



The Politics of Popular Romance Studies

Lynn S. Neal

Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

There is so much to celebrate about this book and its place in the field, but I've been given very little time, so I'd like to focus my brief remarks and questions around the politics—past and present, then and now—that come with studying popular romance. *Reading the Romance* helped pave the way for popular romance studies; however, as we know, research choices impact careers. So, I'd like us to consider together how the politics of our various disciplines have shifted (or not) to accommodate this topic of study. My thought is, to misappropriate a quote from Radway, that we might “activate the critical power” of our “pink ghetto” (18).

In the introduction to the second edition, Radway describes the context in which *Reading the Romance* took shape. She chronicles how the American Civilization Department at Pennsylvania fostered scholarship that critiqued the dominant orthodoxy proffered by many English and History programs. This orthodoxy “assumed that the most reliable and complex record of the American past could be found in the country's ‘greatest’ works of art” (3), whereas the American Civilization Department embarked on a “heretical” challenge by studying “ordinary” people, “popular” literature, and popular culture.

If this was the case in the 1980s, it was similar for me in the mid-1990s as a graduate student in American religious history. I am part of a field dominated historically by a focus on sacred texts, writings about these texts, and control of these texts—namely the Bible, Sunday sermons, and religious institutions. Ministers and missionaries, churches and Sunday schools, and perhaps some Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe are often standard fare. However, these were not the people or the texts that drove my interest in religious studies. Rather, my concern then and now was in how contemporary people, ordinary people, were constructing the concept of religion and creating religious meaning through popular culture forms. With its ethnographic approach, contemporary focus, and theoretical sophistication, *Reading the Romance* provided me with a scholarly model. It demonstrated ways to bring together production and consumption, textual analysis and reader response. It also helped imbue my topic with some legitimacy. It opened up the possibility for me to write my dissertation and eventual book on evangelical romance novels and their readers, *Romancing God*.

However, what I was unprepared for (and I take full responsibility for my 20-something idealism and naiveté) was the ways my work would be received, or perhaps,

more accurately, the ways people projected their own ideas about evangelicals and romance novels onto my work. It ranged from having respected professors in my field ask, “How could you study that crap?” to stereotypical understanding of evangelicals to not getting jobs because search committees thought my topic meant I was either pro-evangelical or anti-evangelical and either way, I clearly read romance novels, so I was beyond the pale. By the time I had a job and my book came out, I was, quite frankly, too tired of defending my topic to say much more about it at conferences or to pursue it further.

So, reflecting on my own history and the genesis of *Reading the Romance* prompts me to ask: What are the current politics of popular romance studies? Have things changed? If so, how have they changed? We now have popular romance sections at national meetings, an International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, and more people entering the field, so what are the current challenges that we face as professionals who study popular romance or related topics? It has, clearly, in some ways become more legitimate to study popular romance, but does this acceptance bring with it new challenges and new questions?

Let me be more specific by referring again to the religious studies context. Some things have changed in U.S. religious history. Scholars have critiqued the existing “grand narratives” of the field and the practice of constructing such narratives, and, as a result, the field has become more open to people studying popular culture. In fact, there are popular culture sections at our national meeting, the American Academy of Religion. These changes have enabled individual scholars to pursue more diverse topics and use increasingly varied methodologies; however, what is valued and “taken seriously” in the field seems to remain relatively unchanged. Studies of religion and popular culture continue to remain at the margins, characterized as micro-studies, “soft,” and “fun,” while others apparently do the “real,” “hard,” and “serious” work of scholarship. For example, in the past twenty-five years, the North American Religions Section of the American Academy of Religion, which acts as a gateway unit at the conference and in the field of American religious history, has not dedicated even one entire session to “popular culture.” And many of the recent jobs in the field of US religious history (there are not many) have gone to scholars trained as historians—historians of ministers, the colonial era, the people and places that dominated the “old” grand narratives.

Perhaps I’m paranoid, or maybe these transformations simply take more time, and I hope you will tell me that it is different in other fields, but I do think we have here a great opportunity to discuss together the relationship between popular romance studies and the larger scholarly endeavors of which we are a part. I look forward to our conversation.