



## Fantasy and Desire: From my Mother's Stack of Trashy Novels to an Experiment in Writing at Field's Edge

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Here's what sparked my interest in popular romance: a tottering stack of books next to my mother's bed. The paperbacks were her romance novels, what we called "trashy novels"—her reading in the evening before going to sleep. I was a young teenager, and this was in Ottawa, Canada. It was the late 1970s, the early 80s. Even now, I can see the covers: the heroine and hero in a clinch, her hair long and flowing (tousled flame-red curls remain my fantasy hair), his chest bare. In the background: the mast of a ship, a castle, a sword . . . a bed.

I started reading my mom's novels and became hooked for the next forty years. Reading romance was my escapist pleasure and reward to self. But now—time for a confession.

I don't read the genre anymore. Only rarely, and then for work. I have lost my desire to read romance novels for pleasure. This feels like a big confession to make in the pages of a journal of popular romance studies. I feel some concern to admit it, a worry that my confession will come across as an abandonment of an academic community that means a lot to me, and a puzzlement about how my desire—once so strong—should have disappeared so entirely.

It has something to do with William Wordsworth's "We murder to dissect." I published an academic book, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, "dissecting" the genre and suddenly—like, cold turkey—I did not want to read another romance novel. But thinking through this loss of desire, I realized it's more accurately a *satiation* of desire.

The original instigation for my work in the romance field had been the desire to interrogate my own lifetime of happy enthrallment to the genre. I wanted to figure out why these books had such a hold on me. My fourteen-year-old self, reading through Mom's stack of trashy novels, couldn't express it this way, but I figured out that for me it had to do with the power of fantasy or fiction to address the conundrum of female sexuality in a patriarchal world.

My desire to understand the genre's hold on me had been more or less sated. But I was, still am, deeply invested in romance studies itself. I had not abandoned the field; I simply want to dig in it differently.

These days, what sparks my interest is a strong desire to explore the writing of romance narrative as a form of experimental scholarship. Previously, I published two historical romance novels (as Catherine LaRoche, the French and therefore sexier version of my name) as companion pieces to that academic book that killed my interest in reading romance. I'm now interested in conjoining fiction writing and scholarship even more closely: What fictional work can scholars do with the narrative structure and tropes of popular romance? How can we use these tropes to write romance narratives or fanfiction as an act of scholarship? Here's another confession: I want to try.

Three conceptual tools help instigate this experiment with fictocriticism, as I go digging at the edges of our academic field:

1. *Dirty work*. Metaphorically, "dirt" may be whatever valued material we work with in our labors, but in negative connotation it conjures disgust for grime and filthy mindedness. "Dirty work" is a concept developed by 20<sup>th</sup>-century sociologist Everett Hughes to describe socially necessary but stigmatized work, such as that of garbage collection or the older notion of prostitution as a "necessary evil." Dirty work captures the paradox that society disavows certain forms of labor, while at the same time recognizing them as crucial. The concept was further developed by Janice Irvine in her influential article, "Is Sexuality Research 'Dirty Work'? Institutionalized Stigma in the Production of Sexual Knowledge." If sexuality research is dirty work, is popular romance studies also dirty? Marginalized but necessary? It may be trivialized because it connects to erotica and low-brow literature and women-centered communities of readers and writers, but also remains essential because it examines such central areas of human emotion and behavior as love, lust, relationships, and fantasy. The concept is a way to point out the hypocrisy of this stigma: why dismiss something as dirty when we can't exist without it?
2. *Riparian research* and *boundary objects* (a two-for-one concept!). In the natural sciences, riparian ecology refers to study of the boundary or transitional zone between an aquatic and a terrestrial system, where a river meets the bank or shore. These streamside and floodplain zones are particularly rich in nutrients and lush in vegetation. Riparian research says interesting ecology happens at these edge zones, where two different things meet up and transition. In sociology of knowledge, a *boundary object* is any object that is part of multiple social worlds, which can also be described as communities of knowledge and practice (e.g., an academic field). Boundary objects cross from one social world to another and facilitate communication between them. They function as an interface where social worlds can intersect and fields overlap, and a way of translating the different perspectives of these worlds to each other. Boundary objects allow for convergence.
3. *Fandom as methodology*. I've written before about academics as fans and about applying the concept of aca-fandom in romance studies. More recently, I've found inspiration in a book that looks at the *artist as fan*: *Fandom as Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers*. One key theme the editors note is "the emergence of new forms of creative writing that refuse boundaries between genres such as art history, autobiography, poetry and fiction, which instead draw upon fannish practices such as letter writing and fan fiction" (3). Fandom can provide new models of

scholarship, an alternate path through a disciplinary field, laid down by the fan's "subjective and emotionally driven engagement"—by their desire, by love (3). Let me throw in another concept here, from planning and transportation studies: a "desire line" is an unofficial path created by the footfall of users as their preferred route or shortcut, as through a field. Fanfiction offers such desire lines through a canonical world. By creating transformative works of fanfiction and fan art, we can rework a canonized icon to "reveal what might be missing in more conventional approaches" (3).

When I put these tools to work in the field of popular romance, they provoke new desire. Sparks fly! I find parallels between the function of fanfiction and that of a boundary object: the ability of a canonized icon to be reworked in new storytelling—to resist having just one meaning or narrative but to yield itself to fresh-laid pathways of meaning—is similar to the interpretive flexibility of a successful boundary object.

My fandom these days? It's a marble statue of a beautiful young woman called [\*The Greek Slave\*](#), hugely famous in the nineteenth-century visual culture of the US and the UK. The artwork—America's first female nude, inspired by Greece's struggle for independence but taken as referencing American slavery also—was at the center of that era's rapidly changing notions of gender and race and debates about abolition and women's rights. I've become obsessed with it the last couple of years; my university owns two versions.

So now, I have a statue standing on the edge of our field. For me, *The Greek Slave* is a powerful boundary object that supports convergence at the riparian edge zone of art history, fandom, popular romance studies, and more. I tramp about in these rich border zones, following a desire line (what adrienne maree brown calls a "pleasure path") through the fields, seeking to expand their boundaries by linking them together. It's dirty work, muddy with a sense of epistemic disobedience or disciplinary infidelity—a cheating heart, with polyamorous fields to plow.

My goal is to return attention to this statue, but I don't want to do it through straightforward academic analysis. I want to tell the story *slant*: from a creative sideways angle instead of head-on. I want arts-research storytelling that combines critical and creative takes. I ask myself: Can I write a fanfiction romance story—maybe a spicy, queer erotica story?—about the woman who is this "Greek Slave" that would function as a love letter to her, a form of reparation and healing? Can I make it about her agency and resistance? Can I make it relevant to racial, gender, and sexual justice today, to rethinking the role of public art and monuments in telling a wider story about America?

In this story, I want *romance*: adventure, heroism, excitement, glamour, passion! I want long, flowing, tousled curls. I want goddess magic, the feminine divine. I definitely want the bed. I want the Greek woman of this statue, standing naked and silent on a marble auction block for 180 years, to speak, to shout, to enact justice, to write her own story of choice and pleasure. Somewhere, there is a ship mast on the Mediterranean and, why not, a castle.

Just like that, I am back to the stack of novels by my mom's bed.

At the most fundamental level, the instigation of my interest in popular romance is the power of fantasy itself. My desire about how to engage with the genre has shifted, and this shift has instigated a new relationship to popular romance studies. But my interest in the capacity of fiction endures. Fiction is a reparative space of limitless possibility. There is nothing more powerful than human imagination and a story.

I thank my mother for opening this space to me.

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