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Romance, Eroticism, and Intimacy in a Work of *Nancy Drew* Fanfiction: Cross-Reading Personal Pedagogies and Literacies

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Abstract: This inquiry is a feminist conversation cross-reading of an erotic Nancy Drew fanfiction story by two critical friends and scholars. Because we have complementary research interests (e.g., children's literature and fanfiction; sexuality education and embodiment), we embarked on a project to converge our expertise through text, talk, and togetherness, exploring how our readings and responses might inform our work as literacy researchers and teachers. We found that collaboratively analysing a text that holds significant meaning for both of us created space to examine how "smutty" fanfiction operates as a personal literacy practice that foregrounds embodiment and relationality and also destabilizes certainties. Through our conversation, we first historicize our shared embodiments of *Nancy Drew* through childhood experiences with these stories, relating them to storying and fanfiction. Then, we analyse a single resonant example of *Nancy Drew* fanfiction smut, critically considering its content note before making meaning of its qualities, such as romance, intimacy, youthfulness, and queerness. Finally, we examine this text as an example of intimate writing, reflecting on how we encounter and respond to similar creative expressions in our personal pedagogies as post-secondary educators.

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Introduction

This feminist cross-reading of a *Nancy Drew* "smutty" fanfiction story emerges from our shared interest in literacy education, as well as our respective interests in embodiment, bodies, and sexuality education (Kaye) and children's literature and fanfiction (Amber). As critical and feminist friends, we collaborate on projects about academic friendship and love (Hare and Moore, "On Fostering Feminist Friendships"); colonial love, space, and place in Hallmark films (Hare and Moore, "Gaslighting Love"); feminist experiential learning (Hare and Moore, "Freighted Love"); and feminist screaming (Moore and Hare, "Come Scream with Me"). We trace feminist wa/onderings in the tradition of Sara Ahmed, in which she "follows words around" "to go where they go" because "they catch your attention" and to "see what is there, to pick up on something" as a way of exploring relationality, power, and connections between people and texts (3, 5, 6, 17).

This inquiry began as ours typically do. Amber texted Kaye a storm of excited sentences about finding a digital dreamland that married our research interests. Amber, working on her postdoctoral project (e.g., see Moore, "Analyzing an Archive"; "'Just a Bit of Fluff'"; "Representations of Testimonial Smothering"; "'They're All Kind of Dark'"), was searching for fanfiction with pedagogical potential (e.g., see Black, *Adolescents and Online Fanfiction*; Black, "English-Language Learners"; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar; Garcia; Lammers et al.) and stumbled across a boutique website: *Adult FanFiction*. This is a multifandom archive created by a frustrated Alya Olsen, who was not being allowed to publish NC-17-rated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* stories elsewhere (fanlore.org). *Adult FanFiction* largely contains what's known as smut fics, or erotic and/or romantic stories. There, Amber discovered archives of sex-filled stories inspired by children's and young adult (YA) literature such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Baby-Sitters Club*, *Goosebumps*, and, of course, *Nancy Drew* (yes, *Hardy Boys* too). Knowing Kaye's current research focus on sex education (e.g., see Hare, "'I Take Them'"; "'Institutionalized States'"; "'Sandpaper. Yeah'") and her previous focus on porn studies (e.g., see Hare et al., "Perspectives on 'Pornography'"; "Revisualizing 'Porn'"), Amber saw compelling feminist possibilities in exploring these texts together and converging our knowledge.

From those initial texts, this inquiry focuses on a compelling prompt: what might enmeshing YA romance literature with erotic fanfiction offer to popular romance studies? We explore this prompt via a feminist conversation in which we cross-read to tease out particular meanings of the intimacy, romance, and sexuality in our chosen *Nancy Drew* fanfiction smut, considering their personal and pedagogical implications for us as literacy researchers and teachers. In this way, we aim to contribute to discussions expounding how popular romance studies is increasingly interdisciplinary and exploratory, opening up possibilities for diverse study and literacy education researchers like ourselves. As Amy

Noelle Parks offers, "romance is at its most liberatory when it poses questions rather than provides answers." Further, we take inspiration from Catherine Roach's notion of embodying our ludic researcher selves—those who approach research as a place of play and pleasure. In this spirit, we endeavour to "embrace [our] enjoyment quite shamelessly" ("Going Native" 46), a stance we hope evident in our conversation. With this attitude, we approach our work by: (1) historicizing our shared embodiments of *Nancy Drew,* reflecting on our childhood with these stories as foundational to our personal literacies; (2) conversing about the selected *Nancy Drew* fanfiction story, including critically wrangling with its complicated content note about incest; (3) analysing the fic's enmeshments with romance, eroticism, and intimacy, focusing on the parts most meaningful to us; and (4) considering how the story prompts us to assess intimate writing as a key component of personal literacies and pedagogies, recognizing a feminist responsibility to respond meaningfully when students or others share personal stories.

Our insights, we argue, connect with and contour to strands of popular romance studies that advocate for attending to the power of/in love and emotional texture in stories. We are reminded of the importance of encouraging ethical and enthusiastic engagement with similar stories—sometimes offered uncertainly—in academic spaces to foster meaningful exchanges and open transformative possibilities for personal literacies.

Beyond Entwined Interests: Bringing Together Re-Readings, Romance, and Intimate Resonances

To begin with, although the *Nancy Drew* books are not exactly romance, you would be hard-pressed to find YA texts without at least a bit of romance in their pages (Carpan).[1] YA romance is a sub-genre of both adult popular romance and YA literature focused on adolescent love stories (Allen). They came into popularity in the 1980s, with extraordinary interest in texts such as Francine Pascal's *Sweet Valley* empire (Cart; Pattee). Many scholars are interested in YA romance's historically conservative nature (e.g., see Christian-Smith), constructions and representations of gender (e.g., see Christian-Smith; Clasen), explorations of desire and sexuality (e.g., see Gills and Simpson; Inggs; Seifert; Wilson), and feminist possibilities (e.g., see Aubrey et al.; Parks), for example. Notable for our discipline is how educators have taken up YA romance in literacy learning (e.g., see Daly; Killingsworth Roberts). And, while some might dismiss such stories—indeed, engaging in such texts is often a conflicted exercise (Radway, *Reading the Romance*)—they warrant serious consideration; after all, "teen romance novels have ideological content and consequences" (Johnson 55). More recent YA romance scholarship demonstrates how the genre has broadened and evolved, including encompassing queer romance (e.g., see Crisp) and stories attendant to race (e.g., see De Jesús; Miles), as well as further subgenres such as paranormal romance (e.g., see Evans; Herb) and supernatural romance (e.g., see Aubrey et al.; Taylor). As this project demonstrates, romance can surface in varying degrees in many types of texts, with fanfiction standing out as a prominent form that champions and celebrates romance writing.

Fanfiction is self-published writing produced by fans of texts (e.g., books, television shows, movies, video games) or people (e.g., celebrities) that is typically housed in online archives and communities such as *Archive of Our Own*, *FanFiction.Net*, and *Wattpad*. In these

stories, amateur authors (often young people, especially girls; see Hedrick; Hellekson and Busse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*; Skaines) reimagine beloved texts and play with original characters, storylines, and worlds on their own terms. As mentioned, fanfiction often includes intimacy, eroticism, romance, and love, usually in dynamic and innovative ways, such as troubling normative understandings and/or offering transformative perspectives.[2] And, as briefly discussed in our introduction, there are many different types of fanfiction, including sexually explicit stories that are sometimes referred to as "smut." Although smut is described by Michelle Santiago Cortes as "fanfiction's sexually explicit problem child," it is appealing and widespread, and, according to Sara K. Day, it "makes possible readers' vicarious exploration of the sexual urges the novels inspire, as readers-turned-fanfic-authors rescript the romance and emphasize the erotic elements, at times adding graphic (or pornographic) details" (34). Scholarship has threaded together discussions of popular romance fiction and fanfiction (e.g., see "Rewriting"; Moore, "'Just a Bit of Fluff'"); as such, smut in particular shares connective tissue with particular types of romance fiction such as erotica and "bodice rippers," which are also known for graphic sexual content and are considered popular fiction. Day also notes that a fanfiction story's focus on smut also does not displace or minimize possibilities for romance and love; rather, they can meaningfully intersect. All of this also connects to YA literature generally and YA romance specifically, as YA texts increasingly include detailed, educative, realistic, and meaningful sexual content (e.g., see Bittner; Gillis and Simpson; Spiering and Kedley). However, despite our chosen story being housed in an "adult" fanfiction site, we were delighted, intrigued, and puzzled by what we consider to be the story's restrained, or tame, smuttiness.

Finally, we draw on feminist understandings of issues such as intimacy to inform how we think about romance writing and sexuality therein; these knowledge(s) undergird much of our talk about this *Nancy Drew* smut fanfiction story and intimacies in our teaching practices. Our conceptualization of intimacy comes from feminist scholars, including Lauren Berlant and Lisa Weems. Emerging from their work on American popular culture, Berlant's intimate publics are what Hannah McGregor describes as

> a kind of discourse public . . . in particular, [intimate publics] come together via mass media that represent what Berlant calls a, quote, broadly common historical experience, end quote, that consumers can identify with whether or not they share the actual details of that experience. So the idea of an intimate public is that it represents something that feels emotionally true to the people who identify with it, whether or not it's literally representing something that's happening to you. (McGregor and Kosman 14)

We use McGregor's description of Berlant's notion because it appears in another scholarly conversation where McGregor, in dialogue with Marcelle Kosman, illustrates the specific intimate public that emerged after the YA supernatural romance series *Twilight* became popular and how "the intensity of the emotions feels emotionally true and resonant, whether or not it has anything to do with any experiences they've ever had. And so the public that organizes around something like *Twilight*, is a public that is characterized by a sort of intimate emotional resonance with what is happening in those texts" (14). We are in agreement with this assessment of the power of intimate publics and YA romance texts more

generally. It is also worth noting that in their dialogue, McGregor and Kosman make clear that they are "huge" fans of Berlant, which certainly connects to this project (13).

Another scholar whose theories about intimacy we find resonate here is Weems, whose work in adolescent sexualities and youth studies closely aligns with our own. We often return to Weems' ideas for her focus on embodiment in theorizing, an approach we also strive to adopt, especially Kaye (e.g., see Hare, "Collecting Sensorial Litter"; "Connecting Students"; "'I Take Them'"; "'Institutionalized States'"). Weems argues that

> the concept of intimacy calls attention to the embodied nature of power, subjectivity, and citizenship. As such, the construct of intimacy allows researchers to attend to the affective, historical, and socio-cultural dimensions of childhood and youth. . . . Furthermore, intimacy permits more dynamic images to animate our sensibility of [what Ann Laura Stoler calls] the "tense and tender ties" of cultural politics. (134)

This understanding informs how we, in feminist conversation, unfurl the connections that form our personal literacies and pedagogies—our approach to meaning making in our scholarly engagement, teaching, and learning. To draw out how we engage relationally with romance, eroticism, and intimacy in texts, we acknowledge the importance of considering how experiences are always historical, ongoing, and imbued with power relations at once (e.g., see Christian-Smith) and reverberate into our present-day scholarly selves.

Our Process: (Re)Reading Nancy

The first step of our inquiry process was deciding what to read; both of us had read several of the children's stories listed as having fanfiction collections. However, nearly immediately, we settled on an archive of fanfiction dedicated to Carolyn Keene's[3] *Nancy Drew* series (1930–1959), which are mystery texts chronicling a young adult detective's adventure(s), usually (like us) alongside and in partnership with close female friends.[4] The books were a major success and became bestsellers despite the Great Depression; this is perhaps due in part to their "escapist appeal" (Greer 301). As Elizabeth Marshall writes of Nancy's influence,

> To say that Nancy Drew is an intriguing character would be to understate her appeal as girlhood super-heroine. The long-lasting popularity of her mysteries, the recurrent appearance of Nancy Drew in different generations, as well as her appeal in popular culture and personal memory proffers the series as a compelling, if informal, American girlhood curriculum. ("Red, White, and Drew" 203)

Obviously, this project is a testament to *Nancy*'s appeal to our "personal memory," and we returned to these stories through fanfiction re-imaginings because we both have strong connections to it, understand it—as many do—as "belong[ing] to a moment in feminist history" and know that there is much literature dedicated to it (Heilbrun 11). Scholars have explored the books' depictions of girlhood, possibilities for queer re-readings, and its

significance as an educational text (e.g., see Abate; Cornelius; Cornelius and Gregg; Geer; Gonzalez; Harper; Marshall, "Global Girls"; Marshall, *Graphic Girlhoods*; Marshall, "Red, White, and Drew"), among other inquiries. For example, returning to Marshall, she has analysed *Nancy Drew* across a few projects; first, she explored how the series contributes complicated understandings of adolescent American girlhoods, gender and sexuality in its early books (Marshall, "Red, White, and Drew"). Next, she analysed how the series positions Nancy as a global role model and allows readers to consume "Other" transnational girlhoods (Marshall, "Global Girls"). Finally, she troubled understandings of Nancy Drew's wholesome appeal in examining how the protagonists inflict violence on racialized girls that is hidden under the cover of benevolence, arguing: "The construction of Nancy Drew as empowered girl relies on the subjugation of Other girls to maintain her privilege" (Marshall, *Graphic Girlhoods* 47).

Returning to the small archive of Nancy Drew smut on *Adult FanFiction*, we found a set of five stories and began reading. We found we were both drawn to one story, "The Secret of the Squeaky Springs," for the same reason: it delighted us, made us laugh. To be clear, this was not a mocking response; rather, we especially appreciated moments of lightness, as well as other parts we felt significant. This story also made us pause and reflect, prompted copious notes, and left us thinking about it days after finishing. Because of these resonances, we decided to focus our analytic attention on it through an experiential cross-reading exercise. Drawing on an eighteenth-century historical understanding of cross-reading wherein lines from newspapers were recycled to produce new texts (e.g., see Goodland; Cursor, "To the Printer" [1770]; Cursor, "To the Printer" [1779]), we too borrow pieces of stories to create news ones in our examination of this fanfiction story—noting the genre itself also carries on this tradition—while also rearranging fragments of our own stories to create new meanings. Cross-reading allows us to understand our impressions of this fanfiction story in relation to one another, our memories of the canon text itself, and the larger context of teasing out how our literacies and pedagogies might be transformed by this collaboration. Cross-reading, then, emphasizes meaning making across texts: *Nancy Drew*, a fanfiction, and our stories.

The text selection settled, we turn to ethics, beginning with Ruth A. Deller's general insight that "negotiating ethical issues within fan studies involves a set of complex questions and interactions. There are no clear 'rights' and 'wrongs'— and every case depends on a number of contextual factors" (138). As such, although this data is freely available online and therefore can be analysed without consent, in keeping with the feminist ethics of Amber's fanfiction research approach and the guidelines set out by fan scholars Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, we are "doing our best to meld together academic and fannish requirements" ("Fan Privacy"). We took a goodwill approach and contacted the author about our planned project. We introduced ourselves and informed them that we wished to present our analysis of this story for academic purposes. We then invited the author to contact us with any concerns, contributions, questions and so forth; we were willing to abandon the project if they did not wish for their work to be taken up in this way.

After allowing ample time for the author to reply, we proceeded to analyse our responses to the story. (Notably, as this paper goes to press, we checked a final time for a reply and found none.) A whirlwind of text messages came next, as we started spewing ideas and impressions at one another. We then shifted to a recorded video call (Zoom) to capture joint insights about the significance of fanfiction as a literacy practice and transcribed the

conversation verbatim; this presented version of the interview has been edited for style, coherency, and is representative of our exchange. We have thus tried to capture this messy yet meaningful talk as we first conceptualized it: as a conversation. In turn, presenting this inquiry as a critical and scholarly dialogue between academic feminist friends seemed an appropriate choice, especially after reflecting on our previous learning from mentor texts written in a similar form (e.g., see Butler; Evans and Friedman[5]; Gibbs Grey and Williams-Ferrier; Nagar et al.). Like Calla Evans and May Friedman, we are inspired by life writing methods as our conversations are "seeded by our prior histories"—in this case, with Nancy Drew and with one another—and our "pre-existing collaborations" (122), and we found that dialogues hold many affordances. For example, we hope our conversation here will initiate further dialogue between us and others and contribute to the aforementioned increasingly interdisciplinarity of popular romance studies. Inspired by ThedaMarie Gibbs Grey and Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, we also loosely understand this conversation as a kind of dialogic narrative performance intended to (re)capture the spirit of our previous texts and talk. And finally, in alignment with Sara Ahmed's interview with Judith Butler, we find that our talk also allows us to consider the question "*Has/how has your sense of who you are in conversation with changed over time?*" (486). Overall, we find conversation to be a generous and generative approach that reflects and showcases how, in this project, intimate work was shared between us as critical feminist friends and scholars.

Our Conversation

. . . so few of us are given permission to theorize about our own lives, so many are bound to the register of everyday chitchat. (Belcourt 35)

Memories of Nancy

To begin, we take turns historicizing our experiences with *Nancy Drew* during childhood. We reflect on how we each began reading these texts during difficult coming-of-age moments that include experiences of grief and loneliness, thinking about how this informs our personal literacies and also provides perspectives into the intertwinements of fanfiction with forms of intimacies.

Amber: When we first conceptualized this project, we agreed to historicize our embodiments of and experiences with the *Nancy Drew* books, which impacted each of us and our personal literacies. Do you want to share first?

Kaye: Sure. . . . When we talked about books we read as kids, I immediately thought of *Nancy Drew*. I went through an awkward phase. My family had moved when I was in grade 4, and I went from having tons of friends to none for a couple of years. I was lonely, unhappy and found school hard. It was about this time that I got into reading, and *Nancy* in particular. I remember spending many summer school breaks trading dozens of books at a used bookstore in my town. As I read them, I pretended that I was daring and smart like Nancy and had best friends like George and Bess. The stories helped me imagine a "me" who might exist if things hadn't happened the way they did.

I think that is why I connect with fanfiction. It is freeing to reimagine a story with established characters but with the exact plot you want, especially about love and relationships. As a personal literacy, I've long written stories to deal with unpleasant things; I am realizing now that period with *Nancy Drew* is how it started. You can thread a bit of yourself and your desires into the story, but also have some distance to keep it feeling "safe" from your unpleasant or vulnerable actual reality—something aligned with the "emotional work" Mandie B. Dunn and R. Ashley Johnson describe as being invaluable for learning through tough topics (17).

Amber: Thank you for sharing that; I never realized that you had this particular experience with loneliness. For myself, I discovered the classic paper yellow-spine books at an entropic and sweltering second-hand store on my tenth birthday. The shop owner saw me poking through this dusty box, filled with the entire original collection of fifty-six or so books and said that girls my age loved them. She sold it to us at a discount when my birthday was mentioned. I was elated; I was drawn to *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Mystery of the 99 Steps*, and *The Witch Tree Symbol* right away, and on the drive home, I mentally mapped my bookshelves, plotting rearrangement. However, we arrived home to awful news: my dog had died. I began reading the next day, to escape and find comfort. And so *Nancy* helped me with my first real experience with grief and loss. It also cemented that I was a quick, voracious reader—a quality of my developing personal literacy that started to inform my overall identity (and indeed, is something I've since had to re-evaluate; e.g., see McGregor 2019). It's no wonder that I became a high school English teacher.

Kaye: Do you still have them?

Amber: Last winter, I spent an afternoon in my dad and stepmom's basement clearing out my old books. I wound up donating the *Nancy Drew* series, which look more like antiques than books now. They held a lot of delight yet melancholy for me—not just because my dog died, but because (and this connects to your loneliness experience) I spent a lot of time alone as a kid, growing up on a farm with two TV channels on good-weather days. It's funny to think about that energy moving to other bookshelves, or maybe they won't go anywhere at all.

Reading Dirty Detectives

> *Perhaps imagination is not where we go to escape reality but where we go to remember it.* (Doyle 66)

Now that our personal and shared connections to *Nancy Drew* are established, we turn to the fanfiction story and critically wrangle with its context. In doing so, we spotlight an opening feature: a complicated content note about incest that garnered audience critique. We consider this warning to highlight our complicated processes of meaning making that emerged relationally via our personal and professional connections to this story.

Kaye: So let's turn to the *Nancy Drew* smut fanfiction story that we both zeroed in on. Can you start by providing some context?

Amber: Let's begin with the summary: "Everyone's favorite teenage girl detective picks up on every clue—except a few between her two best friends [Bess and George]." I think this winking description alone indicates that the author had fun with this; after all, writing fanfiction "is also about legitimate pleasure" (Flegel and Roth 1099). That takes on particular meaning with this story, housed in an archive created for sexually explicit fics, mostly written to capture and produce pleasure. To elaborate on the author's summary, this story is about Nancy, George, and Bess, who decide to investigate a haunted house. Upon arrival, the girls poke around before going to sleep, are soon woken up by noises, and discover a trap door to a secret tunnel. Beyond that, they discover a threatening man "wielding a crescent wrench," but George tackles him, and they call the sheriff. Threaded throughout are strong allusions to lesbian culture and a queer romance between George and Bess, who are first cousins, which we will have to dig into because the content warning[6] is what we both first noticed and unpacked.

Kaye: I was struck by the content warning. It read: "This warning has been added by request. Yes, the f/f couple is George and Bess, who are first cousins. Me, I don't consider that incest. Worldwide 1 out of 5 marriages is between (het) first cousins. The US is one of the few countries where it is banned (24 states) or restricted (7 states) and as many readers come from that culture, I am happy to respect that perspective and place this warning for them."

Amber: Oh, me too! There is so much there.

Kaye: I first considered the taboo itself. Incest taboos are nearly universal, but like the fanfiction author notes, what is considered to be incest changes cross-culturally (Patterson; Wolf). The reasoning behind those taboos can be (heteronormative) genetic concerns or moral normative standards. The author does something interesting by including a statistic about marriage between (het) first cousins to justify the relationship between George and Bess, who are first cousins and lovers in this fanfiction. However, the author doesn't address that same-sex relationships are also often considered taboo. So while the content warning involves these two forms of taboo sexuality, the author only engages with the heteronormative, genetic one. What I love is that by constructing the content warning this way, the author gives unstated permission for same-sex relationships. So often in my primary research area of sexuality education, there is an unequal authoritative and normative framing of topics: puberty and (hetero)sexual reproduction are framed as scientific or biological and thus non-refutable, while sexual and gender identity is framed as value-based and thus refutable (Slovin). Here, the trigger warning on this fanfiction story subverts this framing altogether by highlighting how components of the cousin "genetic" incest discussion can be viewed as socially constructed and then not addressing the sexual identity or orientation component at all. It affirms many types of romantic and sexual relationships at once.

Amber: I love that we were both drawn to the warning for different reasons: you are interested in the actual content, and I am fascinated in the use of such notes. Content notes or trigger warnings are rooted in disability, feminist, and queer activism (Brigley Thompson), and, since the early 2000s (Knox), they are often employed in online cultures such as fanfiction communities (e.g., see Bruns; Lothian), especially when upsetting issues

such as sexual violence are addressed. Their employment has caused considerable debate in education (Bentley); as Alexis Lothian put it, "Omg, academia is having the warning debate" (743), and I am firmly in the camp that believes they are significant (e.g., see Brigley Thompson; Gerdes; Lockhart). For these reasons, I've spent a lot of time discussing their affordances (e.g., see Moore, "Safe Space(s)"). And so I had a positive response to how this fanfiction author listened to their readers and took their needs seriously; to me, this signals an ethics of care that is congruent with much fannish behaviour and strikes me as evidence of Janice Radway's point about how "cultural practices, when sutured to other kinds of practices, can have politically significant impacts and results" (175–76). As the author notes, the warning was included after a review flagged the incest as potentially upsetting, which really showcases how such fans tend towards trauma-informed behaviour in fanfiction communities.

Two Scholars on Two Tensions

> *. . . fan fiction often gets reduced to its erotic aspects, but these erotic aspects also tend to present fan fiction's engagement with gender, sex, and sexuality at its fullest.* ("The Fan Fiction Studies Reader" 75)

Next, we co-analyse the story, especially exploring its romantic, erotic and intimate qualities, as well as the tensions therein that invoke Stoler's "tense and tender ties." We pause on moments where we see transformative possibilities through multiple readings—speaking to our personal literacies, scholarly views, and the connections we make with other scholars' ideas.

Kaye: Okay, so to review, the story is about Nancy, Bess, and George, who decide to investigate a haunted house; however, as they do, Bess and George keep not-so-subtly demonstrating that they are queer and into one another. Nancy remains completely oblivious and focused on her investigation, creating much humour in this story. The author even has the car radio playing Melissa Ethridge singing the line "I'm as blind as a fool can be" at the beginning. Throughout, I was struck by the irony of the clueless-about-queerness detective, as well as the exuberant, stereotypical signposting of lesbian or queer identity in an otherwise pretty realistic romantic mystery story.

Amber: By signposting, you mean all the Ani Difranco and womyn references?

Kaye: That George was written as a flannel-camp-shirt-wearing, Melissa-Ethridge-listening, tofu-skillet-eating vegetarian who also has an affinity for pink triangles kind of lady? Yes. The author played up these signifiers of lesbianism in popular media and culture. To me, it seemed an example where "The reference to the joke, rather than the actual telling of it, is meant to invoke social knowledge [about lesbians] assumed to be shared" (Queen 240). I think in this instance, it is shared with a niche audience of *Nancy Drew* fanfiction readers and also perhaps fans of the fic's author in their own right.

Amber: I thought it was likely a feminist who wrote it, and one who also might understand *Anne of Green Gables* as queer-coded as well; there is definitely some smut fanfiction pairing "bosom buddies" Anne and Diana out there, by the way. And on that note, it is worth

mentioning that these "pairings" in fanfiction are often referred to as "slash" fic where creators focus on intimate relationships between characters of the same sex; Elizabeth Woledge has called the slash genre "intimatopia" (99), Cristina Vischer Bruns has argued that "much slash fanfiction also emphasizes intimacy" (19), and Mafalda Stasi has compared slash fics to palimpsests— these rich, and arguably intimately entwined, layers of texts that have been erased and built on, "compress[ing] meaning" (Popova "'Dogfuck'" 178). I mention this because what I find compelling about slash fic is how it can be understood as a critical literacy practice; as Consuela Francis and Alison Piepmeir discuss with Joanna Russ, who does feminist analyses of such homoerotic stories, "part of what these slash stories are doing is making explicit a subtext that's already very much there." In this talk, they are addressing how, because of this underlying significance, slash can feel threatening, especially to toxic male fans, and so I understand this playful wordplay as evidence of not only pleasure, but a politics as well.

Kaye: I didn't know what to think! I am quite earnest, so in my first reading, I thought these references were very "on the nose" and perhaps by a young feminist or lesbian or queer person who was pulling out cultural references available to them rather than drawing from personal experience.

Amber: Yes, I wasn't sure either!

Kaye: But then many reader comments referenced the author's sense of humour; reviews included "FUCKING PRICELESS! I laughed SO HARD," "I actually LOL-ed at one point," and "utterly, utterly hilarious." The trigger warning also states the author is not American, which signals that the lesbian and queer references are likely cultural play. In re-reading the fic as an example of humorous writing, I reflected on the use of humour in classrooms and pedagogies of laughter and how "Squeaky Springs" might function as an educative text. Louisa Allen discusses how humour can increase engagement with sex education, take up the needs of particular cultural groups, and reduce apprehension. I have also read scholarship (e.g., see Kolenz and Branfman; Trethewey) that explores how feminist laughter in particular can deconstruct sexism, racism and heterosexism around sexual stigma, violence, health and pleasure, and also usher feminist desire into learning spaces.

Amber: I like Kristen A. Kolenz and Jonathan Branfman's article too. One of my favourite moments is "Instead of dismissing laughter as a bodily distraction from serious thought, we promote laughter as a tool that creates temporary communities, deconstructs oppression and enhances learning" (Kolenz and Branfman 573). This makes me think about how laughter presents and is produced differently in education: as an expression of joy, as a trauma response, as a source of conflict, and so on.

Kaye: It is a good one! The fanfiction author seems to be using humour here to make a specific point through obviousness. I think the story is about the power of heteronormativity in making people overlook alternative sexual possibilities. George is written as the ultimate lesbian or queer stereotype, and yet, her detective best friend Nancy still misses it. This might be playing with the embodied experience of feeling "super gay," if you will, but then how people closest to you still seem clueless—pun intended [*laughs*].

Amber: Groan.

Kaye: It is so obvious. Although, in this fanfiction, George and Bess are keeping their relationship to themselves and from Nancy too, so that just may be my reading; indeed, creative expressions like this "simultaneously [expose] the fluidity and multiplicity of meaning" (Leavy 66). And so maybe for the author it was just a funny romance story about the power of heteronormative assumptions overall. It reminds me of once being at a Pride event next to a group of shirtless gay men, covered in glitter, dancing suggestively. Then, this girl starts hitting on one of them—the guy looked so confused.

Amber: I love this analysis, and yes, as one reviewer communicated, Nancy, "ace detective," is oblivious to her obviously queer buddies hooking up right under her nose. By the way, what did you make of the tame sexual content?

Kaye: I was expecting more when I saw it was titled "Squeaky Springs"!

Amber: Don't forget that the chapter with the sexual content was called "The Secret Passage," which also led me to believe there would be more action, so to speak.

Kaye: Ha! In the story, Nancy interrupts George and Bess having sex. Nancy questions them about the squeaking sounds that she hears, finds a vibrator (a "sports massager") and some twelve-inch dildos ("anatomical models from science class"). We also read about Bess's lipstick being on George's face ("a makeup lesson"). And that is it! The smut is . . . almost missing. However, I noticed too that despite this tameness couched in almost satirical humour, the fanfiction still gives slivers of intimacy in other ways that seemed incredibly realistic to me, especially with George and Bess's tiny moments of bodily, romantic, and sexual connection. For example, there's this very early, subtle suggestion of a romance with the quick detail, "George opened the back door of the Mustang for Bess who slid in and arranged her skirt." This struck me as sweet, reading like a date. Moments later, "Bess reach[es] from the back and tuck[s] George's short tag back inside, giving the soft hairs on the back of her neck a sweet little caress in the process."

Amber: This makes me reflect on how we ruled out stories that included more sexually graphic and even sometimes violent imaginings. We both strongly responded *no*; we did not want to analyse more explicit and intense storytelling. Maybe, without quite acknowledging it from the outset, we steered ourselves into a "softer" story with tender moments such as George's chivalry and Bess's caressing. Our selection struck us both as perhaps less scary, more inviting and again, returning to laughter, the pleasure that we found in it was not about sex at all, but rather co-experiencing delight in humour and the intimacy of giggling together.

Kaye: I agree. I also wonder about why this story was written for an adults-only fanfiction site; I don't think this particular story would be out of place in other fandoms?

Amber: Definitely not. There's a lot of smut fanfiction out there across sites. In my own research, I've read far more sexually graphic fanfiction in places like *Archive of Our Own* (AO3) and *FanFiction.Net* (FFN).

Kaye: Interesting. I'm also reflecting on our talk about reading the *Nancy Drew* canon mysteries when we were aged ten to thirteen. The original books are, after all, intended to be read by children, with Nancy and friends being written as "near peers" at age sixteen. I wonder if the author is writing for an eighteen-plus fandom who would presumably be reflecting as adults back on childhood books, or maybe for the author there was something that felt illicit in re-writing a somewhat chaste book from one's childhood to contain sexuality, whether or not actual sexual activities are graphically described. . . .

Amber: Very possibly.

Kaye: I wonder if this connects to why we had such strong negative reaction to the other intense or violent stories and self-protecting childhood safe places from rewritings that do contain violent rapes, for example, but I think exploring that in depth is a different project. For this fanfiction, it further reminds me that the wondrous part of fanfiction is that meanings between the writer and the readers are not fixed; as John Nyman highlights, in creative expression, meanings start to branch from themselves "as soon as they engage with the readers they anticipate" (13). In this way, the last line from the reading is very fitting: "Bess threw herself back down on the queen-sized bed with a thud. George joined her and shortly the bedsprings began to squeak again in rhythm."

Responding to Intimate Writing

Finally, we detail what this story prompted us to (re)consider in our personal feminist pedagogies and literacies, especially in terms of how we encounter other forms of intimate writing in our scholarly lives: students' sometimes more intimate or personal assignments and our consequent assessments. While the intimate writings we receive in the classroom are often different than fanfiction stories, there are commonalities in terms of how such embodied, personal, and curated works speak to writers' similar negotiation of relationality, (un)certainties, and potentially transformative re-imaginings of lived experiences. We also see engaging others' embodied works of any form as a process that involves feminist negotiations of ethical issues.

Amber: Okay, I hoped that we could lastly unpack how this story made us think about our personal pedagogies and being educators who sometimes assess intimate writings. I don't necessarily mean sexual; rather, I mean work that cuts deep—the kind of writing where you know that you are witnessing something personal—perhaps a risk taken. When I was a secondary English teacher, students would sometimes hand in fanfiction for personal writing projects. In fact, one student's work was very erotic, which was quite a process to navigate. However, it inspired me to revisit my own pedagogical priorities so as to respond generously and generatively. And this is not unique; quite often, teachers encounter charged student writing. So how do we respond ethically, encouragingly, dare I say safely, and so on?

Kaye: Yes, I have encountered this as well. In addition to intimate works, especially when trying to write about self and relationships in relation to big-C Culture, I have had students write themselves into stories using personas. It makes me think about how Elizabeth Johnson addresses that although personal writings in education hold power for

empowerment, critical feminists have long highlighted that we can't over romanticize concepts of voice and authenticity because classrooms are "never safe spaces for free expression" (576). I take up this reminder in how I design personal writing assignment that could result in intimate writing. I take steps to outline that the assignment can be personal if desired, and students determine their sharing boundaries. I explicitly give "permission" for personal writings, though; don't you do something similar—something about working with "permission slips" as a class activity?

Amber: Yes, I had an excellent teacher who has us write ourselves permission notes to allow for the messiness of growth and remind ourselves that struggling is part of the learning process. I too want my pedagogy to be affirming and invitational. These permission slips functioned more as affirmations, and I often encourage students to write themselves validating notes to post in their workspaces so that they might remind themselves that literacy work (especially writing intimate expressions) is challenging, and also, it's okay (often necessary) to feel the weight of our art, our work.

Kaye: I am going to borrow that! Certainly, personal reflection or anything related to bodies may result in deeper-than-expected work. For myself, I try to foreground the power running through our relationship and how I represent a desired audience (just like fanfic!). For example, students often tell me, "I wouldn't say this to a male professor" or "This is just for you." The intimate writing is for themselves, but it is also for me, and a grade. This strikes a complex relationship; I must facilitate meaning making beyond confession or self-indulgence, as Juanita Rodgers Comfort talks about in "Becoming a Writerly Self: College Writers Engaging Black Feminist Essays." To help, I ask: *how can I help them theorize experiences more deeply? Who has written a helpful mentor text? What writing conventions might help them express more fully to the reader?* With that tone, I try to convey that I have handled their intimate writing with care.

Amber: I recently read Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewitt's *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*. Beth Walker's chapter, "Trigger Warnings: An Ethics for Tutoring #MeToo Content and Rape Narratives in Writing Centers," helps me with such questions. For example, she discusses how to respond to writing about sexual trauma; her advice includes avoiding cliches (e.g., calling writers "brave"), using affirming language with careful questions, focusing on listening, ignoring sentence-level issues and embracing unconventional writing, framing revision as empowering, and thanking writers.

Kaye: I can see how feminist ethics are woven into those practices.

Amber: Yes, this was validating, and I collect such best practices because I also find that "[w]hen you become a writing instructor, eventually, you end up with stories about rape" (Hirsch 4). And it can be intense to witness such testimony. Lily Orland-Barak and Ditza Maskit's research is evidence of this truth; in their study, one new teacher reacted to learning about the rape of one of her students in this way: "The tears froze in my eyes" (442). Although this especially speaks to my research about addressing sexual trauma in classrooms, much

of Walker's advice can be applied to other sorts of intimate writing we encounter as educators. What do you think?

Kaye: Well, we can never be sure what feels intimate to others. As you said, it is not always sexual or romantic but something that cuts deeply. Sometimes an intimate sharing is a picture of a hairy armpit, or a son's reference to his father's expectations, or the sacrifices of being an immigrant parent, or being accused of assault. As someone who is providing feedback for learning purposes, I think that I need to respond to personal expressions as intimate expressions, as though I can assume that there is a little piece of that person on the page. So I try to take up whatever intimacy is offered as generously and generativity as possible.

Concluding Thought

This conversation between two critical, feminist friends about smutty fanfiction afforded us many opportunities to consider how bridging YA romance literature, erotic fanfiction, and popular romance studies can inform our scholarly practices. Approaching the *Nancy Drew* fic with the aim of cross-reading a text that converges our interests provided an entry point for us to play and think in expansive, connective ways that sometimes feel unavailable when we do similar work individually. This inquiry thus represents our effort to carve out space to bump our expertise up against one another and other scholars, as well as to reconsider fragments of our own stories to create new meanings about romance, eroticism, and intimacy.

What resulted was a generative conversation that aided us in considering how several ideas resonate in our always (re)shaping personal literacies and pedagogies, including the embodied connections evoked through fanfiction; the transdisciplinary meanings of content warnings; the ways eroticism and romance can be storied in laughing ways that creates communities, deconstructs oppression and enhances learning; and how we engage as feminists with intimate writing in our research and teaching. Said another way, perhaps, and pulling from the earlier quote by Weems who draws on Stoler, our conversation started with considering the affordance of what some may classify fanfiction "smut" and found anew the many "tense and tender ties" we share with one another, *Nancy Drew*, friendships, and other forms of love. We also found how through intimate expressions, there are pieces of people embedded in texts that ask us to take seriously storied romance-y re-imaginings of self.

We see our conversation as one we can thus revisit to pick up on reflections and resonances and dialogue differently in the future, building on our shared meaning making. As such, we encourage other scholarly friends to engage in similar forms of inquiry that ask you to find places where particular interests overlap and find fresh ways to engage with what you wish to "follow . . . around" in text and partnership (Ahmed 3).

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[1] And, while we are analyzing an erotic reimagining of *Nancy Drew* via fanfiction, it is worth mentioning that throughout iterations of the series, romance is threaded through, such as between Nancy and her sometimes boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, who first appears in the seventh book, *The Clue in the Diary* (Harris).

[2] For example, take into consideration Milena Popova's work ("Rewriting") on arranged marriage fanfiction and the ways in which authors reimagine relationships to include emotion work and consent such that power dynamics are progressively shifted.

[3] These books were written under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene by multiple authors, including Mildred Benson, who wrote the first several (Heilbrun). In reflecting on this, we agree it is quite apt that Nancy Drew be rewritten by several fanfiction authors, as this collective storying is in keeping with the genesis of the traditional texts.

[4] Beyond the original series, the franchise of Nancy Drew continues with many additional book series past the original such as *Nancy Drew: Girl Detective* (Petrucha, 2005–2010) and TV shows such as the CW's *Nancy Drew* (2019–2023), for example; as Marshall contends, "Nancy's character is periodically revamped, appearing in different guises in various time periods" ("Red, White, and Drew" 203). However, our understanding of the texts emerges solely from the original series and, now, its fanfiction.

[5] We wish to highlight that we appreciate and are inspired by the conversational tone and fast pacing in Evans and Friedman's piece; take for example, when, in the concluding remarks, Friedman hilariously says, "We are pushing our AGENDA THROUGH CAKE" (139).

[6] A content note, or trigger warning, is an alert that a text might include upsetting subject matter.

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