by historian Darlene Clark Hine, and neither her fellow panelists nor audience questions give her the chance to develop them. The panel on "Community and the Romance Genre" is uniformly celebratory—yet it comes just months

before this conversation would decisively shift: first after Suleikha Snyder posted "**A Tale of Two Conferences**," her blog report on the "convergence of microagressions" that she and other BIPOC authors experienced at the 2015 RWA conference, and then, a few weeks later, after Sarah Wendell excoriated the RWA Board of Directors in a **public letter** for allowing Kate Breslin's SS-Kommandant/Jewish heroine romance *For Such a Time* to be nominated for not one but *two* RITA awards (Best First Book and Best Inspirational Romance), shining the first light, for many of us, on issues with the RITA nomination and judging process.[2]

Compared to those panels, our session on "What Should Belong in the Romance Canon" feels positively timeless—but not, alas, in a good way. Yes, a couple of topics have grown dated, as when Beverly Jenkins muses that "[i]t would be nice if I had somebody on the [African American] historical branch with me." (She mentions Piper Huguley, and before the year was out, the Juneteenth-themed historical romance anthology *The Brightest Day* would bring her Alyssa Cole, Lena Hart, and Kianna Alexander for additional company, with many more authors to follow.) Yet the overall conversation about whether there is, or by rights ought to be, some thing or things we call a "Romance Canon"—and, if there is one, what should be on it—seems to have stalled at more or less the point that this panel captures. This essay will sum up where things stood in February, 2015, and I hope that it will restart the conversation, putting it back in motion on tactical, practical, and conceptual lines.

Tactical and Practical Considerations

There are both tactical and practical reasons why we might want to reopen the question addressed to our panel: "What Should Belong in the Romance Canon?" As Nicole Peeler points out in the Library of Congress discussion, framing the question in this way implies, first and foremost, that there *is* a popular romance canon. This gesture implicitly rebukes the notions, widespread outside our field, that popular romance texts are either fungible instances of some narrative formula or only *really* of interest when they become cultural touchstones and sociological phenomena (e.g., *The Sheik*, the flurry of blockbuster historical romances in the 1970s, or the one-two punch of the *Twilight* franchise and *Fifty Shades of Grey*). To speak of a romance canon is to "elevate" the genre, Peeler says, placing it not only on the level of other popular genres (fantasy, SF, mystery and detective fiction, each of which has gone through decades of canon discussion) but on the level of "precious art" more generally. Peeler knows full well that literary and popular fiction studies have both spent much of the last three decades trying to *free* themselves from the notion of canon. Yet from a purely tactical standpoint, even a provisional canon, a tongue in cheek canon, a "~~canon~~" *sous rature* will send, she observes, this message: "We're putting teeth into romance novels and saying they're part of something big. They're a part of something real, even if we know that our syllabus will shift in two years."

As that mention of a syllabus suggests, there are also purely practical reasons to thrash out what should belong in romance canon. Anyone entering the field of popular romance studies—a first-year grad student, a senior scholar, an advisor for thesis research—needs some sense of where to start reading and of the touchstone texts that are

already part of the conversation. The same goes for those of us who are lucky enough to teach courses on popular romance or to request acquisitions from an academic library. In each of these cases, practically speaking, a canon wouldn't constrain your choices—who now believes you should focus *only* on "the canon"?—but it would serve as a useful baseline for comparison, or maybe a *bassline*: a steady, unifying groove above which the romance scholar can take off on solo flights. In the absence of a canon coming from us, other lists will surely fill the gap: some of them systematic, like the "Classic" and "Selected Bibliographies" in a library advisory book like Kristin Ramsdell's *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*; some of them ad hoc, cobbled together from available coverage in essays, monographs, and podcasts (if it's good enough for Teo or Regis, Roach or Vivanco, Kamblé or Moody-Freeman, a *JPRS* piece or Fated Mates discussion or a Black Romance interview, etc.). Some lists defer to reader polls (e.g., the All About Romance Top 100 list); and some take their cue from author associations or awards, as when the Nora Roberts American Romance Collection decides to "**focus on RITA Award winners and RWA Lifetime Award recipients**" for its acquisitions.[3]

To discuss what belongs in the popular romance canon is also, practically speaking, to put ourselves as romance scholars in a definitional hot seat. Only a portion of "popular romance culture"—that is, of popular culture centered on romantic love—consists of texts with an HEA (Happily Ever After) or HFN (Happy For Now) ending. A canon in keeping with the broad church definition of "popular romance" used here at IASPR and *JPRS* might well raise some eyebrows in the popular romance reading (and writing, and publishing) community. Thus, for example, at the Library of Congress discussion, author and publisher Barot describes a happy ending for the romantic partners (that is, some promise of their futurity as a couple or triad or what-have-you) as the *sine qua non* that defines the romance novel as a form, and Jenkins concurs. "We want our HEA, and if you're going to kill somebody at the end then you need to get out of our category," Jenkins quips, to audience laughter. Scholar Ostrov Weisser, by contrast, insists that even if *Jane Eyre* didn't have a happy ending, "I would still think of it as a romance, myself." Is she wrong, or is this just a matter of terminology? As Hsu-Ming Teo has observed, the HEA or HFN as a genre requirement is a geographically and historically specific phenomenon ("The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre"), and even *within* the romance community, as a veteran Harlequin editor in the audience pointed out at the conference, readers of Harlequin's *Romance Report* routinely pick *Casablanca* as the "most romantic movie," which suggests an openness to media that are, in Ostrov Weisser's words, "*romantic* without being generically a *romance*." Indeed, at least according to Jennifer Crusie, the Romance Writers of America's definition of the romance novel as having "an optimistic, emotionally satisfying ending" was designed to leave some wiggle room for genre-adjacent love stories. Crusie's example is *Gone With the Wind*, but other, less problematic instances might well be cited, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a text that some authors and scholars of popular romance have mentioned as ancestral. In Olivia Waite's "A-Z of Intersectional Feminism in Romance," for example, N was for **Zora Neale Hurston**, and although Waite worried whether there was something appropriative in her "desire to connect Hurston's text with the romance genre," historian Kim Gallon's **post** on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for the Popular Romance Project, some years prior, made that connection with gusto. (For a discussion of Hurston and popular romance, see Moody-Freeman 231-2.)

If only for these practical reasons, then, there might be plenty to gain by discussing what belongs—and, by extension, what does *not* belong—in the popular romance canon. The effort may sometimes put us at odds with readers, reviewers, and authors of the popular romance novel, but the sparks that fly could be illuminating, and they might lead to a more systematic use, by us scholars, of such terms as "romantic fiction" (that is, "love stories"), the "romance novel" (love story plus HEA/HFN), and the "popular romance novel" (love story with HEA/HFN and a paratext or epitext that places it in a popular rather than a literary genre world).[4] These debates might encourage us to look at how other genres of popular fiction have approached definitional issues. Perhaps we, like the scholars of fantasy fiction,[5] need to think in terms of "fuzzy sets" and rhetorics and grammars and multiple modes of love-story narrative—or perhaps we don't. We won't know until the conversation lurches back into motion.

To be sure, there are at least two gaps in the picture I have sketched so far. First, I have not yet addressed who should be part of any canon conversation. As John Guillory pointed out decades ago, canons are the creations of institutions, not individuals[6]—but that may also imply that in publishing a canon here at *JPRS*, or on the IASPR website, we would be elevating *ourselves*, as well as the genre. That seemed unwise to me in 2015, and it still feels like a risky move, whether we constructed that canon by consulting only scholars or by asking authors, reviewers, podcasters, and other non-academic experts to join our little Council of Nicea and decide which books are romance gospel and which are apocrypha. Second, I have not mentioned yet the fundamental question facing any attempt to codify a canon: on what basis would a book or author merit or forfeit inclusion? Are the criteria quantitative, so that we simply have to verify that the candidate has been discussed in some number of scholarly sources, or appeared on some number of syllabi? Or is canonizing an author or text more like canonizing a saint, so that we're looking for proof of… what? Textual miracles? What would these look like—and who should be the Devil's Advocate?[7]

Conceptual Issues

Clearly, then, as soon as we begin to discuss how a canon might be constructed, the practical side of our question—"What Belongs in the Romance Canon?"—leads us into other, more theoretical questions. Perhaps for that reason, the Library of Congress panel spent relatively little time discussing which books do or do not belong, and quite a bit of time debating instead just how many canons, if any, the genre might need. Broadly speaking, three perspectives were championed during the panel. For convenience, I will dub these "Many," "None," and "One," with the provisos that each gets mentioned by more than one person, with slightly different emphases and reasons, and that sometimes one person will take more than one position, depending on the context. (As you will see, I am particularly guilty of that—or perhaps my position is something like "many someday, but none just yet.")

Many

In the Library of Congress panel video, the first articulation of the "Many" position comes from Len Barot, with quick support from Jenkins and, in the audience, Sarah Wendell. Any discussion of what belongs in the popular romance canon, Barot proposes, should start by dividing that putative list, like Gaul, into three parts. Questions such as "What came first?" and "What were the groundbreaking books?" will create a Historical Canon, she avers, and although this may sometimes overlap with a Readers' Canon—that is, "the works that readers loved"—, it need not do so, and neither of these lists has any necessary relationship with the set of books that scholars choose to teach and study, which Barot calls the Literary Canon. (As the conversation goes on, the terms "Academic" or "Teaching" Canon mostly replace "Literary," and the slippage makes sense: as Roland Barthes quips, "Literature is what is taught, period" [*Rustle*, 22].) Wendell notes that what puts a book into the Academic Canon—that is, what gets a text taught or discussed—won't necessarily place it in the Readers' Canon, and vice versa. When a friend alerts Wendell that she will be teaching a romance course at Duke,

> …she mentioned she's teaching Heyer. And of course the instantaneous thought for anyone who's read Heyer is "Oh! *Venetia*. *Arabella*. *The Grand Sophy*." Those are the titles you think of quickly. But she chose *Masqueraders*. Now, when you ponder it: gender roles. Of course! What's male, what's female? The boy's the girl, the girl's the boy: what's going on? But is that the one you'd recommend when you go up to a reader and they say "Ooh! Georgette Heyer—what should I read?"

The Readers' Canon, by contrast, is created not just through individual experiences of enjoyment, but also, and perhaps primarily, through dialogue. "Tell me what you've already read, so that I'm not just shoving you what *I* like, I want to know what *you* like and then I can come back to you," Wendell sums up the archetypal exchange. "So how is that aspect of the question addressed," she wonders, "when we look at canon?"

For Barot, Wendell's question is a springboard to talk about method. "We have the tools now to look at readers' canons, because we have social networking," Barot explains—implying, in the process, that the Readers' Canon itself is not one thing but rather many things, constituted by different communities of readers. As an example of social networking tools in action, Barot describes asking several hundred authors and associates of her publishing house, Bold Strokes Books, what books belong in a Gay and Lesbian Romance Canon, with the happy result that "everybody said basically five that were the same: *The Latecomer* by Sarah Aldridge; *Desert of the Heart* by Jane Rule; *The Lord Won't Mind* by Gordon Merrick; *Amateur City* by Katherine Forrest, and *Curious Wine* by Katherine Forrest." Each of these books is part of the Historical Canon, too, Barot explains, because "for us in gay and lesbian romance the firsts are the ones that we love, because we mark the steps in the evolution of our community by those works." As the rate and diversity of gay and lesbian romance publishing picks up, the consensus breaks down, but Barot seems

confident that targeted reader surveys can continue to establish this particular "Readers' Canon," implying that this approach might work for other readerships as well.

Likewise responding to Wendell's question, Jenkins is far less sanguine. "My thing is, who's going to decide? Who's going to decide what goes in the Academic Canon? The readers don't care because they've already got their canon. And it's pretty well cemented. But who's going to speak for Len? Who's going to speak for you? Who's going to speak for the people who are writing urban fantasy? Who's going to decide? And it's going to be argued, just like anything that's supposed to be, you know, cemented. I'm just waiting to see the fight." Because there was no follow-up question put to Jenkins—the next points are made by Barot, who blithely quips that "The scholars can fight it out over the scholarly works, because isn't that what scholars do?"—it's hard to know for sure what precisely drew Jenkins's concern. Her implication, though, seems to be that as they pursue their own agendas, scholars are likely to exclude, and thus render invisible, works that don't fit their preconceptions: queer romance, Black romance, new subgenres, and texts which readers love but which raise the wrong sorts of questions, or possibly which raise questions that no scholar has bothered to ask. Jenkins's repeated "who's going to decide?" also illuminates, however briefly, the issues of authority that Barot's social science approach to the Readers' Canon seems designed to circumvent—although even in the case of reader surveys, the questions of how and which readers are contacted, and what precisely they are asked, will put *someone* in the driver's seat. (Would a general survey of Goodreads ratings distribute authority more neutrally? My students often ask me why I am teaching books that don't get high marks there, or books that have few reviews, which suggests that they see Goodreads as useful in determining, in Barot's phrase, "the works that readers loved.")

Because she teaches in a popular fiction MFA program, Peeler proposes yet a fourth canon for the roster: a Writers' Canon, comprised of the books that seasoned romance novelists recommend as models of voice, plot, characterization, structure, and all the other elements of craft. In the field of poetry studies, my first area of expertise, critics such as Helen Vendler, Hugh Kenner, and Harold Bloom insist that poets are ultimately responsible for canonizing one another. Perhaps the same will ultimately be true for romance authors? In any case, the concept of a Writer's Canon would certainly open up the field of popular romance studies in fascinating ways, not least because some romance authors point us far outside the genre when they talk about both craft and inspiration. (Jennifer Crusie cites Dorothy Parker as an inspiration—could Parker go in such a canon?) And, of course, a Writers' Canon would remain in motion, as each wave of authors puts a fresh range of precursors on the map. As T. S. Eliot puts it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "|t]he existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered." The more "really new" romance voices and authors enter the contemporary scene, the more the "whole existing order" of popular romance history may need to shift in response.

None

Given the number of canons we are now discussing—multiple *types* of romance, each with its own history; multiple *readerships*, each of which might change its views from

survey to survey, year after year; multiple *academic canons*, with scholars battling it out like Highlanders in the '90s fantasy franchise ("There can be only one!"); a perpetually shifting set of writer-loved monuments —a skeptic might wonder whether the term *canon* still applies. At the Library of Congress, Mary Bly took that view. From her perspective as a literary scholar, talk of a popular romance canon was "really kind of spurious," she remarked from the audience (it was more of a comment than a question), unless all that we mean by this is a list of books that capture some cultural moment, probably no more than a year or two in duration. "What if there is *no* canon?" Bly challenges the panel, but what she meant by "canon" in this question is something like "a set of texts with, not just enduring, but *transhistorical* value, as opposed to historical interest." Jenkins seems to sense that meaning when she replies, briefly but pointedly, that although the heroes and stories that readers prefer may change from year to year, "There are classics. I mean, we all know that there are classics." (I will return to Jenkins's remarks when I reach the stance that I've called "One.")

My own remarks to the conference also questioned whether anything really constituting a "romance canon" exists. My reasons, however, were different from Bly's. First, citing articles by Noah Berlatsky and Jodi McAlister that had been published a few months before, I made the case that no list of authors, novels, or publishing lines in popular romance currently serves what I described as the *functions* of a canon: namely, as I put it at the time, "to establish authority, to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, the gospel of the Lord from the Bible fanfic," etc. As many have observed, I reminded the audience, romance readers are

> quite comfortable with the ideas of subjective pleasure and contingent value. What works for me won't necessarily work for you, and what works for me might work for me for some reason other than "objective artistic merit" (subtlety, artistry, deftness, and all these other supposedly demonstrable qualities of canonicity). There are, we might say, many fish in the sea, a lid for every pot. That's a lesson from within the novels, right? The same hero doesn't work for every heroine, and vice versa, or heroine for heroine, or hero for hero … That's a lesson from *within* the novels that readers seem able to map onto the *literary field itself*.

If the romance community is already at home with what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls "contingencies of value," I concluded, doesn't that mean it's *ahead* of us scholars, waiting for us to catch up? (So speaks a man who spent his youth huddling for cover during the Canon Wars of the '80s and '90s—battles which, like the Clone Wars, are rather more fun to hear mentioned than to watch at length.)

Along with the example set by readers, my own experience as a teacher and scholar makes me a skeptic. Suppose we say, with Guillory and others, that canons are produced by institutions—which means, in practice, by relatively small numbers of individuals with access to some kind of institutional authority. Since 2005 I have become, by happy chance, one such individual—but as I said at the conference, a book doesn't show up on my syllabi or in my writing because I have "done all of the reading" and determined that this is the first of its kind or the best of the best, or even the best illustration of this or that trope or subgenre. A host of other, contingent reasons put books in my sights. Sometimes a blogger,

reviewer, podcaster, reader, librarian, or author has praised it, or a fellow scholar has buttonholed me to suggest that I give it a try. Sometimes it's a book that fits with the secondary works I like to draw on (e.g., it plays nicely with a chapter in Laura Vivanco's invaluable *For Love and Money: the Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance*, or with essays I like to teach by Hsu-Ming Teo on romance and historiography, or Erin Young on romance and whiteness). Sometimes it works as metafiction, setting up the way that I like to teach the genre more generally. (Since 2017 I have opened many a romance class with Rose Lerner's *Sweet Disorder*, in part because this book allows me to teach a set of questions and interpretive moves that my students can use for the rest of the quarter.) Sometimes my focus is on representation, because I've seen how much it means to my BIPOC students, my neurodiverse students, my trans students, my Muslim and Jewish students, and so on, to read books where characters like themselves are romantic protagonists—but sometimes I simply want to think through why I, myself, found this or that book so moving, while modeling for my students what a combination of affective and academic inquiry can look like.

In an aging but elegant essay on canon formation, Hugh Kenner casts a cold eye on canons determined by mere "pedagogic expedience" (61). *Authentic* canons are based upon someone's sense of aesthetic freshness and value, he writes, and not on the fact that a text lets us say certain classroom-useful things about its ideas, its form, its politics, and so on. The older I get, the more pedagogic expedience seems a perfectly reasonable criterion for putting something on a syllabus, but even I am wary of drawing conclusions about what is or is not "canonical" based on the relatively brief scholarly record on popular romance and the even shorter stack of syllabi. Having been guilty of basing generalizations about the whole genre on a small number of texts, we scholars of popular romance ought to be nervous about making claims about the romance canon based on what remains a small data set of courses and critical studies. As I said at the Library of Congress conference, "[t]he scholarship on popular romance is really young. It's really just getting started. The teaching of popular romance is even younger. I can probably count on my fingers the number of people who have taught multiple courses on popular romance fiction. There are not very many of us." To know what has or hasn't made it into the Academic Canon we will need to wait a few decades ("a hundred years or so," I said at the conference) for courses to proliferate and the field itself to expand, so that a handful of friendship networks and pedagogical exigencies don't overdetermine what is discussed.

It might be particularly premature to say with confidence what belongs on the *Historical* Canon. Do we know when it ought to begin? Regis's *Natural History of the Romance Novel* starts with *Pamela* (1740), but as Lerner's Regency-era heroine muses in *Sweet Disorder*, the marriage plot of that bestselling novel "had been old when Richardson did it seventy years ago" (9). At the first Princeton popular romance conference, back in 2009, Margaret Anne Doody made the case for starting with Chariton's first-century historical romance *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, and in her **Black Romance Masterclass** in 2021, Margo Hendricks suggested the third-century *Aethiopica* (*An Ethiopian Romance*, as the Moses Hadad translation has it). At the Library of Congress, Nicole Peeler made a case for E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1859) as a precursor text for its adventurous heroine Capitola Black, which brings us closer to the present, and both Jenkins and Regis mentioned Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) as an early instance of Black romance—but here too, as the discussion went on, it grew clear that for every

groundbreaking instance that somebody mentioned, two or three others needed to be added. Barot's Reader's Canon of gay and lesbian romance did not include Ann Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) and *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), but later she added these two Black-authored lesbian romances to the Historical Canon discussion; Gwendolyn Osborne, speaking from the audience, had to remind the panel that there are multiple waves of Black romance between *Iola Leroy* (1892) and, a century later, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), the landmarks mentioned by Jenkins. (As instances, she mentions an unnamed book by W. E. B. DuBois—probably his 1928 novel *Dark Princess: a Romance*—and *Entwined Destinies*, the category romance by Rosalind Welles, published in 1980.) That both Shockley and Welles appear on the RWA's 2019 list of Romance Trailblazers suggests that we may be getting *closer* to a solid account of American romance from 1970 onward, but even published histories of this slice of the genre's global history remain riddled with gaps and errors (for a survey of those narratives, see Moody-Freeman; for more on gaps in the record, see Ammidown, "A Black Romance Timeline" and "Towards an Accurate History"). In any case, American romance is only a slice of the genre's global history.

One (AKA, "There Are Classics")

Perhaps there is nothing inherently worrisome about our concluding that romance does not, in fact, have a canon. Other genres have reached this conclusion: the editors of the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, for example, seem unperturbed by the fact that "there is very little consensus around a canon," to the point where "[t]wo people's understanding of the fantastic can be sufficiently different as to generate a list of texts with little overlap apart from Tolkien (and sometimes not even him)" (James and Mendlesohn, loc 262). This lack of consensus may, they acknowledge, make fantasy literature trickier to teach, but they urge their readers to experience it not as a lack, but as an "enormously liberating" opportunity (loc 262). We might follow their lead.

Yet even as I type these words, I recall Beverly Jenkins's quiet admonition in response to Mary Bly/Eloisa James: "There *are* classics. I mean, we all know that there are classics." To bring this essay to a close, let me think about what that still small voice might mean.

First off, let me simply ask: *can* we, in romance, take our cue from the work done on fantasy fiction? Scholars of that genre have the luxury of knowing that fantasy authors have been taken quite seriously both inside and outside the academy. The opening paragraph of Mark Scroggins's monograph on British fantasy author Michael Moorcock reels off a list of national and international awards that Moorcock has garnered—over a dozen, some for individual works, many for lifetime achievement—and it concludes with the reminder that "[i]n 2008, he was named by the London *Times* as one of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945" (1). The Library of America, which **"champions our nation's cultural heritage by publishing America's greatest writing,"** publishes not one, not two, but *five* hardcover anthologies of work by Ursula K. Le Guin, an author who straddles the line between fantasy and science fiction, while Gene Wolfe routinely receives such giddy accolades as this, from the *Washington Post*: "If any writer from within genre fiction ever merited the designation Great Author, it is surely Wolfe," who "reads like Dickens, Proust, Kipling, Chesterton, Borges, and Nabokov rolled into one" (Gevers). No wonder the *Cambridge Companion* editors are so sanguine! When a *fantasy* scholar writes that "there is

no consensus on a canon," it suggests that there is simply too much excellent work for one canon to hold. When a romance scholar or author says the same, it sounds like there's simply too little: no historical canon worth our preserving; no literary or academic canon worth the classroom effort; no readers' or writers' canon worthy of such celebration. That seems to be what Jenkins heard, and why she felt compelled to reply.

Jenkins is far from the only romance author, reviewer, reader, or scholar to claim, when provoked, that the romance genre not only has its classics, but that romance authors, reviewers, and readers (if not necessarily scholars) *do* know them, or come to know them, as they become more genre-competent. In her memorable blast **"Little Miss Crabby Pants Fires the Canon,"** for example, reviewer and blogger Wendy the SuperLibrarian (2011's RWA Librarian of the Year) replied to Noah Berlatsky's 2014 *Salon* piece on the lack of a romance canon with a "Starter Guide To The Romance Canon That You Think Doesn't Exist." Her dozen entries mostly focus on what Barot calls the Historical Canon—a single influential text or author, a tetrarchy of "Gothic Queens," another quartet of groundbreaking "Erotic Romance Goddesses"—and they quickly drew over 100 comments, mostly suggesting additions on historical and/or reader-favorite grounds. The comment thread includes only one or two academic scholars, and thus highlights the expertise to be found in the romance community more broadly, not least via contributors' thoughtful observations about the contrasts between the US and UK modern romance traditions, about romance outside the Anglosphere, and about whether in genre fiction canons (as Wendy herself observed) "authors tend to be more important than specific books."

The expertise and memory of romance readers, authors, editors, reviewers, and so on, has not always been respected by romance scholars. Even now, my sense is that we draw on this collective wisdom mostly in informal and unsystematic ways. Is it time (past time?) for us at IASPR and *JPRS* to make this a more systematic practice, in order to articulate, if not a romance *canon*, at least a list of classics—not so that we can talk about them to the romance community, which does not need our guidance, but rather as a way to school ourselves? As I pursued my Ph.D., I had a set of "comps lists" to help me prepare for comprehensive exams on various periods before I could move on to write a dissertation. As graduate programs in popular romance begin to spread, might it be useful to have one or more "comps lists" for those who study and teach the genre, so that every graduate student, faculty advisor, or research librarian assigned to support them does not have to cobble together a set of texts based on hunches, assumptions, conversations, or the still-nascent scholarly record? (The *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* should help with the last of these, but its primary goal is to introduce readers to secondary texts and critical approaches, rather than to novels and authors as such.)

One such systematic approach to compiling a list of classics can be found in scholarship on another academically marginal genre, YA fiction. In their introduction to *Critical Explorations of Young Adult Literature: Identifying and Critiquing the Canon* (2020), editors Victor Malo-Juvera and Craig Hill propose to "*discover*, rather than *decide*, which texts qualify as canonical" (5, my emphasis).[8] Their process is procedural, based on such qualifications as whether the text "has been widely and continuously read over many years," whether it has been "taught with greater frequency when compared to other YA texts," and whether it was considered "groundbreaking at the time of its release and/or [has] had lasting impacts on subsequent writers in the field" (6). Our qualifying questions might have to be different, and the process that Malo-Juvera and Hill outline centers

scholars and teachers in a way that we might find it hard to emulate. (For example, using a survey of "attendees at the 2018 Adolescent Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English Conference [*n* = 89] and the 2018 Summit on the Pedagogy for Young Adult Literature at the University of Las Vegas Nevada [*n* = 15]," Malo-Juvera and Hill construct initial lists of The YA Texts Most Frequently Taught, while when it comes to romance, I doubt that we could find fourteen people around the world who are lucky enough to teach the genre on a regular basis, let alone 104.) Later steps in the process factor in texts that "have been and continue to be read widely by adolescents" *outside* of school, and those which have influenced "not only popular culture, but the field of YA literature in groundbreaking ways." Those might have closer analogues for us, and surely we could muster a hundred authors, reviewers, librarians, bloggers, podcasters, and others with well-informed opinions about whatever qualifications we might want our classics to meet.

Like the "Many Canon" proponents I discussed above, Malo-Juvera and Hill are careful to point out that any given subset of YA fiction could be said to have its own canon. They are likewise careful to use a metaphor based on constant motion to keep their canon from seeming static or monolithic. Briefly put, their YA canon is presented as a solar system, with a group of central texts (the sun), a set of "major players" circling this (planets, some more visible than others), and finally a group of books that are currently either "approaching or departing" the other two lists (these are "asteroids, comets, and meteors"). The metaphor has its limits, since plenty of asteroids are in a stable orbit at a steady distance from the sun, but perhaps achieving canonicity would mean something like being captured as a moon by one of the planets or… well, my astronomy is a bit rusty, but whatever's the opposite of either burning up in an atmosphere or flying off into some Oort Cloud of textual oblivion.

Do we in romance have enough data in hand to pursue this sort of procedural approach? I don't know what access we have to sales figures, but I suppose a team of researchers could assemble syllabi, tally awards, explore reader ratings, and do surveys of well-informed people (authors, reviewers, librarians, bloggers, as well as fellow scholars—again, expertise with this genre is widely dispersed). Could this data be processed to give us a list of the classics that, as Jenkins says, "we all know are out there?" If so, I wonder how the list would compare to the set of texts that we as scholars have studied for the past half-century. The **Romance Scholarship Database** might help us determine which romance novels have, so far, been written about, whether in journals or books or dissertations (there's no comparable record of conference papers, but it's not an unthinkable project)—and although I'm not at all sure that such attention correlates with whether a novel or author is, in fact, seen as a "classic," if the books that we're studying and/or teaching aren't part of anyone's list of historical or readers' classics, we might want to think about what that means. (Is there such a thing as a "*succès d'estime*" in popular romance studies? Barot's Literary, Academic, and Teaching Canon division gives us a way to categorize such novels, should we find them.)

Because I am a close reader by training, rather than a data-driven scholar, I can barely imagine the conceptual and practical issues involved in trying to "*discover*, rather than *decide*," which authors and texts would take their place on an official IASPR and *JPRS* Comps List or List of the Classics. My training does, though, help me spot a different, perhaps more purely temperamental issue dogging the project: the results of an algorithm,

however useful to others, would probably interest me less than a sheaf of lists, however idiosyncratic, by named individuals weighing in the genre's classics (as they see them), or simply on books that ought to be known by us scholars, *deciding* rather than *discovering* these on whatever grounds they think best. At the risk of being flip, the first model strikes me as using crowdsourcing to capture consensus—call it the "50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong" approach—while the second shrugs off consensus as a goal and takes its cue instead from Sophie Tucker's original use of that figure in a 1927 hit about the differences between French and American cultures: "In *Vive la France* / They're full of romance / You'll find policemen with embroidery on their pants / And when they start to sing the Marseillaise / They sing it forty different ways / Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong."

In the end, I can see both plusses and minuses to both of these approaches. The first is smooth at the public-facing front end but complicated at the back, as we try to design the procedure that yields our results. The second approach is simple to design, but leaves things messy and unfinished at the front end, and therefore might prove less useful as a guide for library acquisitions, syllabi, and so on. That said, an ongoing series of curated lists would foreground the contingencies-of-value, there's-a-lid-for-every-pot ethos that the romance community seems to embrace, so perhaps some loss in guidance would be worth that gain. (It also addresses a complication I have wriggled past thus far: we may all know that *there are classics* while still disagreeing, for good reasons, and perhaps quite vehemently, as to which books and/or authors those are.)

Conclusion—and Onward to the Discussion!

In the years that I've been working on this genre, I've sometimes played a thought experiment based on the Library of America's handsome, hardcover gatherings of American Science Fiction (eight novels from the Sixties in two volumes; another nine from the Fifties in two more), American Noir crime fiction (eleven novels in three volumes), Women Crime Writers (eight novels in two volumes), the Western, and of American poetry. Suppose that I, or you, or both of us had wrangled an invitation to edit a comparable volume for American or Anglophone popular romance. What would we pick? Not what should we *study*, not what should we *teach*, but what would we gather and showcase as our set of "classics of the genre," either in general or broken down by, say, period or subgenre? If "we all know that there are classics," surely we could thrash out a list of contenders, even if we know that such a list will be subject to the same questions, doubts, and scrutiny that surround all comparable projects. (The Library of America *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century* volumes drew plenty of controversy, including William Logan's derisive snort that "it takes an editor without fear of God to favor Muriel Rukeyser [35 pages] over T. S. Eliot [only 34]" (470-71)).

I like this thought experiment for several reasons. First, it forces me to move from general claims about an author's status (Beverly Jenkins is a classic of American romance!) to the vexing, vital, invigorating moment of decision about which specific book makes the cut (*Indigo? Forbidden? Something Like Love?*). Second, it forces me to think about whom I would trust to edit this project, making those difficult calls—even as I know that having

this or that name on the spine of an anthology also frees me to nod, roll my eyes, or simply shrug about the editor's list of choices.

I do not know how long it will take for such a book to happen, or even a less-prestigious version, like the fat, slightly pulpy collections that introduced me to the histories of SF and detective fiction back in the 1970s. But I do think one reason that the scholarly conversation about the romance canon seems (to me) to have stalled is because it has not yet born fruit in any tangible, durable, and, yes, debatable *product*: a publishing project; a scholar's advisory; *something*. The *JPRS* **special issue on *The Sheik*** is a step in this direction, and our **special issue on Black Romance** is another, but I am eager to hear any other ideas that my respondents can offer.

To close out my portion of this discussion and to open things up for the respondents, let me briefly list the titles that were mentioned, however briefly, in the Library of Congress conversation. Whether they came up in discussions of Academic, Historical, Readerly, or Writerly canons, of precursors for the modern genre, of disability and neurodiversity in romance (an audience question), or of books that might have been canonical in their time, but would not be seen so anymore, the novels named in our discussion of "What Belongs in the Romance Canon?" were:

Pride and Prejudice (1813) by Jane Austen
Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brontë
The Hidden Hand (1857) by E. D. E. N. Southworth
Iola Leroy (1892) by Frances E. W. Harper
The Sheik (1919) by E. M. Hull
The Masqueraders (1928) by Georgette Heyer
Devil's Cub (1932) by Georgette Heyer
Arabella (1949) by Georgette Heyer
The Grand Sophy (1950) by Georgette Heyer
Venetia (1958) by Georgette Heyer
A Civil Contract (1961) by Georgette Heyer
Desert of the Heart (1964) by Jane Rule
The Lord Won't Mind (1970) by Gordon Merrick
The Flame and the Flower (1972) by Kathleen Woodiwiss
The Latecomer (1974) by Sarah Aldridge
Loving Her (1974) by Ann Shockley
Entwined Destinies (1980) by Rosalind Welles
Say Jesus and Come to Me (1982) by Ann Shockley
Curious Wine (1983) by Katherine Forrest
Amateur City (1984) by Katherine Forrest
Waiting to Exhale (1992) by Terry McMillan
Flowers from the Storm (1992) by Laura Kinsale
Redeeming Love (1997) by Francine Rivers
Ain't She Sweet (2001) by Susan Elizabeth Phillips
Bet Me (2005) by Jennifer Crusie
Natural Born Charmer (2007) by Susan Elizabeth Phillips
The Duke is Mine (2009) by Eloisa James

Fifty Shades of Grey (2011) by E. L. James
The Rosie Project (2013) by Graeme Simsion

In addition to the specific titles mentioned, a handful of authors came up by name, if only briefly:

W. E. B. DuBois
Donna Hill
Piper Huguley
Jayne Ann Krentz
Brenda Jackson
Beverly Jenkins
Rosemary Rogers

These lists are context-dependent: for example, four of the six Heyer titles were mentioned in a single question; Jayne Ann Krentz appeared as a talking head in the documentary film clip that introduced our panel, and it was her quote from that clip, not her fiction, that was discussed; both Jenkins and Barot refrained from mentioning their own novels by name, although their presence on the panel implies some sort of "classic" status. Had different members of the audience gotten the microphone, no doubt there would be some difference in the list we generated.

For the record, though, if you went to the panel on "What Belongs in the Romance Canon," back in 2015, those were the names and titles you heard.

So, respondents: over to you! What have I missed? And where do we go from here?

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[1] A six-hour video, with transcript, remains available at the Library of Congress **website**; a panel-by-panel version appears on Kahn's **Blueberry Hill website**, but the audio and video tracks are out of sync throughout.

[2] For a useful discussion of those issues, see "'Obstructing the Laws": Romance Writers of America'" in Laura Vivanco's monograph ***Faith, Love, Hope and Popular Romance***.

[3] For a useful discussion of the limitations of using the RITAs as a guide for library acquisitions, with suggestions for other awards that might be used, see Steve Ammidown's *Library Journal* article, "**Romance Writers of America Rescind Award for Lakota Genocide Redemption Narrative**." Kecia Ali raises similar concerns (324-5; 329).

[4] For more on the concept of a "genre world," see Fletcher et al., "Genre Worlds and Popular Fiction."

[5] I draw, here, on Farah Mendelsohn's discussion of genre in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*.

[6] See Guillory, John. "Canon." Critical Terms for Literary Study. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 233-49.

[7] I joke—but in fact, the idea of authors as "cultural saints" goes back at least to Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* and has been explored at length by Dović and Helgason.

[8] I am grateful to Stacey Lee for suggesting that I consider this book and the procedural approach that it outlines as a model for the identification of one or more canons in popular romance.

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