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SMUTTY FANTASY IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE: SELF-PUBLISHED EROTIC ROMANCE AND SPACES OF ALTERNATIVE FEMININISM

Anne Gilbert
University of Kansas

Feminist perspectives on the romance novel are often ambivalent as they attempt to reconcile its contradictions: On one hand is the liberatory possibility of sexually explicit fantasies authored by and for women, but this is countered by the reality of a genre that frequently reverts to safe, accepted reinscriptions of heteronormative values. In this presentation, I consider how these tensions play out in a digital sphere, where the rise of e-books and digital publishing platforms has created a market for independent romance authors, erotic self-published novels, and networks of blogs and recommendation sites supporting them. I argue that the cottage industry of erotic romance e-books and review blogs represent an online space of gendered conversation, an opportunity for participants to legitimate devalued, feminized, risqué texts, as well as the practices of both writing and reading them.

The arenas in which self-published erotic romance novels are promoted and recommended are spaces on the internet in which romance, happy endings, and explicit sexuality are celebrated in the collective imaginations of its participants. Through an analysis of reviews and recommendations of self-published erotic romances; promotional and paratextual materials created by authors; and of book blogs and message boards, this presentation will investigate how these networks operate as an alternate sphere for feminized discussion, a space for formulating and indulging in fantasy.

Lori Kido Lopez (2009) refers to mommy blogging is a “radical act” for the way in which it “challenges and reinterprets representations of motherhood” (p. 730), and allows bloggers and readers alike to collectively reimagine mothering and femininity. Similarly, sex blogs written by and for women have been argued to be safe spaces in which women can build community by articulating sexual desires and shames (Wood, 2008). The proliferation of digitally self-published erotic romances, and the semi-professional network of bloggers, recommenders, and marketers that accompany them, act in much the same way. Like mommy blogs, sex blogs, or even crafting circles, blogging about so-called smut validates the significance of culturally neglected and deeply feminized

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artifacts, creating a space in which the value of both the e-books themselves and the interest in them is accepted as a given by its participants. Sexual imagination is celebrated here, not merely for the content of fantasies, but for the presumed pleasures of being permitted to indulge that imagination through writing and reading.

E-book romances are big business, done \$2.99 at a time. Romance/erotica brought in \$1.1 billion in 2013, with digital book sales outpacing romances published in other formats (Terrero, 2014). Of the top 100 romance e-books in 2014, a full 50% were self-published, with small publishers (including author collectives) and Amazon adding an additional 20% (Robertson, 2015). Self-published e-books comprise a significant portion of bestseller lists, from Amazon to the *New York Times*. Successful self-published authors often receive offers for contracts from traditional publishing houses and book agents. Electronically published erotic romances have emerged as in-demand commodities.

The significance of the digital boom in erotic e-books, however, extends beyond economic value. Successful self-published authors often choose to remain independent, rather than accept industrial offers; amateur reviewers create sites to sort through the myriad novels published each month and make recommendations; enthusiastic readers participate in discussions, leave author feedback, and advocate for authors and individual books in message boards and review sites across the internet. Participants in the interactive process of publishing and circulating erotic e-books – writers, yes, but also these editors, bloggers, volunteer marketers, notable reviewers – can build fame in this arena and develop a following from others who appreciate their labors. Communities and networks devoted to self-published romance celebrate creators and consumers of these books, fostering the legitimacy of writing, reading, and promoting sexually explicit romantic novels. This valorization is an internal construct; these pursuits are not legitimated by economics or industrial structures, but by the significance awarded to them by the actions of their participants.

Blogs, with names such as *Shh Moms Reading*, *Flirty and Dirty Book Blog*, *The SubClub Books*, and *Up All Night Book Blog*, are modeled on longer-standing romance review sites such as *All About Romance* and *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books*. Whereas sites had previously adhered to a professionalized model of reviews, in which reviewers were paid at least a nominal sum and the site solicited and accepted review copies of books from publishers, newer blogs are grounded in affective attachments rather than institutional structures. Bloggers refer to themselves as “book junkies” or “addicts,” “fangirls” and “obsessives,” and the transition from reader to reviewer is prompted by an overflow of enthusiasm for reading, sexy romances, and even book-based fantasy boyfriends. The books reviewed are also different, as book bloggers are interested in books that can be had instantly and at low cost via digital channels. Subsequently, only a small percentage of books reviewed on amateur book blogs are those originally published by imprints at a major publishing house. The conventions and practices of these user-generated blogs reinforce the interest in a steady supply of new romance novels and also indicate the role that the consumption and celebration of erotic fantasies – beyond the production of them by writers – plays in building a collective romantic imagination among the readership.

In addition to reviews, book blogs include author interviews, previews of covers and excerpts of upcoming titles, notifications of price drops and release dates, and interactive comments sections or forums. Conversations on these blogs are also part of a larger network of interactions surrounding the publicizing and recommending of titles. These interactions also take place on social media pages of authors and bloggers, review sections of Amazon, Good Reads, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Wattpad, on message boards of retailers, and author websites. In these spaces, readers, authors, and amateur reviewers praise and critique book content, articulate preferences for the heroes, heroines, sexual encounters, and romantic outcomes they hope to find in their books, and situate writing and reading romances within their daily lives.

I consider the nature of the gendered empowerment that arises from the collective imaginations of participants as they create, circulate, and promote digital erotic romances within a feminized online space. Empowerment here may be a challenging concept; the fantasies inscribed in these erotic romances often reinforce traditional gender dynamics, heteronormative values, and idealized (and unattainable) standards of beauty, wealth, and purity, and may seem incompatible with opportunities for reimagining female writers' and readers' cultural roles. Nevertheless, by constructing a venue where the creation and articulation of desire, wish fulfillment, and sexuality are imagined as productive pursuits that speak to entrepreneurial energy and digital savvy, online spaces surrounding the publication and circulation of smutty e-books speak to how participants are able to realize a degree of agency that has implications beyond textual content.

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