DECOLONISING AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC NARRATIVES: MAPPING THE CRITICAL GROUNDS*

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DESCOLONIZAR LAS RELACIONES AFECTIVAS EN LAS NARRATIVAS ROMÁNTICAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS: UNA CARTOGRAFÍA CRÍTICA

> Love is the prism through which I view the world. I truly believe it binds and propels us. This isn't a naive denial of the darkness that we know exists in the world, rather it is a refusal to allow the devastation, the horror or the heartache to consume us. It is affirming the knowledge that there is light. Love is that light. Romance sweetens the casual bitterness we can encounter; it heightens the mundane and makes the terrestrial supernatural. (Babalola 2020, ix)

> I portray love and desire between a variety of characters in my writing –people who look like me, and whose world view is similar to my own, or in some cases not. However –and this should be obvious, but– human beings *of all kinds* fall in love, and have desire, and heartache, and heartbreak. It's vital that we get to see one another in this sometimes fire-hot, sometimes soul-warming, sometimes icily-devastating light. It is vital that we see *ourselves* portrayed in this way. Seeing love of all kinds represented fully, in art as in life, allows us to relate on a level that can be dangerous when lacking. (Domingo 2022, 2-3; italics in original)

Few literary genres have attracted such sustained popular attention as romantic fiction. Romance is one of the most widely published, read and culturally influential literary genres (Allan 2020; Larson 2024; Markert 2017; Tapper 2014) with an established and vibrant scholarship, which in the last decade has witnessed an enriching surge of academic research (Burge 2016; Burge & McAlister 2026; Gleason & Selinger 2016; Kamblé, Selinger, & Teo 2021; Missler 2017; Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Teo & Fresno Calleja 2024). This third wave of scholarship, marked by interdisciplinary expansion, explores the genre's complexity and significance for readers and has decisively transcended outdated critical assumptions that dismissed

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romance as formulaic, merely escapist or politically conservative and associated it with emotional excess, commercial culture, and narratives of personal fulfilment seemingly detached from broader social realities (Anderson 1974; Pearce 1995; Radway 1984; Regis 2003; Snitow 1979). Despite this increasing scholarly attention, romance continues to attract a degree of scepticism in certain academic circles rarely directed to other expressions of popular culture, a tendency that might explain the scarcity of research on the intersections of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies with romance in particular, or genre fiction in general (Munos & Ledent 2018).

Questions of identity, kinship, migration, memory, belonging, cultural conflict, race, and social justice have long occupied a central place within Postcolonial and Decolonial scholarship (Jazeel 2019; Lugones 2020; Mignolo 2011; McLeod 2000; Young 2016) and are intrinsically intertwined with issues concerning love, intimacy, and desire, which, in turn, are not detached from the historical and cultural contexts in which they emerge (Berlant 2000; Illouz 2012; Jónasdóttir 2018). Indeed, colonial discourses and histories influence perceptions of race, gender, and desirability; migration transforms family structures and affective bonds; and cultural traditions shape expectations surrounding intimacy, marriage, kinship, and community. Thus, a genre such as romance, whose main interests are affective attachments, offers a productive perspective from which to examine how colonial legacies continue to influence understanding of desire, identity and love. Despite this, too often, the romance genre has been regarded as excessively commercial, predictable, or closely associated with private fulfilment and happiness to contribute meaningfully to wider discussions of resistance, colonialism and its legacies, or personal and social transformation (Kamblé, Selinger, & Teo 2021; Roach 2016).

Certainly, as the third wave of romantic criticism has demonstrated,[1] contemporary popular romantic narratives are increasingly challenging established generic conventions while also unsettling and reconfiguring traditional cultural understanding of love, intimacy and desire. Driven by the genre's commercial success and by a growing demand for more diverse perspectives, writers from postcolonial, diasporic, indigenous and minoritized communities have adopted romance in its wide range of subgenres and formats, adapting and transforming its conventions to celebrate diversity in love, accommodate their own experiences and to promote distinct political and cultural agendas (Pryde 2022; Teo 2021). Romantic narratives such as Bolu Babalola's *Love in Colour: Mythical Tales from Around the World, Retold*

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[1] The third wave of popular romance scholarship refers to the most recent post-millennial scholarly work examining the genre. See, for example, Burge 2016; Burge & McAlister 2026; Gleason & Selinger 2016; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Missler 2017; Pérez-Fernández & Pérez Ríu, 2021; Roach 2016; Teo 2018; Teo & Fresno Calleja 2024. This wave moves beyond earlier debates and approaches the genre as a complex cultural product, engaging with intersectional perspectives to explore postmillennial transformations in publishing, authorship, and readership.

(2020), Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last* (2018), Alexis Daria's *You Had Me at Hola* (2020), Kelechi Okafor's *Edge of Here* (2021), Jane Igharo's *The Sweetest Remedy* (2021) or Sareeta Domingo's edited collection of short stories *Who's Loving You* (2021), to name but a few, increasingly engage with issues that have long occupied postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, thus inviting us to reconsider the association between the genre of romance and Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies. These narratives bear witness to histories marked by exclusion and inequality, experiences of migration and displacement, tensions between cultural traditions and contemporary identities, and examine the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality shape intimate experiences. At the same time, these romantic narratives retain one of the genre's defining features: an investment in hope and the possibility of positive transformation (Kamblé 2023; Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Roach 2016). As the opening quotations of this introduction by Black British romance authors Bolu Babalola and Sareeta Domingo suggest, love is a powerful force in the face of adversity which affirms humanity and enables meaningful connection across differences; love is indeed a fundamental decolonial practice of recognition and belonging. The combination of social critique and affective optimism makes contemporary romance particularly relevant in discussions about how minoritized subjects and communities negotiate the ever-increasing challenges of modern life. This special issue seeks to contribute to the discussion on how present-day romantic narratives constitute a privileged site for examining how colonial histories and legacies still shape intimacy, kinship, belonging and affect while simultaneously imagining decolonial alternative futures.

To decolonise affective relationships involves more than expanding representations or diversifying romantic narratives. It entails interrogating the conditions that have produced and sustained the norms that legitimise certain forms of intimacy while others have been marginalised, rendered invisible, or excluded. The growing attention devoted to affective relationships within scholarship has also generated renewed interest in the connection between romance and happiness. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed examines how happiness becomes attached to particular objects, aspirations, and ways of living. Ahmed highlights the normative dimensions of happiness, specifically observing that "one of the primary happiness indicators is marriage" (6). This statement is very significant within the context of romance, a genre traditionally associated with courtship, couple formation, and emotional fulfilment. As Ahmed suggests, marriage frequently emerges as a privileged marker of happiness and social success (6), an assumption which has played a key role in shaping both cultural understandings of intimacy and the narrative conventions traditionally associated with romance. Ahmed's notion of happiness provides a framework for examining why certain aspects and representations of intimacy acquire cultural legitimacy while others remain marginalised. As she argues, certain objects become "happiness means" and "happiness pointers" (26), directing individuals towards specific futures. In this way, happiness becomes closely tied to social expectations concerning emotions, marriage, family, coupledom, relationality and belonging. To question these expectations therefore involves questioning how successful lives are imagined and evaluated.

Beyond this normative understanding of happiness, relationality and interdependence have also occupied a central position within care ethics in which love and our capacity to respond to others become centripetal humanising forces (hooks 2003, 103) that not only validate one's existence but also acknowledge its positioning in relation to that of other beings and to the environment, recognising our inherent interdependencies. Scholarship on care has challenged understandings of the self as an autonomous and sufficient subject, highlighting instead the extent to which human life depends upon networks of care, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility (Held 2006; Gilligan 2011; Tronto 1993). Carol Gilligan argues that modern societies are becoming increasingly aware of "the reality of interdependence and the costs of isolation," recognising that "autonomy is an illusion –that people's lives are interconnected" (2011, 17). Similarly, Virginia Held sustains that "the ethics of care usually works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories" (2006, 13). These notions challenge understandings of intimacy and happiness grounded exclusively in personal fulfilment. Instead, they foreground the relational dimensions of human existence, for affective bonds reveal the networks of dependency and responsibility that connect private lives to the communities of which they are part. Held underlines the importance of "attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations" (15), qualities which emphasize to what extent social life depends upon relationships of reciprocity and mutual support. Against this background, the notion of "promiscuous care" (Chatzidakis et al 2020, 35) proves fruitful for decolonizing affective connections. Rejecting restrictive and hierarchical understandings of obligation and kinship, the authors argue that "anyone can potentially care for, about and with anyone" (35), suggesting that "all forms of care between all categories of human and non-human should be valued, recognised and resourced equally" (35). In this respect, care theory is essential to examine contemporary romantic narratives and their articulation of relationality and alternative forms of kinship, community and belonging.

Along these lines, recent scholarship on love and intimacy has increasingly challenged the tendency to understand romantic relationships as purely private experiences detached from institutional power. Instead, scholars have highlighted the extent to which love is shaped by cultural values, social expectations, and systems of power. Maija Lanas and Michalinos Zembylas conceptualise "love as an emotion, love as choice, love as response, love as relational, love as political, and love as praxis" (2014, 3). This association between love and community echoes Janine Joyce's observation that, within the context of Peace Studies, love is predominantly articulated "through the activities of peace education and through the embodiment of individuals committed to a series of practices and activities aimed at creating change" (2023, 18), thus placing an emphasis on agency and community. This understanding of love as a social and relational force is not entirely new. As Erich Fromm (1957) famously argues, the desire for interpersonal union constitutes "the most fundamental passion" because it is the force that keeps together "the human race, the clan, the family, society" (qtd Grobbelaar, Boyd, & Dudek 2023, 6). Fromm's observation underlines the extent to which love exceeds personal experience. Similarly,

bell hooks conceives love not as a mere emotion but as an ethical and relational practice. hooks defines love through a combination of "affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (2001, 5). Such an understanding moves beyond idealised or purely emotional conceptions of intimacy. Instead, it emphasises the relational practices through which connections between human beings are established and maintained. Hence, instead of merely representing personal connection, a narrative genre such as romance, whose primary focus is love, may be understood as a space through which pressing concerns around (self)care, recognition, responsibility, and belonging are depicted and negotiated.

The contributions in this special issue precisely engage with contemporary debates on, love, happiness and care from a variety of literary, cultural and theoretical perspectives. The articles included here differ in terms of genre, and cultural context. Yet, they share an interest in how romantic narratives respond to key debates about history, identity, representation, belonging, and social justice. This special issue is organized around a set of interconnected analytical concerns that reflect both the thematic diversity of the corpus examined and the range of critical questions through which contemporary romance is explored. Three interconnected themes structure this volume: revising and reimagining romantic traditions, the personal and communal dimension of love, and finally alternative intimacies and new relational futures in contemporary romance. The first group of essays address the relationship between contemporary romance and inherited traditions, engaging with established romantic conventions while exploring their limitations, revising their assumptions, or adapting them to new social and cultural contexts. Nóra Máthé's analysis of Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series (2015-2021) explores how recent fantasy romance revisits narrative traditions associated with Jane Austen, the Brontës, and gothic romance. Her discussion examines how these familiar structures are adapted to address trauma, agency, healing, and emotional recovery, demonstrating how inherited romantic forms continue to be reshaped in response to contemporary concerns, transforming into narratives in which affective justice and personal healing occupy a central place. Marie Herbillon's discussion of J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole* (2023), focuses on the novella's engagement with European Romanticism, intercultural encounters, and unequal cultural relationships. Marie Herbillon's analysis of intercultural negotiations through the lens of love reveals how ideals of romance emerge from particular cultural histories and how they become unsettled when confronted with alternative cultural contexts.

A second group of articles explores the connections between intimacy and belonging, with several contributions moving beyond individualized understandings of romance and affective relations to examine how love intersects with community, family, cultural identity and collective memory. Silvia Martínez-Falquina's analysis of Tashia Hart's *Native Love Jams* (2023) shifts attention to indigenous understandings of relationality grounded in reciprocity, community, and connection to the natural world. As Martínez-Falquina demonstrates, *Native Love Jams* offers a vision of intimacy rooted in collective wellbeing, where personal relationships remain inseparable from larger questions of community and cultural continuity. Similar concerns of belonging and collective identity are present in Nattie Golubov's

discussion of contemporary Latinx romance fiction in her examination of Alana Quintana Albertson's Love & Tacos series, Natalie Caña's Vega Family series, and the Milagro Street series by Angelina M. Lopez. The narratives examined in Nattie Golubov's contribution are shaped by experiences of displacement, gentrification, and cultural erasure, situating romantic attachments within ongoing struggles over space, memory, and community survival.

Although belonging continues to be a central concern in the subsequent articles in this second theme the focus gradually shifts from community to the more intimate negotiations through which individuals make sense of identity, desire, and selfhood. Paloma Fresno-Calleja's reading of Rebecca K Reilly's *Greta & Valdin* (2021) examines the experiences of queer, Māori, and diasporic characters as they navigate family bonds, romantic attachments, and competing understandings of happiness. Instead of presenting happiness as a clearly defined goal, Fresno-Calleja argues that *Greta & Valdin* portrays it as an ongoing process shaped by uncertainty, vulnerability, and the negotiation of multiple belongings. Recognition and representation also occupy a central place in Astrid Schwegler-Castañer's discussion of Leanne Yong's *Two Can Play That Game* (2023). This contribution examines Yong's focus on a Malaysian-Australian demisexual protagonist and the intersection of cultural identity, sexuality, and romantic experience in the novel, demonstrating how representation itself emerges as an important aspect of a sense of belonging.

The third thematic strand of the special issue explores alternative affective unions and futures, focusing on narratives that envision different relational possibilities. Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar's discussion of Jane Igharo's *Ties That Tether* (2020) introduces the notion of "cultural polyamory" as a lens through which to understand diasporic identity. The analysis explores the ways humans navigate multiple cultural affiliations without reducing them to mutually exclusive choices. The contribution demonstrates that romantic relationships become spaces through which these negotiations take place, allowing the protagonist to reconcile different attachments without subordinating one to the other. This emphasis on multiplicity also informs Inés Hernández-Martínez's discussion of *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017). Hernández-Martínez examines how the film challenges hegemonic assumptions about intimacy, family, and romantic legitimacy through its portrayal of polyamorous relationships as consensual non-monogamy. Examining the communication, negotiation, and mutual care that sustain their intimacy, this piece studies how *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* complicates conventional understandings of commitment and emotional fulfilment.

Many of the concerns that are central throughout the scholarly essays are discussed in Jayashree Kamblé's interview with bestselling romance author Sherry Thomas. The inclusion of this interview reflects this special issue's commitment to bringing scholars' and authors' approaches into dialogue while also broadening the perspectives represented within the volume. As a Chinese American writer whose work has contributed significantly to enlarge the cultural and historical horizons of contemporary romance, Thomas reflects on migration, identity, memory, representation, and the publishing industry. Her observations provide valuable insight into the experiences of a writer working within a genre that has traditionally

been shaped by white-centered assumptions (Beckett 2019; Young, 2020) while also illustrating the ways authors from historically underrepresented backgrounds continue to transform the field. The volume closes with Eugenia Ossana's short story "A Thousand Times Away," a creative contribution that articulates many of the themes explored throughout the preceding essays. Through its engagement with class difference, racial prejudice, memory, desire, motherhood, and social mobility, the story examines the relationship between private choices and the wider social structures within which they are made. Including a creative work alongside scholarly and authorial contributions highlights the special issue's belief that storytelling itself is a meaningful site of knowledge production and a valuable space for exploring the affective, social, and political concerns that run throughout the volume.

Taken together, the essays, the interview, and the short story included in this special issue demonstrate that romance is far more deeply intertwined with history, identity, migration, community, and social change than long-standing misconceptions about the genre suggest. The texts discussed here reveal the extent to which affective ties are shaped by larger cultural and political forces, while also highlighting the role romance can play in negotiating experiences of belonging, exclusion, and transformation. Together, the contributions explore how romantic narratives imagine forms of attachment that challenge dominant assumptions about happiness, marriage and personal fulfilment. By bringing together scholarly, authorial, and creative voices, this volume seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations in the academically robust field of romance, whose literary and academic significance within literary and cultural studies is well established, and to foreground its relevance to broader discussions of representation, identity, and social justice within the fields of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies.

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