

Feeling Judged: Reflections on Pornography and Romance from a Minotaur Milking Farm

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Abstract: In general, “pornography has been defined in terms of content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts), lack thereof (materials without any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value), intention (texts intended to arouse their consumers) and effect (texts arousing their consumers)” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1). This article explores the relationship between pornography and romance via an examination of just one romance novel, C. M. Nascosta’s *Morning Glory Milking Farm* (2021), not because it is representative of the entire genre, but because its setting, plot, and characterisation facilitate such an exploration. Consensus seems unlikely to emerge as to whether or not romance fiction meets the criteria for classification as pornography. Even those works lacking explicit sexual content may be considered akin to pornography (‘emotional porn’) due to the genre’s focus on producing emotional responses in its readers.

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In the *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance* (2021) Jonathan A. Allan stated that “[o]ne unresolvable conundrum, or at least one that has ongoing permanence, is the relationship between pornography and popular romance. Future work should continue to think about this relationship” (Allan, “Gender and Sexuality” 446). This work seems particularly relevant given that currently in the USA “Book banners are increasingly going after a wide variety of titles, including romance novels, under the guise of targeting ‘pornography’” (Sargent and Waldman). While it must be acknowledged that, as Greg Sargent and Paul Waldman note with regards to current book bans, the term pornography “is a very flexible one—deliberately so, it appears—and it is sweeping ever more broadly to include books that can’t be described as such in any reasonable sense” (Sargent and Waldman), in general

pornography has been defined in terms of content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts), lack thereof (materials without any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value), intention (texts intended to arouse their consumers) and effect (texts arousing their consumers). (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1)

In this article I explore the relationship between pornography and romance via an examination of just one romance, C. M. Nascosta’s *Morning Glory Milking Farm* (2021), not because it is representative of the entire genre, but because its setting, plot, and characterisation facilitate the exploration to such an extent that it can be read as a metafiction centred on this topic. Moreover, a focus on a single text may demonstrate the value, the necessity even, of close, detailed reading when attempting to identify whether there is “artistic, cultural or social value” in works of popular culture which include “sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts.” A cursory inspection of *Morning Glory Milking Farm* will certainly reveal that it contains sexually explicit material, including detailed descriptions of minotaur genitalia, and skirts the edges of the bestiality taboo. For some readers such content would provide immediate grounds for assuming the novel is pornographic and intended only to arouse. A closer reading, however, may suggest that *Morning Glory Milking Farm* is a text which, to rework Thomas J. Roberts’ statement about popular fiction more generally, is “vivid, sometimes outrageous: [it] must be to keep our attention. Like serious fiction, however, [it] would not hold us if [it] did not offer something to feed our minds” (128) in addition to offering to stimulate our bodies.

“Content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts)” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1)

Nascosta’s novel is a romance in which the setting, the eponymous Morning Glory Milking Farm, is a facility which both intends and ensures the arousal of its clientele of male minotaurs: “[t]he goal for every client is a plentiful, speedy collection” (2) of their semen. As such, considerable salience is given to “sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts.” However, as stated in Nascosta’s tagline on her website, her works are “High Heat, Always Sweet;” one reader commented in her review, “I was expecting straight smut and

while I got that I hadn't realized I'd get the sweetest love story" (Howe). It was a comment echoed by another reader:

After seeing this book EVERYWHERE on Instagram, I decided to give it a go. *Morning Glory Milking Farm* is my first monster romance, and I've got to say, it managed to be exactly what I expected it to be, but also unexpected in how sweet the romance was. (Dani)

These readers' difficulty in classifying the novel as "straight smut"/porn or "the sweetest love story"/romance is mirrored in the text itself by the human heroine's attempts to determine whether or not her role as a "milking technician" (9), responsible for stimulating minotaurs to ejaculation, constitutes "sex work" (25). The term "sex work," used in the novel itself, is an "inclusive term for a wide range of occupations—everything from the street prostitute or escort to the phone sex 'actress,' stripper, or porn star" (Escoffier 174). This perhaps encourages consideration of the possibility that, even if Violet's employment as a "milking technician" at the milking farm is not "sex work," her function within the novel is in fact "sex work" with respect to the novel's readers. Indeed, at one point she realises that the sex she is engaging in with Rourke, the minotaur hero of the novel, closely resembles the porn she has previously watched. She had downloaded "some minotaur porn, scrolling until she found a bull with similar coloring to him, and set to work rubbing circles against her aching clit as the human on screen was taken from behind" (161). Later, the first time she invites him home, she takes up a position "on her hands and knees" (177) and

he stayed behind her. She instantly thought of the minotaur porn she'd watched on several occasions by then, the human in the video keeping her eyes closed as her mouth hung open and her head lolled as she was fucked from behind by the huge bull with his coloring. (177)

Given that Violet herself recognises the similarity between pornography and the scene being depicted in the novel, it seems justifiable for readers to consider it to be pornography too.

There are, however, reasons why readers and authors might resist sexually explicit romances being classified as porn. As Amber Davisson and Kyra Hunting have observed, "The question of whether or not the sexual explicitness of romance novels makes them pornographic is contentious in no small part because of the shame and moralizing that exist around pornography" (10-11). This "shame and moralizing" has a direct effect on readers. Kim Pettigrew Brackett, for example, found that romance readers "were clearly motivated to act by their perception of romance reading as a stigmatized activity, albeit a mildly stigmatized one" (357):

women who read these books are, by association, sexual beings. Because sexuality is a private matter, the concealment strategy is employed. This points to a comparison between romances hidden behind a book cover and *Playboy* magazines hidden in dad's sock drawer. (358)

The impact on authors is potentially even greater. According to research conducted by sociologists Jennifer Lois and Joanna Gregson, romance authors often receive comments

suggesting that they are viewed “as oversexed women who documented their personal sexual experiences and fantasies in their books” (465). Indeed, the “slut-shaming was [...] so common that writers braced themselves when conversations turned toward the topic of their writing” (467). In addition to accounts of writers being shamed, there were also many reports of writers being treated “as though they were ‘open to sexual invitation’” (471) and being asked “if they had performed all of the sexual encounters described in their books. [...] This type of prying into writers’ sex lives was constant” (473). In *Morning Glory Milking Farm* Violet similarly associates her job with sex and pre-emptively self-shames, thinking prior to accepting a job at the milking farm that it was “completely ... lewd and vulgar and inappropriate” (14).

However, Violet then almost immediately starts to defuse this sexual stigma by reframing what she will be doing: she reminds herself that she will be employed by “a pharmaceutical company, a major multinational” (14). It is respectable to be “working with clients at a pharmaceutical company” (65): “pharmaceutical company had a nice panache to it, one that she knew would impress her mother and great aunt enough that there would be no need for further questions” (77). This attempt to destigmatise her work parallels romance authors’ “focus on professionalism [which] becomes a way to legitimate romance writing as a practice, making claims to respect based on the image of authors as business people” (Taylor 276). In addition, Violet reassures herself that her job cannot be “inappropriate” (14) and socially unacceptable because it is situated in Cambric Creek, where she has witnessed:

A family of mothpeople [...]; a couple with two small children. As she watched, the roly-poly baby was tossed in the air by the bespectacled mothman, peals of squealing infant laughter meeting her ears [...]. She’d watched as the couple reached the opposite sidewalk where they were greeted by a petite goblin, clutching the hand of her own small, green-skinned child. *This is a nice place.* The thought had come to her unbidden, but the moment it crossed her mind, she had known it was true. *This is a nice place, and they wouldn’t have a business that wasn’t completely on the up-and-up operating right out in the open.* (18-19)

That niceness and respectability are so closely associated with families with children may be problematic, but these are associations also present when many romance authors create “a public self, an author brand” (Golubov 138):

family seems to be a recurring fact in bios because the genre reflects upon family (traditional and nonconventional), caring for a family is a «moral force for good» in the genre generally, nuclear familialism a cornerstone of an acceptable white middle class lifestyle as well as an expression of a type of successful femininity. (Golubov 144)[1]

Violet, then, may be naïve in her assumptions about business locations, families and “nice place[s],” but her thoughts on these matters do, nonetheless, point to the fact that definitions concerning what is, or is not, “nice” are socially constructed and policed. As one of Violet’s non-human colleagues tells her:

humans have a, let's say *different* view on what you call 'sex work' than a lot of us do. There are a lot of species that go through seasonal heats [...] It's not just being horny, it's a medical handicap. Not everyone has the luxury of having someone at home to help them get through it. Being a heat helper is a real job, you know [...]. It's more like ... home health care, I guess. (25)

After "the better part of three months" (119), during which Violet has learned considerably more about non-human species, she has come to understand "what Kirime had meant by saying their job wasn't sex work, not from the point of view of the technician" (119). Nonetheless, she acknowledges that "It might have been in the human communities" (120).

In human society,

pornography is the return of the repressed, of feelings and fantasies driven underground by a culture that atomizes sexuality, defining love as a noble affair of the heart and mind, lust as a base animal urge centered in unmentionable organs. (Willis 462)

One can perhaps see an element of this atomizing in the fact that despite working with many minotaurs, Violet herself is only aroused by "her official first client" (42), Rourke, who becomes her boyfriend. While "[s]he didn't know why she'd been so affected by the Clockwatcher, why him, among all the other minotaurs she'd worked on that day, amongst all those she'd observed over her training" (44), her experience conforms to a pattern in romance in which the first indication that a couple will develop a "noble affair of the heart and mind" (Willis 462) is an unusual degree of sexual attraction. Insofar as it affects romance heroines, Jodi McAlister has termed it "compulsory demisexuality: the idea that for women, sex and love are and should be tied together, and that romantic love is the only socially appropriate reason for a woman to have sex" (McAlister, *Consummate* 25). In romance, "compulsory demisexuality [...] intersects with a kind of compulsory monogamy to create a One True Love narrative. Desire is problematic if it is not linked to love, and so it is used to signal love" (McAlister, *Consummate* 155). Lust, then, is tamed by being placed in service to love, particularly if one or more protagonists are depicted as feeling no sexual attraction towards anyone other than the one they love, or will come to love. In this context, "the genres of romance and pornography are [...] apparently ideologically opposed. Romance is a literature of emotion, sentiment, and feeling; whereas pornography is not" (McAlister, "Breaking" 30).

There are, however, difficulties with the argument that it is the domestication of sexual desire which sets romance apart from pornography. Firstly, it would require romance authors to accept the "atomization" of sexuality described above, and many are keen advocates of sex positivity who oppose the 'slut shaming' of heroines who have been sexually active outside the context of "a noble affair of the heart" (Willis 462). Secondly, it is undermined by the existence of material classified as pornography which is "not violent but rather is vanilla, tame, and sensual" (Allan, *Men* 104) such as an example of "mainstream pornography" (Allan, *Men* 107) discussed by Jonathan A. Allan in which "[t]he credit sequence of the film, in some ways, seems to mimic the romance novel. The lovers embrace in a way that is reminiscent of the covers of romance novels" (Allan, *Men* 105); "[w]hile we do not have tell-tale signs of marriage between the actors (for instance, we see no visible

wedding rings), we do have indications of a kind of conjugal life—a living together and with one another” (Allan, *Men* 106).

If one cannot rely on the presence of “emotion, sentiment, and feeling” (McAlister, “Breaking” 30) to eject explicit romances from the category of pornography, romance readers and authors who wish to avoid the stigma attached to porn must turn to other criteria to distinguish between the two, such as their potential “redeeming artistic, cultural or social value” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1), their effects, and the intentions of their authors.

“Intention (texts intended to arouse their consumers)” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1)

It would clearly be impossible to determine the intents of each romance author: some make their intent explicit, others do not. Moreover, intents may be multiple. One commonly asserted intent of romance novels is the provision of pastoral care (Vivanco 2020), but this does not preclude an intent to arouse. In this novel the possibility of the coexistence of multiple intents is exemplified in the appearance of the Morning Glory Milking Farm. From the outside it is “a building with the outer facade of a great red barn” (7) and inside there is

Artificial turf in the lobby with the ceiling painted to look like a summer sky; bright, punchy colors that invoked gleaming tractors and richly painted barns, with milk glass vases of daisies on every surface. They had spared no expense creating the visuals. (7-8)

Yet,

The farmhouse aesthetic ended within the sterile white hallways of the employee corridors, the synthetic turf flooring of the lobby giving way to linoleum and the bright colors smoothing out to cool eggshell and ice blue. (8)

The décor of the sections of the facility exclusively for the use of employees parallels the technical, scientific language employed in the job advertisement (“[t]echnicians” (3), “a subsidiary of Pfizzle Pharmaceuticals” (3)) and employee training (“maintaining our quality protocols” (2), “the integrity of the genetic material” (9), “pharmaceutical processing” (9)). They signal that the intent of the company, at least as far as the staff are concerned, is to manufacture a pharmaceutical product:

The cleanup, the machines, the checklists – it’s all to remind us that this is a normal job, ya know? It’s not any different than working at the blood banks or the organ trade-in places. Some facilities extract venom from snake people to make medicines, we extract this. It’s no different. (24-25)

While the technical language is accurate, and the décor in these areas may assist in maintaining the sterile environment required for the production of the product, the company, like Violet and romance authors, may also have an interest in avoiding the stigma

of being associated with sex. Certainly in a similar non-fictional context involving a pharmaceutical company and a product associated with sex

it seems that in order to maintain its reputation in the public sphere as a serious company dedicated to drug development and disease treatment, Pfizer continued to develop a corporate strategy and promotional campaign that associated Viagra with debilitating medical dysfunction or disease. [...] In other words, to break the sexuality taboo, Pfizer offered “sexual chemistry” only to those with debilitating conditions, creating a legitimate, sanitized medical campaign. (Loe 43-45)

The intention signalled by the “farmhouse aesthetic” (8), however, is more ambiguous. While it may simply be intended “to invoke the friendly feeling of a neighborhood farmstead both inside and out” (7), it is perhaps more apt to be interpreted this way by a human than by a minotaur. In the companion novel, published in 2023 and written from the point of view of Rourke, the minotaur hero, he observes on his first visit to the farm that

They had gone out of their way to give the impression of a bucolic, postcard-worthy farm ... or a primary-colored daycare center designed for toddlers. For the space of a heartbeat, he was offended. *What the fuck are they trying to say? [...] Fine. Pretend we're barnyard animals.* (Nascosta, *A Blue Ribbon Romance* 6)

Pfizzle Pharmaceuticals could, of course, have chosen this aesthetic in order to infantilise their clients or imply that they are animals but there are perhaps parallels here between Rourke’s response to the décor of the farm, and that of critics to the language of romance:

Nothing about the romance genre is more reviled by literary critics [...] than the conventional diction of romance. [...] You would think that we romance novelists [...] would have the wit to clean up our act. After all, we are talented professionals. We’re quite capable of choosing other, more subtle, less effusive forms of narrative and discourse. [...] We write this way because we know that this is the language which [...] most effectively carries and reinforces the essential messages that we, consciously or unconsciously, are endeavoring to convey. (Barlow and Krentz 20-21)

Both the company and romance authors have chosen to express themselves in a way which attracts criticism and could be deemed to be the result of prejudice or to be insulting to the target audience’s intelligence. Yet, the company, like romance authors, is composed of “professionals” who one might therefore assume know precisely which messages they are conveying. In the case of Pfizzle Pharmaceuticals, the “farmhouse aesthetic” is almost certainly intended to appeal to the kink of a very important segment of their clientele, the “Good Little Cows” (30), who “really like to push the fantasy of being *milked*” (32).

“Effect (texts arousing their consumers)” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1)

The clientele of the farm is varied and so the impact of the décor upon them varies, just as there is variety among romance readers and the effects which texts have upon them. The minotaurs, like readers, can be divided into certain broad groupings. For the “Good Little Cows” (30) the experience of attending the Farm is deeply arousing because they can imagine they are “being milked like an actual dairy heifer” (89): “[i]t’s a fetish thing for them” (32). There are certainly readers who seek out particular romances for specific sexual content. The sexual experience is also foremost for

The Pop-n-Goes [...] the minotaurs who visited the farm infrequently, sometimes for the very first time, who were unprepared for the sensation of the sucking milking machine nozzles, ejaculating almost immediately and leaving the room just as quickly, unable to meet the tech’s eye. (32)

One can perhaps compare them to infrequent or new readers to romance, who pick up a book such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, find it surprisingly arousing, consider it to be porn and feel shame for having enjoyed it. Their opposites are the experienced genre readers who derive a considerable amount of satisfaction from cataloging their expertise (perhaps through maintaining a spreadsheet of their reading, or a Goodreads account where they leave reviews of each novel they’ve read). These are like the “Earners” (28) who can “account for every drop of semen they produced” (31), although readers tend to spend money on books instead of receiving it in return for their services. Another group of frequent users, the “Clockwatchers” (30), “tended to be businessmen always on their way to somewhere else. The milking process was a transaction to those bulls” (32). One can perhaps consider them akin to readers who proclaim their own intellectual superiority while admitting that they often read ‘trashy’ romances for escape and to help them relax: for them the activity fulfils a necessary physiological function but they ascribe little importance to it. Overlapping with some of the above categories are minotaurs whose longer-term aims in visiting the farm are related to self-improvement or the support of a family. These aims are less easily identified by Violet, so

Every minotaur who came in with a ring through his nose left her wondering if he had a new baby at home, a family vacation to save for, a down payment on a house. The bulls without rings may have been students, may have been looking to splurge on a gaming system or pay hospital bills or start building a retirement fund. (183)

The function of family as a marker of what is “nice” and respectable has already been discussed: its appearance here in connection with the ringed (married) minotaurs clearly places ostensibly purely sexual activity in service to love and community. Again, there are parallels here with arguments that some readers make about the value of the romance genre. Sarah Wendell, of the popular romance review site *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, wrote a book titled *Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels* in which she claims that

reading romance can help readers improve both their own lives and those of the people close to them:

Reading romance, a genre focused on the emotional development and self-actualization of the heroine and hero [...] gives romance fans a deep, multifaceted, all-encompassing lesson on how human relationships work. Many of us find ourselves in the role of advisor to our friends as the person others turn to for help with problems. (6)

Clearly this experience is not universal among romance readers but, just as minotaurs have varied experiences with the farm, so too do readers with their novels and, evidently, many of these texts which arouse their readers are also felt to have positive longer-term outcomes.[2]

“Redeeming artistic, cultural or social value” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1)

Wendell’s claim is, in fact, an argument that romance, taken as a whole, has redeeming social value. Focusing specifically on *Morning Glory Milking Farm*, however, those whose definition of pornography centres on its lack of “any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1) may find such redeeming value in non-sexual aspects of the novel. It provides a reflection on some of the realities facing young adults in an economy in which “income levels remain stagnated, average rental prices increase, more people take on large amounts of student debt, and the supply of new housing remains low” (Lew 330). This is not simply because Violet takes a job at the milking farm because “the advertised starting salary was higher than any belonging to the handful of jobs open in her degree field, none of which paid enough to comfortably keep a roof over her head” (4), but also because her search for suitable accommodation, and for employment which is both intellectually and financially rewarding, continues throughout the novel. Her quest concludes when she is offered a job which “would be perfect. It was largely a research position, digging into archives to recreate the textiles and paint colors of some of the grandest buildings in town” (207). However, in a metafictional move, the novel explicitly acknowledges the lack of realism involved in such an outcome:

Violet was half certain it was an elaborate joke, for dreamy-sounding jobs in cozy little carriage houses with ivy-clad walls in quaint little towns only existed in those predictable romance movies that she would binge watch from her sofa. (207)

There is also a subtle, feminist humour in the fact that the monster penises which feature so largely in the novel at once serve to inflate (by producing semen which is a “major component” of “erection-enhancing little blue pills” (11)) and minimise (by comparison) the sexual organs of human males. These “little blue pills” produced by Pfizzle Pharmaceuticals are clearly the fictional equivalent of Pfizer Pharmaceuticals’ Viagra which, because it “offers

symbolic forms of ‘empowerment’ for primarily white, middle-class, heterosexual men, [...] invites social critique for at least symbolically reinforcing male privilege and power” (Loe 22). Moreover, the revelation concerning the purpose for which the minotaur semen is collected appears alongside a critique of a phallogentric (human) society:

That human men placed an enormous importance on their dicks was no surprise to her. The whole world seemed to be designed for cocks, after all. Offices that were too cold, seat belts that cut across the neck instead of sitting comfortably across the chest, medicines that had only ever been tested on one segment of the population. Modern conveniences had been designed with only one half of the population in mind, at least in the human world. (11)

This is a version of the feminist argument, summarised in the subtitle of Caroline Criado Perez’s *Invisible Women* (2019), that we live in “a world designed for men,” in which

the lives of men have been taken to represent those of humans overall. [...] These silences, these gaps, have consequences. [...] Shivering in offices set to a male temperature norm, for example [...] crashing in a car whose safety measures don’t account for women’s measurements [...] having your heart attack go undiagnosed because your symptoms are deemed ‘atypical’. (xi-xii)

Judgements about what level of artistic merit or social commentary raises a work out of the category of “pornography” are, however, subjective and are perhaps at least partially based on modern assumptions about the content of pornography. The period which saw the beginning of the romance novel’s “modern ascendancy in the mid-eighteenth century” (Regis 53) also saw the publication of works such as *The History of the Human Heart* (1749), a novel which “embodies a model of pornography” (Lubey ix) which, Kathleen Lubey states, “has been effaced by historians seeking familiar pornographic conventions in works of the past” (ix):

Human Heart and its contemporaries show genital sexuality to overlap with philosophy, ideology, and culture, and they exemplify pornography as a textual expression of this energetic, frenetic discursive inquiry. They represent what was once pornography’s meandering and associative form, a form adept at connecting sex to culture and admitting the infelicities, even violence, of those connections. (3)

Lubey acknowledges, however, that

Reaching this insight requires that we examine pornographic texts with a certain wide-eyed receptiveness, such that we might under-read the content we assume is ubiquitous (penetration, heteronormativity, misogyny) and over-read the content we assume is absent (queerness, feminism, social perceptiveness). (6-7)

Those who are less wide-eyed might well argue, particularly with regard to contemporary texts, that a certain amount of non-sexual content is merely intended to provide a veneer of respectability, much as, according to one female vampire, human women move to Cambric Creek ostensibly because “it’s all very clean and respectable and no one ever lets on how horny they are to try something new” (118).

This something new, in the case of *Morning Glory Milking Farm*, is perhaps designed to appeal to readers’ desires while not provoking their fears. In the context of resentment of a “world designed for men” (Criado Perez), monster romances can, Saraliza Anzaldúa, argues, deploy “the monster as a means to avoid cognitive dissonance evoked by traditional heterosexual pairings contextualized in a patriarchal structure” (3). In other words, “as outsiders themselves monsters offer female readers understanding as a sympathetic Other” (4). Rourke does possess many attributes of the traditional, dominant human male hero. He is “a bit older” (215) than Violet, “[h]andsome, successful” (102), has “started his own company, [and] owned a home in Cambric Creek” (143). Violet perceives a clear power imbalance between them since she is “an unremarkable human [with] no career, drowning in debt, [and] nothing to bring to the table with someone like him” (103). Moreover, “she had always been a sucker for authority. She’d been certain that he could ask anything of her in that commanding voice and she’d be helpless” (147). However, it is made explicit that in some ways he too is excluded from a “world designed for men” (Criado Perez). His is a world where “[i]t’s not always safe to be surrounded by humans” (143) and in which humans have “commodified” (70) minotaurs.

While this explicit acknowledgement of the objectification of minotaurs, and Nascosta’s use of the phrases “human privilege” (154), and “majority culture” (144), demonstrate some degree of awareness of the commodification of, and discrimination against, the racial Other, these brief moments of insight into social inequality may fail to offset the impact of a depiction of the Other which appears to draw on an existing stereotype. Sanjana Basker has argued that “*Morning Glory Milking Farm* presents a deeply fetishistic view of interracial, rather interspecies, relationships between white women and black men.” The fact is that

The black man’s relationship to the phallus in the Western symbolic economy has long been a problematic one. As Frantz Fanon has noted in *Peaux noires/Masques blancs*, in Western discourse on black men’s sexuality [...] “The negro is eclipsed. He is made into a member. He *is* the penis.” (Steward 509)

This is also an accurate summary of the milking farm’s approach to the minotaurs, where “the main aspect of the job” (21) involves stimulating “the minotaurs’ girthy members [which] vaguely resembled their human counterparts, but there was no comparing the *size*. Commensurate with the heft of the hulking bullmen, their cocks were long and impossibly thick” (12).

In addition to having larger than human penises, the minotaurs have other, markedly non-human features, including hooves and tails. Violet notices when she first sees Rourke that “[t]he short, silky-coarse hide that covered his body was the same color as the shaggy, pecan-brown hair that fell messily into his face with huge, roan-colored horns pushing through it” (35) and much later, before they finally have vaginal intercourse, “[s]he was struck at that moment [...] at how completely non-human he really was” (189). The

minotaurs, then, have distinctly animal characteristics and, as Quaylan Allen and Henry Santos Metcalf have observed, “[w]hite America’s fascination with black sexual practices equated black men’s presumed sexual prowess with animalistic desires” (21). While the figure of the minotaur has not commonly been used as a symbol of animalistic Black masculinity, it is open to such usage and, indeed, white supremacist South Carolina senator Ben Tillman stated in 1913 that “forty to a hundred Southern maidens were annually offered as a sacrifice to the African Minotaur, and no Theseus had arisen to rid the land of this terror” (qtd. In Gossett 271).

Literature can, of course, serve “as a primary locus for reworking social categories, for rearticulating the whole terrain of values and parties involved” (Steward 507) and one method for doing so is by “reiterating a stereotype that is susceptible to racist hystericization, the speaker perpetuates such stereotypes in order, paradoxically, to counter them” (510). Douglas Steward gives an example from a collection of poems by gay Black poets, *Milking Black Bull*: in “‘The Labyrinth,’ Brad Johnson’s poem from which the anthology’s title derives, the speaker indeed has sex with a hypermasculine, Minotaur-like ‘Bull’” (Steward 513). The risk inherent in such reworkings, however, is that the reiteration of stereotypes may simply reinforce them, and for Basker, at least, *Morning Glory Milking Farm* does precisely that. If it is indeed the case in Cambric Creek that “every human in town’s only here because they want to be dicked down by other species” (118) and if that is true of a great many readers too then, as Basker has argued, the novel is guilty of “evoking imagery and language of interracial pornography without a critical eye or awareness” or, at least, of having done insufficient work to ensure that the novel’s audience will not receive it primarily as a variant of interracial pornography.

Conclusion: Accepting a Contested Status

Given the difficulties in determining how all readers respond to the texts, in proving authorial intent, and assessing whether or not non-sexual elements of the novels are “redeeming,” it seems highly unlikely that a consensus will emerge on whether some or all romance novels are, or are not, pornography:

for some individuals, very few types of sexual media constitute pornography. For others, even the slightest suggestion of sexual content is often self-defined as pornography. [...] Two individuals may view the same sexual content but have very different perceptions of whether that content is pornographic and therefore have very different emotional and cognitive reactions to such use. (Willoughby and Busby 687)

Even romance novels which exclude “sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts” (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1) are likely to elicit disapproval among some individuals because romance, like pornography, is a “body genre” (Williams 268). Body genres provide “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (Williams 269) and there “is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of” (Williams 270) the depicted

bodies. One may remove sex from romance, but by definition a romance cannot exist without protagonists who experience love intensely. Moreover, the ‘happy’ or “emotionally satisfying and optimistic” (Romance Writers of America) ending of every romance must make the reader, not just the protagonists, happy and emotionally satisfied. As romance author Jennifer Crusie, who was involved in the drafting of the Romance Writers of America’s definition of romance, tells would-be romance authors:

If your story is about interesting people who have real problems that are written with irony and distance, you’re not our kind of people. Irony and distance kill emotional involvement and reader identification, and without involvement and identification, there’s no emotional catharsis when the lovers finally commit in the end. And romance is about emotional catharsis. (Crusie)

Since much of romance fiction is produced, and many of its readers exist, in a cultural context in which “[t]he cool reason with which we are supposed to approach thought requires us to isolate the mind from the emotional body” (Hautsch 6), romance readers form part of a “long tradition of ‘bad’ readers, who are considered unacademic, silly, effeminate, and out of control because of their social, emotional, and embodied engagement with texts” (Hautsch 8) and romances may be labelled ‘emotional porn’ for deliberately provoking this type of engagement.

It seems that, unless there is cultural change so great that all humans would think about the Morning Glory Milking Farm the same way that most of Cambric Creek’s non-humans would, romance readers and authors will, as Lurielle the elf tells Violet, just have to accept that loving the genre entails accepting that “there will always be people who will say nasty things – but it doesn’t matter if you work through it together. If you love each other and you’re good together, it’s worth it” (214).

[1] See also Luneau, whose analysis of a small corpus of biographies of Harlequin authors similarly found that “[c]e qui saute d’abord aux yeux reste la prédominance accordée, dans la biographie, à la description d’une vie amoureuse d’abord, d’où naîtra une vie familiale féconde et heureuse.”

[2] I have discussed the perceived benefits of the “pastoral care” offered by romance to its readers in *Faith, Love, Hope and Popular Romance Fiction* (Vivanco 2020).

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