

Special Issue: Critical Love Studies (Editors' Introduction)

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The *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* started out as an interdisciplinary journal exploring popular romance fiction, mostly in print. It has steadily been expanding its remit to include “the logics, institutions, and social practices of romantic love in global popular culture.” Recent special issues have thrown a light on romantic love in regional contexts such as Latin America ([issue 4.1](#)) and Australia ([issue 4.2](#)) as well as on questions of [library studies and popular romance](#) and on the [increasing queer sensibilities of popular romance media](#). This special issue on the emerging field of Critical Love Studies (CLS) draws together contributions from various disciplines ranging from human geography to cultural studies, and it marks a further development both for *JPRS* and for popular romance studies more generally.

There are plenty of definitions of love but none of them – we feel – captures the fullness of love, unless we subscribe to a religious view which determines a deity as the sole source of all love. As always, there is wisdom in the way people use language. As guest editor Michael Gratzke, who chairs the international Love Research Network, points out in his contribution which opens this special issue, “The Oxford English Dictionary lists no fewer than seven different uses of the noun, not counting scoring conventions in games including tennis, and four categories for the verb.” This irreducible multiplicity is an indicator for the richness of love as it is experienced and expressed by people. Critical Love Studies, therefore, refrains from offering a single definition of love. As shorthand, we stick with phenomenological descriptors such as parental love, sibling love, romantic (or intimate) love, neighbourly love or the more abstract loves for one’s community, a sports team or country.

The approach of Critical Love Studies is not to reduce any occurrence of love to an instance of something other than love: that is, to sexual desire, or to re-inscriptions of consumer culture, or to exercises in gendered power, etc. Rather, the currency of love is “love acts,” a concept modelled on the “speech acts” of Linguistics. As Gratzke explains, “each occurrence of love should be judged against the backdrop of the socio-historic circumstances in which a set of love acts is performed” (Gratzke 2017). We cannot grasp the fullness of love (its *langue*); instead we look at the patterns of love acts (the *parole* of love) in their given context. This robustly contextualized investigation must retain “a good dose of scepticism regarding our ability fully to understand the object of our studies.” In other words, as

scholars of love, we need to be careful, to look closely at our subject(s) and, above all, to be critical, not just of practices and institutions of love, but of our own methodologies and analytical frameworks. Whilst it makes good sense to be critical of love, in particular the inequalities in the division of emotional and reproductive labour, we must at all times retain both confidence in and a critical stance towards our own bias, which is that love is a valuable expression of human relationality.

From one perspective, Popular Romance Studies and Critical Love Studies have much in common. In issue 4.1, Eric Selinger writes that both areas focus on:

the topics of love, desire, and intimate relationships; interests in gender and power, the global and the local; a willingness to look at love in real life as well as in its media representations, neither conflating the two nor ignoring the complex feedback loops that link them.

Indeed, Popular Romance Studies and Critical Love Studies each take a contextualised approach to their objects of study, whether that be a romance novel or the transcript of a conversation between lovers. Scholarship of popular romance novels, for instance, has focused on Marxist readings (e.g. Fowler), and explored the way gender is represented in popular romance. It has been argued that Critical Love Studies has taken a broadly more 'critical' approach to its subject; Selinger posits that "Love Studies ... boasts a well-honed critical edge, a wariness about the costs of love as such, especially to women. Such wariness was not uncommon in works of Popular Romance Studies from the 1980s and early '90s, but the field seems to have mellowed in the past decade."

Selinger's assessment of a critical shift in Popular Romance Studies is astute. The feminised nature of popular romance production and consumption has inevitably led critics to take a feminist approach, and this characterised many early studies of the romance novel (e.g. Greer (1970), Modleski (1982), Radway (1984), Mussell (1984), Coward (1984), and Thurston (1987)).[1] Selinger quite rightly observes that scholarship of the popular romance has, as he puts it, 'mellowed' in recent years, yet the articles in this special issue indicate a similar 'mellowing' in Critical Love Studies. This is not to say that scholars are not attuned to feminist thought and its relationship with romantic love, but that the argument in Critical Love Studies is shifting from questions like 'is love bad for women?' towards a more critically-minded approach characterised as 'how does love work?' (or, as Clarke-Salt puts it, "what love does"). Two contributions in particular, by Susan Ostrov Weisser and Nagore García, address the tensions between feminist critiques of love and the lived experiences of love feminists experience and encounter. Feminist approaches to Critical Love Studies (often referred to as Feminist Love Studies) rightfully highlight the unequal distribution of domestic and emotional labour in heteronormative relationships and the central role mainstream love narratives play in perpetuating the oppression of women and marginalisation of sexual minorities. Yet, this branch of Critical Love Studies has recently been engaging recently more directly with affirmations of love as romantic love, and love as experienced in relationship anarchy – a line of thought which aims to undo the privilege of coupledness in favour of a multitude of intimate relationship models. This nuancing of the field mirrors the shift that has occurred over the past twenty years in Popular Romance Studies.

There are disciplinary differences between Popular Romance Studies and Critical Love Studies. Selinger argues that “Love Studies attends to a wider range of loves than Popular Romance Studies...and also, at least so far, to a rather different set of texts: more ancient and medieval works; more canonical philosophers; more theorists and thinkers from the contemporary academic scene”. It is true that, on the whole, Popular Romance Studies has tended to focus on literature, media, and cultural studies, with important but rarer explorations into sociology (e.g. Radway’s canonical *Reading the Romance* (1984) or the recent work by Joanna Gregson and Jen Lois (2015)).[2] Critical Love Studies, on the other hand, has tended to draw its framework from sociology, anthropology, psychology, politics, philosophy, language sciences, and history. The difference is also one of perspective – conventionally, Popular Romance Studies has focused on questions of ‘romance’ and the ‘popular’, whereas Critical Love Studies prioritises ‘love’ and the critical’ (although, if ‘love is what people say it is’, then who is more qualified to define it than a bestselling romance author?).

Despite their differences, Popular Romance Studies and Critical Love Studies have much to gain from alignment, and we put forward three proposals for future collaboration between the fields. The first proposal is that combining Critical Love Studies and Popular Romance Studies can bolster arguments in both fields for taking the study of love and romance seriously. Several contributors to this special issue cite the work of the philosopher Margaret E. Toye who argues that “Love...needs to be taken as a serious, valid and crucial subject for study” (41) simultaneously revealing that, at present, it is not always viewed as such.[3] Clarke-Salt similarly rebuts claims that “‘topics that are associated with rationality and reason’ (Morrison et al 2013 p.507) are more widely recognised as suitable for research” , and that “the topic of love suggests a conservatism or even a denial of politics, not to mention an aura of naïveté, sentimentality and religiosity” (Toye, 2010).[4] The lack of seriousness associated with Popular Romance Studies is equally well-established. The result of this is that each field is engaged in a parallel, but separate, discourse of defence and rebuttal, defending the critical study of love or romance against (usually ill-informed) detractors. Surely it would be a better use of time if both fields, related as they are, were to work together to share this labour, rather than duplicating it?

Second, we propose that a closer relationship between Critical Love Studies and Popular Romance Studies can support greater diversity in the study of romantic love. While we feature two articles in this special issue that focus on non-Western romantic love and one that addresses the researcher’s own working-class background, it is still the case that most studies of love have taken middle-class Western societies and culture as their subject. Popular Romance Studies is beset by a lack of diversity on two fronts – in its scholarly approach *and* in a lack of diversity in Western romantic cultural production (non-white protagonists remain rare in mainstream Western romantic fiction, and heterosexual romance between two young, cisgendered protagonists remains the normative media model). The commitment, in Critical Love Studies, to judge “Each occurrence of love ... against the backdrop of the socio-historic circumstances in which a set of love acts is performed” (Gratzke, 2017) is one too often ignored in Popular Romance Studies. Both fields can do more to explore the way romantic love works for those who do not live in the Western world, as well as for those who are black, Asian, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, disabled, poor or otherwise marginalised.

Third, it is our contention that combining Critical Love Studies and Popular Romance Studies is a way to bridge the (critical, intellectual, disciplinary, and prejudicial) gap between the study of romance as genre, and the study of romance as 'mode' or strategy (as Frye or Fuchs might put it).[5] Increasingly, scholars are exploring how the tropes of romance function in sources and artefacts that would not usually be classified generically as 'romance'. In this way, scholars are making use of methods and disciplinary approaches that are closer to those used in Critical Love Studies. Sharing methodological frames and approaches can guard against 'talking past one another'; in her article in this special issue, Weisser cites Lynne Pearce who points "the extent to which the social sciences, literary studies and philosophy talk past one another when it comes to research on love and romance" (Pearce, cited in Weisser 2017). We argue that by sharing disciplinary approaches and methods the connections between Critical Love Studies and Popular Romance Studies as well as the links between romance as genre and romance as strategy become clearer in our shared aim, as Weisser puts it, of finding "a more complex, nuanced, and yes, more critical (in the most generous sense) view of romantic love." This statement on feminist engagements with lived experiences of intimate love can be taken as a guiding principle for both Critical Love Studies *and* Popular Romance Studies in general, and this special issue of JPRS in particular.

In creating this special issue, the guest editors issued an open call for papers conscious not to be prescriptive about the scope, methodology or source material of Critical Love Studies. The understanding was that we were looking at love as a positive force in human relations which is produced by and entangled in various sets of cultural meanings, social inequalities and political conflict. The selection criteria were the overall quality of the submission, its originality, and its broad fit with the other contributions. The outcome is a special issue which addresses practices of intimacy in video calling, feminist engagements with love narratives which reflect real-life experiences, and encounters between Western and non-Western experiences and representations of love. It also contains audio files from an art installation which juxtaposes the personal narratives of six people engaged in three romantic relationships.

The opening contribution, 'Love is what people say it is: Performativity and Narrativity in Critical Love Studies', by guest editor Michael Gratzke, focuses on performativity and narrativity in Critical Love Studies. Written in parallel to the editing process of this special issue, it draws upon all the other contributions rather than having informed them, and thus offers a starting point for a conversation on a thematically more integrated, and methodologically more focussed approach to Critical Love Studies. Gratzke offers definitions of some key terms of Critical Love Studies with a particular view on narrative research methodologies in literary studies and social sciences. In so doing he draws upon the terminology of linguistics as a lingua franca of narrative research. He makes three claims about love. "Firstly, that we cannot grasp the full potentiality of love (it is always yet to come); secondly that love is performative (it needs to come into being in individual occurrences of love); thirdly that changes to the ways in which people experience and represent love happen through countless iterations of 'love acts.'" He likens love acts to speech act theory and argues that they occur in the contexts of normative frameworks which make them intelligible.

Gratzke reflects on the tension between a feminist or anti-capitalist critique of normative love practices and the need to listen to the voices of people who experience love.

The aim of Critical Love Studies, he writes, is to do justice to experiences and representations of love in their normativity as well as in their individuality. The interplay between pattern and deviation or the general and the particular is important to Critical Love Studies because this opposition marks out the theatre of social relations and therefore experiences and representations of love. Change happens in processes of uncountable non-identical repetitions of love acts which follow a discursive drift resulting in some cases in social transformation, as we have seen in the shift in attitudes towards marriage. The experts of the 1990s, such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, predicted the end of marriage as an institution, and saw it supplanted by more fluid relationship models. Since then, the mainstream debate has been characterised by a re-traditionalization and a focus on equal marriage. We don't seem to ask very often whether marriage is a good model to organise the intimate relationships between non-related adults. We ask why anyone should be excluded from marriage.

The following three articles by Yvonne Clarke-Salt, Susan Ostrov Weisser and Nagore García all use interviews and various forms of transcription and co-production to present powerful real-life narratives of love and intimacy. This approach links with Gratzke's call to favour close listening and close reading of love, as love is what people say it is and not what researchers state it ought to be.

In 'Loving over Skype: Tactile Viewing, Emotional Atmospheres and Video Calling', Yvonne Clarke-Salt clearly articulates a common theme of Critical Love Studies which is the need to address love as love and not as a proxy for anything else. Her article raises questions of embodiment and digital media which are hugely pertinent in current public and academic debates. Through interviews with couples who conduct at least part of their love relationship at a distance, termed 'love migrants', Clarke-Salt shows how Skype can nurture intimacy in couples who live apart for longer periods of time. Rather than focusing on objects that seek to recreate the physical presence of the absent partner, such as pillows that play back recorded messages, or robotic lips that simulate the pressure of a partner's lips, Clarke-Salt focuses on the virtual space of video calling to show how video calling creates visceral connections between the distant partners. In other words, "technology can be a useful medium to open up virtual space and foster emotional exchange and connection." Clarke-Salt extends our understanding of video calling by introducing the concepts of tactile and haptic viewing to the debate. Viewing is to be understood as more than a cerebral process of reading visual signs. It is instrumental in creating an emotional atmosphere, even if the image quality may be poor at times. For some couples a poorly lit video feed may also enhance the experience of an emotional 'thickness in the air' (Ahmed 2004). Embodied emotions are therefore present in a shared virtual space which goes beyond the audio-visual. Ultimately, Clarke-Salt argues that in matters of love, what she calls "embodied knowledge" is not reducible to only sex, but is part of a wider intimacy between the couples she interviewed.

In her contribution 'Feminist Researcher Wishes to Meet Romantic Subject: The "Case" of Mrs. F.', Susan Ostrov Weisser takes sides with Shulamith Firestone in looking at love itself not as a "problem" but as an opportunity for personal and interpersonal growth and transformation. Drawing on Stevi Jackson's assertion that "Feminist critique should focus on what is knowable", Weisser writes

I hope to follow my own path to a feminist understanding of romantic love as at once an individual transformative emotion and a social phenomenon

situated in a particular time and location. Rather than argue an ideological position, I would like to look at the “problem of romance” for feminists from the inside out, or bottom up, so to speak, through the lens of “thick description” in personal narrative, rather than top downward from the heady atmospheric heights of abstract ideology.

Weisser asks whether there is a way for feminists “to claim love that goes beyond the sentiment of virtue rewarded, that recognizes both love’s capacity to limit and harm as well as to give joy, that questions the definition of a happy ending, and makes space for more transgressive sorts of romance than those rigid forms that dominated popular culture in the past?” Mrs. F. stands for a ‘case study’ Weisser conducted in the mid-1980s. Decades on, the author revisits the ‘case’ of Mrs. F. and opens herself up to the challenge that is the research subject’s strong belief in romantic love, destined lovers and happy ends. This renewed encounter with research notes and transcripts triggers self-reflection in the researcher who shares elements of her own relationship history with us. In the 1980s, Weisser felt rather distant from Mrs. F. although she shared her socio-economic background removed by one generation. Now in the twenty-first century, the similarities are more readily accepted. Weisser triangulates Mrs. F., her own mother and her life story, and comes to the conclusion that they all “inhabit the same romantic universe”. Being a feminist and a middle-class academic marks less of a break with tradition and more of a development of aspirations already present in the generation of Mrs. F. and Weisser’s mother. This extends to an acknowledgement that the traditional romantic trajectory with all its patriarchal trappings encompasses valued elements of female agency.

Nagore García, in her article ‘Love and its contradictions: feminist women’s resistance strategies in their love narratives’, uses a Narrative Production Methodology to trace “the resistance strategies of feminist women in order to understand how complicity and resistance work in their narratives about love”. Narrative Production is a research method in which “informants” and “researchers” co-produce narratives on the basis of shared interview transcripts. This co-production is described as a “circle of dialogue” which allows all parties to tease out concealed or marginalised ideas and contradictions. It levels the hierarchy between researcher and researched by incorporating layers of close reading and (self-) reflection into the final ‘narrative productions’ which constitute a sophisticated version of source material. This sophistication or complexity is to do justice to the richness of the lived experiences of feminist women residing in Barcelona, Spain.

García identifies in her article five resistance strategies: three work against heteronormative love myths and two of them engage critically with feminist love myths. The three strategies that “respond to specific imperatives of romantic love” are: 1) intentional singleness, which challenges compulsory ‘coupleness’ and redefines “singleness as a possible and acceptable way of being in the world”; 2) lover networks, which challenge “sexual exclusivity and its temporality by recognizing the intimacy shared with punctual lovers as a valuable kind of love”; and 3) falling for the collective, where love is redefined as “an energy that is the basis of mobilization and collective action, rather than as the passionate sexual bond associated with romantic love”. García finds that many of the respondents’ narratives are contradictory, incorporating mainstream love scripts as well as feminist ideas. She notes that respondents both claim ‘romance’ and accept its contradictions, indicating how “it is possible to maintain a critical view on romantic love and its connection to patriarchal relations while still desiring a romantic fantasy and the passion of falling in love.” Ultimately,

García finds that “women are not mere victims of romantic ideology, rather they are located among contradictory discourses and power relationships.”

The following two articles, by Jennifer Leetsch and Ágnes Zsila and Zsolt Demetrovics focus on non-Western romantic love. Jennifer Leetsch’s engagement with Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie in ‘Love, Limb-Loosener’ draws our attention to the complex relationships between race and romance. She argues that the self-shattering force of love can be understood as transformative in the ways in which it facilitates geographical and emotional border crossings, and opens multifaceted liminal spaces. The article takes turns to explore spatiality, corporeality, and textuality in the novel *Americanah* (2013) with an emphasis on “the different affects and effects of love and what it *does*, as material practice, embodied experience, and as a discursive and textual construct”. Leetsch argues that *Americanah* exemplifies the transformative potential of love in the context of postcolonial and transnational writing. The love story contained in this novel produces creative textual strategies and subversive spaces and embodiments of femininity which explore the leeway for non-normative identities, and sidestep conventional attribution. According to Leetsch it is precisely the self-shattering experience of love and, by extension, the creative potentiality of love stories which facilitates this transformative and emancipatory liminal space between the US, UK and Nigeria.

In ‘Crafting Boys’ Love: Social Implications of a Japanese Romantic Genre’, Ágnes Zsila and Zsolt Demetrovics provide an overview of two decades’ worth of research into the Boys’ Love genre, a fascinating yet highly problematic transgressive body of romance fiction. Not only does this genre appropriate the imagery and dynamics of gay male relationships in Japan for a mostly female audience, it also transfers and normalises tropes of sexual violence and emotional abuse into an ‘exotic’ setting where Japanese and Western readers, mostly women, can experience them as emotionally cleansing fantasies. This genre depicts intimacy and romantic love of two men, frequently using sexually explicit imagery. It materialises in anime, manga, video games, fan fiction and fan visual art. It has its roots in shōjo manga from the 1970s which had heterosexual themes but has grown into an all-male fictional universe split into the sub-genres of shōnen-ai (romantic boy love) and yaoi (which focuses on sex between men). In terms of fandom culture and practices, Boys’ Love and Popular Romance are remarkably similar. Faced with a largely dismissive general public, genre enthusiasts build support communities in which the differentiation between authors and readers becomes blurred. This links with Gratzke’s assertion that an affirmative stance towards experiences and voices of love entails an engagement with views and materials which may be challenging to researchers and the general public.

Finally, Angelika Böck’s installation *Plots*, which rounds off this special issue, allows people to experience the voices of six people on headsets: the right and left channel are dedicated to one voice and one narrative each within the same relationship. Listening to both simultaneously makes it hard to follow either which perfectly demonstrates the complexity of close listening. A simple juxtaposition like this erodes the persuasive powers of personal myths, and forces the listener to work hard at understanding the complexity of relationships. Things become even more complex, when we take into account that the texts in themselves have undergone a transformation from testimony to fiction. Three real-life couples were asked to narrate turning points in their relationships. These narrative were then re-written by professional authors with backgrounds as diverse as children’s literature and crime

fiction. Our knowledge of narrative patterns allows us to start unpacking and to reflect on the complexities encountered.

[1] Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 1970 (London: Flamingo, 1999); Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Routledge, 1982); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984); Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire* (London: Paladin, 1984); Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

[2] Jennifer Lois and Joanna Gregson, "Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and Gendered Sexual Stigma", *Gender & Society* 29.4 (2015): 459-483.

[3] Toye, Margaret E, "Towards a poethics of love Poststructuralist feminist ethics and literary creation", *Feminist Theory* 11.1 (2010): 39-55.

[4] Carey-Ann Morrison, Lynda Johnston, and Robyn Longhurst, "Critical Geographies of Love as Spatial, Relational and Political", *Progress in Human Geography* 37.4 (2013): 505-521.

[5] Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004).