

LOVE IS (COLOR) BLIND: HISTORICAL ROMANCE FICTION AND INTERRACIAL
RELATIONSHIPS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes three historical romance novels—*Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* by Theresa Romain (2015), *The Duke of Shadows* by Meredith Duran (2008) and *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan (2013)—to understand how postracial rhetoric is being contested and confirmed in a genre where the reader is promised an “emotionally just” ending. In historical romance novels, this “emotionally just” ending often involves a re-writing of history where institutional systems (often patriarchy) are made progressive and more hospitable to oppressed groups through the power of romantic love (RWA “About the Romance Genre”). I argue that depictions of interracial relationships in twenty-first century historical romance novels written by American authors for a primarily American audience helps to illustrate both the problem of postracial thinking *and* the complexities and contradictions of postracial thinking by rewriting both history and historical stereotypes. The inclusion of interracial relationships that seriously analyze issues of racial identity within the course of the narrative helps to trouble the dominance of the postracial narrative for readers of romance, 83% of whom are white according to a survey conducted by The Nielsen Company for the Romance Writers of America (“The Romance Book Buyer” 11).

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INTRODUCTION

Romance novels, in general, have long been considered one of the worst forms of literature one can read. In *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*, British popular culture scholar Joanne Hollows notes that both literary critics and feminists scorn the genre. Literary scholars perceive “romantic fiction as the ultimate example of the trivial and dangerous fantasies, which characterized a mass culture for mindless, passive consumers” (68). And though the genre is one of the best indicators of women’s economic power, for many feminists, the genre has been considered “politically dangerous, a mechanism through which patriarchal culture was produced” (68). For such critics, the romance genre is dangerous in that it supposedly enshrines mindless drivel that encourages women to “cherish the chains of their bondage” in the words of second-wave feminist Germaine Greer (180).

Contrary to the opinions noted above, my work views romance novels as a space that allows for an in-depth investigation into American beliefs of love and romance, especially in regard to interracial romantic relationships. While representations of such relationships are not common in the romance genre, they are exceptional in regard to their portrayal. Romance novels are one of the few spaces in American popular culture where interracial relationships (and the families that result from them) are portrayed as triumphs, not tragedies. Historically set romance novels that feature interracial couples envision the possibility of a future that promises racial justice through romantic love. Within these novels, issues of the present are worked upon from the comfortable distance of the past where the rules that govern society can be brought into sharper focus than those that govern contemporary society. Historically, interracial relationships were seen as unnatural and threats to the moral fabric of the country. While this view has changed since 1967 when the Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation laws in *Loving v*

Virginia, interracial relationships—particularly those between white women and men of color—still challenge common beliefs about the notion of family.

While the percentage of interracial marriages and mixed-race individuals has risen since 1967, the country's prevailing understanding of race and race relations has changed as a result of the growing influence of the postracial narrative, an understanding of race professing that Americans have gotten past race.¹ For example, during Barack Obama's presidential campaign, news outlets classified his ability to appeal to both white and non-white individuals as postracial. In a January 2008 news report NPR Senior News Analyst Daniel Schorr defined the postracial era as "the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them," noting that the term became popular after Obama performed well in the early primary races of Iowa and New Hampshire ("A New 'Post-Racial' Political Era in America"). With the election of Obama to the office of President of the United States, it seemed that the postracial narrative had reached its apex: racism belonged to the past as white individuals had overcome prejudice to vote a black man into the highest political office, implying that race no longer matters.

This dissertation analyzes three historical romance novels—*Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* by Theresa Romain (2015), *The Duke of Shadows* by Meredith Duran (2008) and *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan (2013)—to understand how postracial rhetoric is being contested and confirmed in a genre where the reader is promised an "emotionally just" ending. In historical romance novels, this "emotionally just" ending often involves a re-writing of history where institutional systems (often patriarchy) are made progressive and more hospitable to oppressed groups through the power of romantic love (RWA "About the Romance Genre"). I

¹ See Wendy Wang's "[The Rise of Intermarriage](#)" for the Pew Research Center and Suzannah Gonzalez's "[U.S. Multiracial Population is Growing, Nears 7 Percent](#)."

argue that depictions of interracial relationships in twenty-first century historical romance novels written by American authors for a primarily American audience helps to illustrate both the problem of postracial thinking *and* the complexities and contradictions of postracial thinking by rewriting both history and historical stereotypes. The inclusion of interracial relationships that seriously analyze issues of racial identity within the course of the narrative helps to trouble the dominance of the postracial narrative for readers of romance, 83% of whom are white according to a survey conducted by The Nielsen Company for the Romance Writers of America (“The Romance Book Buyer” 11).

At its most elemental form, the romance novel is concerned with the process of falling in love, and this is a story that sells, over and over again. In 2012, sales for romance hit over 1.4 billion dollars. Writing for *Salon*, Noah Berlatsky notes that this figure is “16.7 percent of the U.S. consumer market in books, the single largest slice for any segment – a third larger than the inspirational book market and roughly equivalent to sci-fi and mystery sales combined” (“Highbrow Media’s Sexist Blind Spot”). Though sales have fallen from this height, (in part due to trade fiction experiencing a 2.3% decrease in sales as reported by *Publisher’s Weekly*) romance still sold 1.08 billion in 2013 (Milliot “Industry Sales Flat in 2013; Trade Dropped 2.3%,” RWA “The Romance Genre: Romance Industry Statistics”). This decline in sales meant a drop from the genre’s previous position as the number one genre in America to the second-best selling genre of literature (second to general fiction). While this decline in sales is drastic for romance, its sales figures for 2013 were still many millions of dollars ahead of other genres of literature.

To fully understand the romance genre, one must understand the environment that produces the novels. The environment is made up of four primary groups of actors: authors,

readers (and bloggers), publishers, and scholars. What makes romance different from other fiction genres is the level of interaction and cross-over between these groups. Readers regularly become authors, authors are frequently romance readers, as are scholars, and those who work on the publishing end sometimes becomes authors. With the advent of the internet, these groups communicate with one another frequently, resulting in a genre where issues found to be problematic (plagiarism, racism, wage disputes to name a few) are critiqued and commented on by a large number of the online community. As Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S.G. Frantz note in their introduction to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, “academics of many disciplines take part in this field [popular romance scholarship], as do authors, expert fans, and editors, in an ongoing, increasingly audible dialogue. (We list them separately—in fact, the romance scholar will often wear two or three of these hats, either at once or by turns.)” (10). This active and engaged community is one of the reasons why romance scholarship has grown as a scholarly field within the past decade.

This dissertation emerges from the history detailed above. I’ve been a romance reader since my freshman year in college (2004-2005) when my college roommate handed me Jennifer Crusie’s contemporary romance novel *Bet Me* and said she thought I would like the novel. Being a voracious reader since childhood, I was always looking for something new to read and welcomed her recommendation. I loved the novel and took to the internet to discover where I could find more books like Crusie’s. That initial search led me to *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books* and ignited my passion for romance novels. I asked to do my senior honors thesis on romance novels, but no professor would take on the project. (Instead, I studied my other literary love, Medieval and Renaissance literature.) Despite this setback as an undergraduate student, I have been able to center my entire graduate career on the romance genre. I’ve been fortunate to enter

the field of popular romance studies at a time when there was a theoretical foundation upon which I could build and a number of knowledgeable scholars who could answer my questions about the genre. As I started teaching as a graduate instructor during my Master's degree, I became more and more interested in issues of social justice, particularly those that concern gender and race. I began thinking about the overwhelming whiteness of the romance genre, and I ultimately decided that I wanted my dissertation to address the ways I see the romance genre contesting and conforming to postracial rhetoric in the subgenre of European historical romance novels.

Why Study Historical Romance in the Twenty-First Century?

It may seem odd for this dissertation to argue that in writing about race relations in Britain between the early to mid-nineteenth century, the American authors of these works of fiction are actually addressing twenty-first century American racial issues.² However, that is exactly what this dissertation argues. I argue that in writing about interracial relationships between white women and mixed-race Indian/Indian men during Britain's height of colonization, these American authors are working out and responding to issues of race and racism in the United States in the twenty-first century by displacing these issues onto a distant, yet somewhat similar, past. I posit that the colonial relationship is utilized to talk about race in historical romance novels for several different reasons. First, by writing a romantic pairing that is white/Indian, an author and her audience can sidestep America's legacy of slavery, which continues to be a point of contention 150 years after its abolition. For the majority of romance

² The novels studied in this dissertation are set in the following years: 1817 (*Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*); 1857-1861 (*The Duke of Shadows*); and 1867 (*The Heiress Effect*)

readers, slavery cannot be made romantic.³ Second, by pairing a white heroine with an Indian hero, the author and her audience can also avoid the myth of the black rapist, which has been used to terrorize interracial couples and to justify the murders of black men for supposed crimes of lust. Additionally, with a white/Indian pairing, authors and audiences can rest assured in the idea that in America, Indians are accorded the designation of honorary whiteness. This, of course, has not been the case historically in the British context of race relations. So, in effect, American authors are drawing from a British historical past to create a historical fiction that then addresses an American present in regard to race.

The displacement of complex issues onto the past is not exclusive to the romance genre. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair note in *The Distant Mirror: Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction* that “the genre labeled as ‘historical fiction’ has been defined by various writers over time in various ways” (10). One of the most popular definitions, they note, comes from Amy J. Elias in *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Elias writes that historical fiction consists of three characteristics:

1. specific historical detail, featured prominently is crucial to plot or character development or some experimental representation of these narrative attributes;
2. a *sense* of history informs all facets of the fictional construct (from authorial perspective to character development to selection of place);
3. this sense of history emerges from and is constructed by the text itself. (11, emphasis in original)

³ There is a long tradition of African American romance authors who make a point to write romance novels set in America during slavery. These novels often feature heroes and heroines who are African/African-American. Beverly Jenkins holds the most name-recognition in mainstream romance as an author who acknowledges the importance of accepting and acknowledging slavery as part of America’s past. In doing so, she creates a space where African-Americans are fully incorporated into America’s “bittersweet” history. For Jenkins, “to be able to love is freedom,” and her novels demonstrate how love and romance are not exclusive to white America (Jenkins 44).

Brown and St. Clair argue that this definition misses one important criterion that is critical to understanding the genre: “historical fiction is marked by a clash between opposing socio-political powers” (11). Though cloaked in the historical period of the day, these socio-political powers often reflect contemporary socio-political issues, and the scholarship on historical fiction, particularly that which focuses on women, reflects this fact. In *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction*, Rosemary Erickson Johnsen argues that “in these books written in the present and set in the past... [there is] a strong concern for the future.... Although written as genre fictions, the novels studied here add to the historical record and offer readers new ways of seeing women” (1). Johnsen clearly sees the novels she studies as participating in a feminist historiography, restoring women and their stories to the historical record from which they are often absented. While the novels studied in this dissertation do some of the same work Johnsen describes, they also do the work referenced by Brown and St. Clair in that these novels provide a space where the institutional power of whiteness is challenged through the interracial couple of the novel.

This desire to restore women and their stories to the past has been observed in historical romance more broadly. Cultural historian Hsu-Ming Teo remarks on this in an article about the uses of history in Bertrice Small’s 1978 historical romance novel *The Kadin*, set in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. Teo writes that

women’s historical novels may often play fast and loose with the known facts of history [...]. However, they present an unsettling view of the past which forces the reader to think about past gender and social orders which limited women’s lives and condemned them to silence, preventing their stories from appearing in the historical record.

According to Diana Wallace, the very excesses of historical fancy—the highlighting of

sentiment and the concerns of the domestic sphere with its different rhythms and cycles that contrast with the received chronology of political history—“all work to disturb accepted accounts of ‘history’ and suggest that what it offers as ‘truth’ is in fact equally fictional, and damaging to women.” (“Bertrice Teaches You About History”” 25)

By presenting an alternative view to the past, these novels centralize the stories of women, and as I argue in this dissertation, other minority groups, restoring them to the historical record.

Restoration of unknown stories is not the only benefit of writing and reading historical fiction. Historical fiction can also serve as a space to work out the thorny and intricate issues of the present. In her recent PhD thesis on narratives of virginity loss, Jodi McAlister draws from the work of Deborah Kaye Chappell to argue that historical romance serves as a space that

allows readers to indulge in fantasies that might be considered transgressive if located in a modern setting. By setting a book in the past, the reader is automatically placed at a cultural remove. The historical romance takes place in a recognizable but fantastical world, with different rules and mores than the contemporary world of the reader, which allows boundaries to be pushed. (19)

McAlister notes that the rules that govern the world of the historical romance are both different from and similar to the social rules and norms that govern the twenty-first century. In historical romance, the rules of patriarchy are made conspicuous in order to facilitate “the heroine[’s] triumph[...] over a patriarchal society distinctly unfriendly to her needs, often one that treats her cruelly” (23-24). Because the strictures of patriarchal society are more clearly delineated in historical romance than in the twenty-first century, the heroine’s victory over systemic gender inequality is rendered visible. This is also true of the novels studied in this dissertation. However,

these novels go one step further and make the rules and norms of white supremacy more obvious by utilizing the colonial encounter to explore contemporary issues of racism.

However, it should be noted that these triumphs are mostly those of white, heterosexual women, who are rewarded with the genre's requisite happily-ever-after with partners who are similarly white, heterosexual, and often wealthy men. Though the class status of heroines varies widely within the genre, they are almost uniformly white and heterosexual, and that is true of the heroines in the novels examined in this dissertation. The heroes in the novels I examine are quite different from the typical historical romance hero in that each hero in this dissertation is marked as racially Other. Whereas most romance is quite sophisticated in its discussion of patriarchy and the suffering of women under such a system, the genre's discussion of race and intersectionality is often less sophisticated (a fuller discussion on this to follow). Too often, when the romance genre features non-white characters, it has treated them (as popular culture often does) in the vein of the "magical Negro, [who is] a character full of knowledge and wisdom, sometimes with supernatural powers, whose job is to help a white protagonist reach his full potential" (Touré "The Magical Negro Falls to Earth"). I am concerned with *whom* the romance genre is interested in rewarding with "emotionally-just" endings.

While romance as a genre is concerned with depicting women's triumphs over systemic inequality, it seldom extends that kind of concern to other marginalized groups. The authors of the texts I study have chosen to look beyond just patriarchal oppression to consider other types of systemic oppression, like racial oppression, class oppression, and oppression based on ability. In considering these other types of oppression in addition to patriarchal oppression, the focus of these novels becomes more intersectional in nature as different oppressions are considered in

conjunction with one another.⁴ However, in taking a more intersectional approach to their characters, these authors must contend with contemporary understandings of race, class, gender, ability, etc. In particular, I assert that the contemporary postracial narrative in the United States is the biggest challenge these authors face when writing an interracial couple in a historically set novel.

The contemporary postracial narrative borrows a merit-based framework from the neoconservatism of the 1980s and an avoidance of race through color-blind rhetoric to become the dominant framework for understanding race today. In their seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain that neoconservatism presented as a “conservative egalitarian perspective which emphasized the dangerous radicalism and [...] antidemocratic character of ‘positive’ or ‘affirmative’ antidiscrimination policies. [Neoconservatives believe that] state activities should be restricted [...] to guarantees of equality for individuals,” not groups of individuals (20). By reframing social progress as a matter to be achieved on a case by case basis, neoconservative ideology worked to reduce race to the level of the individual when the greatest effects of racism (housing, employment, incarceration) have always worked at the systemic level. In addition to a refusal to consider issues at the systemic level, the postracial narrative also avoids a discussion of race through the use of color-blind rhetoric. Colorblind racism, as explained by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, is an ideology that “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” and operates through more subtle discrimination practices than in the past (2). For

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to help account for the ways black women were/are discriminated against by laws that fail to take into account the ways in which being a member of two oppressed groups affects/ed their lives. Crenshaw advocates for understanding how black women’s experiences are marginalized by their “intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other” (1242).

example, racial discrimination in the 1960s could be identified via signs and laws that demanded racial segregation. Twenty-first century color-blind racism operates in a quieter manner through “covert behaviors”—like “not showing all available units” in a building—and through rhetorical phrases that claim universalism—such as “I don’t see race” (3). Henry A. Giroux states that colorblindness “deletes the relationship between racial differences and power” by ignoring and denying America’s racial past and the way this past granted “political, economic, and cultural weight to the social power of whiteness” (*America on the Edge* 159). By refusing to acknowledge race as a social category that affects lives, the systemic power of whiteness is reaffirmed.

And so, when romance authors write an interracial couple, they must contend with the way the postracial narrative shapes our contemporary understanding of race. The authors of these novels take up elements of this discourse in their narratives, both confirming and rejecting aspects of contemporary postracial thought through their interracial couples. These authors draw on history, popular racial tropes, and popular romance fiction tropes and conventions to construct their plots and rework them for twenty-first century readers in ways that both affirm and reject postracial ideologies of race. However, when authors adhere too closely to established genre standards, they run the risk of absencing racial justice from the genre’s promise of emotional justice, thus fulfilling the goals of the postracial narrative.

Defining “Romance Novel”

One of the most common stereotypes of the genre from non-readers is that all romance novels are the same: trashy, simplistic novels that promise lurid sex scenes and adhere to patriarchal gender roles. As romance readers, authors, scholars, and publishers patiently and frequently explain, there is incredible diversity in the romance genre, and this stereotype applies

to a fraction of the novels published. This is a genre of fiction that encompasses all of the following novels: an inspirational romance with an emphasis on the importance of faith to love, a historical romance about a bisexual duke and a feisty heroine, an erotic romance about an enchanted prince who is never sexually satisfied until he meets an equally enchanted princess, a contemporary category about a NASCAR driver, a paranormal romance about a vampire king fighting to save his race who finally meets his mate, and a contemporary single-title novel about a single mother and a recovering alcoholic falling in love in a small mountain town. These are all categorized as romance novels, though their plots, tropes, characters, and sensuality levels are all vastly different. With such diversity, it can sometimes be difficult to understand what exactly makes a romance novel a romance novel. Within this dissertation, I will be working with three distinct, yet compatible definitions of the term romance novel.

First, I rely on the definition put forth by the genre's authors through the Romance Writers Association (RWA), which is perhaps the most well-known as it encompasses the "happily ever after" resolution for which the romance genre is famous. This definition states that a romance novel consists of two elements: "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" ("About the Romance Genre"). The RWA further defines these elements, stating that a central love story means that "the main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel." The RWA defines an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending as follows: "in a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love." The definition presented by the RWA is purposefully broad so as to

encompass a number of novels, both past and present.⁵ I utilize this definition to discuss how the concept of emotional justice must be broadened to include racial justice in romance novels with interracial couples.

The second definition I use comes from American literature scholar Pamela Regis. In her 2003 book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, she writes that a “romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (This has been recently updated to protagonists rather than heroines to reflect the rise of LGBT romance fiction) (19). Regis’ definition is concerned with creating a lineage of romance novels, linking the genre back to the medieval romance and to the comedy. In creating this genealogy, Regis focuses much on form and narrative elements, listing eight essential elements to define a romance novel. The following can occur in any order: “the initial state of society in which the heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal” (30). I rely on Regis’ definition of these narrative elements to illustrate how the authors discussed in this dissertation navigate racial difference as a potential barrier to the romance between the heroine and hero.

Finally, I employ the definition of the genre recently put forth by Jayashree Kamblé, whose definition of the romance novel delineates the epistemological foundation of the genre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Kamblé argues that romance novels have been a ground for working out, understanding, and responding to the global upheavals and shifts in thought of the late twentieth century: “capitalism, warfare and espionage, heteronormativity, and

⁵ The romance genre claims *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, as a founding text of the genre.

white identity. In fact, the genre is in the thick of twentieth-century counter-hegemonic movements, from ones contesting capitalism and its wars to ones advocating gay rights and coping with white Protestantism's cultural influence" (21). These four themes (capitalism, war, heterosexuality, and white Protestantism) are examined by Kamblé through the lens of the hero because he, more so than the heroine, is identified as embodying these themes and their contradictions in the genre (as industry tycoon, soldier, seducer, and, less explicitly stated, as white privilege) and providing "a way to see the genre's 'restructuration' of this subtext" (30). In other words, Kamblé contends that it is through the hero that the romance genre works out and responds to the greatest sites of struggle in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She notes that the romance novel does not always reject these themes, but that "the very texts that appear to glamorize global capitalism, justify war, and align themselves with heteronormative Christian values also contain reservations about these ideologies," most often illustrated through the figure of the romance hero (23). I rely on Kamblé's definition to discuss how the authors of the novels I analyze challenge the unspoken white identity of romance fiction.

Portrayals of Nonwhite Characters in Romance

As mentioned earlier, mainstream romance does not often feature characters of color or interracial romances. The lack of novels featuring characters of color and/or interracial relationships is commonly acknowledged to be one of the main problems of the genre. In *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan write that "one of the complaints that most often faces historical romance is that it's very white, very British, and very classist" (190). They note that this isn't necessarily unique to romance as popular culture in general tends to read white characters as neutral ones whereas nonwhite characters must be defined by their race in some way (similar to how male characters are read as neutral while female characters are read as

descriptive). Yet, Wendell and Tan go on to note that unlike other forms of popular culture (such as television), romance, and in particular historical romance, has not really interrogated the dominance of whiteness that pervades the industry.

When mainstream romance does feature characters of color, it often does so by drawing on stereotypes. For example, non-white heroes are often portrayed as hypermasculine. Jayashree Kamblé remarks on the prevalence of associating heterosexuality and masculinity in the novels of Harlequin Enterprises through “alpha-male heroes that are exotic—men whose ethnic identity evokes a heterosexist cultural heritage. [...]. [T]he novels rely on a popular assumption that cultures that appear chauvinistic and allied to machismo are also completely heterosexual; hence, the emergence of the Latin hero in novels like *Dearest Demon*, and later, the Arab hero” (99). Jay Dixon also observes this association in the novels of Mills and Boon in the 1960s, saying that in this time of “hippies and male dedicated followers of fashion, [...] Mills & Boon authors once again looked abroad specifically to Roman Catholic and Arab countries, where they could find a more traditionally masculine hero to idealize” (72). Dixon notes that these new heroes “are never Eastern European, nor are they black,” speaking to the racist assumptions that undergird the romance genre (72).

It is not just romance scholars who have noted the stereotypical portrayal of nonwhite characters in romance. Romance reviewers have observed this trend as well. For example, Jennie on *Dear Author* found the Asian stereotypes in Anne Stuart’s 2008 romantic suspense novel *Fire and Ice* distasteful, noting in her review that

the culture clash between [hero] Reno and [heroine] Jilly was too broadly drawn, at times distastefully so. He calls her *gaijin* constantly (which I understand is a slur; how serious of one seems to be a matter of debate among the various websites I checked out); she,

upon seeing his penis, remarks that she thought Japanese men were supposed to be 'small'. Ew. Even if this intended to be tongue-in-cheek, it's a rather offensive stereotype. ("REVIEW: Fire and Ice by Anne Stuart," emphasis mine)

Though Anne Stuart may have been trying to deliberately counter the portrayal of Asian men as hyposexual, it is clear that Stuart's reliance on stereotypes of Asian men spoiled any belief in the happily ever after for the heroine and hero of the novel for this particular reviewer. In order to avoid this kind of pushback from readers, many (white) romance authors seem to avoid writing characters of color, allowing the standard of white supremacy within the genre to remain unchallenged.

The dominance of whiteness as neutral remains true in the publishing arm of the romance genre: white characters are classified as belonging to mainstream romance and nonwhite characters are classified as belonging to multicultural and ethnic romance, a subgenre of the overarching romance genre. Quite often, stories about characters of color or stories written by authors of color are automatically slotted in the subgenre of multicultural and ethnic romance. Because multicultural romance is a much smaller subgenre with a smaller readership than a subgenre like historical romance, the automatic categorization of a romance with nonwhite characters as a multicultural romance can lead to less author support and less resources to market the novel, leading to less reader consumption and less profit for the (often nonwhite) author.

From Print Romance to Digital Romance

In her 1984 study of romance readers, Janice Radway included a chapter on what she called the institutional matrix of the romance industry, detailing the publishing circumstances that brought the novels to fruition. She discusses the rise of the major publishing conglomerates, known in the industry as the Big Five (formerly Big Six), and the dominance of Harlequin

Enterprises in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶ While Radway gives an excellent overview of the state of publishing in the mid to late twentieth century, the state of publishing has changed with the onset of the internet, and many publishers are struggling to cope with the ways the internet is changing book-buying behavior and adjusting to new reader expectations that the genre represent a greater number of Americans. The failure of publishers to cope with the switch from print romance to digital romance negatively affects authors who publish in the smaller subgenres of romance—like multicultural romance—as such subgenres typically receive less financial support and investment than bigger genres like paranormal romance and contemporary romance.

The inability of publisher to adequately manage the shift to digital romance is best exemplified in Courtney Milan's frank discussion of Harlequin Mills and Boon's decision to cancel the print run of Jeannie Lin's historical romance *The Jade Temptress*, set in Tang Dynasty China, and instead only release the novel digitally after print sales of the first novel (*The Lotus Palace*) in the series nose-dived. In an interview with *RT Book Reviews* (formerly *Romantic Times*), Lin states that she knew the lack of a print run "means a loss of distribution and readers," which was devastating as she was "fighting tooth and nail to build readership" ("Jeannie Lin Tells Us"). In a post on her blog, Lin writes that she isn't upset with Harlequin because "[i]n the beginning and end, publishing is a business. My stories failed to woo a significant number of readers even after five years and multiple releases. It's down to the numbers; the cold equations. I can't say that Harlequin and I didn't give it a fighting try" ("The Jade Temptress and the Future of Jeannie Lin").

While Lin doesn't blame Harlequin, Courtney Milan is quicker to take them to task (perhaps because she, unlike Lin, is no longer under contract with Harlequin). Milan explains

⁶ The Big Six comprises publishers Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin Group (recently merged with former Big Six member Random House), HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster.

that not only did Lin carry the fate of an entire sub-genre on her shoulders with her novels—she is the first romance author to ever set a historical romance in Tang Dynasty China and feature only Chinese characters under a mainstream publisher—but that Harlequin expected her to maintain print sales in a time when “historical romance shelf-space, in general, is falling precipitously” (“A Note on Historical Romance Sales in Print”). Milan maintains that though Harlequin offers enormous support to its authors, it would behoove the company to “recognize that they have a problem selling historical romance in print. [...] And I hope they figure it out before they run more print careers into the ground” (“A Note”). The fact is that selling romance in print has become a much larger problem for the publishing industry as e-books are now the primary way romance novels are sold (RWA “Romance Industry Statistics”). And rather than admit that certain publishing companies are struggling with this switch, authors seem to be encouraged to write novels that are more like past novels that have had successful print runs, and companies seem to take fewer risks with innovative romance novels that insist on bringing diversity to the genre. By refusing to take these risks, publishers are complicit in maintaining the white supremacy of the romance genre at large. Given the rarity of interracial couples in mainstream historical romance, it is important to note that all of the interracial romance novels I discuss in this dissertation were published outside the Big Five publishers, a fact that underscores just how marginal such stories remain within the genre.

Literary Segregation

The romance publishing industry has had a fraught relationship with race, from insensitive portrayals of people of color to the mostly unexamined whiteness of the genre. The overwhelming whiteness of the genre is present not only in terms of representation via characters in the novels, but the dominance of whiteness extends to the physical space of bookstores.

Romance novels deemed “multicultural” (those featuring characters of color or written by authors who are themselves visibly marked and marketed as being of color) are often shelved apart from romance fiction in brick and mortar stores, if the novels make it into the store at all. This is particularly evident in the October 15th, 2005 issue of *At the Back Fence*, published on *All About Romance*. This issue takes a hard look at both the romance publishing industry and shelving practices in bookstores in order to discern the depths of romance’s problem with race. In this issue, site founder Laurie Gold puts together a panel of authors, publishers, readers, and reviewers to answer why there are segregated publishing imprints for African-American romances and why they are often shelved apart from other romances in bookstores. The responses of the panelists vary, but what emerges is a discussion of the state of race, particularly in regard to African-Americans, in romance. Authors Karen Templeton and Monica Jackson tell Gold that they had “heard that when black author’s books are sold alongside white titles (not as a separate imprint, but as part of a larger imprint), those black authors sell fewer books than white authors,” with Jackson noting that “[t]he majority culture as a whole demands black title segregation and niche marketing. Black romance is obviously treated far differently than whites by the majority romance community,” suggesting that romance readers, whether consciously or not, have racist reading habits (Gold).

In her reflection on race and racism in romance for this issue of *At the Back Fence*, black British blogger Karen Scott offers several hypotheses for why black/multicultural romances don’t sell as well as white mainstream romance: 1) the fantasy element of the relationship is disturbed—“apparently white women don’t want the distraction of having a black-skinned hero or heroine marring their fantasy of the perfect relationship;” 2) packaging of the book—“I would wager that a white person is probably less likely to pick up a romance book that has a

stereotypical black person (ie. braided hair, ethnically identifiable mode of dress etc.) on the front cover;” 3) the idea that a romance with characters of color has some overt social message—“maybe something as simple as white people assuming that most AA [African-American] romance books are there to tweak one’s social conscience, rather than just telling a story about two people falling in love” (Scott). Scott concludes that all of these factor into black romances selling less than white romances, but adds that the lack of marketing and promotion received by black romances is ultimately to blame for the lack of white readership stating that “[p]romotion and marketing is so powerful, that in the past, I’ve seen distinctly average books elevated to the top of the best seller lists, just because the author happened to be a marketing genius.” What these discussions make clear is that romance’s struggle to portray racially diverse characters is structural in nature; racism runs through the publishing and professional arms of the romance industry.

Ten years later, literary segregation is still an issue as the March 2015 issue of *Romance Writers Report*—the trade magazine for romance authors published by Romance Writers of America, with a readership of over 10,000—features an article by Sylvie Fox and Beth Yarnell on multicultural romance and the genre’s struggle to incorporate non-white characters into its offerings and to make non-white authors and readers feel welcome. Fox and Yarnell interview several multicultural authors on the status of multicultural romance and provide commentary on the subject. One author named Caridad Pineiro references the practice of “literary segregation,” noting that when she discussed the issue with fellow authors in the past,

[a] large number of writers felt this practice limited their sales and kept readers of other races and ethnicities from trying out their books. For Latino writers, I believe the practice was especially tough since there were often few “Latino” book sections, and when they

did exist, they contained Spanish language books of varying genres and even nonfiction. This made it difficult for readers specifically looking for English language Latino romances to find the books (16).

Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan explain the dynamics behind literary segregation. They state that “It’s not what you write but what color you are when you write it; what color the folks are on the cover; and what marker appears on the spine of the book, which may determine its shelving. If the marker says ‘African American’ or ‘African American Romance,’ that book will most likely be shelved in the ‘African American’ books section of the store” rather than in the generic romance section (191). Wendell and Tan observe that this is not merely about access to books written by or featuring people of color, but that shelf segregation is an issue of economics with real-life consequences. They note that by shelving “a section of romance [...] away from the money-spending romance-hunting book-buying fans of romance [...] [t]hose books have a lesser chance of being purchased, and those authors lose out on sales to romance readers who shop only in the romance section and who take chances on authors they may not have read before” (192-3). While they note that publishers are intending to respond to reader preferences in terms of shelving, Wendell and Tan are hopeful that online publishing will help eradicate the shelving segregation that takes place in most brick and mortar stores due to “the Rise of Online Booksellers and the even bigger rise of the e-pubs and the erotica market. [There will be] [n]o worries about who to shelve near whom. They’re all in one database, and they’re linked by topic, plot, author name, or historical period. There’s no ‘black romance only’ section at Amazon.com unless a user creates a list specifically for the topic” (194). I, however, am less optimistic that literary segregation vanishes when the transaction takes place online, in part due to the way

online retailers sort and categorize romances and because of the way online retailers recommend novels to readers based on their purchase history.

Literary Segregation Online

Online retailers—most notably Amazon—tend to follow the types of categorization already set up by the print publishing industry.⁷ Amazon has categories for both African-American and Multicultural under the broader category of romance (no other racial group receives its own specific category). However, these subcategories disappear once one selects a subgenre like “Contemporary” or “Historical.” Once a larger subgenre is selected, Amazon suggests the customer refine the initial romance novel search via themes such as amnesia, secret baby, pirates, and highlanders. Thus, literary segregation seems to still be enforced, at least implicitly, as it is up to the publisher (whether that is a traditional publisher or a self-publisher) to tag novels in regard to their so-called appropriate subgenre.⁸ The authors interviewed for the article in *Romance Writers Report* suggest a way to remedy literary segregation online would be to tag novels according to generic trope (such as marriage of convenience) so readers can search all romance books by the tropes they enjoy, such as marriage in name only, friends to lovers, beta heroes, captivity narratives, etc.⁹ However, these kinds of theme searches are only possible at Amazon.com after selecting an initial subgenre like “Historical” or “Multicultural,” and

⁷ I have chosen to discuss only Amazon.com in regard to shelf segregation due to the popularity of the Amazon Kindle e-reader ([Forbes: Kindle is Most Popular e-Reader](#)).

⁸ For example, the first book in my Multicultural and Interracial results page is the erotic romance *Venomous: Alien Warrior, Book 1*, self-published and written by Penelope Fletcher and is tagged as “Romance: Multicultural” and “Romance: Science Fiction.” The novel’s Amazon summary makes clear that this book is about **interspecies** relationships, not interracial ones, and features a warning for “violence, profanity, and sexual situations with multiple partners.”

⁹ Upon the second revision of this chapter in March 2015, one can now conduct an initial search in the Amazon Kindle Store by the following “themes:” Amnesia; Beaches; Gambling; International; Love Triangle; Medical; Second Chances; Secret Baby; Vacation; Wedding; Workplace. Of these themes, I would not count gambling, love triangle, wedding, and workplace as tropes commonly found in romance. A better listing of romance novels by tropes can be found under *All About Romance*’s Special Title Listing (<http://likesbooks.com/lists.html>). *All About Romance* polls its users periodically to update each special title listing and to create new special title listings.

customers are not offered a wide variety of themes from which to narrow their searches. If a customer does click on the Multicultural and Interracial romance links, the romances featured on the first results page of this search primarily feature black women and/or white men on their covers (speaking to the prevalence of the black/white binary in American conceptions of race), and the majority of novels featured were paranormal erotica rather than straight romance.¹⁰ In this respect, authors of novels featuring non-white characters, mixed-race characters, and interracial pairings are pushed out of Amazon's digital market in favor of self-published (or even Amazon published) erotica, reinforcing literary segregation in a new way.

One other setback to making literary segregation obsolete in the virtual world in regard to Amazon (and other online retailers as well) is the way Amazon populates the "Recommended Reads" section for each individual user. Because this is based on an individual user's purchase history, books recommended tend to come from the same tags that mark books previously bought by the consumer.¹¹ This could mean that unless a reader ventures into the Multicultural & Interracial tag and purchases a book tagged as such, it is feasible that a Multicultural/Interracial romance could never be recommended for her. Of course, readers, particularly those savvy to the internet, use other tools such as book review websites (*Smart Bitches*; *Dear Author*), recommendations by other readers (Goodreads), and romance author recommendations (Courtney Milan recommending Jeannie Lin) to inform the purchases they make. But to think

¹⁰ I'm typing this section on February 2, 2015, and it is currently 4:10PM. One important caveat is that I am searching the Amazon Kindle Store, which offers me slightly different search parameters than the Amazon Books section. While Amazon says the selection of Multicultural and Interracial Romance was populated by New and Popular novels, I do think the fact that the majority of these novels were paranormal erotica speaks to how interracial sex is still considered taboo or a sexual fetish in contemporary American culture. In fact, the interspecies romances in paranormal romances have been considered as a way to talk about interracial relationships without having to initiate discussions of race and institutional racism.

¹¹ This is similar to many of the book subscription services as well (On Scribd's splash page, they state "We want to get to know you (yes, you) as a reader. Our editors and algorithms work tirelessly to bring you personalized recommendations based on books you've read and loved" (*Scribd*).

that shelf segregation is a thing of the past confined to bricks and mortar bookstores would be a mistake. To me, the continued segregation of romance in the online marketplace indicates that the internet has not challenged the underlying white supremacy of the genre.

Shifts in the Genre over the Past Forty Years

The romance novel of the twenty-first century traces its origins to the 1972 romance novel *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss. This novel, a historical romance, was the first romance to include explicit sex scenes. *The Flame and the Flower* revolutionized the historical romance to center the female sexual experience, and soon, many other authors were attempting to emulate Woodiwiss' success by incorporating brutal heroes and the rape or forced seduction of the heroine into their plots. Wendell and Tan note that many of these "Old Skool" novels (as they term them) are told solely from the heroine's point of view, forcing the reader to immerse herself in the heroine's (mis)understanding of the hero and experience the novel solely from a female perspective. The novels of this era reflected the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the feminist politics of the 1970s through their feisty, independent heroines who found sexual pleasure with the hero.¹²

The genre underwent another shift in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s with the growth of the perspective of the hero. Wendell and Tan write that during this period "[t]he heroes softened and became less monolithic in their roles as symbols of love and fear; rape largely disappeared from the genre; and the heroine's sexual purity, while still an unhealthy indicator of moral integrity in many novels, is no longer clung to as stringently" (21).

Additionally, dual perspectives became the norm in romance novels, allowing readers to immerse themselves not only in the point of view of the heroine, but that of the hero as well.

¹² See Chapter Five ("The Orientalist Historical Romance Novel") of Hsu-Ming Teo's *Desert Passions* for a more detailed discussion of second-wave feminism and the rise of the erotic historical romance.

This era of romance has been referred to by some as the “Golden Era” of romance. A poll conducted in August of 2009 at the review website *Dear Author*, run by reader/reviewer-turned-author Jane Litte, mirrors this sentiment with 40% of 415 readers choosing the 1990s as the “Golden Era” of romance. The shifts in the romance novels of the 1990s reflect the kind of shifts in feminist thought as third-wave feminism gained traction with young women with its emphasis on choice and intersectionality.

In the “Golden Era” poll conducted by *Dear Author*, the second most popular decade was the 2000s, with 34% of the vote. Commenters who voted for this era note that novels of the early twenty-first century have brought exciting new trends and freshly revised tropes to the genre. Commenter traceyleann writes that romances of the twenty-first century offer “intelligent yet accessible writing and characters who seem more dimensional.” Other commenters note that the plethora of online review sites have contributed to greater variety in the genre. RStewie writes that “the internet plays an important role in my belief that now is the best years of Romance’s life [...] because there are SO MANY great sites that are all about reading and enjoying, critiquing and reviewing Romance, that it’s great to be able to share my love of this genre with others of a like mind so easily” (emphasis in original). For these readers, the novels of the 2000s are notable due to the accessibility and diversity of the internet. Such accessibility allows not only for more communication between readers who help each other select romances they may enjoy, but also between readers and authors. So, while it remains to be seen what trends and tropes come to define the romances of the next decade, the influence of the internet on the genre is definitely one of the factors defining the genre at this time, giving authors the ability to fine tune their stories to the preferences of their respective audiences, particularly in regard to the audience’s racial preferences of the novel’s main romantic couple.

A Genealogy of Romance Fiction Scholarship

In order to properly orient my study, it is necessary to trace the drastic changes the understanding of romance fiction has undergone in the academy in the past thirty years. The first critics of popular romance fiction, influenced by second-wave feminism, worried that the genre was doing irreparable harm to women by preventing them from achieving empowerment and independence. These early critics included Germaine Greer, Kay Mussel, Tania Modleski, and Janice Radway, each transforming the study of the genre in her own way. Germaine Greer's thoughts on romance novels in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) set the tone for subsequent scholarship as she claims that "[r]omance sanctions drudgery, physical incompetence and prostitution" and that "[t]he only literary form which could outsell romantic trash on the female market is hard-core pornography" (185). Greer's feminist critique combined with popular negative sentiment towards women's pastimes echoes throughout later scholarship conducted by Mussel, Modleski, and Radway. Under scholars such as these, romance novels were portrayed as spaces of "[d]uality, conflict, [and] ambivalence" over gender roles and ideologies, both repressive and empowering at once (Selinger and Frantz 4). These authors ultimately insist that romance novels are a tool of the patriarchy that renders women subservient to men through heterosexual marriage.

The most well-regarded work that came from this first generation of scholars is Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, published in 1984. In this work, Radway uses a psychoanalytic framework to determine what sorts of "needs, desires, and wishes" were being fulfilled by the Smithton women reading romance novels (13). Radway asks how romance reading functions in a woman's everyday life, and she concludes that the Smithton women she studies have a different literacy than the academics and feminist critics

of the day who were notorious for railing against romance. Radway engages in reading some of the romances suggested by the Smithton women and concludes that while romances do have patriarchal messages, they allow these women to claim their own time and space in households that are almost completely dependent on them.

Radway's work has been extremely influential in both the academy and in the culture at large in regard to how romance novels are perceived. This long-lasting influence has two flaws, however. First, Radway employs a psychoanalytic framework to understand the responses given by her subjects, which interprets the reader's idealization of the hero as desire for a nurturing mother figure. In the introduction to the 1991 edition of *Reading the Romance*, Radway explains her reliance on Nancy Chodorow's "feminist revision of Freud" saying that "[h]er work seemed relevant in this context because it insistently focused on the precise manner in which the social fact of parenting by women constitutes a female child with an ongoing need for the style of care associated originally with her primary parent, that is, her mother" (13). Radway argues that "the Smithton women apparently felt an intense need to be nurtured and cared for and despite their universal claim to being happily married (a claim I did not doubt), that need was not being met adequately in their day-to-day existence" (13). Radway's explanation as to why the Smithton women read romance (though her study has often been misconstrued as a study about all romance readers) has been rejected by a number of romance readers and authors. The reliance on a psychoanalytic framework to interpret her participants' comments and claims about the genre assumes a certain, identical lack in the Smithton women. In his article "Rereading the Romance," romance and poetry scholar Eric Selinger notes that Radway's argument "has provoked witty and artful ripostes within romance novels themselves" as authors respond to Radway's insistence that romance readers are searching for a nurturing mother figure (310).

The second flaw I find with *Reading the Romance* is that Radway's critique of the genre does not understand (or frequently misreads) the genre's history and its conventions and tropes. In her chapter "Language and Narrative Discourse," Radway takes romance novels as a whole to task for making the reader a passive participant in constructing meaning. In trying to understand what distinguishes a good romance from a bad romance, Radway lays the blame on the linguistic and narrative structure of the genre rather than entertain the idea that she is not well-versed enough in the genre to understand what her participants are trying to explain:

Moreover, Dot's readers are even less likely than she to comment on the language of a romance. They think of the terms 'good' and 'bad' as evaluations applicable only to the quality of the story a particular novel tells. No matter how often I asked readers to clarify the difference between a well-written book and a poorly written one, I always received an answer dealing with the exceptional nature of a plot or the likeable personality of the heroine or the hero. (190)

As a romance reader interpreting this passage, I find it strange that Radway was unable to find a satisfactory answer to this question, especially as several of her participants distinguish between a book that is well-written versus one that fulfills generic conventions in a satisfactory way (as many romance reviews online today note). As a reader, there can be a difference between romances that are well-written and romances that are good, and this, I believe, is one of the instances where Radway's status as an outsider to the community and unfamiliarity with the genre prevents her from understanding her participants. This is not to say that outside critiques are always wrong or always unwelcome, but to say that romance fiction is generic fiction and relies on an understanding of generic conventions and inventions that go through cycles of popularity. For example, the Smithton women primarily read historical romance, which, during

the time period Radway writes, was going through a phase where forced seduction and rape, trembling virgins, cruel heroes, and the ripping of bodices was popular. Because Radway lacks an understanding of the history of the genre (though her industry analysis is quite good), these tropes become what define romance novels rather than defining a particular subgenre of a particular era, thus legitimizing the bias against romance novels and readers. This dissertation seeks to remedy this flaw in Radway's work by appropriately grounding the texts I analyze in the existing scholarship on romance and by analyzing the various ways these texts negotiate race and interracial relationships.

Radway's study gained fame not only in the academic community but in the romance fiction community as well. Not only do authors write back to Radway in their novels, as Selinger observes, but they write back in more direct forms such as in Jayne Ann Krentz's edited collection of author essays entitled *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*. In addition to authors defending their craft and establishing their own identities (rather than the identity created for them by Radway), many, though not all, readers took to the internet to discuss novels adored and abhorred. Websites such as *All About Romance* (1997), *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books* (2005), *Dear Author* (2006), as well as reader discussion boards on individual author websites have allowed readers and authors to interact on a scale previously unavailable to them.

While several scholars published on romance after *Reading the Romance*, Radway remained the scholarly authority on the genre until relatively recently when a new generation of scholars began to revive interest in the genre with the idea to form a scholarly community dedicated to analyzing popular representations of romance. Selinger and Frantz document the origins of this shift in the introduction to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, and they

attribute the change to two things: 1) the publication of “innovative book-length studies of romance fiction [by Juliet Flesch and Pamela Regis that] offered new critical models that could, at last, compete with those offered by first-wave feminist scholars” and 2) financial and communicative infrastructure. In 2005, The Romance Writers of America (RWA) began to administer an academic grant program to fund the study of the genre. Suddenly, it was possible for scholars to show their institutions that their work was being validated and worthy of financial support. As Selinger and Frantz note, both used their RWA grant money to set up a communicative infrastructure for the burgeoning field of popular romance studies with Selinger beginning a romance scholar listserv in 2006 and Frantz organizing the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance in 2009, the first scholarly organization whose focus was “to foster the study of romantic love in popular culture, past and present, all around the world [...] [by] found[ing] a brand-new academic organization, a dedicated journal, and a series of international conferences” (IASPR “About: History”). The founding of the professional organization has brought legitimacy to the study of popular romance and has brought scholars of popular romance out of isolation to advance the scholarship of the field.

Selinger and Frantz observe that in setting up this communicative infrastructure, they were mirroring what was happening in the world of romance blogging. In 2005, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan set up the website *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, which they envisioned as “a community of romance readers eager to talk about which romance novels rocked their worlds, and which ones made them throw the book with as much velocity as possible” (“About: Once Upon a Smart and Sassy Time...”). The site reviews romance novels with humor and brutal honesty and often discusses problematic issues of the genre and the industry. In April of 2006, the Smart Bitches were joined by the website *Dear Author*, founded by Jane Litte and Jayne S.

The Ja(y)nes write their reviews in the style of a letter to the author. Like *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books*, *Dear Author* not only reviews novels, but features industry news and opinion roundtables on issues within the genre. Of course, other romance novel blogs and listservs existed prior to *Smart Bitches* and *Dear Author*, the most recognizable being *All About Romance*, which has been online in one form or another since 1996. The internet has been instrumental in connecting romance readers to one another in real time, creating a savvy community that “know[s] the history and variety of the genre better, even now, than most academics who study it” and is capable of responding to the claims made by academia about popular romance (Selinger and Frantz 9-10).

This dissertation comes out of the past ten years of change in romance and seeks to contribute to the community’s growing body of scholarly knowledge. The novels selected for this dissertation have been done so with care. Taken together, these three texts can be read as challenges to the contemporary postracial narrative through the discourse of romantic love, some of which are more successful than others. In the beginnings of this project, I emailed the romancescholar listserv for book suggestions and invited suggestions for how to compose a corpus to study. I have chosen these texts for several reasons. First, each text in this dissertation represents the author’s first attempt at writing an interracial romantic relationship. I believe that analyzing an author’s initial depiction of an interracial romantic relationship can (and does) reveal the thorny aspects of writing about race in the twenty-first century. These narratives indicate the starting point of the author’s ability to write about interracial romantic relationships and have the potential for more missteps and slippages in the text.¹³ Second, each author came to

¹³ Of the authors in this dissertation, only Courtney Milan has gone on to write more interracial relationships. She wrote a historical romance novella with a black heroine and a white Irish hero (*Talk Sweetly to Me*) and a contemporary New Adult romance with an Asian American heroine and a white hero (*Trade Me*).

write this interracial relationship under vastly different publishing circumstances. Theresa Romain writes for a traditional publisher, though not one of the New York Big Five publishers; Meredith Duran won a contest; and Courtney Milan self-publishes. The variation in methods of publication is reflected in the kind of risks and innovations in regard to the racial pairing that each author has taken. For example, as a self-publisher, Courtney Milan has considerably more freedom than Theresa Romain when it comes to pushing genre boundaries as Milan does not have the same kind of pressure to write to the middle of the romance market that Romain most likely does. Third, each of these authors started publishing in the twenty-first century, starting with Meredith Duran in 2008. Fourth, each of these authors has a graduate degree and builds on her in-depth theoretical knowledge of race, gender, and history in the novels she writes. These authors, with their graduate careers, bring a level of sophistication to the genre as their plots and characters are informed by the kind of intellectually rigorous scholarship demanded by graduate programs. Meredith Duran is pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology with an area specialization in South Asia. Before writing romance, Courtney Milan received a graduate degree in theoretical physical chemistry from UC Berkeley and subsequently earned a J.D., *summa cum laude*, from the University of Michigan. Theresa Romain completed a Master of Arts in History at Wichita State University in 2004 and published her thesis work through McFarland in 2008.

While none of these authors has won the prestigious RITA award given out by the Romance Writers of America, they have been awarded other honors. Meredith Duran has generated considerable online buzz with two of her novels being included in a list of the Top 100 Romances published by romance review site *All About Romance* in November of 2010. She also became a *USA TODAY* Bestseller with her most recent novel *Fool Me Twice*. Courtney Milan has been named as a RITA finalist three separate times (twice in the Historical Romance

category and once in the Romance Novella category). She is also a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* best-selling author, both lists she made as a self-publisher. As a self-publisher, Milan has a considerable internet presence, engaging on multiple platforms (Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and her professional website and blog). While Theresa Romain does not have the same kind of distinctions that Duran and Milan do, she has been generating a good amount of positive press for her Matchmaker Trilogy, of which *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* is the final novel. All three of the novels in the Matchmaker Trilogy were given Desert Isle Keeper status by Caz Owens at *All About Romance*. While these authors have not yet reached superstar status (on the levels of Nora Roberts, Jennifer Crusie, or Eloisa James) in the genre, it is clear that their novels are well-received by the community and that they represent the next generation of superstar romance authors.

Project Limitations

Because the romance genre is so vast, one cannot possibly make claims about the entire genre. As such, I have chosen to limit the primary texts examined in this dissertation according to several factors. First, this dissertation is limited in that the novels I consider are single-title romances. This means that I am not looking at category romances, though this type of romance novel has a long past in its portrayal of interracial romance. Cultural historian and popular romance scholar Teo explains the difference between single-title romance and category romance as follows: single-title romances are “novels of varying length (between three hundred and four hundred pages), that include subplots not directly related to the unfolding romance between hero and heroine” while category romances are “novels of a certain length that are released regularly (e.g., monthly), focus almost exclusively on the unfolding romance between the hero and heroine, and are sold under particular publisher imprints or series lines, such as Harlequin

Presents, Harlequin Intrigue, Silhouette, and so forth” (*Desert Passions* 20). In short, category romances are shorter works, often must include certain tropes (which vary according to imprint/series line), and mainly concern the developing love story between the protagonists.

Due to the prevalence of the figure of the Arab sheikh in category romance, much of the scholarship on interracial relationships in popular romance focuses on category romance taking place in contemporary times rather than single-title historical romance. Recent examples of scholarship on interracial relationships in category romances include Amy Burge’s 2012 PhD thesis *Desiring the East: A Comparative Study of Middle English Romance and Modern Popular Sheikh Romance* and Amira Jarmakani’s forthcoming book *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror*.¹⁴ To differentiate myself from this scholarship and to take advantage of my romance reading history, I have decided to focus only on single-title historical romance. In focusing on single-title novels, I have found that these novels are more interested than category romance in depicting the effects of colonization on the colonized. With “desert romances,” it is often the white Western woman attempting to figure out how to assimilate to a different culture; the single-title romances I analyze all involve a return to the colonial metropole, of the racialized Other negotiating his/her place in (primarily white) British society. This familiar setting allows for a controlled exploration of issues relating to race and racism, which the genre often does not take up.

Second, I have limited the texts by subgenre. The Romance Writers of America, the professional trade organization for American writers of romance fiction, formally recognizes seven subgenres of romance fiction: contemporary series romance (such as Harlequin novels);

¹⁴ Burge explains in her PhD thesis that one of the ways she “distil[led] [her] contemporary sheikh romance source sample into a manageable, coherent group” was by “decid[ing] to focus on the romances published by Harlequin Mills and Boon” (34).

contemporary single-title romance; historical romance; inspirational romance; paranormal romance; romantic suspense; and young adult romance.¹⁵ This dissertation examines only historical romance novels, and because there is a great deal of variety amongst historical novels, I have been able to narrow the scope of this dissertation even further by examining only European historical romance novels. This term is somewhat of a catch-all for historical romances that are not Regency romances, which are another subgenre of historical romance. Regency romances are generally characterized via several features: 1) they are shorter than other historical romances 2) they are set in the *ton* (British high society) of London, England 3) characters are “bound by [societal] codes of conduct” 4) “witty conversation” is a feature of character dialogue and 5) sex scenes are usually more “subtle” than those found in other historical romance novels (Uncapher). Novels taking place in Europe that do not fit these loose restrictions generally are termed European historical romance and are often marked according to the time period in which they are set. Jayashree Kamblé notes that this categorization changes when the historical novel is set in America. American historical romance “include[s] sub-genres based on the setting (e.g., Western) or the ethnicity of one of the protagonists (e.g., Native American)” (25). I have chosen not to focus on American historical romances, where the most common interracial pairing is that of white women with American Indian men, as this subgenre takes up postracial rhetoric in a somewhat different manner due to the subgenre’s fascination with captivity narratives.¹⁶

Third, this study is limited in that it only explores one particular type of interracial character pairing: white heroines with heroes of Indian descent. The colonial relationship between Britain and India presents an interesting context in which authors work out issues of

¹⁵ Interestingly, the RWA’s annual award ceremony—the RITAs—has a category for best erotic romance, though erotic romance is not listed as a subgenre.

¹⁶ For more on this, please see Robin Harders’ “Borderlands of Desire: Captivity, Romance, and the Revolutionary Power of Love” in Selinger and Frantz’s *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*.

race and institutional power in a manner that is more explicit than in other racial pairings. Additionally, state-sanctioned colonization in Britain offers rich parallels with state-sanctioned slavery in the United States. While I am not claiming that the two systems are even remotely the same, I am using the resemblance between the two to argue that American romance authors utilize the colonial relationship between Britain and India to critique the contemporary postracial narrative that governs America's racial present.

Finally, I have limited the texts in this dissertation by publication date. I have chosen to limit this study to novels published after 2000 for two reasons: 1) While romance novels are still sparsely populated by characters of color, novels published in the twenty-first century must contend with an era that increasingly claims to be postracial while still being obsessed with race. And, 2) because I believe the internet has changed the way romance authors, readers and publishers interact, particularly around hot-button issues such as white authors' representations of racial otherness. The tensions of writing during an era that claims to be past race and racism, but remains fixated on governing racial boundaries can be read in the way the authors depict their mixed-race characters, and, at times, in their depictions of their monoracial white characters' understandings of race. In addition to the pervasiveness of the postracial narrative in the twenty-first century, the internet has facilitated faster communication between authors, readers, bloggers, and publishers. While the genre's portrayal of race and colonialism may have become more politically correct as well as historically accurate over time, the immediacy of discussion and blockbuster reviews provided by the internet have made it impossible to ignore the lack of diversity in the romance genre. Romantic suspense author Suzanne Brockmann remarks that the genre's treatment of characters of color has changed, thanks in part to the internet as it "helped readers become more vocal about books that they liked, which also helped

publishers become more willing to take perceived risks” (“Embracing the ‘Other’”). This vocal segment of the online romance reading community has helped change the racial makeup of the romance genre and how race is portrayed in its novels.

This dissertation is composed of three body chapters, each examining a single work by a single author. They are arranged by the strength of challenge they present to the postracial narrative, from weakest to strongest. In Chapter One, I discuss Theresa Romain’s 2015 novel *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*, which relies on the romance trope of secrets and disguises in the construction of its narrative and its interracial romance. Romain’s novel is notable for several reasons. The heroine twists patriarchal ideologies of femininity to her advantage through her masquerades. Through one masquerade, she is able to discreetly control the direction and scope of her family’s beauty company. Through the other, she escapes the behavioral restrictions patriarchal society requires of unmarried women. Additionally, the novel’s hero is quite remarkable in that he is both mixed-race and poor, a combination that is rarely seen in historical romance. While the novel’s unconventional, interracial couple does challenge certain generic norms, the novel ultimately advocates ideals of neoliberal rhetoric through its emphasis on individual triumph over systemic issues of patriarchy and racism, as embodied by its couple’s business partnership (?). Romain’s novel, due in part to its lack of an identifiable villain, conforms to the ideals of neoliberal rhetoric by espousing the belief in the myth of self-reliance promoted by neoliberal rhetoric and disregarding the systemic powers of whiteness and patriarchy in shaping the choices available to an individual. Though the narrative is capable of identifying instances of systemic oppression, it evades discussion of systemic oppression in favor of a focus on individual journeys of self-acceptance. The initial challenges ultimately are dismissed in favor of individual solutions championed by neoliberal thought, thus obscuring the

power and authority of systems like patriarchy and racism. By reducing systemic discrimination to individual problems, the narrative espouses a postfeminist and postracial worldview over the course of the narrative.

In Chapter Two, I analyze how Meredith Duran's 2008 novel *The Duke of Shadows* utilizes the trope of the naïve heroine to addresses white privilege, the politics of mixed-race identity, and issues of sexism/misogyny, often through graphic descriptions of violent acts. I argue that Duran's narrative utilizes the romance trope of the naïve heroine to illustrate the similarities and differences between racism and sexism through the heroine's encounters with racialized and gendered violence. In the novel, Duran's white heroine gradually draws parallels between patriarchal oppression and racial and national oppression to confront hegemonic understandings of whiteness and national authority/state violence. However, the narrative endorses postracial understandings of race in the second half of the novel; once the plot removes itself from colonial India and the mixed-race hero ascends to the status of duke, discussions of race are nearly absent from the narrative, suggesting that race is subordinate to class rather than entwined with it. I argue that Duran uses her white heroine, mixed-race hero, and white villain to navigate national and racial tensions of the past in a way that can be read as relevant to undermining the structural power of whiteness and racism today.

Chapter Three takes up Courtney Milan's 2013 novel *The Heiress Effect* and considers how the extension of the "recognition," the scene(s) which give the heroine and hero new information that they use to surmount the barrier to their union. Through the struggles faced by the novel's two couples, Milan's narrative uses the role of reading to offer a critique of white privilege, ableism, and misogyny. The narrative's consideration of unequal access to power based on identity illustrates the connection between performativity and precarity, underscoring

the fact that non-hegemonic performances of identity often endanger those who do not conform to norms governing gender, class, race, and ability. I argue that through the narrative's attention to the role of reading, *The Heiress Effect* challenges its readers to consider how asymmetrical access to power impedes national belonging.

The authors in this dissertation question the unspoken white hegemony of the genre by choosing to write romances between white heroines and heroes of color. As such, each contends with the racist comprehension of this pairing present in history and popular culture in her own way. Each must deal with the way non-white men have been represented as sexual threats to the virginity/sexual purity of white women. Duran navigates this trope by having her heroine face threats of sexual violence only from white men. Milan constructs her hero as a beta hero rather than an alpha hero, one who looks down on aggression as a character trait. And, rather than have her heroine be the one fending off sexual advances from a non-white man, Romain has her non-white hero reject the advances made by the white heroine of the novel, refusing to risk bringing a child into the world who would suffer the stigma of illegitimacy. Each author navigates the depiction of men of color as sexual threat without resorting to emasculating the hero and completely neutralizing his sexual potential.

While each author contends with these historical narratives, it must be acknowledged that their narratives, published in the twenty-first century, also rely on present-day constructions of race. As such, these authors utilize different strategies and engage with different aspects of postracial rhetoric, illustrating its complexities and contradictions. Theresa Romain's novel engages with postracial and postfeminist rhetoric by validating the focus on individualism. By making barriers to power personal issues rather than structural ones, the narrative endorses the bootstraps rhetoric so common to discussions of the American Dream. The narrative suggests

that structural hindrances to power and privilege can be overcome so long as an individual visualizes her/his success. Meredith Duran centers the colonial experience on white women's understanding of race in her narrative. The narrative's focus on colonialism is significant to both historical and contemporary understandings of race. Through the novel's interracial couple and the violence to which they are subjected, Duran's narrative historicizes the power of whiteness and asks (demands) that its readers consider its legacy today. The narrative does not shy away from the violence of colonization or excuse the actions of the (white) colonists. In short, Duran's narrative examines racism as the center of colonialism. While Duran's narrative renders clear the violence of colonialism, its focus on white women eventually encompasses the narrative and largely silences subaltern voices, particularly in the second half of the novel. In terms of contemporary understandings of race, Duran's narrative specifically addresses the majority-white readers of historical romance fiction through her heroine's burgeoning understanding of white privilege. The narrative subjects readers to the same journey the heroine takes toward an understanding and acknowledgement of white privilege. In contrast, Courtney Milan makes intersectionality the focus of her narrative. By examining each character's various avenues to power based on her/his identity, Milan's narrative insists on recognizing the structural barriers to exercising power based on identity. Characters granted privilege via structures like patriarchy and white racial hegemony are required to reject these structures in order to attain the genre's requisite happily ever after. Thus, Milan's narrative offers a critique of not only white privilege, but also of misogyny and ableism. Her narrative insists on the power of alliances to undermining the structures that promote conservative ideology.

Taken together, these three texts offer varying challenges to the contemporary postracial narrative governing the United States. They reflect not only the work of contemporary social

justice groups through the narratives' critiques of sexism, misogyny, and white privilege, but they also reflect how the modern shift to neoliberalism has affected how we understand race and gender to encourage postfeminist and postracial conceptions of the world. At times, these novels contest this neoliberal-influenced rhetoric through historical revisions to emphasize analyses of white privilege and demonstrations of intersectional identities. At other times, these novels confirm the ideals of this rhetoric by emphasizing the importance of individual hard work and life decisions to one's success. However, it should be noted that these novels all culminate in interracial relationships, which can be read as a challenge to the romance genre's overwhelming preponderance of monoracial white characters and intra-racial relationships. These authors have used popular romance, a genre read by many, to rewrite both history and historical stereotypes to illustrate that history could have taken a different path and that it is up to those in the present to choose a path that represents all.

CHAPTER I: SECRETS, MASQUERADES, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN THERESA ROMAIN'S *SECRETS OF A SCANDALOUS HEIRESS*

This chapter examines Theresa Romain's 2015 novel *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*, which relies on the romance trope of secrets and disguises in the construction of its narrative and its interracial romance to address the challenges of minority groups living under systems that disadvantage them on the basis of often immutable identifying characteristics. There are several layers of secrets throughout the narrative: the heroine, Augusta Meredith, assumes a secret identity in hopes of securing greater sexual freedom; the hero, Joss Everett, conceals the open secret of his mixed-race heritage from Augusta; the hero's cousin, Lord Sutcliffe, is being blackmailed (by his wife) over his sexual infidelity. For the novel's romantic couple, secret keeping functions to mount small challenges to systems of power and domination, especially to the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy. Romain's novel is notable for several reasons. The heroine manipulates patriarchal ideologies of femininity to her advantage through her masquerades. Through one masquerade, she is able to discreetly control the direction and scope of her family's beauty company by reassuring the trustees of the company that she is too feminine to be an economic threat. Through the other (a secret identity), she escapes the behavioral restrictions the patriarchal society of the novel requires of unmarried women by taking on the persona of a merry widow. Additionally, the novel's hero is quite remarkable in that he is both mixed-race and poor, a combination that is rarely seen in historical romance. Through her atypical hero, Romain's narrative challenges the standards of masculinity in romance.

While the novel's unconventional, interracial couple does challenge certain generic norms, the novel ultimately advocates ideals of neoliberal rhetoric through its emphasis on

individual triumph over systemic issues of patriarchy and racism, endorsing a postracial worldview. Romain's novel, perhaps due to its lack of an identifiable villain, conforms to the ideals of neoliberal rhetoric by espousing the belief in the myth of self-reliance promoted by neoliberal rhetoric and disregarding the systemic powers of whiteness and patriarchy in shaping the choices available to an individual. Though the narrative is capable of identifying instances of systemic oppression, it evades discussion of these instances in favor of a focus on private journeys of self-acceptance. By omitting discussions of systemic oppression from the narrative, racial justice is ultimately excluded from the emotional justice and unconditional love promised by the genre's happily ever after.

While the revelation of Joss and Augusta's secrets exposes the problems of the society in which they live, in the aftermath of the revelations, the narrative encourages neoliberal solutions by proclaiming the power of the individual to either solve, dismiss, or ignore the effects of systems of power and domination, resulting in private solutions to public problems. This is partly due to the fact that there are no real villains in the narrative. Augusta's battles with the trustees of her company and her ill-fated affair take place off-page. Joss's understandings of racism come primarily from his interactions with his drug-addicted cousin. With no villain to oppose, Augusta and Joss's struggles become *individual* rather than systemic; in other words, their barriers are internal and are resolved privately through self-acceptance. The novel ultimately enacts the kind of privatization (and commodification) of difference that marks the current neoliberal moment. The systemic barriers of class, race, and gender simply disappear once Augusta and Joss each "get past" the limitations of their respective identity issues to become masters of their own respective fates.

Locating Theresa Romain in the Romance Industry

Of all the authors discussed in this dissertation, Theresa Romain has had the most conventional publishing career. Prior to publishing in romance, Romain received a Master's degree in history and published her thesis work on a silent film star in 2008. Subsequently, Romain began her romance writing career in the historical romance subgenre in 2011 under Kensington Publishing's Zebra imprint and has since published seven full-length novels.¹⁷ Each of these novels has been published by an independent publisher, unlike the self-published *The Heiress Effect* and contest-winning *The Duke of Shadows*. Sourcebooks, like Romain's previous publisher Kensington, is an independent publisher, meaning that it is not part of the Big Five (formerly Big Six) publishing houses.¹⁸ As such, Sourcebooks and Kensington are smaller in both size and scope than the Big Five. Though this may mean authors receive a greater amount of individual attention, it does not mean that authors have the same kind of freedom self-publishers do.

While Theresa Romain did conduct a small online publicity tour in advance of the release of *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*, these guest blog posts reveal little about her process for writing her first interracial relationship. At most, she mentions "want[ing] to research some aspects of Regency history that were new to [her]—setting, social class, and race" ("Interview and Contest: Theresa Romain"). She divulges some of her thought process in an interview with fellow historical romance author Rose Lerner, which was conducted to generate publicity for their respective January 2015 releases.¹⁹ In this interview, Romain discusses the "culture-clash"

¹⁷ Romain's later novels, starting with *It Takes Two to Tangle* in September 2013, have been published by Sourcebooks Casablanca, another independent publisher.

¹⁸ Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin Group (recently merged with former Big Six member Random House), HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster.

¹⁹ The interview with Rose Lerner was hosted both at Theresa Romain's website and Rose Lerner's website, hence the different citations.

she sees happening between Joss and Augusta because “he thinks she’s above him because of her money, and she thinks he’s above her because he’s descended from a baron” (“Welcome Theresa Romain;” “A Chat with the Fantastic Rose Lerner”). Notably, throughout this interview and the novel itself, Romain depicts the main barrier to the romance not as race, but as the difference in class status between the heroine and hero.

While Joss’ racial background is relevant to the narrative and Romain discusses it sensitively, it does seem that class differences are more acceptable as the main barrier to the romance as this is a more familiar territory for readers, writers, and publishers of historical romance than racial difference. In a later section of the interview, Romain states that Joss “feels hampered by his poverty (more so than being mixed race),” suggesting a preference for remaining within the racial standards of the genre (“Welcome Theresa Romain”). Though still important to the narrative, race is eclipsed as a barrier in favor of one based in economics. The obscuring of race in Romain’s narrative mimics the way contemporary neoliberal ideology ignores the effects of systemic racism. Henry A. Giroux explains this process through a discussion on what he terms neoliberal racism, stating that “neoliberal racism asserts the insignificance of race as a social force, and it aggressively roots out any vestige of race as a category at odds with an individualistic embrace of formal legal rights. Focusing on individuals rather than on groups, neoliberal racism either dismisses the concept of institutional racism or argues that it has no merit” (200). By making class the main barrier to the romance between Augusta and Joss, Romain’s narrative elides the significance of race as a social force.

Overview of Key Plot Points

Theresa Romain's *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* is the third in her Matchmaker trilogy and is set in 1817, during Britain's Regency era.²⁰ The final book in the trilogy centers on the various secrets characters keep from one another, particularly those of the heroine, Augusta Meredith, and the hero, Joss Everett. The novel introduces Augusta Meredith, the very wealthy heiress to the cosmetics company Meredith Beauty, which was started by her recently deceased parents. The novel begins in Bath, England, with Augusta masquerading as a widow by the name of Mrs. John Flowers. Augusta is in Bath acting as companion to her friend Emily, Lady Tallant, who has recently suffered a miscarriage. Lady Tallant has come to Bath not for physical healing, but for mental and emotional healing. She has chosen Augusta to accompany her rather than her husband because Augusta "understand[s] what loss means," referencing the sudden and unexpected deaths of Augusta's parents two years prior (35). What Lady Tallant does not know is that in addition to losing her parents, Augusta also lost her lover, Colin Hawford, who abandoned her after he discovered that Augusta's fortune would be held in a trust until the age of twenty-five upon her parents' deaths. Augusta decides to use this period of recuperation in Bath to her advantage. In a place where no one knows that she is a wealthy heiress, she decides that she will take a lover to scrub away her remaining memories of Colin and exercise a degree of sexual freedom. However, the secret of her identity is jeopardized when she runs into Joss Everett, whom she knows from London, at one of the balls held in Bath's public rooms.

²⁰ The two other books in the trilogy are *It Takes Two to Tangle* (2013) and *To Charm a Naughty Countess* (2014). While the two previous books do not feature interracial couples, they do challenge genre standards in other ways. *It Takes Two to Tangle* features a disabled hero and a feisty heroine who is a poor war widow, while *To Charm a Naughty Countess* features a hero with debilitating social anxiety and a wealthy widowed heroine who is quite sexually experienced. Both Joss and Augusta do appear as secondary characters in *To Charm a Naughty Countess*, though their courtship does not begin until *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*.

Joss Everett is in Bath in his duties as man of business for his second cousin Baron Sutcliffe. The baron is being blackmailed by someone threatening to tell his wife, Lady Sutcliffe, that he has impregnated a maid formerly in their service (near the end of the novel, the blackmailer is revealed to be none other than Lady Sutcliffe herself; she is angry that her husband thinks he can conceal his extramarital affairs secret with money from her dowry). Joss is tasked with either discovering who is blackmailing Sutcliffe or selling enough unentailed land to meet the blackmailer's financial demand for silence. Joss' relationship to his cousin is complicated by the fact that Joss is treated much more like a servant than a member of the Sutcliffe family. Joss wonders if this is because of his Indian ancestry through his mother Kitty and grandmother Jumanah. He also speculates that his treatment could be due to his relative poverty, brought about by a patriarchal system that ultimately disadvantages men as well as women. In Joss' case, his grandmother so anticipated the birth of a son that no economic provisions were made for the birth of a daughter. Kitty, though the daughter of a baron, was left with no dowry and no support after the deaths of her parents. Without the guidance of her parents, she made a hasty marriage to a wastrel who quickly abandoned her after she gave birth to Joss. Sutcliffe soon arrives in Bath, worried that Joss is making little progress on finding the blackmailer and individuals to purchase the land.

In order to prevent Joss from revealing her secret, Augusta proposes that they strike a bargain: Augusta will provide the names of four individuals who may either know information about Sutcliffe's blackmailer or who would be willing to purchase land from Sutcliffe, and in exchange, Joss will help Augusta choose a lover. The plot focuses more heavily on blackmail than seriously finding a lover for Augusta, in part due to her realization that she is developing romantic feelings for Joss and the increasing lack of fulfillment masquerading as Mrs. Flowers

brings her. Augusta eventually garners the courage to ask Joss to be her lover. Joss, however, refuses to engage in an affair with Augusta because of the way his mother was treated after her affair resulted in a pregnancy and a subsequent compelled marriage that was very unhappy. He tells her that he wants her for more than a simple affair, in part “because of [his] birth” (248). However, rather than attribute Joss’ refusal to engage in an affair with Augusta to how an illegitimate child of mixed race would be received in society, the narrative supports Joss’ logic through a kind of benevolent sexism. He states that “‘If anything should happen—if there should be a scandal or a child—you [Augusta] would suffer far more than I. You would bear the loss of reputation or the burden of an unwanted child’” (248). The narrative attributes Joss’ refusal to engage in sexual intercourse without the binding legality of marriage to a loving concern for her reputation. Joss’ insistence on marriage (and the love he feels should come with it), overwhelms Augusta, and when he refuses sexual intercourse, she views this refusal as a personal rejection.

All the plot threads are tied together in the final chapters of the novel when the principal characters unite in Bath’s Pump Room, a daily gathering place for visitors. Joss gives Augusta a copy of his notes on his grandmother’s catalog of Indian plants and herbs for use in Meredith Beauty as a final gift before they part. Shortly after this exchange, Augusta’s masquerade is revealed to all of Bath society when Lord Sutcliffe’s wife arrives in Bath and greets Augusta by her given name. Lady Sutcliffe loudly insists to her husband that he is talking nonsense by referring to Augusta as Mrs. John Flowers. Panicked at the thought of having her lie revealed in such a public fashion, Augusta slips as she tries to escape from the room and hits her head on the floor, suffering a concussion. She summons Joss to her room as she recovers and proposes marriage to him, saying that he has given her the courage to be herself. After some groveling on Augusta’s part for her earlier rejection of Joss’ proposal, Joss agrees to marry Augusta under the

condition that her fortune be protected for her and any children they may have, sons or daughters. At the end of the novel, the couple has freed themselves from the secrets that create the major conflict of the novel through the power of self-acceptance: Augusta declares that she has “decided to embrace her vulgarity” (referring to her family’s origins in industry) by framing her secret identity as Mrs. Flowers as a new promotion for Meredith Beauty, and Joss states he has “ignored the Indian part of myself, and I should like to learn more about it” through an apprenticeship with Dean Mahomet, a character based on the real-life Dean Mahomet whose Indian baths in Brighton were quite successful. (295; 301). In the epilogue, readers discover that Augusta and Joss marry shortly after the events in Bath, move to Brighton for Joss’ apprenticeship, and eventually have a daughter.

While the message of self-acceptance is one that resonates strongly with readers, it is also one that advocates for private solutions to public problems, echoing neoliberal ideologies. I want to make clear that romance novels do focus on individual happiness and success; however, this individual happiness is often achieved by symbolically triumphing over systemic ills as well. Jodi McAlister notes this in her discussion of how romance authors see their novels as feminist works. McAlister observes that for romance novelists, “romantic love becomes not a panacea to reconcile women to patriarchy, but a weapon that enables women to fight against it” (12). In other words, romantic love becomes a radical tool for social justice and equality. The other novels discussed in this dissertation indict various systems for the ills suffered by their characters: Duran indicts the systems of patriarchy and colonialism, while Milan takes patriarchy, ableism, and white supremacy to task. Romain’s novel acknowledges that these systems are harmful, yet endorses the rhetoric of individualism so favored by neoliberal ideology, and in doing so, forswears racial justice and gender equality.

Reader Reception

Of the review sites discussed in this dissertation, *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* was reviewed only at *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books* and *All About Romance*, most likely because the novel was released relatively recently on January 6, 2015.²¹ At both sites, the novel was highly praised for its witty dialogue and the well-written angst both the heroine and hero feel in regard to their identity issues. At *Smart Bitches*, *Trashy Books*, the novel received an “A” rating from reviewer Redheadedgirl. She states that she “really enjoyed everything about this book. The characters were fascinating and not the standard duke (I don’t have anything against the standard duke, mind, but I like reading about the 99% too)” (Book Review: *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*). Redheadedgirl also commented favorably on Romain’s mixed-race hero, writing that she “found Joss to be fascinating” because he “knows he’s different, and so does everybody else, but he has no idea what it means to be Indian.” I think this characterization of Joss is interesting for two reasons: 1) it hints at the novel’s treatment of race as a private problem rather than a structural issue (Joss must figure out what it means to be racialized on his own), and 2) this characterization misses the fact that no one in the novel other than his cousin can be said to treat him differently due to his race. Nevertheless, the novel’s meditation on identity issues, combined with its unusual setting of Bath rather than London, set the novel apart for Redheadedgirl.

At *All About Romance*, the novel was reviewed by Caz Owens, who awarded the novel not only an A rating, but also the site’s highly desired “Desert Isle Keeper” (DIK) label. On the site, a novel awarded this status is one the reviewer would “would want with [her] if [her] ship when down at sea,” meaning that the book is so good it would keep the reader happy on this

²¹ In the months since its release, *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* has been generating quite a bit of buzz online. While it still has not been reviewed at *Dear Author* or *Love in the Margins*, a number of smaller websites have issued favorable reviews for Romain’s latest novel.

imaginary Desert Isle until help came (“About AAR: FAQ G”). Caz writes that “[t]he romance between Joss and Augusta is deeply felt and beautifully developed—and their verbal sparring is an absolute delight. Clever, smart-mouthed heroes are my drug of choice, and Joss possesses a biting, dead-pan wit” (Owens). While Caz doesn’t comment on the class dynamics of the novel as much as *Redheadedgirl* does, she does note that issues of identity are important to the novel. She observes that “[b]oth characters have to come to a sense of their own self-worth in order for their relationship to work, and it’s through their friendship and support for each other that they are able to find it” (Owens). It is true that the narrative provides a number of thoughtful meditations on the effects of social isolation due to matters of identity. However, the novel presents these issues as matters that can be solved privately through the rhetoric of self-acceptance rather than on a systemic level for all. I see this as an issue not because romance novels should serve as revolutionary blueprints for women’s lives (as Radway laments) but because Romain’s novel is one of the *very* few mainstream historical romances that features characters of color. The emotional justice promised by the genre cannot be delivered if racial justice within the novel remains elusive or is constantly deferred by characters insisting, in line with the contemporary postracial narrative, that race does not matter.

Private Solutions to Public Problems

This particular chapter focuses on how *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* uses the trope of secrets and disguises to mount small challenges to the systemic issues of patriarchy, racism, and classism, yet ultimately abandons these challenges by the novel’s end. Both main characters keep secrets that enable them to live their lives with minimal difficulty while out in public. Through Augusta’s masquerades of exaggerated femininity, the narrative questions patriarchal authority. The secrets that govern Joss operate in a slightly different manner. His mixed-race heritage and

relative poverty are family secrets and, as such, notions of belonging are at their core. At various points in the novel, both Augusta and Joss decide they want to live a public life free of the secrets that govern them. The narrative offers only private solutions to these secrets by insisting that Augusta's fate can only be determined by her, regardless of the patriarchal system in which she operates and that Joss' feelings of isolation can be solved once he learns to see himself beyond the narrow view of his cousin. These resolutions to the secrets and masquerades of the novel ultimately absent the systemic from the narrative, reaffirming the neoliberal narrative of self-reliance.

Secrets and Masquerades in Romance

Secrets are a commonly deployed trope in romance to strengthen the conflict and resolution of the courtship plot. Secrets are so popular in romance that certain secret elements, like secret babies and secret identities have become their own tropes. In romance novels, there is usually one secret, held by either the heroine or the hero, which governs the conflict of the plot. This is commonly referred to as the Big Secret, which can take many forms. In a cross-dressing romance, the Big Secret will be the revelation of the heroine's true gender; in a historical romance, the Big Secret may be that the hero has lost his wealth, or that the heroine is not a virgin.²² Either way, the potential exposure of the secret poses a threat to the development of the romantic relationship.

The focus of the Big Secret in romance is often on the ways the secret can harm the developing romantic relationship. Usually, it is the hero and heroine who keep secrets from one another. As they reveal their secrets to each other and expose their vulnerabilities, the narrative rewards them with emotional intimacy per genre stipulations. In Issue #72 of *At the Back Fence*,

²² For scholarly work on the cross-dressing romance, see Lisa Fletcher's 2008 *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*.

Beverly Medos and Karen Wheless discuss the appeal of the Big Secret in romance, ultimately advocating that The Big Secret revolves around the concept of acceptance, fitting with the romance genre's overarching understanding that true love can conquer anything and everything. Wheless notes that a "secret can be a terrific conflict, because it goes to the heart of a relationship – *Who am I? Who are you?* It forces the characters to look at each other, and consider what is truly important" ("The Big Secret"). Because the Big Secret functions as a threat to the stability of the romantic relationship, it functions privately, and, as such, its resolutions are often private acceptance.

In regard to race, the Big Secret is often utilized as a solution in that it resolves the societal problem of the interracial relationship by revealing that the nonwhite hero has either white or aristocratic lineage, or both. In these cases, the Big Secret is often revealed at the end of the novel, after the novel's main characters have come to terms with their interracial relationship. The revelation of white and/or aristocratic heritage is a precedent set by E.M. Hull's 1919 novel *The Sheik*, in which British heroine Lady Diana Mayo falls in love with Arab sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan. In *The Sheik*, the novel's titular hero is believed to be Arab but is revealed at the novel's end to be the son of a Spanish woman and a British nobleman, making Ahmed a peer of the British realm. Hsu-Ming Teo writes that with this racial reveal, Hull

excused Diana's inexplicable attraction to the supposed "native," dissipated the horrible specter of miscegenation, and provided the means of Ahmed's repentance and redemption and consequently, the novel's happy ending. Moreover, it [Ahmed's "true" whiteness] meant that Diana would remain British in nationality, for the 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act stated that "the wife of an alien shall be deemed to

be an alien,” losing the rights and privileges of British nationality. (“Historicizing the Sheik”).

While Hull’s novel completely erases the nonwhiteness of her hero, more recent novels, like Lisa Kleypas’ 2008 novel *Seduce Me at Sunrise*, allow the hero to maintain some degree of nonwhiteness by revealing the hero to be mixed-race. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that the Romany hero Kev Merripen is actually the oldest son of a marriage between an Irish peer and a Romany woman, making him the heir apparent to an earldom in Ireland. Jayashree Kamblé observes that this revelation “confers genetic whiteness on the ‘gypsy’ hero”, whose “‘spirit’ is consistently coded as white” in the way Richard Dyer defines whiteness as having “energy, will, ambition, [and] the ability to think and see things through” (Kamblé 142; Dyer 31). In Kleypas’ novel, the revelation of Kev’s racial lineage serves to match his “white” spirit, further stabilizing the white supremacy of the romance genre.

Romain’s narrative stands out in its use of the Big Secret for two reasons: 1) the secrets kept by each character do not threaten the developing relationship and 2) the racial revelation is that Joss is of Indian descent. In these ways, Romain flips the usual function of the Big Secret. Instead of the Big Secret threatening the romantic relationship, it is used to develop intimacy between the heroine and hero. While there are various levels of secret-keeping in the novel, for the most part, Joss and Augusta do not keep secrets from one another.²³ Rather, they are bound to one another through Joss’ knowledge of Augusta’s true identity, which is the Big Secret of the narrative. Instead of deceiving each other, both Augusta and Joss deceive society. Instead of paving the way for whiteness, the revelation of Joss’ mixed-race is a slight disruption to the hegemonic power of whiteness. In keeping secrets, both Joss and Augusta attempt to circumvent

²³ Augusta’s masquerade as Mrs. John Flowers, the open secret of Joss’ mixed-race, Augusta’s secret lover, Lady Sutcliffe’s knowledge that her husband impregnated one of their maids, Lady Sutcliffe’s identity as the blackmailer

the systems of power that govern their lives. These secrets question the hegemony of patriarchy and racism and reveal the difficulty of living under such oppressive systems.

As the trope goes, the Big Secret must be revealed for the novel's couple to be rewarded with the emotional justice promised by the happily ever after. In the case of Augusta and Joss, their secrets must be revealed to one another and society. Romain's narrative makes the public issues of patriarchy and racism the Big Secret(s) of the narrative through Augusta's masquerades and the open secret of Joss' racial heritage. However, the narrative offers only private solutions to these issues, not public ones. The problems brought about by racism and patriarchy vanish once Augusta and Joss embrace the concept of individual empowerment, echoing the rhetoric of neoliberal ideology that social ills are issues best solved privately. The structural forces that govern Augusta and Joss' lives vanish once Augusta and Joss each become masters of their own respective fates.

Augusta Meredith: Postfeminist Solutions to Gender Inequity

Though *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* is set in the past, the narrative's approach to gender inequity echoes contemporary postfeminist rhetoric. Postfeminist rhetoric often recommends that society recognize gender differences, but insists that these differences either do not or should not matter, and that an individual should work harder or pull him/herself up by the bootstraps in order to achieve social and economic success. Augusta's narrative arc reflects the ways postfeminist rhetoric professes the ability of an individual to solve issues of systemic oppression in regard to misogyny/sexism. Augusta adopts two personas to deal with systemic oppression, both of which rely on an exaggeration of her femininity by playing into patriarchal expectations of feminine aesthetic superficiality. In other words, Augusta uses the idea that she is too pretty to be smart to manipulate the men who control various aspects of her life to her own

advantage. While these secret identities do oppose patriarchal oppression to some degree, they are ultimately dismissed as unnecessary by the end of the novel, resulting in an endorsement of the power of the individual to disregard systems of oppression.

Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress, like the other two novels examined in this dissertation, does recognize that minority identities are limited by societal expectations. In the novel, Augusta is presented as being limited by two aspects of her identity: her wealth and her gender. Each presents its own particular obstacles to romantic resolution, and Augusta uses complex schemes to circumvent these obstacles. Her wealth prevents her from engaging in romantic entanglements because she doesn't know who values her as a person over the money she can bring to a potential marriage. To deal with this, she creates the persona of Mrs. John Flowers, a widow who can engage in an affair without too much social scrutiny and censure. Her gender limits the ways in which she can lead her family's successful beauty company, Meredith Beauty. To maintain a hand in the business, she adopts a caricature of femininity in order to bend the ears of the company's trustees in regard to the company's legacy of providing the finest beauty products. In both of these situations, Augusta creates fake personas in order to exercise some semblance of agency and authority. Though these fake personas help Augusta circumvent patriarchal authority, they are ultimately treated as "tricks" that Augusta employs to avoid embracing her power as an individual to change her circumstances.

The first fake persona Augusta creates is a caricature of femininity to negotiate the relationships she has with the trustees who run Meredith Beauty after the deaths of her parents. In this caricature of femininity, Augusta uses patriarchal expectations of hegemonic femininity to her advantage in order to make her voice heard and exercise authority. Augusta remarks to Joss that she can find out information regarding his blackmailer that he cannot with the help of her

femininity. She states that she learned to use a ““breathy voice and batted eyelashes”” when she wanted to ““interfer[e] in [her] father’s business affairs without seeming to do so”” (68). To exercise some kind of agency and authority in the company, Augusta ““give[s] them [the trustees] a bit of cooing on minor matters related to the company’s products. The labeling that catches the eyes of flighty females. The pricing suited to a lady’s pin money”” (69). Joss points out that labeling and pricing are two of the most important aspects of a business, which Augusta acknowledges. Augusta’s caricature of femininity capitalizes on specific traits and behaviors prized in women by patriarchy to ensure that she maintains a strong hand in the company. Not only does she coo and bat her eyelashes to present herself as less of an (economic, and thus, patriarchal) threat but she presents other women in the same manner, as “flighty females.”

Augusta’s recognition of patriarchal constraints is hampered, however, by an emphasis on the physical nature of her body. During this conversation with Joss, she states: ““[i]f I wore trousers and had my hair cropped short, I might be credited with knowledge. But since I am burdened with gowns and a *dockyard* [a running euphemism in the novel for Augusta’s large breasts] [...] then Meredith Beauty’s affairs are overseen by trustees,”” who, she observes, don’t really utilize the products as she does and thus are not as familiar with them (68). Augusta’s focus is on the style of her body and dress, suggesting that if only she did not look conventionally feminine, she would be taken more seriously. In this recognition of limitations, the narrative echoes the contradiction of postfeminist rhetoric, in that feminist ideals and goals are ““incorporated but simultaneously reviled”” (Budgeon 281). The narrative does not engage in the postfeminist practice of asserting that equality has been achieved, but it does engage in the postfeminist practice of dismissing inequity in favor of a focus on “individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption

choices” by presenting gender inequity as a problem of style (281). Augusta’s insistence that having short hair and wearing trousers would change the way in which the trustees perceive her suggests that the bias of the trustees is one based on individual choices rather than institutionalized discrimination.²⁴

The second fake persona Augusta creates to circumvent not only gendered, but classed expectations as well, is that of Mrs. John Flowers. Augusta discusses the reasons for becoming Mrs. Flowers rather than simply marrying someone with Joss in the following passage:

“Mrs. Flowers is not a prize marriage prospect. As far as Bath knows, she has no birth and little fortune. Nothing to recommend her but her noble friend.” [...]. “As a widow, she has more possibilities open to her than I do.” [...]. “I do not think about marriage. I don’t wish to marry.”

“A lovely heiress such as Augusta Meredith? Surely you could find some land-rich blue blood with pockets to let. He would be delighted to take you to wife.”

“Me? Or my money?”

A wry smile. “For most of the *ton*, there is little difference.”

“Ah, but there is to me.” [...] “I cannot allow anyone to have that sort of control over me. Once I trusted a man too much, and he abandoned me. This time, I shall do the choosing. All I require is a lover. I will take him, then leave him, when I see fit.” (17-19).

Here, Augusta’s decision to choose her own lover is presented as a decision for control and agency over her emotional life. Choosing a lover appears to be one of the very few decisions she can make as a woman, even though she must create a fake persona to do so. She chooses to have

²⁴ It should be noted that a woman wearing trousers in 1817, the year in which the novel is set, would have been quite a shock to much of British society. Amelia Bloomer debuted her bloomers in 1851 in the United States, and the Rational Dress Society was established in London in 1881, many years after the novel is set.

a lover as marrying a man would ultimately result in him controlling her fortune, and a lover who chooses her, as Colin Hawford did, would control her heart. Choosing and ultimately leaving a lover, Augusta believes, will restore some of the control over her life that she has lost after the deaths of her parents and loss of her lover to another woman.

The narrative once again advocates against traditional gender roles dictated by patriarchy as the persona of Mrs. Flowers begins to sour on Augusta after a few weeks. She notes that “[e]very caller for Mrs. Flowers requires me to lie more and say less. I can’t say anything that’s true of my real self; I have to be so *careful*. And so I wind up saying nothing and smiling like a doll” (167). Though Augusta takes on the persona of Mrs. Flowers in order to escape patriarchal censure, she finds it is not so easy to escape patriarchal ideologies of womanhood that have so often dictated that a woman’s purpose is to be pretty and quiet with the goal of making the lives and tasks of men easier. Through Augusta’s dissatisfaction, the narrative suggests that one cannot escape the demands of patriarchy by parodying them. Instead of granting the sexual and emotional liberation Augusta seeks, being Mrs. Flowers has brought new limitations to Augusta’s life in that she is constrained to “mak[ing] herself invisible and act[ing] as though her ears are full of cotton wool” (168).

The solutions offered by other characters to remedy Augusta’s frustrations with her limits of her femininity focus on the power of the individual to triumph over the injustice she experiences. In a conversation with Joss about her desire to be taken seriously despite “this pestilential femininity that makes most men assume there’s nothing on my mind but a bonnet,” Joss responds that she already possesses the ability to be heard (192). He states that “I am listening to you right now, Augusta, and [...] you are not playing any tricks [via her personas] to get me to do so,” subsequently reminding her that she would “not be the magnificent Augusta

Meredith if [she] were a scrubby little creature. Or a man” (193). In his response, Joss affirms the neoliberal and postfeminist belief in self-reliance to triumph over the systemic.

Similarly, Augusta’s friend Emily, Lady Tallant takes her to task for “playing tricks,” which Emily sees as a refusal of her power as an individual to shape her life. Though Emily sees Mrs. Flowers as a “lark,” she also sees this persona as a way for Augusta to “persist in thinking of [her]self as weak and wounded,” which causes her to throw “away much good [a relationship with Joss] as a result” (281). She states further: “You’ve had much to grieve, there is no question. Were you a man, you might have coped by destroying your health and fortune with drink and gambling and whores. All things considered, dear Augusta, I think you must give yourself credit for being quite strong. [...]. You must choose for yourself in the present, not to chase away the past” (281-282). In this particular passage, Emily’s observation that Augusta would have handled her tragedies differently were she a man speaks to the way in which Western/American society has historically understood the processing of strong emotions to be gendered. Men are to externalize emotions like grief in self-destructive excess while women are meant to internalize grief in order to maintain their primary role as caretaker for others. Emily sees Augusta as strong for not engaging in a path of physical self-destruction, but also as weak for refusing to see herself as strong. To me, this reads as another exhortation for Augusta to be her authentic self in order to achieve success and happiness. Similar to the conversation with Joss, Augusta is repeatedly depicted as the only barrier to her own success and happiness. In other words, gender and personal tragedy are depicted as excuses to discard rather than complex obstacles to carefully negotiate.

Throughout much of the novel, other characters emphasize the importance of Augusta remaining true to her authentic self rather than “playing tricks” on those who hold more social

power. However, much is made of the fact that Augusta's wealth affords her many more privileges than are available to other characters. This is most noticeable in passages told from Joss' point of view, though it comes out infrequently in conversations between Joss and Augusta. In one particular instance, Joss points out the ways Augusta flaunts her wealth when the two take dinner in a public house. The barmaid serving them reacts to Augusta's dress by calling her "My lady" and dropping into a curtsy, behavior that stuns Augusta as being somewhat bizarre as her presence has been tolerated, not welcomed, by aristocratic society. Joss explains that the obeisance is because her dress is probably the "loveliest gown she's [the barmaid] ever seen" with its "exquisite tailoring mark[ing] it as costly—short sleeves trimmed with a fold of satin, and more satin piping the low vee of her bodice above a red sash" combining to make Augusta a "lovely picture at any season, but especially on a cold March day in the middle of a muddy city" (175). Augusta responds that she didn't realize her gown was anything special, and, feeling guilty for overlooking her privilege, she gives her ivory kid gloves to the barmaid as a gift. Joss chastises her for this gesture:

"Why flaunt your wealth by giving such a gift to the barmaid? You do not even know her."

"I know something about her." [...]. "She likes pretty things. And she probably doesn't have as many as she deserves."

"How are you to know what she deserves?" What if she turned her attention to him next? If she gave him charity, he could not abide it—but the alternative was to think he deserved nothing.

“I don’t. I don’t know anything about what she deserves, or you, or anyone else in the world. All I know is what I deserve, and I know that I have far more than that. So someone else in the world probably has less.” [...].

“It’s not your responsibility to make anyone smile.”

Her brows lifted. “Josiah Everett. I have little responsibility in the world, but I have a great many gloves. Please stop your caterwauling.” (176-177).

Though this passage seems to gesture toward intersectionality on behalf of Augusta, the claim is complicated by the fact that the exchange is told from Joss’ point of view. Joss, being of a lower economic position, notices Augusta’s wealth and resents the ease it brings her. So, rather than this being an instance where Augusta recognizes both her privileges and oppressions, the narrative instead drives home the point that Joss is being unfair to Augusta by holding aspects of her identity, specifically her wealth, against her. Once again, the narrative avoids the broader societal issue (in this case, poverty) in favor of focusing on the individual, a critical piece of neoliberal rhetoric that endorses postracial and postfeminist understandings of the world. The focus of the passage shifts from Augusta’s discomfort with her wealth to Joss’ discomfort with his lack of wealth as evidenced by his thoughts about not being able to “abide her charity,” though whether he refers to monetary charity or the charity of Augusta’s affection is unknown. The failing becomes Joss’ rather than Augusta’s. Rather than making an intersectional connection, the novel instead promotes the neoliberal understanding that everyone has difficulties in their lives, and the key to working around these difficulties is not societal change, but change within the individual.

The narrative further negates an understanding of misogyny/sexism as a form of systemic oppression in the way Augusta solves her difficulties with being taken seriously by the trustees

of Meredith Beauty. The narrative instead opts for the neoliberal, postfeminist solution. Toward the novel's end, Joss gifts Augusta his grandmother's notes on Indian plants for use in developing new products for her company, either by "'trick[ing] Meredith Beauty's trustees into thinking these are their notions'" or "'beat[ing] them over the head with [her] brilliance'" (270). He reminds her that the company is ultimately hers, not the trustees. When Augusta's charade is discovered, she decides to "turn [her] deception to advantage" by claiming Mrs. Flowers to be a publicity stunt for Meredith Beauty and convincing the visitors to Bath that they were aware of the charade from the start (295). She tells Joss that she's decided to embrace the vulgarity aristocratic society expects of her because "I shall never be welcomed to the heart of the *ton*. My money allows me passage to its edges, but my birth shall never allow me to proceed further" (295). She explains that she is not worried about what the company's trustees (who only serve a slightly disproving role off-page) will think because "[t]hey will think I am being a silly woman again, no doubt. It has never occurred to them to attribute the steadiness of the company's profits to my silliness. Now that I am twenty-five, though, the terms of my father's will and the labyrinthine constructs of business would permit me to divorce my fortune from their care" (296-297).

In two quick turns, Augusta's experiences with systemic oppression are negated through private solutions, first, in regard to class, and second, in regard to gender. In her decision to "embrace vulgarity," she claims to abandon seeking the social approval of aristocratic society. However, it should be pointed out that the narrative does not invest much time in understanding the ways Augusta is made to feel unwelcome in upper-class society (a major contrast to the other two novels examined in this dissertation). In fact, the novel reflects only briefly on this social ostracization. In one of the longer instances, Augusta remarks on how she was embarrassed by

the way her father spoke—“every word was clipped off, every vowel an ‘ay’”—and the way her mother thought “more lace, more trim, more bugles were better on every gown” (187). In one of the shorter instances, a minor character remarks that Augusta was “in the gossip columns in London not a month ago for being a madcap flirt,” suggesting that Augusta’s reputation in London is somewhat tarnished (277). These instances pay lip service to the idea that Augusta does not fit in with aristocratic society, though Romain does little to demonstrate how Augusta’s social isolation is a manifestation of systemic classism.

Just as Augusta’s concerns regarding class and wealth are dismissed, so, too, is her battle with the trustees of Meredith Beauty. She dismisses the trustees just as easily as they (reportedly) dismiss her contributions to the company because of her gender. Rather than actually challenging the trustees and their notions about gender and labor, Augusta’s issues are solved, *deus ex machina*, by turning twenty-five. In doing so, the narrative engages, once again, in the spirit of neoliberalism, where individual battles are greater and more important than those of the community at large.

The moment that cements Augusta’s turn toward the individual in regard to class occurs when she reflects on the hardships of her aristocratic and wealthy friends:

They represented England’s elite; they were wealthy and influential. Yet even so, they had suffered. A scion of the nobility could lose a leg; a countess could lose a child.

An heiress could lose her parents, then a false suitor too.

No one had a perfect life. Everyone lied sometimes, even if only when they said *I’m quite well, thank you*. Augusta had been selfish, so selfish, to act as though her pain was worse.

(273-274, emphasis in original)

In this moment when Augusta measures her orphanage and her lover's betrayal against the losses of her friends and comes up short, the novel stands in favor of the neoliberal attitude of individualism, which favors the strength of the individual to overcome rather than communal efforts to combat systemic oppression. Feminist theorists and activists have argued against engaging in an Oppression Olympics, particularly in regard to the intersection of race and gender. Elizabeth Martinez writes that "[t]oo often we make the categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, physical condition, etc. contend for the title of 'most oppressed.' [...]. [P]ursuing some hierarchy of competing oppressions leads us down dead-end streets where we will never find the linkage between oppressions or how to overcome them" (23). Rather than understand the ways in which her losses are complicated by her class status and gender, the narrative places the blame on Augusta for being "so selfish" as to wallow in her pain, reducing her struggles to an individual level. In this respect, everyone in society has their own trials and tragedies that must be overcome in order to succeed in life, but what is not examined is the way the trials and tragedies for the dominant classes are often made less complicated due to the lack of societal barriers they face.

Part of the reason for the narrative's turn toward the neoliberal belief in individual power is the novel's lack of a villain who embodies the authority of the systems of privilege and domination. Without a villain, Augusta's systemic struggles are easily dismissed and framed as private problems rather than systemic issues. Though she ostensibly stands in opposition to aristocratic society and the trustees of Meredith Beauty, Augusta's struggles to fit into hegemonic femininity take place off page. Because the narrative never allows its audience to witness these struggles, it sets Augusta up as being the only barrier to her future success and happiness. Without an on-page villain for Augusta to challenge, the novel slips further and

further into the neoliberal belief of self-reliance. She has nothing to oppose. Rather, her struggle is made individual. The trauma of losing her parents and the man she imagined she would marry is not linked explicitly to a larger class of identity and because of this, Augusta's character arc emphasizes the power of the individual over the power of systemic oppression in the shaping of one's life. However, Augusta's struggle is not with these institutions of privilege and power. Rather, her struggle, at face value, is in realizing the ways she is limiting her success. The systemic struggles against class and gender are dismissed as trivial matters for Augusta and are easily solved by not caring and turning twenty-five.

Joss Everett: Complicating Masculinity Through Poverty

As with Augusta, the open secrets of Joss' birth and his class do mount small challenges to white hegemony and aristocratic rule, both within the text and outside it. Notably, Joss challenges the romance genre's common assumptions about desirable heroes within the subgenre of historical romance because, as a romance hero, he is quite unusual. Not only is Joss mixed race via his maternal grandmother, but he is also poor. Though he is the grandson of and cousin to a baron and thus maintains ties to the aristocracy, he has no wealth, instead "work[ing] for his bread [by] serving as Baron Sutcliffe's man of business" (4). The confluence of factors of Joss' birth (mixed-race, poor, lower gentry) makes him quite unconventional within the genre. In her analysis of the way capitalism helps form the episteme of the romance genre, Jayashree Kamblé writes that

[t]he preoccupation with men who own land, labor, and capital goods across national boundaries has become increasingly visible in most popular romance novels, from Harlequin Mills and Boon series titles, to single-title contemporary and historical romances published in the last four decades. It is unsurprising that the romance genre, a

highly refined product of consumer capitalism, valorizes the system that produces it. (32-33)

Because wealth and facility with business are so often associated with hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in the United States, part of a romance hero's appeal is often found in the way he either earns or manages his wealth. In historical romances, the hero is often not just wealthy, but also a member of the British aristocracy, thus possessing both good fortune and good birth. Kamblé writes that these historical heroes "are actually capitalists in aristocrats' clothing" and "the language of the business world underlies their romantic narratives" (42; 43). To have a historical hero who is not wealthy, nor a titled member of the British aristocracy, **and** is mixed-race is quite rare in the world of romance. In making such a man the hero of her novel, Romain's narrative advocates for broadening the standards of masculinity deemed attractive in the genre.

While Romain does expand the genre's notion of what makes a hero, Joss' race and class, like Augusta's gender, become private issues as the systemic issues of Joss' race and class are easily vanquished once Joss embraces his power as an individual by rejecting the way his cousin Sutcliffe sees him as a servant among his own family members. Though Joss does not keep secrets in the same manner as Augusta, he does attempt to conceal or mitigate his mixed-race heritage and lack of wealth in order to better fit in. Due to these factors, Joss often feels that he does not belong as he is frequently relegated to the fringes of the aristocracy. While the narrative does explore Joss' feelings of isolation and rejection, it only does so in comparison to two characters: Joss' cousin Sutcliffe, who is a foil readers are not supposed to admire, and Augusta, who is the love interest readers are meant to see Joss with forever. In these two characters, the isolation and rejection Joss feels become personal problems, with no indication that they are linked to systemic issues of race and poverty. The failure to link Joss' experiences of poverty and

race to a broader societal understanding of these issues reveals the novel's espousal of neoliberal rhetoric that advocates individual change over systemic change, endorsing a postracial worldview.

Joss' poverty is made apparent throughout the novel through his relationships with his cousin Baron Sutcliffe and Augusta, both of whom are wealthier than he. Unlike Augusta's unseen interactions with British aristocracy and the trustees of Meredith Beauty, Joss' interactions with Augusta and Sutcliffe take place on the page, and readers are privy to Joss' ruminations on these interactions. For example, when Joss visits Augusta in her rented Bath home, he notes that "being in the presence of effortless wealth ma[kes] him ill at ease" (61). This effortless wealth is communicated to Joss in a variety of ways. He remarks on the presence of many servants, noting that the "rented house in Queen Square [is] better staffed than Sutcliffe's estate" and that he climbs far more stairs to reach his rented quarters in Bath (60). Upon entering the drawing room, he observes "the warmth of the room; [signifying there is] no skimping on coal in this household. Adding to the impression of cozy cheer [is] the furniture, all carved wood and soft, ruddy-colored upholstery. Between two slipper chairs, a burnished tea table bore a laden tray and a plate heaped with biscuits" (61). Scenes from Augusta's view reflect the lack of concern regarding wealth while the majority of scenes from Joss' point of view remark in some way on Joss' relative poverty in comparison to other characters.

Unlike the lack of villain for Augusta, Sutcliffe is made out to be a foil for Joss to define himself against and establish his character. Where Sutcliffe spends freely, Joss counts every shilling; where Sutcliffe flirts with maids, Joss refuses Augusta's sexual advances several times for fear that she become pregnant out of wedlock like his mother; where Sutcliffe is stupid and incompetent, Joss is smart and capable. Joss is shown to be disciplined, intelligent, and driven.

Joss is coded in the manner of a self-made man who only needs to be blessed with the right circumstances before making his millions. Despite these attributes, Joss finds the societal privileges bestowed on Sutcliffe due to his aristocratic title (for instance, purchasing items on credit) are closed off to him due to the confluence of his lack of money, his mixed-race heritage, and the hasty, unhappy marriage of his parents.

Sutcliffe's access to these privileges enables an obliviousness in regard to the way his actions affect others.²⁵ However, this obliviousness is complicated by the depiction of Sutcliffe as somewhat mentally ill (perhaps due to his addiction to the stimulant *somalata*, perhaps not). For example, in one scene, Joss finds that Sutcliffe has been wreaking havoc on his rented house when a footman answers the door instead of the butler, who is "[s]tuck under a wardrobe in the attics [...]" as Sutcliffe had the servants "crawling under ever so much cast-off furniture," all so that Sutcliffe can practice throwing unlikely things (a teapot in this instance) in unlikely places because it is "[j]ust the sort of unlikely thing [he] could wager on" to bring him a decent sum of money (214; 215). Sutcliffe, quite obviously, is not someone meant to be admired by readers. While a more generous reading of the novel may suggest that Sutcliffe's purpose shows the ways in which wealth and high social status can corrupt an individual, I do not believe that is what is at work in the juxtaposition of Joss and Sutcliffe. Rather, Sutcliffe's primary purpose in the novel serves to redeem Joss' masculinity through a reinforcement of the myth of self-reliance, a myth with which the romance genre has an uneasy relationship as the genre alternately justifies and vilifies free-market capitalism.²⁶

²⁵ For a modern day reference, it may help readers to think of the case of Texas teenager Ethan Couch who saw no jail time for killing four pedestrians and wounding eleven while driving drunk. Couch's lawyers argued that he suffered from "affluenza," where his parents taught him that wealth buys privilege. In other words, there are no consequences to one's actions so long as one can buy a way out of the situation.

²⁶ For more on romance's uneasy relationship with capitalism, see Jayashree Kamblé's "Capitalism: Money and Means in Romance Novels" in her book *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction*. Kamblé notes that one of

Romain's narrative runs counter to the typical way capitalism is romanticized by the genre in that it foregrounds Augusta, the heroine, and not Joss, the hero, as the capitalist ideal. Jayashree Kamblé explains that in romance, it is typically the hero who serves as the embodiment of capitalism as he "allows the faults as well as the attractions of capitalism to be represented by the corresponding off-putting or seductive traits of the lover" (32). The capitalist hero embodies "dangerous competitiveness, aggression, and an inclination to treat relationships as mercantile exchanges" (47). Though Augusta does not embody these traits, Joss does not quite embody them either, and, as such, the narrative places Joss in a feminized position from which his masculinity must be rescued. By casting him as the type of hero who is willing to work for his money and contrasting him with Sutcliffe, the narrative redeems Joss' masculinity and makes him a viable hero. The narrative insists that while Joss struggles with poverty, his self-reliance is ultimately rewarded with a more desirable life via a happy marriage and financial success. These two are twined together by Joss' idea to create new product lines for Meredith Beauty by adding Indian plants and flowers to existing products. While Augusta and Joss' marriage produces a child in accordance with the genre's requisite happily ever after, the marriage also produces literal products, bringing the novel's investment in the myth of self-reliance full circle.

If comparisons to Sutcliffe are meant to endorse the myth of meritocracy, Joss' interactions with Augusta endorse the neoliberal narrative that each individual goes through their own struggles and that each of these struggles matters in the same way, whether they are systemic or not. Just as neoliberalism states a preference for personal choice over structural impact, struggles against injustice are not defined systemically but as individual obstacles. The narrative in *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* equates Augusta's sheltered, but wealthy,

the ways the romance genre justifies capitalism is by pairing capitalist heroes with social reforming heroines (though this is not the case in Romain's narrative).

upbringing with Joss' relative poverty. In doing so, the narrative demonstrates an allegiance to the narrative of individual struggle and refuses to understand struggle and hardship on a structural level, particularly in regard to wealth. Augusta's wealth has made her sheltered and naïve rather than dissolute and corrupt of mind like Sutcliffe. For example, the scene where Augusta gives her gloves to the barmaid also reveals an interesting thread regarding class and work through Joss' discomfort with Augusta's wealth and her wonderment at eating in a pub.

"I like this place, Joss. It's...alive."

"Alive? In what sense?"

"Interesting. Busy. Loud."

"It certainly is those things. But there's nothing particularly romantic or elegant about taking mutton in a public room."

"There's nothing shameful or improper about it either. Just as there's nothing admirable about having a cook prepare far more food than anyone could ever eat, then wasting it with a languid appetite." Her brandy-brown eyes drank in the room as eagerly as she had drunk the small beer. "I've never eaten in a public house before. Can you credit that? My parents always wanted the best for me, and when I traveled, that meant taking my meals in the carriage with a lady's maid. In truth, I didn't even travel much. Life was in London. Business was in London."

"Life was business?"

"Yes," she said quietly. I suppose it was."

He had never wondered whether a life of *only the best* could limit one's choices. With wealth how could a person not pursue whatever he or she wanted? But each class

had its own expectations. Its own proper sphere, outside of which one was not to stray.
(178-179)

In this passage, readers are introduced to the way Augusta's wealth has sheltered her by restricting her person to the smallest sphere. Her experience "slumming it" with Joss in the pub plays into the more positive capitalist narratives of the working poor: that they are truly alive in a way that the wealthy are not because of their lack of physical labor. The working poor have traditionally been defined via physical labor, which allows for a certain *joie de vivre* that the wealthy cannot possess. Augusta's wonderment at the pub is, in part, due to the way that the pub is a full sensory (and perhaps sensual) experience for her.

Though Joss had "hoped to draw [Augusta] closer by taking her to a place where he belonged," it is ultimately Joss who ends up feeling out of place and listening to Augusta's struggles as she shares her life. Rather than showing off his pride in the pub and its ability to evoke delicious flavors from the humblest of ingredients, Joss ends up nearly apologizing for the pub not being the sort of meal Augusta is accustomed. The narrative's refusal to have Joss be the one defending the pub serves the narrative's investment in the myth of self-reliance through Augusta's disdain for the wastefulness of the meals of the wealthy. Augusta's disdain leads to Joss' sympathy for the ways her wealth has sheltered her and restricted her from real-world experiences. Joss' sympathy for Augusta's position is meant to extend to the readers of the novel; like Joss, we are meant to feel sad for the ways Augusta's life has been limited by her extensive wealth.

The narrative equates Joss' struggle with poverty with the gilded cage of Augusta's wealth and in doing so, the novel refuses to acknowledge the systemic nature of poverty. Instead, the novel engages in a defense of the wealthy. However, this defense is only mounted in favor of

the “right” kind of wealth. Unlike Sutcliffe and his inherited prestige, Augusta’s parents pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and made business her life. Because Augusta is willing to shepherd and grow the company (though the novel only references her life as a working woman rather than giving readers actual scenes of Augusta working), the narrative paints Augusta as worthy of her inherited wealth in a way that Sutcliffe is not. Whereas Sutcliffe is meant to be a foil for Joss, Augusta is meant to be that which he wishes to become. Augusta is not only the romantic ideal, but she is the capitalist (and perhaps masculine) ideal as well.

Joss Everett and the Privatization of Racial Difference

Though class is the main identity concern *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*, the narrative engages with postracial perceptions of race through the way it portrays Joss’ mixed-race identity as a private, personal matter.²⁷ As David Theo Goldberg explains, postraciality is linked to the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism: “the postracial, in good neoliberal spirit, is committed to individualizing responsibility” (17). Henry A. Giroux offers a more detailed explanation when he writes that under neoliberalism, “it is argued that racial conflict and discrimination are things of the past and that race has no bearing on an individual’s or group’s location or standing in contemporary American society” (158). By portraying race as an individual matter devoid of any structural connection, neoliberal-influenced postraciality perpetuates the idea that race does not (or should not) matter. In doing so, postraciality “enabl[es] whites to disregard the degree to which race is tangled up with asymmetrical relations of power” (159). *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* encourages this postracial understanding of race in two ways. First, the narrative ties by Joss’ race to physical objects, suggesting that race is a matter of style and can be signaled by

²⁷ It should be acknowledged that part of this issue is due to Joss not knowing anyone else of Indian descent. The deaths of his grandmother and mother before his birth and in his youth, respectively, leave Joss in a world where there is no one to facilitate understanding his racial heritage.

stable and fixed objects. Second, the narrative implies that the other characters in the novel see Joss as white, suggesting that his understanding of his racial difference is solely a private matter.

In the novel, race is tied to physical objects, suggesting that race is better understood as a style one affects than as a social category. As Henry A. Giroux explains, “race is simply another choice” as “in an era ‘free’ of racism, race becomes a matter of taste, lifestyle, or heritage” (“Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial” 198; 199). The narrative offers three physical markers of Joss’ Indianness: his grandmother’s book of Indian plants, the sandalwood oil he wears as cologne, and his skin. Of these three markers, his grandmother’s book and the sandalwood oil fit Giroux’s explanation of race under neoliberalism. Joss carries his grandmother’s book with him because it is the only physical tie to his mother and grandmother that he possesses, reminding him of a racial heritage through the unfamiliar Hindi words written by his grandmother. The book is filled with

the curling Devanagari script of his grandmother’s native Hindustani, [and] the English translations his mother had later jotted in the page margins. Here and there was a spidery botanical drawing, the ink browned with age. He remembered some of these plants from his youth, when his mother still lived to tend them. Their names twisted and lilted over the tongue: *ghikumari*, which could soothe burns; *tindora*, the ivy gourd, which strengthened the blood and quieted palpitations. *Shikakai* and *reetha* for cleansing hair. *Neem*, a tree too tall for the shelter of the glassed-in conservatory. [...] In her day, Jumanah, Lady Sutcliffe had coaxed a small corner of India to flourish. (37-38, emphasis in original).

While the book is presented as a marker of heritage (being that it has been passed down to through his maternal lineage), the sandalwood oil Joss wears is presented as a stylized marker of

his race. In a conversation with Augusta, he states, “I choose sandalwood [...] because it reminds me of my birth” (183). These two items are the only physical ties Joss has to India. Though he professes not to be affected by his “Indian blood,” he notes the falsehood of that statement as he “th[inks] of it every time he open[s] his last vial of sandalwood oil and breathe[s] its faraway scent. Every time he look[s] at his grandmother’s worn botanical ledger and wonder[s] when *somalata* had first grown in the Sutcliffe Hall conservatory. Every time Sutcliffe sp[eaks] to him as a servant” (185; 186, emphasis in original). The narrative chooses to racialize Joss through (exotic) objects, implying that race can be put on and discarded at will, strengthening the narrative’s investment in the neoliberal (and ultimately postracial) belief that race is simply another choice one makes.

Above, I mentioned that Joss’ skin is a primary signifier of being mixed-race. While it is presented as such in the novel, I argue that for the majority of the novel, Joss passes as white. As Ruth Frankenberg and other scholars on critical whiteness note, whiteness is not just a skin tone. Frankenberg notes that being “‘white’ is as much as anything else an economic and political category maintained over time by a changing set of exclusionary practices, both legislative and customary,” indicating that whiteness has expanded and contracted its boundaries in order to maintain its position at the top of the racial hierarchy (11-12). Richard Dyer notes that whiteness is often associated with a particular work ethic, which he states includes qualities like “energy, will, ambition, [and] the ability to think and see things through” (31). The narrative codes Joss with these qualities, reinforcing his bond to whiteness.

Another indication to Joss’ passing is that his racial difference is rarely remarked upon by characters other than Joss. In fact, Joss’ coloring is remarked on only once by a character who is not Augusta or a member of Joss’ family, who asks Joss if he is of Spanish descent as he is

“‘[r]ather dark’” (104). In other words, the narrative portrays him as the only character who sees himself as different according to race. As such, Joss’ racial difference may as well be something he’s made up in his head. This kind of racial redirection is appealing under neoliberalism as it affirms that racism is not the fault of systemic white supremacy, but of nonwhite individuals who are too sensitive to the perceptions others may have of them. By depicting Joss as the sole character who sees himself as racially Other, the novel denies even a consideration of race as a social category. This echoes neoliberal perceptions of race that desire a treatment of racism on a case-by-case basis rather than a systemic one.

When Joss’ multiraciality is discussed by and with other characters in the novel, the narrative minimizes Joss’ understanding of the barriers he faces. When Joss tells Augusta that he is mixed-race (which occurs just shy of two thirds through the novel), she confesses surprise:

Her elbow slid on the table; her sleepy-looking eyes flew open. “You’re of Indian descent?”

As he had expected, she sounded surprised—though somehow, he had hoped the truth wouldn’t matter. “In part. Yes.” Joss leaned away from her in his chair.

“I had no idea.”

“What would you have me do? Write ‘Josiah Everett, possesses Indian blood’ in the Pump Room guest book?” [...]

“It just seems unfair that your secret is hidden and mine is obvious.”

“It’s not obvious that you’re not a widow. And how could it be hidden that I have mixed blood? I wear it all over my skin. Figuratively,” he added when her nose wrinkled.

“I didn’t think about it, honestly. I’ve seen Welshmen as dark as you, so your coloring does not seem unusual. Have you ever been thought Welsh?” (184)

Though Joss bristles at Augusta's final statement, he does not challenge it. The narrative sets up Joss' mixed-raceness as a secret and treats his confession to Augusta as a big reveal by having Joss share his maternal ancestry in the final sentence of chapter 13, giving it a dramatic resonance and leaving Augusta's reaction to chapter 14. Though the reveal of Joss' mixed-race is constructed as a secret, Augusta's reaction treats the reveal merely as "new information [about Joss], much like if you told me you had a twin" (184). This anticlimactic reveal repeats the power dynamics seen earlier in this chapter in regard to class. The narrative positions Joss as only seeing the negatives of being mixed-race while Augusta is positioned to champion the virtues of being mixed-race. When Joss states shortly after this conversation that being mixed-race doesn't affect him, Augusta is stunned:

"I hope you don't mean that. Or even *think* you mean that."

"Why? What possible argument could you make with my determination to be English?"

"That is not the part that bothers me. It's the fact that you just said you would cut away one of your grandparents. As if she doesn't matter to you." [...]. "[Y]ou would never have been born at all if she hadn't given birth to your mother. Your grandmother is *part* of you." (186, emphasis in original).

Augusta's outrage is not on behalf of any racial awareness. Rather, it is Joss' denial of his family that has her defending his mixed-race heritage. Later in this scene, Augusta reminds Joss that "the prime minister has Indian blood. Lord Liverpool. He is welcomed everywhere in society. He's powerful" (188). And when Joss points out that Lord Liverpool also has the advantages of wealth and aristocratic birth, Augusta counters that Joss is the only Josiah Everett, once more revealing the novel's investment in the myth of self-reliance. Augusta's championing of Joss'

uniqueness and individuality suggests a neoliberal understanding of race and racism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant critique this understanding in *Racial Formation in the United States* for “seek[ing] to downplay the continuing significance of race in American society; indeed it promotes a false universalism which can only serve to mask underlying racial conflicts. [...]. The universalist view of race does not recognize the instability inherent in racial politics and identity. It treats race as something we can ‘get beyond’” (152-156).

This neoliberal understanding of race is once again revealed in an earlier scene in the novel between Joss and Lord Chatfield. Joss visits Lord Chatfield on Augusta’s recommendation to see if he has any information about Lord Sutcliffe’s blackmailer. Lord Chatfield arranges for Joss to meet him while he is taking the waters in Bath, so he is submerged in a pool of water and thus concealing that part of his right leg is missing. Much of their conversation revolves around Augusta and how Joss feels she is “unappreciative” of her wealth and the many avenues it presents to her until Lord Chatfield turns Joss’ critique of Augusta back on himself (150).

“You are unappreciative too.” [...].

“I do not think you are correct, my lord,” Joss shot back. I support myself, and it is done with some difficulty.”

“Hmm.” Chatfield leaned forward, stirring the water with one hand, and the scent of sandalwood grew stronger. “Do you work in a mine or somewhere that places you in daily peril? Did you hunger for education but had no opportunity to gain it?” He paused. “Are you an unmarried female who must be accompanied everywhere by a servant, lest her reputation—her future—be destroyed?”

Joss narrowed his eyes until Chatfield was nothing but blurs.

“You dislike what I say,” said the marquess. “You think your birth and straitened upbringing has given you a right to feel wronged. I can’t say as it hasn’t, but I also can’t see what good the resentment does you.”

“I beg your pardon, my lord.” Joss set his teeth. “But I cannot imagine what someone in your position would know about feeling wronged. Or about wishing for anything that cannot be gained.” (152-153)

Just after this rebuttal, Lord Chatfield requests that Joss help him rise from the pool in which he is submerged, which is when Joss realizes he is missing part of a limb and apologizes for misjudging the marquess. He reflects that “[e]veryone had something to grieve, did they not? A leg, a parent, an inconstant lover. There was always something more to be lost. Which meant there was always something for which to be grateful” (154). Joss’ reflections on suffering echo those voiced by Augusta earlier in this chapter, and both passages reinforce the narrative’s heavy investment in neoliberal individualist rhetoric by emphasizing that each and every person has their own struggles. While both these passages speak to the myth of self-reliance, this particular passage plays into another facet of neoliberal ideology as well. Through Lord Chatfield’s critique, Joss is portrayed as blaming his lack of success on circumstances out of his control (birth/race/class). Though Chatfield agrees these circumstances are a hindrance, he sees Joss as refusing to succeed because of these limits. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies this minimization of racism as one of the key central frames of color-blind racism. The minimization of racism “suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (29). It allows whites to “accuse minorities of being ‘hypersensitive,’ of using race as an ‘excuse,’ or of ‘playing the infamous race card’” while ignoring the systemic difficulties faced by a majority of people of color. Through Lord Chatfield’s understanding of Joss, the novel plays into the idea

that one pulls oneself up by the bootstraps and that the individual is responsible for all advances made in life.

Conclusions

Romain's narrative should be admired for its attempts to broaden the understanding of what heroes look like in the romance genre. While Joss has aristocratic lineage, he is both poor and mixed-race, a kind of hero not often seen in romance. Additionally, the narrative does identify instances of systemic oppression in regard to race and class (through Joss) and gender (through Augusta). However, the novel offers only privatized and individual solutions to these oppressions through neoliberal rhetoric, ultimately endorsing a postracial and postfeminist worldview. Rather than attempt to identify and understand the ways systems of power and privilege limit the choices and stymie the progress an individual can make, the narrative professes a belief in the myth of self-reliance, that if one works hard enough, dreams hard enough, systemic barriers to success disappear. So, while *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress* acknowledges differences in identity based on markers such as race, class, gender, and ability, it ultimately professes faith in a neoliberal ideology of progress: that we each have our own struggles to face and that systemic barriers do not matter as much as one's strength of will and determination. In the next chapter, I will show how Meredith Duran draws on parallels between different systemic oppressions (sexism and racism) to spark an understanding of white privilege in her heroine, which I read as a challenge to the contemporary postracial narrative.

CHAPTER II: THE NAÏVE HEROINE AND WHITE PRIVILEGE IN MEREDITH DURAN'S *THE DUKE OF SHADOWS*

As a meditation on the effects of racialized and gendered violence, Meredith Duran's *The Duke of Shadows* contests the current postracial narrative in the United States. Duran's narrative utilizes the romance trope of the naïve heroine to illustrate the similarities and differences between racism and sexism through the heroine's encounters with racialized and gendered violence. In the novel, Duran's white heroine gradually draws parallels between patriarchal oppression and racial and colonial/national oppression to confront hegemonic understandings of whiteness and national authority/state violence. However, the narrative endorses postracial understandings of race in the second half of the novel: once the characters leave colonial India and the mixed-race hero ascends to the status of English duke, discussions of race are nearly absent from the narrative. This process mimics the logic of colorblind racism, which relegates discussions of race to the past in anticipation of a postracial future, and suggests that the narrative's heavy reliance on genre tropes prevents Duran from writing a satisfying way out of the racism of colonialism. In this chapter, I argue that Duran uses her white heroine, mixed-race hero, and white villain to navigate national and racial tensions of the past in a way that can be read as relevant to undermining the structural power of whiteness and racism today.

Locating Meredith Duran in the Romance Industry

Meredith Duran debuted in the romance world in a quite unusual way. In 2007, Gathers.com (a now-defunct social networking site), (the now-defunct) bookstore chain Borders, and publisher Simon and Schuster held a contest for new authors with a book contract as the grand prize. In order to apply, authors had to submit a completed electronic manuscript and post the first two chapters of their manuscript online. Duran, at the time just beginning her doctoral

work in anthropology, submitted her manuscript and won the contest several weeks later.²⁸ The completed manuscript became Duran's 2008 debut novel *The Duke of Shadows*.

In interviews, much has been made of Duran's dual life, not only in terms of how she handles the workload, but also how her academic and romance writing lives have influenced one another. In a 2009 interview with Evangeline Holland of the website *Edwardian Promenade*, Duran comments on how these roles complement one another:

As I grew older and my academic interests came to center on India, I was exposed to a far wider range of writing on colonialism, and I realized that Britain's colonial project didn't just impact Britons abroad; it was also crucial to the way British people understood themselves and their nation's place in the world. Especially in the latter half of the century, these people were living in the most powerful empire on earth. And this shaped their lives, every day, in countless ways, even if they never set foot out of England. [...] So. I do think we're missing something about the "feel" of nineteenth century England when we ignore the influence of the colonies on everyday life back then. And if I want to see this in romances, it's because I want to be immersed in the "feel" of the time I'm reading about. ("Interview With Meredith Duran")

I believe that it is important to acknowledge Duran's academic background because it is evident that it influenced *The Duke of Shadows* and the events included in the narrative. Additionally, Duran's familiarity with postcolonial scholarship comes through not only in her writing, but also in her interviews. And while Duran describes her research into imperial Britain as informing the core setting of the story and the identities of her characters, I see Duran asking

²⁸ I know where Duran studies thanks to Google and piecing together bits of information, but I've chosen not to include it out of respect for her professional life as an academic as many academics who are romance writers are not "out" to their departments for fear it could hurt their chances for tenure.

her readers to consider the violence of imperialism and the continuing present-day conflicts that arise from racial inequality. Romance as a genre frequently talks about itself as a rebuttal to patriarchal images and stereotypes of women. Romance authors, time and time again, profess that theirs is a genre by women, about women, and for women. However, racial, class, and sexual privilege often go unquestioned in the genre. Characters are primarily white, primarily aristocratic, and nearly always heterosexual. *The Duke of Shadows* challenges the implicit racial identity of romance by creating a mixed-race character and an interracial couple who subvert character tropes and asks readers to confront the reality of white privilege. In her review of the novel, Jane Litte critiques Duran's construction of Emma, remarking that she "was less of a character and more of a vessel for whatever message the story was trying to convey at the time," particularly evident when Emma "play[s] the role of the pro-colonial message as a foil for the anti-colonial hero" ("REVIEW: *Duke of Shadows* by Meredith Duran). While the reviews on whether Duran's heroine is more than a stock character are divided, I think the more important aspect of Emma's characterization is the portrayal of her gradual realization of her complicity in the colonial project. I argue that Emma's characterization as initially pro-colonial works to illustrate the insidious ways white privilege has justified and continues to justify atrocities around the globe. George Lipsitz writes that recognizing "the systemic practices of aversion, exploitation, denigration, and discrimination practiced by people who think of themselves as 'white'" is imperative for the advancement of racial equality (1). Through her debates with Julian about the merits and moralities of colonization and her developing romantic relationship with him, Emma begins to change her view from one who uncritically supports the colonial project to one who abhors the violence wrought by colonization, and, on a larger level,

institutionalized racism and sexism. As such, Emma serves as a proxy for readers, who might not realize their own participation in (benefitting from) imperialism and racial inequality today.

Overview of Key Plot Points

While Duran's novel tackles many subjects through various plot threads, the main plot of the novel concerns the developing romantic relationship between the white heroine Emmaline (Emma) Martin and the aristocratic, mixed-race hero Julian Sinclair, Marquess of Holdensmoor and later Duke of Auburn, "whose blood [is] one quarter native" Indian (16). While the interracial romance is the novel's end goal, the budding relationship allows Duran to delve into the sexual, gender, and racial politics of British colonial India from a twenty-first century vantage point. *The Duke of Shadows* begins with a vignette of Emma lost at sea before her arrival in Delhi as she refuses to let go of the wreckage to which she clings.²⁹ In this prologue, we learn that this shipwreck has orphaned Emma and that she was witness to her parents drowning. After the vignette, the novel moves to Delhi where Emma is reunited with her fiancé Marcus Lindley, whose behavior, to her dismay, is nothing as it was when her parents were alive. He has become a philanderer and profligate gambler who voices increasingly racist opinions about his mixed-race cousin Julian Sinclair, who is set to inherit the duchy of Auburn. Marcus believes that due to his own racial purity, he should become the next Duke of Auburn. Emma increasingly finds herself incapable of adjusting to British-Indian life. Through a series of chance encounters, Emma and Julian continue to meet and converse, discovering a compatibility based on their status as outsiders to Anglo-Indian society.³⁰

²⁹ I have elected to use the novel's spelling of city names to maintain clarity throughout this chapter, so you will see Calcutta rather than Kolkata and Cawnpore rather than Kanpur, for example.

³⁰ This is how the British referenced themselves while in India.

After Marcus physically assaults Emma for questioning the colonial status quo and his patriarchal authority, Julian promises to help her escape to Calcutta. However, the day of their departure becomes the same day that the Rebellion comes to Delhi, and the two attempt to flee the violence of the city. Along their journey, the two begin to fall in love, but are parted when Julian decides to return to Delhi to see to the safety of his Indian relatives in the city, though he promises to return for Emma. He leaves her with a Maharajah with whom he is friendly, and Emma befriends the Maharajah's daughter-in-law Kavita, though she is rebuffed by two other British women who are also under the Maharajah's protection. The two British women are brutally murdered by rebel soldiers, whom Emma and Kavita initially mistake as tax collectors. Emma manages to escape the city and attempts to make her way to Delhi. She stops briefly in Kurnaul where Marcus is leading the British suppression of the Rebellion. In this encampment, she kills a British soldier who attempts to rape her and, horrified that she too has become part of the rising tide of violence, she flees under the name of one of the murdered British women. The first half of the novel ends with a confrontation between Julian and Marcus at Cawnpore with both believing that Emma has likely perished.

The second half of the novel opens four years later in 1861 with Emma traveling to London for the first time since before the Rebellion with her married cousin Delphinia. Delphinia has convinced Emma to show her paintings to the Earl of Lockwood, who then arranges to exhibit her work during one of the balls he hosts as he "believe[s] a ball is *exactly* the place to display [Emma's] work. [... Her work illustrates] the things we tend to forget in this cloistered little world of ours... [and he] wishe[s] to remind society of it" (187, emphasis in original). Emma insists that these paintings are not suitable for display due to their portrayals of the violence she witnessed in the Rebellion. If the paintings were shown to the public, Emma

believes that her career as an artist would be over before it began. However, the Earl of Lockwood convinces her to show the paintings under a pseudonym at one of his balls. Julian views these paintings at the ball and realizes that Emma must have some connection to the paintings due to their subject matter. Upon finding her, he breaks off his recent engagement and attempts to understand what happened to her after he left her in the care of the Maharajah. He finds Emma much changed from their time together in India, and Emma acknowledges this fact, often debating whether or not she is actually sane given that the violence of the Rebellion continues to haunt her.

The end of the novel rushes through a murder plot intended for Emma as she has included lines in Urdu in her paintings that reveal her former fiancé Marcus Lindley to be partly responsible for the murders of British women and children at Cawnpore. Marcus takes Emma captive and plans to marry her for her substantial inheritance, but changes his mind and decides to kill her instead. However, Julian foils his plans and shoots Marcus before he can harm Emma.³¹ Emma's faith in Julian is restored, and she tells him how she escaped from India, the violence she witnessed, and the murder she committed. With no more secrets between them, our central couple begins to heal together, and Duran's novel comes to a close.

Reader Reception

Within the online romance reading and reviewing community, *The Duke of Shadows* received more attention than typical debut novels do, most likely due to the initial availability of its first two chapters through the Gathers.com/Borders book contract contest. Given the novel's online presence before its publication, the novel received a number of reviews while Meredith Duran conducted several interviews across the online romance community. Reviewers, however,

³¹ Classic romance trope.

did not come to a unanimous decision about the novel, and this ambivalence is apparent in the comments left on these reviews as well. *The Duke of Shadows* earned grades ranging from a “C” at *Dear Author* from reviewer Jane Litte to an “A” at the same site from reviewer Jan; Sandy Coleman from *All About Romance* and Sarah Wendell of *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* both gave the novel a “B-”.

Both the range of opinions and sheer volume of reviews for this debut novel are slightly out of the norm for the online romance reviewing community. Many reviewers agree that Duran brings something new to the romance genre, whether that be “haunting and heartbreaking” depictions of violence (Wendell), the heroine as “the tormented character of the book” rather than the hero (Jane Litte), the focus on the heroine’s attempts to overcome her survivor’s guilt (Janet), or the “fresh” setting of “India during the Great Uprising of 1857” (Coleman). However, the majority of reviewers mention that Duran’s novelty is inhibited by a reliance on stock romance tropes, particularly the one-dimensionality of the villain. Sarah Wendell remarks that in a novel filled with ambiguity in regard to morality and sanity, “a starkly Just Plain Bad hero [i]s a detriment to the story” (“Book Review: *The Duke of Shadows* by Meredith Duran). A commenter who goes by the name Sunita states that she is Indian and critiques Duran’s characterizations of the British at the time as they are “too uniformly over-the-top racist, and there [is] none of the well-meaning cultural obliviousness that characterized a lot of the more admirable Brits of the time” and states that she finds Marcus Lindley’s characterization as a villain “awfully cartoonish” (“Comment on Jan’s Review: 21 April 2008; 11:07:47”).³² The overt racism of the villain seems, as many reviewers observe, to detract from the narrative as it

³² Sunita eventually becomes a reviewer at *Dear Author*.

lacks the nuance accorded to other components of the novel or because the racism seems too contemporary for readers.

While some of these elements admittedly detract from the evenness of the novel, I believe that each of these elements works to emphasize the historical (and current) significance of white privilege and to bring the whiteness of history and romance to the fore. Duran does this by rewriting not only historical racial and romantic scripts, but through her graphic depictions of colonization and violence. In order to destabilize the image of whiteness as innately good and non-threatening, Duran sets an indisputably evil white man as the foil to her mixed-race hero. So, while Duran's execution may not be as subtle as readers desire, I see the stark portrayal of the villain as necessary to the social justice thrust of the novel. In making the Anglo character the stock villain, one who betrays his country and facilitates the murder of (white) women and children, Duran asks her readers to recognize the insidiousness of privilege and the way it encourages those in power to make choices that replicate and reinforce these systems of privilege. Duran's novel challenges this assumption and asks readers to consider the choices that lead to how history is made.

What sets Duran's debut novel apart from other romance novels for reviewers is that its setting of India is far different from settings usually seen in historical romance (London, the English countryside, the streets of Mayfair, occasionally France). Nearly all reviews remark on the "fresh" setting. It is not just the setting of India that makes Duran's novel interesting or innovative; it is also the time period in which she sets the events of her narrative. The novel takes place during the rebellion of 1857, which is sometimes referenced as the Sepoy Mutiny or as India's First War of Independence, depending on which historical accounts one reads. Just over a year long, this rebellion was notable for the violence of both the East India Company and the

rebel Indian forces. For example, the violence at Cawnpore, only alluded to in *The Duke of Shadows*, was carried out by both Indian and British forces. Indian forces, led by Nana Sahib, murdered a number of Anglo women and children after initially promising to grant them freedom after they were taken captive. As one British soldier observed: the women were “stripped naked, beheaded, and thrown into a well; the [children] [were] hurled down alive upon their butchered mothers, whose blood yet reeked on their mangled bodies” (Blunt 413). As Alison Blunt observes, this violence was perceived as an attack on British domesticity and the homefront. In retaliation, soldiers of the East India Company forced those they believed to have taken part in the massacre to wash (in some accounts, by licking) the blood of British women and children from the floor while being whipped. These individuals were then executed, with one of the most common methods involving strapping the individual to the mouth of a cannon before it was set off. Duran’s choice to set her novel during this period of extreme violence allows her to work out the racial power dynamics at play in the past and in the present. When romances are set during historically violent periods, the novel’s action often takes place between two sovereign powers, giving a sense of somewhat equal footing. In contrast, the unique setting of Duran’s novel explores the unequal power relations between colonial Britain and India. I argue that Duran’s portrayal of the colonial relationship can be read as a discussion of contemporary race relations in the United States.

The Naïve Heroine and the Specter of Whiteness

Though this dissertation’s overarching focus is on interracial relationships in romance novels, this particular chapter focuses on the romance trope of the naïve heroine and the (in)visibility of whiteness. Through the vantage point of its naïve heroine, the narrative insists on questioning whiteness and colonial authority, primarily through graphic depictions of violence.

The narrative questions whiteness explicitly through Marcus' character arc as the novel's villain, but also implicitly through the evolution in Emma's thinking regarding colonialism. While the novel is very much concerned with white women as evidenced by Emma's struggles and character arc, the novel also addresses the liminal state of its mixed-race hero, with varying degrees of success. Though Julian exists in a liminal state vis-à-vis race for the first half of the novel, the second half of the novel presupposes whiteness as a racial endpoint when he assumes the mantle of Duke of Auburn, with lands and people in England to shepherd. Once Julian ascends to the near pinnacle of the British aristocratic hierarchy, nearly all discussions of India and of race are abandoned, reflecting the way colorblind racism seeks to eliminate critical discussions of race to secure a postracial future.

The Inexperienced/Innocent/Naïve Heroine in Romance Novels

The portrayal of Emma as a young, innocent, and naïve heroine is not new to romance. The romance genre features countless heroines who are inexperienced in sexual matters and in the ways of the world. In many instances, inexperience, particularly sexual inexperience, is used as a shorthand by authors to indicate the strong moral character of the heroine. In Jayne Ann Krentz's *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women*, an edited collection of essays on the appeal of romance written by romance authors, novelists such as Doreen Owens Malek and Brittany Young discuss the decision to write their heroines as virgins. Owens Malek writes that her heroines take after virginal heroines from Greek and Roman myths "who behaved with extraordinary courage and passion and style" (116). Young, on the other hand, explains that her heroines are virgins because it "is completely a matter of mature choice—her choice, not that of the men she has dated. [...] She values herself most for qualities that have nothing to do with her sexuality—qualities such as integrity, loyalty, courage, intelligence, generosity of spirit, and,

often, a sense of humor” (122-123). Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, founders of the romance review site *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, observe that virginity or limited sexual experience serve a function within the portrayal of the romantic relationship, saying that

the awakening to love [which is the main thrust of the genre] is that much more powerful when it’s accompanied by a sexual awakening as well. Everything about the love [between the romance novel’s protagonists] has to be superlative, and on the heroine’s part, it’s easiest to use an association we’re already comfortable with: sexual purity. The sexually experienced woman in fiction still raises hackles and creates uncomfortable associations with uncleanness, the threat of infidelity, and moral degeneration (37-38).

Virginity in romance heroines, then, often is used as a shorthand for either the heroine’s character or for the depth of love between herself and the hero.

However, there are a number of romance readers who dislike the association of virginity with the heroine’s integrity. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, mentioned above, argue that the emphasis on female sexual purity in romance novels reflects the fact that “widespread acceptance of women as fully actualized human beings with rights equal to those of men is only a handful of decades old in many industrialized nations and barely in its nascent stages in most parts of the world” (49). Wendell and Tan see the influence of patriarchal gender norms at play as romance novels are produced and written in environments where a woman’s sexual experience is understood to be a reflection of her morality.

It is important to note that in addition to prizing sexual inexperience, the romance genre frequently places a high value on worldly inexperience. In *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, Wendell and Tan suggest that a heroine’s virginity and inexperience often work in tandem to create conflict within the novel. They write that

virginity and inexperience are extremely common methods to establish an imbalance of power between the hero and heroine [...]. The power imbalance becomes one of the crucial conflicts of a romance, as the characters seek to rebalance that power, either with the heroine gaining the required experience, or by making peace with the fact that her power will stem from other sources. (40-41)

The resolution of the conflict puts the heroine on the same level as the hero, changing the circumstances of her power. For Wendell and Tan, the heroine's inexperience initiates the movement of the plot.

In *The Duke of Shadows*, Emma Martin's worldly and sexual inexperience serves to define the society of the novel, which is one of the eight essential elements of a romance novel identified by Pamela Regis. Regis writes that "[n]ear the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero" (31). For many romances published in the twenty-first century, this flawed and oppressive society draws on the ways in which patriarchy has oppressed and continues to oppress women. *The Duke of Shadows* depicts a nineteenth-century society corrupted by both patriarchy and colonization. The narrative highlights this corruption in two ways: first, the narrative's treatment of Emma's sexual inexperience reveals the ways patriarchal expectations of women are based in perceptions of their sexuality and sexual practices, thus limiting women's freedom. And, second, the narrative's treatment of Emma's worldly inexperience reveals the societal corruption caused by colonization by repeatedly exposing the damaging effects of white privilege through her attempts to engage with India outside the role of colonizer.

Emma's inexperience at the start of her character arc is magnified by the traumatic loss of her parents prior to the novel's beginning. Without the protection of a family unit, Emma must learn to navigate a new country and different socio-cultural standards on her own. The social isolation of a heroine is also quite common to romance. In fact, Emma's becoming an orphan and losing her parents in such a tragic manner follows in the tradition set up in 1919 by the Orientalist romance *The Sheikh* by E.M. Hull. In her work on Orientalism and romance fiction, historian Hsu-Ming Teo observes that films following in the tradition of *The Sheikh* feature "virginal American heiresses who are, or become, orphans, have a headstrong, tomboyish, independent streak, and transgress gender roles to do things that were the preserves of men in the early twentieth century" (141). Teo argues that this loss of parental authority frees these young heroines from the immediacy of patriarchy via their fathers in order to act upon their innate independent streaks and transgress boundaries demarcated by gender and race. So, in becoming an orphan, Emma follows in the tradition of romance heroines, such as Diana Mayo of *The Sheikh*, who engage in interracial romantic relationships, and the loss of her parents facilitates her questioning of systems of authority.

While the loss of her parents amplifies her worldly inexperience, the way the narrative treats Emma's sexual inexperience reveals the depths of societal corruption due to patriarchy. Upon her debut into Anglo-Indian society, Emma finds "that Delhi society [is] no friend to her, that news of the shipwreck and her 'dishonorable' rescue ha[s] tainted local opinion" (10). Being rescued by "a crew of rough-and-ready sailors" instead of arriving in Delhi "under the watchful gaze of her mother and father" puts Emma's virginity in question for Anglo-Indian society and marks her as deviant for other characters in the novel (17). Though readers may take comfort in the knowledge that Emma is a virgin, within the world of the novel, Emma faces harsh judgment

for potentially not being a virgin. This gap between what the reader knows and what the characters presume reveals the flawed reasoning behind associating female virginity with morality. Under a patriarchal system, Emma's worth as a human being derives from her being sexually inexperienced. The social ostracizing done by the other characters in the novel is indicative of contemporary attitudes surrounding women's sexual behavior, and, by incorporating these attitudes, the novel asks readers to consider whether virginity should be considered indicative of a woman's character, in our culture and in the novel, when the majority of characters seem to value Emma's virginity more than her life.

In *The Duke of Shadows*, the question of whether Emma was raped by the Irish sailors who rescued her is a point of contention for other characters of the novel. While as readers, we know that Emma was, in fact, not raped by the Irish sailors who rescued her, the characters of Anglo-Indian society refuse to take Emma at her word that she remains a virgin. Whereas rape in historical romances, especially novels written in the 1970s and 1980s, has often served the function of "awaken[ing] [the heroine] to sexuality, love, and 'true womanhood,'" the potentiality of rape in this instance is different in that it illustrates the way patriarchal forces police Emma's life in Anglo-Indian society (Teo 160). This is representative of a shift in the genre's thinking about feminism. Whereas romance novels from the 1970s and 1980s often struggled to incorporate and express feminist values and beliefs, the majority of novels today (along with a number of readers and authors) espouse feminism. They do so by depicting female characters who initially suffer from patriarchal expectations and traditional gender ideology, but ultimately triumph over these expectations by achieving her goals on her terms.

With Emma's virginity in question and Marcus's affair with a married woman having no discernable effect on his career, the novel explicitly engages with the gender bias Western

society continues to have when it comes to sexual behavior, demonstrating a contemporary feminist sensibility. Emma marvels at the fact that her “betrothed’s virtue [being] completely and publicly compromised [is] of no import at all” (18). This double standard marks a clear distinction in how Emma, though wealthy, is thought by the Anglo-Indian society of the novel to be unworthy of Marcus due to her tainted honor. In comparison to the scrutiny Emma faces regarding her virginity, Marcus is celebrated and fêted by British society in spite of his “conspicuous philandering, [and] his exorbitant gambling debts” (17). He avoids scandal due to his aristocratic privilege and the privilege he holds as a male member of society.³³ Indeed, Marcus uses this double standard to his advantage to shame Emma and maintain patriarchal power over her. He insinuates that it would have been more honorable for Emma to drown than have every member of society question whether Marcus’s “honor [would be] tarnished” upon marrying Emma if she is, in fact, not a virgin (17). Emma speculates that this damages his pride: “[s]urely it must irk him, to risk being made a laughingstock by upholding a betrothal with a woman of questionable reputation” (17). Even in moments of crisis, Marcus views Emma more as his personal property rather than an individual human being as he tells her at the beginning of the rebellion “[i]f the natives come, don’t dishonor me. Slit your throat quick. The wrists are too slow. Though, knowing you, you’d probably enjoy being plowed by them” (76). The novel emphasizes this sexual double standard not only to enhance Emma’s social isolation (thus strengthening an affinity with Julian), but to lay the foundation for Emma’s questioning of gender and racial hegemonies. In drawing parallels between the experiences of living as part of a minority group under the systems of patriarchy and/or white supremacy, the novel works to challenge the stability of the contemporary postracial narrative.

³³ He is a cousin to Julian, and therefore a cousin to a future duke and stands to inherit the dukedom should Julian have no children under the law of male primogeniture.

Over the course of the novel, Emma faces the threat of sexual violence twice. What is notable about these instances is that, both times, the perpetrators are white men. With this, the narrative flips the conventional American understanding that white men are the protectors and saviors of white women's purity. Instead, they pose the greatest threat to Emma's person. Teo observes that while many historical romance novels set in a fictional Middle East/East are undeniably Orientalist, these novels are often critical of Western society as well: "[i]n the novels, the East is sensual, violent, barbaric, despotic, debauched, and patriarchal to the point of misogyny. But then again, so is the West, according to these novels, in which the greatest villains are often not Muslims or Arabs or Ottomans, but other Europeans" (*Desert Passions* 191). In her discussion of feminist critique of contemporary sheik novels of the 1980s and 1990s, Teo writes that these novels challenge patriarchal authority by drawing upon a discourse of racial and religious hierarchy:

if *even sheiks*—who, in the tradition of Orientalist representation are despotic, domineering, patriarchal leaders, and intolerant of women's rights—can be brought to understand the importance of women's independence and right to fulfilling careers, and to adjust their attitudes toward women accordingly, then how much more should Western men do the same? (234, emphasis in original)

The Duke of Shadows poses a similar question as the violence Emma encounters is perpetrated primarily by white British men. The first threat of sexual violence occurs when Emma visits the local bazaar with her Indian maid Usha. There, they are accosted by two soldiers of the East India Company who believe that Emma must be a prostitute as no "real lady would be out consorting with the natives, giving 'em ideas" (26). These men physically restrain Emma as they carry on with their threats:

‘That’s what she was doing,’ the other man agreed in an ugly, eager voice. ‘Givin’ the blackies all the encouragement they need, parading herself in front of ’em like she was one of ’em.’

‘Of course, Harry, I heard me that we received a new shipload of doxies for the officers’ mess. Could be that she’s one, eh?’ He thrust his hips up against her, crushing her crinolines; she twisted aside and his teeth closed on the tender skin of her neck (26).

The second time Emma is faced with sexual assault, it again comes from one of these soldiers, well into the violence of the Rebellion and after Julian has left Emma in the care of the Maharajah. Here, she faces the soldier in private, at a tent in an East India Company encampment, rather than in the public sphere of the marketplace.

‘I saw you ride in with them natives. I heard what happened to you. A terrible shame. I always thought that proper ladies’d die before they was dishonored. [...].

He lunged forward, his dirty fingers clamping over her mouth. ‘I’ll make you clean,’ he whispered in her ear. ‘I’m as English as they come. You won’t even remember what those filthy blackies did to you’ (171).

These two scenes are ripe for analysis not only when we consider the intersections of class, race, nationality, and gender present, but also when we consider the historical scripts of race and sexuality. The soldiers are of a lower class status than Emma, as evidenced by an accent commonly associated with the British working-class, yet her upper-class accent fails to protect her; the soldiers ignore Emma’s class by emphasizing her gender to the point of objectification. In her writings on colonization and gender, Anne McClintock argues that citizenship is granted exclusively to men as “a woman’s *political* relation to the nation was submerged as a *social* relation to a man through marriage” (“Family Feuds” 65, emphasis in original). McClintock

argues that much of imperialism is figured through the discourse of domesticity and family. The metaphor of the national family is then used to enforce hierarchies which prize the dominance of white, middle-class males: “[s]ince the subordination of woman to man and child to adult was deemed a natural fact, hierarchies within the nation could be depicted in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature” (*Imperial Leather* 357-358). What the novel demonstrates in this scene is the way in which patriarchal power was (and is) maintained through the regulation of women’s sexual behavior. For working-class white men whose bodies and behaviors were policed and deemed inferior by a system that valued the middle-class, one way to secure national belonging was through the policing of other disadvantaged groups under colonial and patriarchal rule. The narrative’s contemporary version of imperialism adds to McClintock’s reading by considering how a woman who has no father, brother, or husband would be incorporated by the nation; Emma understands herself to be British, but has no patriarchal connection to the nation once she breaks her engagement with Marcus and because of this lack, her body and her behavior are aggressively policed by the white male characters. In the novel’s version of imperialism, readers challenged to consider how imperialism marks white women as both oppressor and oppressed.

While these encounters are ostensibly between Emma and white men, they are also about the perceived threat of nonwhite sexuality to white patriarchal power. As Lola Young observes, “since slavery, African females had been seen as at once women—inasmuch as they were sexualized, reproductive, and subordinate—and not-women, that is not pure, not feminine, but strong and sexually knowing and available. Thus an implicit contrast was established between white (middle class) and black women” (“Imperial Culture” 273-274). The white men in these scenes object to Emma’s presence in the company of nonwhite men as an explicit sexual

temptation. Ruth Frankenberg observes in *White Women, Race Matters*, that “white women who choose interracial relationships are presented as sexually ‘loose,’ sexually unsuccessful, or (at the least negative) sexually radical” (77). In both scenes detailed above, the soldiers’ use of “blackies” demonstrates this idea, even though they are the would-be rapists. In the Western world, white women’s sexuality historically has been viewed as something pure that needs to be protected from men of color, though, as many historians have pointed out, nonwhite women historically have faced threats and have been subject to rape and sexual assault on the part of white men.

Patriarchal and colonial control over the bodies and sexual behaviors of all women in other British colonies was true as well. Philippa Levine points to this in her writing on prostitution in colonial India, remarking that the European prostitutes were a threat to the colonial racial and sexual hierarchy as

non-British women [were] marginalized not merely by their livelihood, but by their relative and carefully gradated difference from the centrally definitional and definitionally respectable English woman. [...] If local men could buy the services of European women, then surely they could think in sexual terms of any white woman. (13)

The fear of interracial sexual relations between white women and Indian men was about the threat to the dominance of white men. In keeping white women out of reach of men of color, white men maintained their racial and gender hegemony. In the scene when the white East India Company soldiers accost Emma in order to legitimize their national belonging, the novel reveals that racial and patriarchal dominance is often maintained via sexual violence.

In making the white men of the novel the villains and primary perpetrators of violence, the narrative exposes the way patriarchy, as a system and structure of power and domination, is

maintained through the regulation of women's behavior. Jodi McAlister notes that many historical romances tackle the problem of patriarchy through the courtship plot. She writes that the patriarchal society of historical romance is oppressive to the heroine because it is

not one interested in love, but in marriage and in managing and policing female sexual behaviour so as to reproduce itself. The historical heroine carves out her own subversive, radical space within this society, a space created by an anachronistically modern brand of romantic love. And while she does not destroy and remake the patriarchy, she does destroy and remake a lone patriarch—the romance hero. (25-26)

The Duke of Shadows, however, does not remake a lone patriarch. While Julian has the advantages of being male and heir to a dukedom, he does not endorse patriarchal ideologies. Rather, the characters who do insist that Emma adhere to these ideologies are killed (Julian kills Marcus, and Emma kills her would-be rapist in self-defense). Instead, *The Duke of Shadows* is more interested in remaking the romance heroine as an advocate for racial justice. Whereas the heroines of the sheik novels critiqued by Teo work on reforming nonwhite Eastern men to adapt values associated with liberal Western feminism, it is the white heroine in Duran's novel who is reformed through the nonwhite Eastern hero and through her experiences with the violence of colonialism. In remaking the heroine rather than the hero, the novel gradually draws parallels between patriarchal oppression and racial and national oppression to confront contemporary hegemonic understandings of whiteness to interrupt the contemporary postracial narrative.

Gendered and Racialized Citizenship

While Emma's sexual inexperience functions to highlight the inequality she faces under patriarchy, the novel deploys Emma's worldly inexperience to critique the process of colonization. While Emma's sexual inexperience is used to help illustrate how patriarchy

corrupts society's views of women, Emma's worldly inexperience exposes her complicity with the violence of colonialism at various points throughout the novel. In other words, the narrative makes clear that inexperience is no excuse for ignorance. In order to reinforce this connection, the novel draws parallels between patriarchy and colonialism: each time Emma questions British colonial authority, she is punished via patriarchal authority, often through interactions with Marcus. For example, when she remarks that Marcus is being myopic in ignoring Julian's forecast of the rebellion, Marcus berates her to "cease your ignorant speculations and make yourself pleasant for your host" (19). Emma's conversations with Julian and the violence she encounters during the rebellion reinforce the parallels drawn between patriarchal and racial oppression. These experiences challenge her to question the systemic benefits she receives as a white woman under colonial rule. For example, after having witnessed the violent devastation committed by both sides during the rebellion, Emma reflects that "[t]hey were all the same, British and Indian alike, those men who could commit such horrible acts of violence against the innocent. She wanted none of it, none of them" (166). It is important to note here that it is men who are the perpetrators of violent acts, thus reinforcing the parallel between patriarchal oppression and racial oppression drawn by the novel.

The narrative underscores the correlation between patriarchal oppression and racial oppression by emphasizing the way citizenship is figured as racially white and gendered male through the relationship between Marcus and Emma. McClintock, writing of gendered citizenship within the context of imperialism, considers the way women are often not considered true citizens, but symbolic ones. She writes that for many theorists of nationalism, "the very definition of nationhood rests on the *male* recognition of identity" ("Family Feud" 62). As such, women have not traditionally been seen as members of a nation, but as "the symbolic bearers of

the nation,... [and] are denied any direct relation to national agency” (62). Emma’s whiteness secures her the kind of symbolic citizenship McClintock discusses, though under patriarchal authority, she is less a citizen than a vehicle through which Marcus can express the full extent of his citizenship and colonial authority. This symbolic citizenship is not enough for Emma as she begins to realize the restrictions on her life that come from being Marcus’ fiancée. For example, Emma notes that “Marcus would throw a fit if she went searching for the local paint. He already disapproved of her ‘little habit.’ ‘You draw the most inappropriate things,’ he’d said yesterday, after flipping through, then tossing aside, the sketchbook she’d been keeping” (24). Here, Emma’s personal interests and hobbies fall under Marcus’ jurisdiction. Later in the novel, Marcus stresses the limits of Emma’s symbolic citizenship when she attempts to engage in a political conversation during dinner. He upbraids her: “Do you know how ashamed I was to hear you at the table? Challenging the assistant treasurer about his knowledge of the natives? You know nothing of these things, Emmaline! Nothing!” (64). He reinforces the notion of symbolic citizenship outlined by McClintock by continuously reminding Emma that her proper place in the colonial system is one that can only be in service to patriarchal authority.

Through the individual character of Marcus, Duran lays out the connections among patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and colonization to illustrate how systems of domination and power are maintained. The more Emma questions patriarchal and colonial authority, the more aggressively she is punished by the white male characters of the novel. Duran follows the aforementioned dinner scene with an argument between Emma and Marcus that results in Marcus hitting Emma so hard that she bleeds. The juxtaposition of these two scenes is not an accident as it reinforces the ways the white men of the novel attempt to police Emma’s citizenship through attacks on her person: Emma’s transgression of the boundaries of the

physical colonial space in the bazaar brings threats of rape and sexual assault, while her questioning of colonial politics is punished with physical violence.

Their argument segues from colonial authority to patriarchal authority when they argue about the appropriateness of her conversations with Julian, with Marcus questioning Emma's virtue:

"Because you have no idea what honor means, do you? You, who managed to save yourself by playing the ship doxy for a freighter of Irish peasants." [...] "You'll forgive me," he said conversationally "if I don't take advice on etiquette from a whore."

"Funny," she said, a touch of hysterical humor taking hold of her. "That's rather how I think of you—well, that and a low-down preening coxcomb."

The blow caught her off guard. She fell to [the] floor, the entire side of her face numbed by his fist. When she drew her hand away from her lips, her blurred vision focused on blood. (65)

Every time Emma attempts to add nuance to the colonial manner of thinking about relations of power, her person is physically threatened or assaulted, attempting to force her to submit to her appropriate role under patriarchy.

Quite obviously, Marcus is enraged that Emma refuses to submit to his immediate patriarchal authority and that she dares question the privileges granted to him via that authority. And while many reviewers critique Duran for the flat-out villainy of Marcus, I see the importance of underscoring his villainy as a political statement, since white men are so often thought of as heroes or saviors; indeed, as though to emphasize the unearned privileges of the white male aristocracy, later in the novel, Marcus is rewarded with a viscountcy and dubbed "the Avenger of Cawnpore" for his efforts during the rebellion (260). In *Imperial Leather*,

McClintock observes that “one witnesses in the colonies the reinvention of the tradition of fatherhood, displaced onto the colonial bureaucracy as a surrogate, restored authority. In other words, the figure of the paterfamilias was most vigorously embraced in the colonies at just that moment when it was withering in the European metropolis” (240). Clearly, Duran wishes to illustrate the injustice of the imperial project, which rewards Marcus’s brutal acts of racism and nationalism rather than condemning them. The colonies, both in representation and reality served as a place where patriarchal order could be restored and secured as natural and normal. This is particularly true for Marcus who could have been heir to the Auburn dukedom if Julian’s grandfather had not “made sure through every legal means that his grandson would follow him in the succession. But Marcus could not accept the idea that a man of mixed blood might inherit the title, when Marcus, pure-blooded English and in line after Sinclair to inherit, might himself wear the strawberry leaves so well” (16). Marcus’s villainy comes about because he is denied the societal and economic power he believes due to him as a white man. Having his racial authority subverted, Marcus reacts to this loss violently, and his rage is reserved primarily for Emma and anonymous Indians as he views both as his social inferiors and as objects to be conquered. In this way, Duran highlights a contemporary sensibility/post-colonial awareness of the amorality of the colonial project that is often lost in historical retellings of colonization that lack a focus on intersectionality.

Marcus’ constant denial of Emma’s full citizenship impedes her incorporation into the white racial solidarity described by Lola Young. The scrutiny she faces regarding her virginity isolates her from other characters in the novel, and this isolation is the foundation upon which Emma begins to draw parallels between the patriarchal forces that govern her life and the colonial forces that govern life for the Indians living under colonial rule. Notably, the narrative is

very careful to not absolve Emma of her complicity in colonialism once she begins to understand these parallels. As part of her character arc, Emma is forced to confront the systemic nature of white privilege and how she has benefitted from it. Duran modifies the trope of the naïve heroine slightly to focus not just on the systemic inequalities of patriarchy, but to focus on the systemic effects of racial injustice under a system of white supremacy.

Throughout *The Duke of Shadows*, Emma's naiveté regarding colonialism illustrates the ways in which Emma is complicit with and benefits from the colonial project by virtue of her race. Over the course of the novel, Emma begins to see herself not just as a woman, but as a white woman in Anglo-Indian society. This comes about in two ways: through Emma's dis-identification with other white women in the novel and through her conversations with Julian about the East India company's presence in India.³⁴ Emma increasingly finds herself at odds with other white women in Anglo-Indian society. Her hostess, Lady Metcalfe, has "a pronounced fear of the native culture, and refuse[s] to go into the bazaar," in effect confining herself to the home and realm of domesticity (22). Emma finds that she cannot stomach the monotony expected of her as a woman: "Mama would have advised her to make calls, to accompany Lady Metcalfe on her constitutional through the *maidan*, or to meetings of her sewing circle at the club. But the very prospect made Emma feel breathless and slightly ill [...]. [T]ruly she was blessed to have survived [the shipwreck]. But surely not so she could pass the rest of her life in chatter about amateur theatricals and last season's races?" (22-23). Duran uses Emma's trauma from the shipwreck in order to establish further isolation from the society Emma has always considered herself a part of by having her question the roles prescribed to her as a woman. The questioning

³⁴ This dis-identification, however, does not lead to an identification or dis-identification with nonwhite women. Rather, it ultimately isolates Emma, and this isolation aids in the introduction of post-traumatic stress disorder to the narrative.

of patriarchal gender roles is quite common in historical romance novels. What is different about *The Duke of Shadows* is that the narrative uses the examination of patriarchy to consider other forms of oppression, namely that of racial oppression, by drawing parallels between experiences of oppression.

The other manner by which Emma begins to recognize her racial privilege comes about through her initial conversations with Julian about the East India Company's presence in India. After he rescues Emma from the two soldiers who attempt to sexually assault her, Julian reminds her to exercise caution as India is not England and the rules governing behavior are different. Emma tartly replies that she disagrees, that "the rules here appear to be the same as anywhere" (29). Julian remarks that she seems to think differently from the majority of Anglo-Indian society:

"Surely you shock your friends with this misplaced curiosity! India is here to be conquered, not appreciated."

"You don't believe that."

"Colonel Lindley does."

Long habit made her defensive. "And what of it? He serves the interests of Queen and country!"

"Well then,' he said, laughing. "Your choice is clear. Is it to be your own priorities, or those of Britannia and the Colonel?" (30)

This is the first instance in the narrative where Emma's own interests are pitted against the interest of the British Empire. Emma's defense of her betrothed and the Empire comes out of force of habit and due to the lack of understanding that she plays a part in colonization. In this particular passage, Emma's disidentification with other white women comes into conflict with

her identification with English colonization. At this point in the novel, Emma has been shown to be at odds with the life prescribed for her by Marcus and the rest of Anglo-Indian society; in short, she has no desire to lead the life of a typical officer's wife by "ignor[ing] the country in which she finds herself" (30). It is clear that Duran establishes Emma as different from the rest of Anglo-Indian society in regard to gender roles and behaviors. In this passage, Duran utilizes Julian to illustrate that Emma possesses more than one identity. She is not just a woman, but she is an English woman who plays just as vital a role in the colonization process as any of the officers in the East India Company. Julian points out the discrepancy in Emma's thinking by demonstrating how Emma's wonder at being in India is at odds with the general attitude of the Empire when he observes that Emma can follow only one of two methods of thinking: her own or that of the British Empire. The narrative insists that race and gender cannot be considered separately as it asks that readers, like Emma, consider the gendered and racial dynamics of colonization; the narrative demands that Emma, who has already questioned patriarchy, begin to question white supremacy. As Richard Dyer explains, whiteness has a long, entrenched past of not seeing the systemic ways in which it operates by positioning itself as neutral, stating that "to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people" ("The Matter of Whiteness" 539). In her conversations with Julian, Emma is forced to begin questioning the systemic effects of the Empire's actions as "[t]he point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world" (Dyer 539-540). Julian is the first individual who asks Emma to consider "why these troops [the sepoys] should feel any loyalty whatsoever to the people who have reduced them to subjects—here, in

the land of their birth” (32). In this way, conversations with Julian spark Emma’s questioning of colonial politics.

Emma’s growing understanding of her participation in the imperial project leads to her recognizing commonalities between herself and Indians, so much so that she refuses to partake in the seeming willing ignorance that the rest of Anglo-Indian society observes. The more Emma feels confined by Anglo-Indian society as a woman, the more willing she is to critique it and its practices; this is clearly illustrated by a dinner conversation about Indian soldiers refusing to use “bullets rumored to be greased with cow and pig fat—[...] as Hindus were forbidden to touch beef and Mussulmans could not eat pork” (61).

“Balderdash,” Hawthorne said. “They wouldn’t dare. They know who their masters are.”
[...]

“I don’t understand,” Emma said. “You are simply assuming that they will learn to accept the cartridges?”

Silence was her reply. [...]

“Well, gentlemen?” he [Julian] said to the table at large. “Can no one muster a platitude to soothe our brave memsahibs?”

“I need no soothing,” Miss Crowley said. “I have full faith in our army, and I sleep soundly, I assure you.”

“And why not?” Emma added. “Until, of course, these soldiers overcome their scruples and decide to use the bullets on the people who would force them to commit sacrilege. Which appears, Miss Crowley, to be us.” (61-62)

In this very public manner, Emma demonstrates an awakening with regard to the political, social, and religious dimensions of British imperialism in India. This is a pivotal moment in Emma’s

character arc from inexperienced to experienced heroine as it reveals the resistance Emma will face as she expresses views counter to that of British society. In doing so, the novel as a whole brings a contemporary sensibility to its treatment of British imperialism in India; the narrative makes new demands on its readers by asking them not only to critique patriarchy (as romance novels quite frequently do), but to critique the racist attitudes presented by the other characters in the novel. In doing so, the narrative refuses to accept bumbling ignorance on the part of the British as an excuse for engaging in these practices.

Emma's growing awareness of systems of power and privilege can be further explained through a consideration of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's concept of white habitus. In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva discusses the prevalence of color-blind racism in the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He explains that in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, white individuals increasingly profess not to be racist, even to the point where people state that they do not see race. According to Bonilla-Silva, white habitus is "a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters" that helps account for the colorblind racism of whites as they are socially isolated from people of color (104, emphasis in original). This isolation leads to a complete lack of knowledge of the lives of people who are not white. At the beginning of the novel, Emma can be said to live under the conditions of white habitus, though it is clear she does not wish to be completely isolated from the culture and people of India.

As the novel moves through the Sepoy Rebellion and as the romantic relationship between Emma and Julian develops, Emma's racial isolation disintegrates, destroying her white habitus. The first challenge to Emma's white habitus occurs shortly after Emma and Julian

escape Delhi during the chaos of the rebellion. Julian indicates that after he delivers Emma to a place where she will be safe, he will return to Delhi. Emma is shocked that he intends to return to city:

“Delhi!” He still wore the blood he’d shed during their escape! “Have you run mad? You can’t mean to go back. Not until it’s recaptured!”

“*If* it’s recaptured,” he said softly.

“If?” His insinuation astonished her. “You actually think we’ll let the natives keep it? One of the largest stations in the raj?”

He rolled onto one arm to face her. “I am not sure *we* will have any say in the matter. The Indians appear to have already taken *back* their imperial city.” [...].

“Am I to understand that you’re upbraiding me for espousing the English view? Pray tell, *my lord*, after what we have been through today, do you still take some other position?”

He sat up in one fluid motion, and instinct had her lurching away. The reaction seemed to startle him as much as it did her. He went very still. Then, in curiously formal tones, he said, “Forgive me, Miss Martin. I can see I have upset you. (90-91, emphasis in original).

This conversation is the first that Emma and Julian have outside the perceived safety of the colonial space. In it, Julian reminds Emma that the life she experienced while in Delhi was one sheltered and isolated from the reality of daily life in India. The challenge Julian presents to Emma’s white habitus is met by fear on Emma’s part, as evidenced by her moving away from him. Rather than continuing to challenge Emma, Julian reverts to a more British patriarchal role

by taking on more courtly tones. In this exchange, the narrative illustrates the popular fear that white women are always already vulnerable to nonwhite men and reveals it to be unfounded.

Emma's growing rejection of white habitus is demonstrated when she and Julian find safety with the Maharajah of Sapnagar, and they encounter two Englishwomen—Anne Marie and her chaperone Mrs. Kiddell—also sheltering there. Emma refuses to engage in the women's hysteria about how they will be killed by members of the Maharajah's court. She says

“You do not understand; Lord Holdensmoor escorted me here with the express idea that it is the *only* place he could ensure my safety.”

Anne Marie gasped. “The Marquess? But he is *one* of them! You cannot trust him for an instant!”

“I trust him with my life,” Emma said. (143, emphasis in original).

Rather than rely on racial solidarity with these white women, Emma now places her trust and safety with Julian. In doing so, the narrative chips away at the white habitus that once governed Emma's life. Emma's reaction to these women is markedly different from the reaction she had earlier to Julian. In that example, she demonstrated a particular fear of Indians. Here, after forging a period of trust and intimacy with Julian, she works to discredit the racial fears of other white women.

In showing Emma's rejection of white habitus, *The Duke of Shadows* asks readers to consider the limitations of their own white habitus. Bonilla-Silva reflects that the kind of racial integration that results from a rejection of white habitus “increase[s] the likelihood of equal-status contact between whites and people of color, which may in turn increase the likelihood of whites appreciating minorities as their equals” (146). White individuals who abandon the racial constraints of white habitus are more likely to see the systemic advantages of whiteness and to

acknowledge racial inequality. By showcasing Emma's gradual development and awareness of whiteness as a part of a social system that organizes daily life, the novel challenges readers to consider the historical effects of white supremacy. In illustrating the violent effects of white supremacy and misogyny, Duran encourages her readers to question these systems of privilege and power.

Centering White Women's Experiences by Displacing Those of Brown Women

What Duran most notably leaves off the page in *The Duke of Shadows* is a complex sketch of Indian women under colonial rule. To me, this indicates a troubling repetition of historical accounts that so often absent the voices of women of color by refusing to acknowledge their presence except in relation to those who are white and/or men. Teo builds on Mohja Kahf's argument that "modern Western culture has lost the stock character of the strong, independent, assertive Muslim princess found in medieval Orientalist discourse" in order to assert that "[t]he Western heroine of modern romance novels has subsumed these characteristics, while Muslim women occupy a lower level in the hierarchy of gender, race, and religion" (*Desert Passions* 171). And fellow historian Penelope Tuson notes that "[i]n the case of the 1857 Rebellion, Indian women still remain largely hidden within the official male sources," and that the focus on racially charged sexual codes "in which white women were cast as passionless victims and Indian men as potential sexual predators" effectively silences Indian women by absenting them from the (Western) narrative of colonial sexuality (296; 291). This pattern is similarly present in *The Duke of Shadows*. There are two moments when the narrative contrasts Emma against two Indian women: Usha, her maid, and Kavita, the young wife of the Maharajah's son. The contrast is important to consider not only because these three women comprise nearly half of the novel's notable female characters, but also because of the dichotomy that has been set up historically

between white women and women of color where white women are typically seen as pure and demure while women of color are often viewed as exotic and lustful.

In the depiction of Usha, the narrative demonstrates awareness of class differences, but fails to render the complexity of Usha's experience in comparison with Emma, which is evident in the following scene where Emma spots a woman in purdah while she and Usha visit the bazaar.

Emma touched her maid's wrist. 'Usha, that woman's face—why is it covered?'

Usha's eyes tracked upward. 'Oh—it is purdah, mem. Mussulmans and also Brahmins, the wives and daughters of our priests, cover their faces to show they are—' She paused, searching for the word. 'To protect their *izzat*, their honor.'

"Even when inside?"

"Whenever they can be seen by strange men."

"And how do they see when they go outside?"

"One can see through the veil, but a woman in purdah does not leave her house often." [...].

"How do they bear it?"

"They do not wish to bring shame to their families, mem." [...].

'It's not really fair to us, is it?'

'To us?' Usha studied her face. 'But mem can come and go as she wishes, no?'

(24-25)

While it may seem as if Usha is reminding Emma of the fact that her white privilege grants her access to greater mobility than the woman in purdah, this fact is undercut by the very next line when "a sharp blow land[s] on her [Emma's] back" and one of the white officers grabs her arm.

With this scene, the narrative appears to say that Emma is emphatically not free to go where she wishes and that should she choose to do so, her transgression is punishable by physical and/or sexual assault. In this instance, the novel reinscribes a notion of feminism that elides racial differences. While it is possible that Duran is attempting to heed Gayatri Spivak's admonition not to speak for the subaltern, the focus on Emma allows for an absenting of nonwhite women under colonization; written as such, the narrative implies that Usha's life would be no different free from colonization. By writing Usha in this manner, Duran's narrative falls victim to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty understands as a colonialist imperative underlying Western feminism. Mohanty writes that by representing all women as an oppressed group under patriarchy, what happens when Western feminists write about so-called Third World women is that "Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counterhistory. Third World women, in contrast, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status" (39). Clearly, Duran's depiction of Usha relies on a similar pattern of colonialist impulses within Western feminism.

The narrative repeats the pattern of absenting Indian women from the colonial narrative in its consideration of Kavita. Though the two women befriend one another after an initial period of mistrust, the narrative concerns itself with the dangers facing Emma due to her whiteness and its association with colonization. When the Maharajah's palace is invaded by a small band of rebelling sepoys posing as tax collectors, it is Emma and the two other white women who have taken refuge with the Maharajah who face violence, not the Maharajah or Kavita. The sepoys "d[o] not hesitate in [their] task" and immediately attack the two other white women, first by "slitting [Mrs. Kiddell's] throat in one unbroken gesture" before "cut[ting] off [the] breasts" of Anne Marie (164). Kavita helps Emma escape, but after this scene she does not appear in the

novel except in two brief mentions when Julian tells Emma that Kavita still prays for her and once when Emma finally details her traumatic escape from India, thus revealing the continuing elision of brown women from the narrative.

While Emma faces threats of rape and sexual assault from white men over the course of the novel, the effects of patriarchy and colonization on Indian women go unexplored. This is perhaps due to the structure of the story in that romances tend to focus on the journeys of the hero and heroine to the exclusion of other characters, but the silencing of the fate of Indian women in the novel should not go unremarked. The novel seems to set up a false divide that patriarchal violence only affects white women while colonial violence affects only Indian men. The double effect of colonial and patriarchal violence on Indian women goes unremarked, continuing the trend of mutiny narratives that focus solely on the violence done to British women and children.

Perceptions of Mixed-Race Masculinity

While the novel spends a great deal of time establishing connections between patriarchal and racial oppression as evidenced by Emma's struggles and character arc, the novel also contrasts the masculinity of its mixed-race hero with that of the white villain Marcus to counter stereotypes of nonwhite masculinity as hyper-aggressive and hyper-sexual. This juxtaposition reveals a thoroughly modern and feminist masculinity that abhors the systems of power and domination from which Marcus derives his power. Marcus's masculinity rests on an authority derived from patriarchy and its reliance on traditional gender roles; Marcus's masculinity aligns with a vision of aggressive masculinity described by gender violence prevention activist Jackson Katz as one where "manhood [is] equated with power and control—of other men as well as women" as evidenced by the way Marcus regard the people of India and the manner in which he

treats Emma (Katz 229). For Marcus, India and its peoples are a means to only increasing his prestige as he has “less interest in the native culture than he did in his choice of hats” (30). Emma serves a similar sort of function for Marcus as their marriage will give Marcus control over her substantially large inheritance.

Julian’s masculinity, in contrast with Marcus,’ embraces some contemporary feminist ideals of masculinity. Julian rejects the kind of masculinity embodied by Marcus in favor of one that “stands up for social justice, non-violence, and basic human rights” (Katz 270). His actions stress the importance of family when he maintains relationships with his Indian grandmother and cousin Deven even though his cousin sees him as “the blight on his family tree” and his grandmother believes he brings shame upon the family with his mixed-race heritage (44). He values Emma’s intellect, telling her that her consideration of colonial politics demonstrates “common sense, which distinguishes [her] from [her] masculine counterparts” (32). Unlike Marcus, Julian never physically harms Emma. Julian only physically threatens those who pose a danger to those he loves. The version of masculinity exemplified by Julian is one that is both a feminist version of masculinity and one that resists the portrayal of nonwhite masculinity as hyper-aggressive and hyper-sexual. This version of masculinity works to counter both the ideologies perpetuated by patriarchy and white supremacy of nonwhite men.

While the juxtaposition of Julian’s masculinity with Marcus’ reveals the novel’s investment in a destabilizing patriarchal ideologies of masculinity, the inconsistent reading of Julian’s race by Emma reveals the narrative’s investment in destabilizing whiteness, once more reinforcing the parallels between patriarchal and racial oppression to undermine the contemporary postracial narrative. Emma’s initial classification of Julian as obviously English reflects the fact that whiteness, like any other race, is a category made up of varying identity

markers and has served various purposes throughout U.S. history. Whiteness is not only marked by skin tone, but by other markers of identity such as speech, dress, mannerisms, economic standing, and codes of behavior. To Emma, Julian doesn't "seem Indian" upon their first meeting. Instead, she notes his "Oxford drawl" and though she observes that he is "very tanned," her appraisal of "his starched cravat and elegantly cut tailcoat" convince her that "of course he [is] English," suggesting that defining race is about more than just skin color (11).³⁵ This is particularly true in the twenty-first century. Min Zhou writes in "Are Asian Americans Becoming White?" that in "the United States, groups initially considered nonwhite, such as Irish and Jews, have attained 'white' membership by acquiring status and wealth" (354). Being categorized as white often has just as much to do with being part of the upper class as it does with one's skin tone. Part of what marks Julian as white for Emma are his speech and his English dress. Though she does not yet know that he is heir to a dukedom, it is clear to her that he moves in aristocratic English circles, and this knowledge alone is enough for her to assume that "of course" he, like her, is English and thus a fellow colonizer. Duran uses Emma's racial ignorance to highlight how groups in power are often white and how whiteness is constructed around characteristics other than just skin color.

The narrative pushes the boundaries of what a good heroine is by illustrating how Emma benefits from the structural power of white privilege by placing Julian in opposition to her views on colonization. For example, the initial meeting scene between Emma and Julian contrasts sharply with a later scene that occurs after the violence in Delhi. After fleeing the city, the two

³⁵ By referencing Julian (and Joss from Romain's *Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress*) as "tanned" or "dark," it is possible that Duran (and Romain) are both describing their mixed-race heroes in a strategically ambiguous way that aligns well with the idea in American culture that attractive men are ones who are "tall, **dark**, and handsome."

manage to a small village named Sukhpur where they can rest and refresh themselves. Emma wakes from a nap to see Julian in attendance at a Hindu religious service:

then everyone stood and approached the man with the tray. He smeared something on each of their foreheads, between the eyes. The Marquess, she saw with a shock, was one of the first recipients. [...] His calf-length tunic and loose trousers were in the native style, made of simple homespun cotton with no ornamentation. [...] and the red dot on his forehead called attention to his eyes [...]. If Marcus had reviled him before, he would have been apoplectic now, for Lord Holdensmoor looked anything but English (103).

While this scene may reflect the idea that for mixed-race individuals, changing races is as easy as changing clothes, I argue that it has more to do with Emma's perception of Julian changing from one of him being English to actually acknowledging his mixed race. Zhou writes that if one looks different from the white population, one can always be subject to "stereotypes [which] can emerge and un-whiten Asian Americans anytime and anywhere, no matter how 'successful' and 'assimilated' they have become" and suggests that "whitening has more to do with the beliefs of white America than with the actual situation of Asian Americans" (359). In both of these scenes, it is Emma's perception of Julian that changes based on his clothing and with whom he surrounds himself. With these temporary markers, it is quite easy for Emma to dismiss Julian as white and instead cast him as Other and as forever foreign based on these practices. The instant Julian does something that does not fit Emma's conception of being English, she emphasizes the differences between them.

Emma's unwillingness to read Julian as anything other than white recurs when Julian interacts with other Indian people. In this particular scene, Emma and Julian are surrounded by rebelling soldiers. In order to save their lives, Julian resorts to deception by telling the soldiers

that he wants to aid their cause and that he has captured Emma as a prize in the turmoil. To convince them of his loyalty, he cuts off Emma's long braid. Emma's resulting shock comes as she tries to make sense of Julian, noting that he sits with "his legs crossed and drawn inward before him. Not an English pose. But he'd had no difficulty convincing those sepoys of his native blood. They'd believed she was his captive. That he, too, had killed Englishmen during these wild days of anarchy. [...] It did not disgust her, this foreignness about him. How could it, when it had saved her life? But it unnerved her all the same" (124-126). When Emma confesses to Julian that she feels as if she doesn't know him, he challenges her comprehension of their journey:

"Do you want me to explain why it horrified you to see me deal with those sepoys? Why it would have been easier for you to watch me kill them, than to see me hand them your hair?" His pause was mercilessly precise. "Or do you want to hear me wonder whether your opinion would have been different if it were white men we talked of killing?"

She slammed her palm against the rock. "No! *That is not true!*" [...] "I don't know what to make of you! One moment you're the man I met in the Evershams' garden, and the next, you're someone else entirely!"

"I see." At length, he said, "If you must *make* something of me, the days ahead won't be easy for you. I am *not* just an English aristocrat, Emma. I was born in this country, and for many years of my childhood I knew only two words of English—my first and last name." His words gained speed, took on a sharper edge. "And I must say, if you think I have changed for the worse, that I have somehow *lost my way*, you are badly mistaken. The man you met in Delhi, the one you think you know—the fucking Marquess of Holdensmoor—*he* is the act. He is what I was forced to become." [...].

“You’re Indian then. You don’t consider yourself English. You are Indian.”

His tone was dry enough to burn. “What nice, convenient labels. If one works for you, by all means, don’t mind me. Few ever do, in that regard.” (126-128, emphasis in original)

At this point, the narrative demands, quite forcefully, that its readers recognize Julian’s mixed race, which highlights Emma’s colorblind racism as she has only ever considered Julian to be white. In doing so, the narrative prompts readers to consider just how rootless racial categories actually are. Julian’s insistent denial of being the Marquess of Holdensmoor serves as an emphatic denial of the way honorary whiteness often “rewards” certain individuals in American society with so-called positive racial stereotypes while assigning negative stereotypes to black and African American individuals.

Julian’s emphatic insistence to Emma that he is not just an English aristocrat indicates his desire to be acknowledged as mixed race. So often in colonial India, individuals who were mixed race, individuals who were Indian but desired positions in the British Empire, and British individuals who grew up in India were encouraged to renounce their affiliation with and affection for India in order to become proper members of the British Empire. For example, Adriana Valdez Young recounts that Rudyard Kipling, a “racially white, British writer who was born in India and was extracted from his ‘native land’ to be raised in Britain” was forced in his adult life to “homogenize his cultural identity and political allegiance to be only British, not both British and Indian” (181). For these men, being part of the British Empire required a suppression of other identities in favor of British masculinity.

In his repudiation of identifying solely as British, Julian is not only racially ambiguous, but nationally ambiguous as well. In her discussion of half-caste citizenship and the family

romance in novels by Onoto Watanna, Jolie Sheffer observes that “[t]he half-caste is a perpetual *foreigner-citizen*, a position marked by both presence and absence, hypervisibility and invisibility, possibility and lack” (85, emphasis in original). Julian’s ambiguity in terms of national belonging emerges when Emma realizes that he wishes success for the Rebellion, that he wishes for the destruction of the colonial project. If the “creed [of Anglo-Indian society] was that they were all going Home in the end,” it stands to reason that, during this particular time period, the British saw themselves as occupying India rather than inhabiting it (MacMillan 34). Julian’s birth in India along with his familiarity for the land, its language, and customs marks him as a one who inhabits a place rather than occupying it, calling his national identity into question.

Julian’s speech to Emma not only insists on his multiracial identity, but calls into question her complicity in the power structure of whiteness when he asks her if she would feel “different[ly] if it were white men we talked of killing.” He forces her to question the kind of protection she’s been accorded as a white woman, asking her to consider whether her hair is more valuable than the life of another human being, particularly a human being accorded lower status under the colonial system. Tuson remarks that middle-class British women who ventured to colonial India were “accorded an exalted status and, increasingly, as notions of Britain’s imperial civilizing mission developed, they were protected, nurtured, and, at the same time, disempowered, as its gentler and more fragile representatives. They were to be the velvet glove on the iron fist of colonial aggrandizement” (294). Though Emma has struggled against this conception, she does not recognize the ways in which her position as a white woman has been constructed against that of white British masculinity as well as Indian masculinity. Rather, Julian

must point out her racial double standard by suggesting that she would balk at the killing of white men and not at the murder of Indian men.

However, while the narrative insists on acknowledging Julian's mixed-race identity in the first half of the novel, this insistence falls by the wayside in the latter half of the novel. Instead, the narrative advances the postracial narrative by repeatedly referencing the power of Julian's aristocratic title, thus emphasizing his Englishness (and whiteness). Though Julian and Emma try to make sense of their memories of the rebellion in the second half of the novel, meditations on Julian's mixed-race identity are few and far between. The narrative reflects on Julian's racial identity only once in the second half of the novel when he discusses his childhood with Emma:

"When my mother's mother married an English soldier, her family disowned her. But after his death, my grandmother reestablished herself in the native community. Her son, my uncle, married a Hindu woman. My grandmother lived with them. But my uncle did not like to remember his English blood, so the household did not acknowledge my mother or her English husband." [...].

"It must have been horribly difficult to come here. Knowing nothing but India, I mean."

"Difficult?" He sounded intrigued by the idea. "Yes, I suppose so. Relearning English must have been tedious. I can't clearly recall. I think I was too confused by everything to really consider whether I liked it or not. And then, by the time my head cleared, it was too commonplace to question." (297-298)

In this passage, readers are told that both sides of Julian's family refuse to acknowledge his mixed-race identity. However, the second half of the novel, with its emphasis on Julian's aristocratic title, also refuses to acknowledge his mixed-race identity. In this sense, Julian's

aristocratic lineage whitens his racial identity, reflecting the erasure of race desired by postracial discourse.

Because the novel shifts its focus away from race in its second half, there is a sense that Julian's mixed race status resembles a journey with an end point: whiteness. The novel participates in the postracial narrative by expanding the boundaries of whiteness, and it does so by relying on the concept of honorary whiteness. Honorary whiteness is the idea that some racial minorities (often Asians/Asian Americans and American Indians) can be considered white so long as they govern their behavior according to standards that comply with the systemic power of whiteness. In return, these minority groups move up the socio-economic ladder and are granted better employment, housing, and education. The bestowal of (some aspects of) white privilege on minority groups who have historically not been considered white has been linked with the fortification of white supremacy. Adriana Valdez Young explains that honorary whiteness in Western culture entails "luring individuals to repress or magnify parts of their identities and aspirations in exchange for increased access to privilege. This rise to power occurs by conforming to the psychology of the *self*, (that of the dominant elite), while rejecting the *other*, (that of the excluded masses)" (179, emphasis in original). Under colonization, this fantasy of exception "rewarded Western psychology, and behaviors, and subservience to political and economic structures with increased social visibility and citizenship" (180). While Julian repudiates his whiteness in the first half of the novel, the second half of the novel reinforces his absorption into whiteness by emphasizing his status as Duke of Auburn. The narrative's emphasis on Julian's aristocratic lineage while in England reflects the invisibility of whiteness as a racial category, which in turn strengthens the colorblind rhetoric of the postracial narrative.

Conclusions

In an interview with *Bitch* magazine, four reviewers, Meoskop, Ridley, Rameau, and Beks, from the romance review website *Love in the Margins* take the common defense of romance as a genre “by women, for women” to task by asking “which women?” Beks notes that she “love[s] Happily Ever Afters. [...] But] hate[s] the idea that they belong exclusively to a certain type of white straight people” (*Love in the Margins* Staff). So often, racial, class, and sexual identities go unquestioned in the genre. The main couples in romance novels are nearly always white, aristocratic, and heterosexual. I believe that Meredith Duran attempts to combat aspects of this dominant portrayal through the publication of *The Duke of Shadows* and its mixed-race character and interracial couple who subvert character tropes. Though the narrative ultimately embraces some aspects of the postracial state, this should not negate the work on race that this novel does. Duran is participating in the creation of a new kind of romance, one that insists on diverse representation. The narrative insists that racism and other social ills can be solved by conversing with people who suffer discrimination based on some social identity to understand how a particular form of discrimination operates. By doing so, alliances form and the power to advocate for social change increases. Indeed, it is only when our white heroine and our mixed-race hero are united that they begin to heal each other and society by defeating Marcus, who, as the villain of the story, embodies colonial and patriarchal authority.

By having her heroine experience a recognition of her racial privilege, I also believe Duran is insisting that white individuals, particularly women, examine white privilege and its continuing legacy. Critical race theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that in comparison to other white social identities such as workers or men, it is “white women [who] are the most likely segment to express solidarity with racial minorities” as “actors who experience multiple

oppressions are more likely to share literally a ‘social space’ as well as a set of experiences that tend to develop a sense of commonality” (145). Bonilla-Silva’s observation is significant in that it emphasizes the potential for white, antiracist women to aid in the dismantling of the (rarely questioned) racial hegemony of our society by allying themselves with other groups of people who suffer under the systems of power and domination. While Duran’s novel ultimately embraces some aspects of the postracial narrative, it serves as an important call to social justice through its examination of the similarities and differences between different systemic oppressions. The next novel I analyze, *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan also examines these kinds of similarities and differences, albeit in a more complex manner. Milan’s narrative considers how unequal access to power—through nonwhiteness, through disability, through femaleness—ultimately impedes national belonging.

CHAPTER III: THE RECOGNITION SCENE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND PRECARIETY IN COURTNEY MILAN'S *THE HEIRESS EFFECT*

The Heiress Effect contests contemporary hegemonic ideologies enforced by dominant systems of power through the novel's attention to the role reading plays in understanding identity. Through the struggles faced by the novel's two couples, Milan's narrative uses the role of reading to offer a critique of white privilege, ableism, and misogyny. The narrative's consideration of unequal access to power based on identity illustrates the connection between performativity and precarity, underscoring the fact that non-hegemonic performances of identity often endanger those do not conform to norms governing gender, class, race, and ability. For example, in the novel, the main female characters are threatened with and experience physical harm for not adhering to patriarchal standards of femininity. Through its attention to the role of reading, *The Heiress Effect* challenges its readers to consider how asymmetrical access to power impedes national belonging.

Unlike the other novels examined in this dissertation, *The Heiress Effect* does not utilize a specific trope in an attempt to destabilize the postracial narrative. Genre tropes are recurring plot, setting, and/or character conventions. For example, some romance plot tropes used in the facilitation of the courtship plot are the marriage of convenience, friends to lovers, secret baby, and unrequited love. The romance genre relies on tropes for a diverse range of stories, but not all romance novels take up the same tropes. While the two other novels in this dissertation use tropes to challenge the postracial narrative (secrets and disguises and the innocent/naïve heroine), *The Heiress Effect* relies on one of the eight essential elements to disturb the postracial narrative. Unlike tropes, every romance novel, according to Pamela Regis, shares eight essential elements. Regis writes that "romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of

society between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal” (30). *The Heiress Effect* questions systems of power and domination more broadly through the recognition scene(s). Regis identifies the recognition as “a scene or scenes [in which] the author represents the new information that will overcome the barrier” to the union of the heroine and hero” (36). The recognition scene serves to overcome the barriers to the union of the heroine and hero, which frequently manifest in the form of trust and vulnerability issues, communication issues, and socio-economic differences. Milan’s use of the recognition scene takes a more intersectional approach to uniting her heroines with their respective heroes, and she does this by extending the recognition throughout the novel through an emphasis on the role of reading actions over reading bodies. In the novel, characters read and misread one another’s bodies based on identity markers such as race, class, gender, and ability. Those who learn to read beyond the body and recognize the importance of intersectionality are rewarded not only with the genre’s trademark “happily ever after,” but with individual sovereignty as well. As a consequence, Milan’s narrative challenges not only the contemporary postracial narrative, but also dominant narratives perpetuated by patriarchy and ableism as well.

Scenes of reading and misreading individuals through visual appearances and particular behaviors are used in the novel to expose the struggles oppressed groups have in creating and defining narratives of their own. In her depictions of characters reading and misreading each other, Milan shows the dangers of narrow versions of ideal citizenship as her main characters are harmed through their encounters with systemic oppression perpetuated by patriarchy, racism, and ableism. She suggests the importance of diverse representation in fiction to envision a more

progressive future in which people of all identities are recognized as legitimate citizens.

Reading—of novels, and of bodies—serves as a means to explore and understand experiences of oppression. Reading also marks certain characters beyond their identifying characteristics. Those who are skilled at reading demonstrate an inner life far richer than their physical appearance might suggest, which has a particular resonance for people typically defined by their bodily appearance (women, disabled people, racialized people). Misreading is used in two ways. First, it is used deliberately by the novel's main heroine Jane, who relies on others misreading her in order to achieve her goal of protecting her younger sister. She courts misreading of her body and her character by flouting societal expectations of class and gender. By rejecting patriarchal standards of upper-class femininity, Jane ensures that men are uninterested in courting her for marriage, allowing her to remain in her uncle's home to safeguard her sister. Second, Milan uses misreading to spark growth within a character to broaden understandings of national belonging. For example, Emily misreads Anjan's body solely as a colonial subject. When Anjan challenges her misreading through conversations on colonialism, Emily begins to change her perspective on the matter at hand. Thus, misreading becomes a way to explore and understand similar experiences of oppression, aligning different minority groups in common experience.

Locating Courtney Milan in the Romance Industry

Courtney Milan has had an interesting path to writing romance. Prior to publishing her first romance novel in 2010, Milan had worked as a scientist, a law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and as a professor of law.³⁶ When asked why she left these illustrious careers to write romance, Milan responds that "writing fiction that thousands and thousands of people will read is a lot more fun than writing law review articles that ten people

³⁶ In fact, legal issues are often thematized in Milan's oeuvre as her characters commonly encounter and challenge the legal system.

(most of them law review editors) will read,” adding that an important benefit to her current career is that she “make[s] money that doesn’t come from people taking out egregious student loans” (“About Me: FAQ” #2). Milan began her romance writing career with Harlequin in 2010 and published four historical romances under their HQN imprint, which publishes “full-length romance novels in all subgenres” (“Write for Harlequin: Harlequin HQN”). However, within two years of publishing her first novel, Milan chose to walk away from “a very nice deal” with Harlequin over the 8% digital royalties rate offered by Harlequin and decided to self-publish her subsequent books (Milan “Blog: On the Self-Publishing Horizon”).

Her decision to self-publish has been quite successful. In a 2013 interview with Dabney Grinnan for the *All About Romance* blog, Milan lays out the financial differences between her profits under Harlequin and her profits as a self-publisher through two of her novels—*Unveiled*, published by Harlequin, and *The Duchess War*, which Milan self-published:

As of my last royalty statement from Harlequin (sales through June of 2013), I’ve sold 34,569 English-language copies (print and digital) of *Unveiled*, the first book in my Turner series. I make between 56 and 65 cents per copy sold on that book (and pay my agent 15% on top of that). As of the end of November 2013, I’ve sold 96,430 English-language copies (print and digital) of *The Duchess War*, the first book in the Brothers Sinister series, at an average of \$2.31 per copy sold. *Unveiled* has been out more than twice as long as *The Duchess War*. (“An Interview With Courtney Milan”)

Milan observes that her financial success isn’t just due to the fact that she is taking home a bigger cut of the profits. Rather, she states that self-publishing has given her greater control over the marketing of her books as she now controls “the product, pricing, packaging, placement, as well as [the] promotion” of her books” (“Courtney Milan talks to AAR... and gives away five

copies of *The Suffragette Scandal!*"). As a self-publisher, Milan can market and promote her books in whatever way she sees fit. She contends that her Harlequin books were not marketed as successfully as they could have been, stating that the cover art of the novels "didn't reflect the aesthetic of modern romance," the back matter of didn't do anything to "grow [her] career," and the pricing was prohibitive to "drawing in any new readers." Now that she self-publishes, Milan controls every aspect of the product she produces. For example, she writes the back matter synopsis, prices her novels between \$0.99 and \$4.99, and the cover art of her historical novels features women in dresses with not a heaving bosom or ripped bodice in sight.

Having more control over her novels is an additional reason why Milan decided to self-publish, as she explains in an interview with Sarah Wendell on *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*:

Beyond the financial aspects, there are some creative components of my decision that are exciting and freeing. Under traditional publishing, every one of an author's books needs to be at or around the same level of commercial viability. That means there's pressure on authors to write to the largest segment of the market—and once they've captured that market, they have to keep writing towards it. So far, that pressure hasn't hampered my creative output. I have tons of ideas, and so I've selectively developed stories that are about the British aristocracy. Even so, I had to work to keep some plot points. For instance, I had to push to keep Mark, the hero of my upcoming *Unclaimed*, as a virgin. If I self-publish, the range of stories I can write widens. It's okay if not all my books aim for an audience of 100,000. ("Interview with Courtney Milan: Self Publishing Her Next Novel")

To keep Mark a virgin hero runs counter to not only the masculine ideal in romance, but also to the broader patriarchal understanding of masculinity in American culture. In American culture,

masculinity often is defined by (heterosexual) hyper-masculinity. The more women a man has sex with, the more he is seen by others as a “real” man. Under patriarchy, men conquer others (women and foreign nations), and sexual prowess is seen as one iteration of this masculinity. Self-publishing gives Milan the freedom to craft characters not often seen in romance freedom due to the fact that there is no publisher asking her to make her characters more generic and typical.

Courtney Milan’s insistence on representing characters of diverse backgrounds has not gone unnoticed in the online romance community. Romance bloggers frequently note Milan’s skill in developing stories that address social issues through the romantic relationships in the novel. Caz Owens of the romance review site *All About Romance* writes that Milan’s work “manage[s] to combine a well-developed love story with some serious social commentary, the latter presented in such a way as to never feel preachy or overly didactic” (Desert Isle Keeper Review: *The Heiress Effect*). In an interview with Milan for the personal finance website *The Billfold*, journalist Sara Brady remarks that “the modern romance genre is much better in terms of diversity than it was even ten or fifteen years ago, and [Milan’s] books are part of that” (“How Romance Novelist Courtney Milan Does, and Writes About, Money”). Milan notes in that interview that she shouldn’t be credited with diversifying the genre (that honor, she states, should go to authors like Beverly Jenkins and Selena Kitt, among others). However, it is quite clear that Milan’s narratives are fascinated with complex power relations and her characters—who so often can access only fragments of this power—triumphing over such systems of power and privilege. In a post on her Tumblr, Milan addresses a piece of fan mail that discusses the diverse characters in her most recent novel *Trade Me*, a New Adult romance. The anonymous commenter asks why Milan chose to make the novel “so class-conscious and have it feature an Asian heroine”

(Tumblr post no.108348699833). Milan responds that the matter is partly personal for her as her mother is Chinese. She follows this personal anecdote with an observation that though the experience of her Asian heroine living in poverty is likely to be a common reality while the experience of her hero, a young billionaire, is rare:

There are literally a thousand Asian students who enroll at Berkeley every year.

Statistically speaking, over the last couple dozen years, there have likely been at least hundreds of Asian students who have dealt with serious financial issues while attending Berkeley. Go beyond Berkeley, and I'm guessing that number is in the tens if not hundreds of thousands. By contrast, there are approximately zero twenty-three-year-olds who play a serious, important role in a major technology company that has a market capitalization of \$413 billion. Yet the questions I've been asked over and over are about Tina: Why are you writing a Chinese heroine? At Berkeley? Nobody has asked me, "Why a billionaire? You're not a billionaire." Nobody has said, "This is your tenth full-length book and up until this point, I had no idea you were Asian. What took you so long?" (Tumblr post)

Milan goes on to state that she has to "look askance at the world we live in, when an experience that is shared by hundreds and hundreds of people is the one that comes across as uncommon" (Tumblr post). It is evident from this post that Milan is committed to diverse representation in her fiction in order to better represent a world that so many individuals live in, but so rarely see reflected back at them in popular culture.³⁷

³⁷ This, of course, is not the only instance where Milan states her feelings of diversity in fiction. Please see the following for more statements: her blog post entitled "[Don't Enter More Than Magic](#)," her Tumblr post entitled "[Thank You, LBD \[Lizzie Bennet Diaries\]](#)," this [interview](#) with *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*

Until her recent work, most of Milan's narratives primarily centered on the social issues of gender and class, which is typical for historical romance. Though Milan has recently published work dealing with race, sexuality, gender, and class set in the twenty-first century, she began to address these identities and the various ways they intersect with the publication of *The Heiress Effect* in 2013. In *The Heiress Effect*, Milan uses the act of reading to examine how intersections of identity affect access to power as her characters misread and read one another's visible markers of identity. Characters who learn to read beyond these visible markers to understand how these markers affect one's access to power are rewarded in the narrative. Those who continue to misread become the villains of the narrative. As the two main couples of the narrative learn to read each other beyond visible identity markers, the narrative illustrates how access to power differs based on the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities. Through Jane and Oliver, Milan explores the intersection of gender and class and analyzes the avenues of power accessible to each. Jane's access is hindered because of her illegitimate birth and gender, though bolstered by her wealth, while Oliver's access to power is impeded by his family's socio-economic status and his illegitimate birth, though as a man, he can access power more readily than Jane. Through the secondary romance between Emily and Anjan, Milan examines the intersection between gender and disability through Emily and gender and race through Anjan. In their romance, the misreading and reading of identity makes visible the limitations on their individual sovereignty based on intersectionality.

The Heiress Effect makes a number of demands on romance readers as it plays with and tests genre limits through the role of reading. Through Oliver and his reluctance to reject his privilege, the narrative tests readers' ideas and expectations in regard to what makes a hero an admirable character. The narrative plays with gender performance by having Jane manipulate

gender and class norms to her advantage by playing at being a “bad” heroine in order to safeguard her sister’s well-being. In addition to how the main couple plays with and pushes readers’ expectations of gender roles and behaviors, Milan’s “B” narrative asks readers to consider the importance of intersectionality to understanding identity through the ways Emily and Anjan first learn to read one another. They must learn to read beyond the identity markers of the other’s body in order to understand how they are each perceived by society more broadly. Before Emily and Anjan can write their future together, Anjan must learn how to see Emily’s gender and her disability in conjunction, and Emily must understand how colonialism and racism work simultaneously to limit Anjan’s opportunities. Once they understand the ways the other’s life is bounded by his/her body, the narrative insists on their right to belong to the nation through the institution of marriage.

Overview of Key Plot Points

Set in 1867 in Cambridgeshire, England, *The Heiress Effect* relies on a double romance for its plot. To clarify discussions of these two romance plots, I have designated these two romances as an A romance and a B romance. These terms have been borrowed by romance from screenwriting. In screenwriting, the A plot is where the majority of the plot’s action takes place. The B plot has less action, thus contributing to its secondary status. In a well-done story, the A and B plots intersect to deliver a satisfying conclusion to the action of both plot lines. As such, I will be referring to Jane and Oliver’s plot as the A plot with them as the A heroine and A hero, since their courtship plot comprises most of the action within the novel. Emily and Anjan’s plot will be designated as the B plot with the two characters as the B heroine and the B hero, respectively. In the case of *The Heiress Effect*, the A and B plots intersect whenever the two sisters interact with one another.

The A romance of the novel concerns heiress Jane Fairfield and aspiring politician Oliver Marshall, both of whom are acknowledged bastard children. Because each of their mothers was married to a man other than their respective biological father at the times of their births, neither is legally declared to be illegitimate. However, the truth of their biological fathers is known by everyone as Jane's biological father has left her enough money to be an extremely wealthy heiress, while Oliver is acknowledged by his half-brother, the duke of Clermont. The B romance concerns Jane's younger half-sister Emily and her suitor, Anjan Bhattacharya. Emily lives under the strict guardianship of her uncle Titus, who prescribes "a regimen of bland languishment" as he believes "exercise and excitement" bring on her epileptic fits (28). This regimen is punctuated only by physically harmful attempts by both doctors and charlatans to cure her of her epilepsy. As a nineteen-year-old, Emily chafes at the routine of nothingness and feels smothered by Titus' control. In turn, as one of the few Indian students at Cambridge, Anjan struggles to maintain his cultural identity as his classmates attempt to Anglicize him.

The novel begins with Jane counting the number of days until her sister Emily reaches her majority and will no longer be subject to their uncle Titus' guardianship. Though Jane is past her own majority and therefore has access to her vast fortune, she lives with Titus and Emily in order to shield and protect Emily as much as she can from the quack medical experiments to which Titus subjects her. Jane is allowed to stay under Titus' roof until a man proposes to her. As an heiress, Jane is a desirable marriage prospect for many men. In order to stave off marriage proposals and continue to protect her sister, Jane counters the benefit of her wealth by being as gauche as possible in social situations. She designs her gowns and jewelry to excessive proportions, indicating that she lacks refinement. When in mixed company, she disregards the social strictures that govern the behavior of women. By flouting these social norms, Jane behaves

in a way that decreases the attractiveness her wealth brings her as a marriage prospect. Jane's scheme is first challenged when she meets Oliver Marshall, who, rather than seeing her as an abhorrent woman, recognizes that Jane is being dreadful on purpose.

Oliver comes to Cambridge to meet with the Marquess of Bradenton, who holds a great deal of political power that Oliver wants to utilize to gain approval of what is to be the Representation of the People Act of 1867 (also known as the Reform Act of 1867). Oliver desires to pass this bill to give his non-biological father, Hugo Marshall, the right to vote. He sees Hugo as a man who gave him everything—education, love, a moral compass—even though he thinks his father would have been perfectly within his rights to hate him for being another man's biological child. Oliver's path becomes further entangled with Jane's when Bradenton requests that Oliver humiliate Jane in order to teach her a lesson on her proper place in society. If Oliver agrees, Bradenton promises not only a yes vote for the Reform Act, but also votes of several of his colleagues, thus guaranteeing passage of the Act.

Meanwhile, Emily avoids Titus' mandate that she rest and instead sneaks out of the house in an attempt to experience something other than the suffocating blandness of the medical routine prescribed for her. On her excursion, she has a seizure. She recognizes its onset and dashes into a pub to sit down so she doesn't collapse. She seats herself at a table occupied by Anjan Bhattacharya, a Cambridge student from India studying for his final examination in law. Intrigued by one another, the two arrange to meet along a semi-isolated path closer to Cambridge, and their walks lead to intellectual discussions around English law and a growing affection between the two. Emily's sneaking out is eventually discovered by Titus, and he forbids Emily to leave the house, though she manages to write to Anjan to tell him her uncle has discovered her deception.

As Bradenton's hatred of Jane grows more overt and borders on physical harm, Oliver chooses to not sacrifice Jane for the greater good of enfranchisement. He instead helps Jane expose Bradenton as a petty man obsessed with destroying a woman, gaining the support of Bradenton's former political allies. Though this triumph leads Jane and Oliver to confess their romantic feelings for one another, they decide that because of Jane's sister and Oliver's political ambitions, it is better that they not pursue a relationship, though Oliver promises that he will return should she need him to do so. After they part, Titus sends Jane away to his sister's home as punishment for meddling in Emily's care. Jane acknowledges that Titus is allowed by law to kick her out of his home, and agrees to go on the condition that she be able to write and visit Emily. However, she discovers that her aunt is planning to allow a persistent suitor access to Jane's rooms in an attempt to force her to marry. She writes to Oliver, and he goes to aid Jane right away.

Meanwhile, Titus' attempts to cure Emily of her epilepsy reach dangerous proportions as he ponders committing her to a mental institution. Emily runs away from Titus' home to London where Anjan has gotten a job through one of his friends from Cambridge. Emily and Anjan seek the permission and blessing of Anjan's mother and Emily's uncle for their marriage, convincing them that they have considered the difficulties that will face them as an interracial, inter-able couple and are prepared to support each other through whatever prejudice and discrimination comes their way. After discovering that Emily has run away to London to see Anjan, Jane and Oliver re-route to London where Jane realizes that Oliver still sees her as an impediment to his political career. So, rather than marrying him out of a sense of obligation, Jane calls him a coward and leaves him to start a charitable hospital. After the death of his aunt Freddy, Oliver realizes that the fear of not fitting in has made him into a different person than he wants to be and

that he has sacrificed Jane in favor of his political ambition. Oliver apologizes to Jane, promises to support her and never to fail her again, and asks if she is willing to marry him. Jane forgives him and accepts his marriage proposal.

Reader Reception

While the progressive themes of the novel are generally praised by reviewers, it does appear that Courtney Milan tests the limits of genre conventions with her atypical characters. *The Heiress Effect* earned an “A” grade from CarrieS while RedHeadedGirl gave the novel an “A+” at *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*. Caz at *All About Romance* gave the novel an “A,” while Meoskop at *Love in the Margins* gave the novel an “A-.” Several reviewers note their discontent with the relative lack of Oliver’s redemption arc. This is most remarked upon by the *Dear Author* reviewers who observe that Oliver pales as a hero next to Jane as a heroine stating that Oliver “is not her equal” (Litte “REVIEW: *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan”). Caz at *All About Romance* writes that Oliver’s reluctance to commit to Jane on the basis that she is not right kind of woman for a politician’s wife is “immediately apparent to the reader” as wrong, but notes that his reluctance does not ruin the story for her (“Desert Isle Keeper Review: *The Heiress Effect*”). She notes that while it “might not make him a perfect romantic hero, [...] it certainly makes him an interesting human being,” taking a more lenient approach to Oliver as a hero.

These feelings of ambivalence towards Oliver speak to the changing standards of masculinity in both the romance genre and American society at large. It is no longer enough for a hero to show up for a heroine in her time of need. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan indicate that showing up was the hero’s primary role in older romance novels:

[e]ither he was a catalyst meant to cause the heroine to achieve the main chemical reactions, or he was the standard to which the heroine had to conform in order to fulfill

her own happy ending. Now the hero must face at the very least some kind of journey and resolution alongside the heroine, and thus demonstrate his own worth. Romance readers expect for the most part a hero who will earn his own happy ending. (*Beyond Heaving Bosoms* 81-2)

What reviewers seem to find most problematic with Oliver is that he hasn't "demonstrated his own worth," especially in comparison to the three other main characters. Milan's three other protagonists each contend with misogyny, ableism, and racism due to their respective memberships in oppressed groups by virtue of their identities. By contrast, Oliver is the most privileged: white, heterosexual, male, mostly financially secure, politically powerful. For Milan to have Oliver fail his heroine by refusing (for much of the novel) to contend with the systems through which he derives much of his privilege is disappointing for many readers, to say the least. However, Oliver's reluctance to give up the benefits of his privileged position reflects a reality for many who stand by while others advocate and agitate for hegemonic standards to change.

The lowest review grades for *The Heiress Effect* come from *Dear Author* where the novel earned a "B+" from Janine Ballard along with the designation of a DA Recommended Read while Jane gave it a "B-." Janine notes that the novel at times did not work for her due to the novel feeling too didactic in its progressive messages. To her credit, Janine speculates she isn't sure "whether it is because the strength of the messages can get in the way of the romanticism of the narrative, or whether it's that the messages stand out more because they are feminist and progressive, which [she] like[s], but which isn't typical of the genre. [She] suspect[s] it's some of both" (Ballard "REVIEW: *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan"). Additionally, Janine expresses doubt in the resolution of Anjan's storyline. She writes that

[i]n discussing the book's premise with Sunita, who has not read the book, [she] learned that Anjan's last name indicates that he belongs to a high caste (Brahmin). It is very unlikely that someone in his position would have married an English woman, especially in 1867, although it is possible. It is even less likely that such a marriage would have won approval from Anjan's mother.

This quote from Janine's review of the novel speaks to the overwhelming whiteness of the genre and the white privilege that is endemic throughout the genre. This criticism of historical accuracy is a measure of white privilege because the doubting of the interracial relationship is the only instance in Janine's review where she cites historical inaccuracy as a reason to doubt the optimistic ending for the character. In other words, the possibility of an interracial relationship between a high-caste individual and a white woman is too fantastic for a belief in the couple's happily-ever-after. In considering the rest of the novel, Janine does not cite historical inaccuracy in regard to believing the optimistic ending for Jane and Oliver; rather, she cites Oliver's redemption for this reason, stating that "[she] did believe in Oliver's desire to fit in, and in the ways this hurt his relationship with Jane. But for this reason, [she] wanted a bigger grand gesture, sacrifice, or other balancing of the scales by Oliver at the end of the book. This is a redemption story, and the redemptive arc needed to be stronger" (Ballard). This rejection of optimistic endings for characters of color may seem to some to be a way to do historical justice to the stories of people of color; however, an insistence on such detailed historical accuracy only reifies white supremacy in the genre through its insistence on representing only white characters.

Throughout her romance writing career, Milan's narratives have been critiqued for a lack of historical realism that then impinges upon the believability of the requisite happy ending. Three years prior to the publication of *The Heiress Effect*, Milan addressed these critiques in a

post on her blog entitled “Fairytale of Meritocracy.” In this post, she acknowledges that some readers “don’t want their historical romance to reflect modern sentiments” and that these people probably will not enjoy her novels (“Blog: Fairytale of Meritocracy”). Milan writes that she prefers to write books that are historically extraordinary rather than historically accurate: “I write my books to feel relevant to the struggles of today, not to escape them. I *acknowledge* the norms of the time, but I don’t let them win” (“Blog: Fairytale of Meritocracy”). These “historically extraordinary” characters take their inspiration from historical figures who challenge hegemonic social norm; Milan states that “[w]hen most people get in a fight with reality, reality wins. But there are a handful of people I would back against the crushing weight of reality,” citing Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sandra Day O’Connor as these kinds of people (“Blog: Fairytale of Meritocracy”). While not all of Milan’s characters embody this extraordinariness, the desire to push the boundaries of societal norms regarding class, race, and gender is a thread that runs through all of her novels.

Revising the Recognition Scene

Though this dissertation’s overarching focus is on interracial relationships in romance novels, this particular chapter focuses on the way Courtney Milan extends the recognition throughout the course of the novel by focusing on how each heroine/hero learns to recognize her/his true love by learning to read *beyond* visible markers of identity. Through the role of reading, the narrative challenges the authority of systems of power and privilege through a consideration of how performativity of identity becomes tied to precarity for those who are not advantaged by such systems. The narrative does this explicitly by illustrating various levels of reading bodies: Jane is misread by the villain Bradenton and he reacts with violence when he realizes he’s misread her (and that she’s better at manipulating the perceptions of others than he

is); Oliver must learn to read Jane correctly and find the courage to author his own story rather than the one expected of a man of his social class. Emily and Anjan are set up as readers who take the time to read one another correctly through their courtship conversations, and then must author their own atypical happily ever after. By analyzing the role reading plays in the novel, we can see the ways the narrative examines and critiques contemporary hegemonic ideologies to push readers to ultimately question their own assumptions regarding the systems of power that govern how we understand gender, (dis)ability, and race.

Reading and Misreading Jane and Oliver

In the A plot of the novel, Milan uses Jane and Oliver to examine and critique dominant ideologies perpetuated through the policing of gender and class. Through the deliberate construction of Jane's body to invite misreading by those in power, Milan draws on postmodern understandings of the body and gender made popular by Judith Butler and her theory of performativity, which argues that our understanding of gender is made normal by the way we enact gender norms that have been prescribed by patriarchy over and over again every day. Butler argues that these norms are oppressive to those who suffer under a patriarchal and heterosexist system and that challenges to these norms are necessary to diminishing the power of these norms. Butler's theory of performativity applies to Jane's performance of gender and class, evoking a strong commentary in the novel that aligns with contemporary feminist issues like speaking out against sexism and misogyny in traditionally male-dominated environments, demanding better media representation, and agitating for equal rights under the law. Through Oliver's struggle to be read by those in authority as a valid possessor of that power, Milan lays out the stakes in choosing to conform to dominant ideologies rather than challenge them. Oliver's desire to be read as legitimate by those in power, both in terms of birth and in terms of

subjectivity, is presented as hollow and cowardly in Milan's narrative as the legitimacy Oliver seeks would only reproduce the oppressive systems he is attempting to overthrow. Only by challenging hegemonic norms can Jane and Oliver earn their happily ever after.

In order to understand how Jane deliberately provokes a misreading of her gender and class, it is important to establish an understanding of Judith Butler's theories of performativity. Key to Butler's theory is the knowledge that the actions one takes, whether deliberate or not, are shaped by norms of patriarchy, heterosexism, white supremacy, and ableism (among others). In an interview with Vasu Reddy in *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, Butler discusses the ways in which our social identities are constrained by forces outside our control, stating that "there are norms into which we are born—gendered, racial, national—that decide what kind of subject we can be" (117). By acting in accordance with these norms, patriarchy and heterosexism are reproduced, and the fact that gender is culturally produced rather than an inherent fact remains hidden. This is gender performativity. Butler points out, however, that this enacting of norms is "always a negotiation with power" and that "there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines" ("Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics" i). For Butler, these circuits of power are never closed precisely because they depend upon the recreation of the established norms, and every person remakes these norms in their own way as a "negotiation with power." The challenge to power is what Butler finds so fascinating about drag performance, stating that the "point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested" (*Undoing Gender* 218). In *The Heiress Effect*, Jane's performance of upper-class femininity is a challenge to patriarchal gender norms that

contests the reality created by the values espoused by Bradenton that have been codified into law. The narrative reforms this reality into one that is more hospitable to women by the end of the novel as Jane and Oliver create a politicized domestic sphere in which to challenge the perpetuation of sexism and misogyny, racism, and ableism.

In order to illustrate precisely how Jane subverts the gendered and classed norms of society in Cambridgeshire, the narrative relies on readers' knowledge of traditional gender roles and behaviors, particularly those established in historical romance. Historical romance is a subgenre where gender roles and behaviors are made explicit, which is one reason why feisty heroines who rail against these traditional gender expectations are so popular within the genre. While the first wave of romance scholarship in the 1980s critiqued the genre for a lack of feminism, romance authors have been weaving feminist themes into their stories since at least the 1990s, if not earlier.³⁸ The common statement regarding feminism in romance novels is that these are stories where women act and, in many, obtain, maintain, and/or retain their agency from the beginning of the narrative to the end. Patriarchal expectations now serve a common purpose in romance in keeping the heroine from achieving her goals. Milan's narrative stays true to the tradition of challenging patriarchy through Jane's refusal to acquiesce to the demands of the villain Bradenton and the hero Oliver.

In *The Heiress Effect*, Jane performs the gendered and classed norms of her society, and the fact that she performs them badly exposes them as "non-natural and nonnecessary" (Butler *Undoing Gender* 218). While the main purpose of this performance is to keep marriage proposals at bay, Jane's performance of these norms illustrates to readers that the "terms by which we are

³⁸ For this first wave of critiques, please see Snitow, Greer, Modleski, and Radway. For an accounting of feminist themes, one may wish to consider Jayne Ann Krentz's *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*.

recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable,” rather than stemming from some inherent quality (2). Though escape from these norms is not possible, challenges to them can be mounted and serve as “an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation” (4). Jane challenges these norms by performing an intersection of gender and class in a subversive manner that just skirts the edges of respectability when she is in public. Through Jane’s deliberate subversion, the narrative mounts a challenge to the standards espoused by patriarchy and classism and asks readers to consider how their lives are subject to such standards.

In *The Heiress Effect*, these gendered and classed norms are set up in the novel’s first scene as Jane tries on a new dress in the company of her two friends. Jane compares herself to the Johnson twins, Genevieve and Geraldine, observing that “[t]he two young ladies could do no wrong in the eyes of society. They wore almost identical day gowns—one of pale blue muslin, the other of pale green. They wielded identical fans, both covered with painted scenes of bucolic idleness. They were both beautiful in the most clichéd, china-doll fashion: Wedgwood-blue eyes and pale blond hair that curled in fat, shining ringlets. Their waists came in well under twenty inches” (4). Milan uses the Johnson twins to set up the importance of feminine beauty to the patriarchal worldview espoused by the powerful and privileged characters of the novel. By establishing the Johnson twins as the epitome of this cultural standard of beauty, Milan highlights one of the ways Jane does not fit into the social norms of the society.

Milan further demonstrates Jane’s challenge to societal norms through her refusal to exhibit traditional markers of class status and taste. While the norm of feminine beauty is

established by contrasting Jane with the Johnson twins, the norms of class and taste are established through Jane's gown and the reactions of the seamstress and the Johnson twins. Whereas the gowns of the Johnson twins embody the prized upper-class feminine qualities of submissiveness, idleness, and delicacy, Jane's gown is ostentatious and loud, described in the novel as

overflow[ing] with three different kinds of lace. Thick waves of blue *point de gaze* had been wrapped, yard after obnoxiously expensive yard, around the skirt. A filmy piece of *duchesse* lace from Belgium marked her décolletage, and a black Chantilly in a clashing flowered pattern made dark slashes down the sleeves of her gown. The fabric was a lovely patterned silk. Not that anyone would be able to see it under its burden of lace frosting. This gown was an abomination of lace, and Jane loved it. A real friend, Jane supposed, would have told her to get rid of the lace, all of it. (5, emphasis in original)

The Johnson sisters advise Jane to add more lace to the gown, and Jane agrees, even though she knows the sisters think her “a complete buffoon, devoid of taste and sense and reason” (6). Key to understanding this scene is Jane's knowledge that her lace gown spurns the feminine standards of beauty exemplified by the Johnson twins. In demonstrating her deliberate flouting of societal norms governing class and gender, Jane achieves her purpose of inviting others, particularly men who want to marry her, to misread her as the antithesis of everything a well-bred young lady ought to be.

Over the course of the narrative, Jane reveals that though she currently defies societal norms on purpose, she started off breaking them because she simply was unaware of these standards. Jane recounts to Oliver that she did not initially set out to topple gender and class norms, saying that she moved to her uncle's house “want[ing] *friends*” and desiring to fit in with

local society in Cambridge (81, emphasis in original). This desire, however, was thwarted because she did not understand the norms that govern upper-class women:

“I’d never had a governess. I had never had an etiquette lesson. My uncle purchased a book for me.” [...] “It was sixteen years out of date.” [...].

“I had nobody to instruct me on my gowns. All I knew was what I liked, and what I like is dreadful.” [...]

“I have never been good with names, but when I called Mr. Sanford ‘Mr. Smith’ on accident, you would think that I had robbed a carriage at gunpoint. I ate the wrong foods. I asked questions about trade in mixed company. I have always talked too much, and when I’m nervous, I have difficulty stopping. Is it any surprise that I did everything wrong?” (82)

In this passage, Milan takes pains to illustrate that gender is something that is learned, even though it is often presented to us as something that people innately know how to perform. Though Jane challenges gender norms to her benefit throughout the course of the narrative, Milan shows readers that Jane’s resistance to hegemonic norms has been cultivated over time, illustrating Butler’s point that norms of gender are made and re-made through the repetition of actions. Butler states in an interview with Liz Kotz that “[p]erformativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Butler Kotz Interview 84). These challenges to gender norms are subversive resignifications of hegemonic norms in that they “openly display[...] their status as re-enactments of norms, thereby revealing that these norms require perpetual re-enactment and are thus inherently unstable”

(Stone 14, emphasis in original). In the following passage, Jane reveals to Oliver how she began to force societal norms to resignify in ways that allow her a modicum of agency:

“They thought I was awful? Well, I would give them awful. They wanted to gawk at my ignorance? Well, I would give them something to gawk at. They’d exaggerated my flaws just to have someone to laugh at, and so I vowed to make them exaggerations no more. The more they mocked me, the harder it would be for them.” [...]. ‘I *hate* them. I didn’t choose this role, Mr. Marshall. But it chose me, and I have used it.’ (82, emphasis in original)

In showing the cultivation of Jane’s resistance to hegemonic norms, Milan illustrates the way Jane has exercised agency under a system that rejected her. In doing so, Milan challenges her readers consider the ways in which we learn to enact gender *and* how the ways we enact our gender are subject to societal policing by those who read and misread these norms through our bodies.

Jane’s performance of gender and class mocks the hegemonic system that governs her life in Cambridgeshire. Rather than using her beauty and wit to entice male suitors and adhere to the role dictated for her by patriarchy, Jane obscures her beauty via her flamboyant dresses and uses her wit to insult the men of Cambridgeshire to their faces, though the deliberateness of her actions is always covert. For example, upon meeting Jane for the first time, Oliver notes that “she *should* have been pretty” but that “looking at her was like picking up a luxurious peach and discovering it half-taken over by mold” (12, emphasis in original). And during dinner, she insults the intelligence of the men at the table, telling one man that she “had not thought [him] to have the capacity of intellect to read physics,” asking another if he “was going to take elocution lessons, and when he said no, [...] assur[ing] him that nobody worth knowing would hold the

quietness of his speech against him,” and suggesting to the Marquess of Bradenton that he had mental deficiencies, but if that were true “nobody will ever notice them so long as you make absolutely certain to introduce yourself as a marquess first” (17; 18). In each of these exchanges, Jane insults powerful men and eludes repercussions because she acts as if she simply doesn’t know any better. By performing gender and class crudely, Jane invites those in power to misread her character, opening herself up to mockery and snide remarks that she is “irritating” (20). However, Jane’s actions do more than simply irritate; for Bradenton, a marquess and politically powerful man, Jane is a threat because she “doesn’t know her place and is too stupid to be taught it by the normal methods” of the silent treatment and caustic remarks about her person (32). Jane’s performance of gender and class reveals to the society of the novel and to readers the instability of the systems—patriarchy, white supremacy, aristocracy—from which Bradenton’s power is derived. Jane points out to Bradenton that they each have been the beneficiary of social elevation through no action of their own, and her observation is met with violence:

“We’re simple people. The sort that nobody would care about if circumstances were different. I’m elevated by my fortune. You’re elevated by your title.”

He made a sound of disbelief. “That’s why you spurned me? Because you think you’re my *equal*?” There was an ugly tone in his voice.

Her heart beat faster. She put him off because that was what she *did*. But perhaps she’d made a special effort with him. Others had talked and laughed about her, but after those first few weeks, he’d encouraged them. And he’d tried to pretend he didn’t. [...].

“You *do* need my money,” Jane said. “Don’t you?”

“Shut up.”

“Of course.” Jane kept her face a mask of solicitude. “I feel dreadfully for you. How embarrassing that must be. You write all the laws, you can’t lose your lands even by mismanagement, and yet with all those advantages, you can’t even fix the game to turn a profit on your own estates. Good heavens; that must take singular skill.” [...].

“You must have been so disappointed. You imagined my dowry was yours, and then I laughed at you the first time you gave me a grandiose compliment.”

If anything, his eyes grew angrier. “You little bitch,” he whispered. “You’ve been doing it on purpose.” (102-103, emphasis in original)

Here, Jane inadvertently reveals her subversion by telling Bradenton that she has authored his misreading of her body and actions. In revealing her authorship, Jane tells Bradenton that not only does she think his system is ridiculous, but that the power he thinks of as innate has no basis in reality. Jane’s existence (and later, success) in society forces Bradenton to recognize and acknowledge that his form of power is no longer as reliable as it once was. Milan’s villainization of Bradenton is important because it demonstrates how the maintenance of power is often invested in the oppression of those who do not conform to societal norms.

Through Jane’s narrative, readers are asked to consider what misogyny looks like and the repercussions women suffer when they attempt to counter misogyny. Jane’s subversion of gender is one that threatens the entire system that designates Bradenton as a dominant force in society. Jane’s repeated refusal to engage in these gender and class norms is a direct refutation of Bradenton’s power. Her challenge to these norms further subverts the system Bradenton relies upon for power when she exposes his villainy publically. She exposes the bargain he made with Oliver at a dinner party before Bradenton’s political allies with the help of Oliver and the Johnson twins and proclaims herself the victor in the game where Jane “play[s] at ignorance and

[Bradenton] play[s] at insults” (141). In this victory over Bradenton, Jane demonstrates publicly that she does not need to conform to Bradenton’s system of power in order to live a recognizable life.

While a victory against systemic injustice is important, Milan, through Jane’s narrative, insists that this is not enough. It is one thing to stand up to those in power, like Bradenton, whose reliance on oppressive systems and tendency toward violence render him abhorrent to the reader. It is quite another thing to call out a loved one on their commitment to these oppressive systems as Jane does with Oliver. While Oliver clearly loves Jane, he is not willing to marry her because he sees marriage to her as political suicide. He tells Jane that she is “a doer of impossible things. [And he] need[s] a wife who will stick to the possible,” choosing safety in conformity to hegemonic norms (148). When the two eventually have sex, Oliver does ask Jane to marry him out of a sense of obligation and propriety.³⁹ Oliver suggests that with some training in social graces, Jane would be a suitable wife for him:

“I know there will be difficulties, but we can work them out. Minnie can sponsor you; she could get the Dowager Duchess of Clermont to train you [...]” [...].

“A few lessons on what? Jane’s chin came up, but her lips trembled. “On how to act, how to behave, how to dress. Is that what you mean?”

He couldn’t say anything.

“Tell me, Oliver, how long do you think it will take me to learn to hold my tongue? To talk quietly? To dress as everyone else does?” [...].

³⁹ It should be noted for non-romance readers of this dissertation that many romance authors depict their heroines having sex before marriage, but (often) only with the hero. See Jodi McAlister’s recent PhD thesis on the connections between virginity loss and demisexuality in romance novels.

“I’ve made a career of keeping quiet. Someone from my background has to be particularly careful. My brother can advocate whatever he wishes; I have to be cautious. To make sure that when people think of me, they think of a reasonable man. Someone who is just like them. Someone who...”

“Someone who doesn’t have an awful wife,” Jane said. Her voice was thick.

“Yes,” he whispered. And then seeing that flash in her eyes, he shook his head.

“No. That’s not what I meant. It’s just what everyone else would think.” [...]

“It’s just as well you don’t want an *awful* wife,” she told him, “because I had hoped for a husband with a little courage.” (244)

Though Jane and Oliver have spent the majority of the novel fighting systemic patriarchy and classism in the form of Bradenton, the villain of the A plot, Oliver professes in this exchange similar beliefs to the ones that maintain the systems of power and privilege he and Jane have worked to disrupt. In Jane’s refusal to acquiesce to these initial terms of marriage, Milan illustrates that the more difficult fights for those who wish to abolish hegemonic norms are the fights that affect and involve our loved ones. Milan shows how oppressive ideologies perpetuated by systems like patriarchy appeal to and are espoused by those beyond the privileged classes through Oliver’s reluctance to accept Jane as she is.

Oliver’s reluctance to give up his privilege and, as a consequence, the support of his political peers, illustrates the ways power and success are often associated with whiteness and masculinity in American culture. Though Oliver is advantaged in Western society because of his race and gender, his class and supposed low birth are disadvantages and held as marks against his character. Richard Dyer writes that white men are commonly thought to be enterprising, stating “[e]nterprise’ is an aspect of both spirit itself—energy, will, ambition, the ability to think

and see things through—and of its effect—discovery, science, business, wealth creation, the building of nations, the organization of labor” (31). Dyer explains, however, that these qualities are not as easily accessible to all white men. He writes that “[t]he gradations of whiteness complicate [the narrative of light transcending darkness]. Lower-class and Latin whites of both sexes may also have the darkness, but it is less certain that they have the will to struggle against it. The really white man’s destiny is that he has further to fall (into darkness) but can aspire higher (towards the light)” (28). Oliver’s whiteness is complicated by his illegitimacy and his family’s lower-class status as tenant farmers. These factors serve as a way for characters in power (like Bradenton and other members of Parliament) to read him as less than white and as such, lacking the fullness of traits that comprise the subjectivity of white men. Oliver chooses to gain power by conforming to hegemonic norms, making him legible to those already in power: “he’d learned through long, hard experience that the only way forward was to keep quiet until he grew so tall they could no longer shove him down” (33). Upon securing this position of power, Oliver imagines that he will not just “wield it, but [...] that he might wrest it from the hands of those who abused it” in order to challenge hegemonic norms on a systemic level (33). Through Oliver’s character arc, Milan illustrates that the kind of power Oliver seeks is conditional and that it requires that he reinforce the boundaries of whiteness and patriarchy in order to maintain his power.

Milan sets Oliver’s desires against one another, and through Oliver’s eyes, these are mutually exclusive. Should he choose power via whiteness and hegemonic ideologies, he will forgo Jane and the chance at true love. Should he choose to marry Jane, the rationality conferred by his whiteness and masculinity will be under threat, and he will no longer be able to attain a

position of power by becoming a member of Parliament. Bradenton communicates this to Oliver after Jane is triumphant over him. He tells Oliver that he can't win, that Oliver and his lot

“might achieve a few trifling little victories here and there, but that's what it means to be you—that you can never stop trying. That every inch you win, you must fight to keep.”

[...]. “Men like me? I'm rare. I was born a victor. What I have cannot be given or taken away. What are you? You're one of a thousand similar men. One of ten thousand.

Faceless. Voiceless. It's men like me that run the country.” (144)

This reaffirms Oliver's desire to become a member of Parliament and secure a position of power. Rather than challenge the system through marriage to Jane, Oliver attempts to change the system from within. In doing so, the novel portrays him as falling victim to dominant ideologies of power as he abandons Jane not once, but twice. Both times, he cites her refusal to adhere to the hegemonic norms of gender and class as reasons for why he cannot marry her: “She was Jane of the too-bright gowns. Jane of the dubious reputation. Jane, too blunt, too outspoken. Too much a bastard, just like him” (147). Milan's narrative refuses to allow for the emotional justice promised by genre's requisite happily ever after until Oliver rejects the norms of gender and class and chooses to accept Jane as she is without demanding that she modify herself to aid his pursuit in accruing more political power.

Milan's novel stands apart from other romances because Oliver ultimately rejects these dominant ideologies (though, it should be noted, not nearly vehemently enough for a few romance reviewers). Whereas other novels advance their protagonists to positions of power by espousing hegemonic ideologies that privilege whiteness, industry, and middle-class world-views, *The Heiress Effect* has its hero reject these in favor of romantic love.⁴⁰ Oliver's rejection

⁴⁰ Such as Lisa Kleypas' *Mine Till Midnight* (2007) and *Seduce Me at Sunrise* (2008), Laura Lee Guhrke's *Secret Desires of a Gentleman* (2008), Eloisa James' *Much Ado About You* (2005).

of privilege—both the privilege he is granted for being white and male and the privilege he has gained through his upstanding, rational behavior to counter his so-called low birth—acts to fulfill one of Pamela Regis’ Eight Essential Elements for a romance: a corrupt society that the protagonists’ love will help heal and redefine.

Oliver must realize how his complicity with systemic oppression disenfranchises the voices of those with less social power than he in order to satisfy generic requirements, and this revelation is facilitated by the death of his agoraphobic Aunt Freddy. Freddy insists that Oliver is like her in that he remembers the pain of social rejection and retreats from it. Milan then demonstrates that it is Oliver’s acceptance of societal rules rather than societal upheaval that has changed the course of his life when Oliver reflects on his similarities to his aunt:

Once he’d been like [his sister] Free, unwilling to back down or take “no” for an answer. The question wasn’t when things had changed. It was this: When had he decided to simply accept society’s rules, to play the game precisely as it had been laid out by those who already had power? [...]. [It had happened] [w]hen he’d finally learned to keep his mouth shut. When he’d discovered that he could accomplish more by holding his tongue and biding his time than by lashing out with fists and shouts. He’d made a career of quiet, he’d told Jane. But at some point, quiet no longer carried the day. If he never learned to speak, what would be the point of achieving power? (251-252)

In this passage, Milan clearly indicates to her readers the importance of voice and action. Because of his silence, Oliver is complicit with the oppression caused by classism and patriarchy.

In order to be worthy of Jane and to fulfill his redemptive arc, Oliver must reject the hegemonic power and privilege conferred upon him as a white male. He coerces Bradenton into

voting for the Reform Bill by reminding Bradenton that though he is part of a powerful minority, he will eventually be overwhelmed by the strength in numbers of the majority, and the narrative commends him for not trading his “bravery for his ambition” (253). Oliver acts on his own, knowing that it is unfair to rely on Jane to consistently be the one provoking systems of authority. Having secured Bradenton’s vote, he asks Jane to marry him, asking ““Let me be the one who supports you. Who believes that you must not be any less. Who adds to your magnificence instead of asking you to make yourself less”” (259). In the epilogue, we see both characters fulfilling a social justice mission as Jane has opened a charity hospital with money from her inheritance, and Oliver is a member of Parliament, championing his wife’s charitable causes. This is significant because while romance novels are often cultural texts where women “win” their stories, these scenes often take place in the domestic sphere (often with the heroine and hero in bed together) rather than the public sphere. Milan’s choice to end her novel in the public sphere suggests that romantic love should not be confined to the domestic sphere, but that it can and should be used to effect positive social change in the public sphere.

Though the epilogue takes place in Jane and Oliver’s home, Milan’s epilogue belongs to the public sphere. The gathering in the epilogue is a benefit for the charity hospital where the powerful mingle, which speaks to the kind of political power Jane and Oliver have amassed, even as Jane still refuses to observe the hegemonic norms of upper-class femininity. One of Oliver’s colleagues from Parliament notes that though he considers Jane to be “[t]oo loud” and “[t]oo bright” (as she still dresses in ostentatious gowns) and that there has “never been anything of subtlety to her,” these characteristics have not impeded her as “[p]eople pay attention to her” and Oliver has “only gained respect as her husband” (261). He asks how Oliver knew marrying Jane would benefit his political career and not destroy it, and Oliver replies: “I had seen her in

action. I knew what she could do” (261). The narrative ends the A plot with an emphasis on action, which Jane and Oliver are only able to take once they recognize each other’s capabilities. In learning to read beyond performance, Jane and Oliver have made a space where subversion is no longer the only tool available and where they are both made legible to society. Having found strength together, they work to change systemic inequality through their shared social and economic power.

(Mis)Reading Bodies: Gender, (Dis)Ability, and Race

In the B plot of *The Heiress Effect*, Milan again utilizes the element of recognition to question to systems of power and privilege. While Jane facilitates the misreading of her body by others in the A plot, the B plot is concerned with Emily and Anjan, who are constantly misread by others *because* of their bodies. In other words, they cannot elude the performance dictated by their bodies. Emily is misread by others as frail and weak because of the confluence of her femininity and disability, and Anjan is misread by others because of his race. Emily struggles against the insistence of the medical experts and charlatans employed by her uncle that her knowledge of her own body is flawed because she is a woman. Titus himself insists that she is a girl full of “frailties” and capable of easily becoming “overly emotional” due to her epilepsy (26; 27). Whereas Emily is read by others as frail and weak, Anjan is read by others as both a (sexual) threat and as content with and consenting to colonization. Judith Butler explains that performativity is linked to a condition she identifies as precarity when performativity precludes the recognition of a person as a subject:

To be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition—that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one’s life. [...]. [And so it is] on the basis of this question, who

counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity (iv).

The repeated misreading of the disabled and non-white body indicates the precarity to which both Emily and Anjan are subjected, respectively. Each misreading illustrates the precariousness of their lives under the oppressive systems that structure their respective lives and refuse to recognize them as legitimate subjects. Only by learning to read beyond the body can lives be made less precarious. Emily and Anjan must *learn* to read past the physical to consider how the other is regarded by systems like racism, patriarchy, the medical establishment, and colonialism. After Emily and Anjan learn to read one another beyond the surface of the body, they proceed to author their own happily-ever-after.

In the romance genre more broadly, characters with disabilities tend to be minor characters used to advance the plot of the heroine/hero in the romance genre. In Ria Cheyne's article "Disability Studies Reads the Romance," she observes that Patricia Puccinelli's yardstick concept is a useful tool for considering whether characters with disabilities are being portrayed justly. The yardstick concept is "the capacity to act as or provide a measure against which other characters in the narrative are assessed. From this measurement the reader makes judgments about the other characters" (qtd. in Cheyne 44-45). Cheyne explains that "[d]eveloping empathy for the heroine and/or hero is vital in romance, and yardstick characters are frequently deployed in romance novels to achieve this," particularly in regard to the heroine as yardstick characters allow the heroine to express a kind and generous nature (45).

In addition to using characters with disabilities as an indication of the heroine's character, the genre often fixates on disabilities as markers of difference and barriers to relationships. Ridley, a reviewer and blogger at *Love in the Margins*, takes the genre to task for portraying

characters with disabilities as being flawed for not being whole, thus perpetuating ableism rather than challenging it (“Some Thoughts on Physically Disabled Protagonists”). Consequently, romance tends to “reduce disabled characters to nothing more than cheap gimmicks. It defines people solely by their bodies and how they deviate from the ideal” (Ridley). According to this criticism, the genre overwhelmingly tends to reinforce portrayals of characters with disabilities as either sweet and child-like, thus denying full emotional complexity, or in ways that present the disability as a flaw to overcome or the character’s primary source of conflict.

Courtney Milan proves to be an exception to this rule, not just with *The Heiress Effect*, but with other novels she’s written as well. On *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, reviewer Redheadedgirl notes that “Courtney has a habit of putting fully-formed, well-rounded characters with disabilities in her books—Ash and his dyslexia, Smite and his PTSD, Minnie and her agoraphobia” (“Book Review: *The Heiress Effect* by Courtney Milan”). What is important here is the notion that these characters are ones that are well-rounded and that their stories are told completely rather than simply being an accessory to the plot. In *The Heiress Effect*, Emily’s disability is certainly important to the plot and to Jane’s narrative, but Milan is careful to indicate that Emily’s epilepsy is not what needs to be overcome; rather, it is Titus’ patriarchal strictures that are the problem that must be surmounted by the narrative.

In a similar way, the romance genre’s portrayal of non-white characters remains a point of frustration for many working within the genre. While some mainstream romance authors populate their novels with non-white characters, the portrayal of non-white characters in romance remains relatively sparse. This paucity is tied to the state of publishing in romance as the portrayal of nonwhite characters is nearly always limited to the subgenre of multicultural romance. In a roundtable published on *Love in the Margins* in December 2013, authors who

write multicultural romance were invited to talk about the state of the multicultural romance. When asked to comment on how publishers can assist in growing the market for multicultural romance, several of the roundtable's authors identified marketing support as an issue, perhaps speaking to the underlying white supremacy hegemony of the publishing industry. Author Lena Hart observes that multicultural romance "is a genre that has almost a cult like following but the publishing 'gatekeepers' choose to ignore it for now. [...]. Publishing chooses to see the color, not the content and thus it gets judged, packaged, and shoved into this 'box' [apart from other romance fiction subgenres]" ("Multicultural Romance Roundtable"). Because multicultural romance is so marked by skin color, it is not seen by the publishing industry as a genre for every body and thus less lucrative as it is not reaching the largely white, mainstream romance audience. In refusing to devote more resources to multicultural romance, mainstream publishing upholds and reinforces the racist understanding of white being the default for a normative human body and the view that a universal perspective is one informed by white experiences, white history, and white cultural standards.

Emily and Anjan's courtship is particularly important for romance novels as so much of the genre is not just white, heterosexual, and upperclass, but able-bodied as well. Recently, members of the online romance community have been quite vocal about with their displeasure at this homogeneity. In an interview with *Bitch Magazine*, the reviewers at *Love in the Margins* discuss the reasons for founding their site, saying that they were frustrated that discussions of romance online continued to focus on straight white characters and that they felt it was "time to do something about it, to offer a different perspective" according to Beks (*Love in the Margins* Staff). When a genre explicitly promises emotional justice and unconditional love for those who risk and struggle for that love, a plethora of different perspectives becomes immensely important

in order to ensure that the promise of emotional justice and unconditional love are represented as possible for all people, regardless of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. Having diverse portrayals of people falling in love and being rewarded for it is especially important as these stories are few and far between for individuals with disabilities. Sarah Smith Rainey observes in *Love, Sex, and Disability: The Pleasures of Care* that “[a]lthough it is easy to find people with disabilities in popular culture, it is not easy to find these characters in love relationships, especially with nondisabled people” (29). She goes on to note that when these romantic relationships do get represented in popular culture, “love between a disabled person and a nondisabled person is represented as a tragedy” (31). The romance genre has the ability to represent inter-able love stories not as tragedies, but as successes, and Courtney Milan attempts in a small way to remedy the paucity of characters with disabilities and characters of color through the narrative of Emily and Anjan.

Misreading Emily and Anjan

Whereas Jane deliberately facilitates the misreading of her body by those in power, Emily and Anjan both struggle against the narratives prescribed for them by patriarchy and colonialism. Emily and Anjan’s courtship makes Judith Butler’s concept of precarity relevant as they are both made vulnerable under a system that refuses to recognize each as a “socially produced ‘agent’ and ‘deliberator’ whose agency and thought is made possible” by a recognition made possible through power (Butler iii). This is evident in the novel through the various ways Emily and Anjan are misread by characters who are deemed agents and deliberators by the systems of power. Emily and Anjan are subject to precarity because they “are misrecognized or remain unrecognizable precisely because they exist at the limits of established norms for thinking embodiment and even personhood” (iii). Committed to a successful portrayal of an interracial,

inter-able relationship, Milan refuses to allow the system to win in her narrative and for her B couple to live precariously. Rather, Milan's narrative sees both Emily and Anjan exercise what limited agency they have in order to gain more freedom and greater agency together in order to challenge dominant ideologies of ability and race.

Milan's narrative relies on seeing disability and race as analogous to one another; crucially, though, these two embodied conditions are not portrayed as the same. The impulse to yoke these two conditions is present primarily in disability scholarship, but can be found in critical race scholarship as well. Nirmala Erevelles observes that historically, race and disability have often been grouped together under the rubric of feeble-mindedness, which "linked ethnicity, poverty, and gendered and racialized conceptions of immorality together as 'the signifier of tainted whiteness'" ("Race"). While Erevelles cautions that race and disability should not be treated as "interchangeable tropes in order to foreground the ubiquity of oppression," Phil Smith observes that drawing comparisons between the ways race and disability are each socially constructed can be beneficial to theorizing both race and disability as both are constituted by whiteness. Smith argues that so long as the experiences of race and disability are not conflated, examining how the two are related "has the potential for opening the way to an exploration of how cultural construction of the normative creates both disability and race" ("Whiteness, Normal Theory, and Disability Studies"). Milan's narrative aligns more with Smith's desire for understanding the similarities between race and disability as constituted as "function[s] of capitalist, Western, positivist societies" (Erevelles). Throughout the novel, Milan illustrates the different, yet similar, ways both Emily and Anjan are subject to precarity by systems of power and privilege, particularly via the spaces in which they confront their inequality under these systems, reflecting how race and (dis)ability are also affected by the gendered division of space.

Emily's struggles are mostly confined to the private sphere through Titus' actions as her patriarchal guardian. The narrative gives Emily a definitive opposition to face in the form of an authority figure. Anjan's disadvantages under these systems take place within the public sphere and are shown to be more systemic through his interactions with his classmates and his frustrations with English law. Anjan's oppositional force is more abstract and is present in every English character with whom he interacts, gesturing toward the way the whiteness structures not only the lives of white individuals, but those of non-white individuals as well. Though Emily and Anjan's struggles are different, Milan illustrates the similarities of their struggle to establish both as characters living precarious lives under a system that refuses to recognize each of them individually as subjects.

The most prominent example of misreading in the B plot is Titus' misreading of Emily, who misreads her in part due to her disability, but are also due to her gender. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains that "[b]oth the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them" (19). Milan makes clear that Emily's disability cannot be seen separately from her being female, and she does this through the way Titus' reading of Emily's body is informed by her disability and her gender.

Titus treats Emily as if she is a naïve, impressionable child precisely because of her gender and her epilepsy. He debates sending Jane away because he sees her as "influencing [her] sister to do wrong" (72). He subjects Emily to so-called medical treatments because "he believes that no man will wish to marry [her] until the matter is resolved" (227). To maintain a purity of

mind, Titus refuses to allow her to read anything other than law texts for fear that she be led “astray with novels” (25). He keeps her confined to the house except to attend church “for fear that [she] might suffer from an occurrence if [she] did” go out (28). Titus refuses to even name Emily’s seizures as such because he denies the reality of Emily’s condition, keeping her “confined to her rooms [...] [so] that *he* s[ees] her seizures less often” (28, emphasis in original). As long as Titus does not witness Emily’s seizures, he believes they do not exist, relying upon his male privilege to know Emily’s body and condition better than she. He prescribes a regimen of blandness and languishment which includes a “tepid ten-minute walk around the garden at midday” followed by “a nap in her room as if she were a child of four,” with the walk being composed of “delicate steps that befit[...] her status as a supposed invalid” (50). Titus’ view of Emily is one that also idealizes Emily’s disability, saying that she is “an inspiration” to all of Cambridge for living with epilepsy. As John B. Kelly explains, these kinds of inspiration narratives are actually more about reinforcing ableist narratives as they often are “a form of propaganda that glosses over oppression while simultaneously reassuring normals about the superiority of their ways” (“Inspiration”). For Titus and a few other characters in the novel, Emily’s disability means that she is doomed to a life without happiness as they believe her disability prevents her from fulfilling the social role expected of her as a woman.

In addition to being misread by Titus, who is the novel’s most immediate representative of patriarchy, Emily is misread by those in the medical community, who insist on seeing only her disability. For example, Doctor Fallon, for whom doctor “is something of a courtesy title [...] bestowed upon [him] by dozens of grateful patients,” is allowed to inflict electric shocks on Emily in order to ““cure malingering”” (64). Jane takes issue with the treatment, and the following argument ensues:

“So let me understand. You are proposing to deliver as many electric shocks as you like to my sister, for an indeterminate amount of time, on a theory for which you have no evidence other than a wild guess.”

“That hardly seems fair!” he squawked. “I haven’t even had a chance—”

“Oh, no,” Emily said, speaking up at last. “He’s demonstrated that he can cause a convulsion in me with his current. I told him that it wasn’t the same kind of fit that I have. It doesn’t feel the same at all. But it is, after all, only my body. What do I know?” Jane couldn’t speak for the black rage that filled her. She’d wanted to protect Emily. Why did her uncle have to bring in these fools?

“Exactly,” the charlatan said. “I am the expert on galvanics. What would she know?”

Jane particularly remembered the man who had insisted that the convulsions were an invention of Emily’s mind. Since they were so, he’d insisted that he needed only offer her an incentive to stop. Those burns along her sister’s arm—matched by the ones on her thigh—had been his version of an incentive. What did *Emily* know, after all? (65, emphasis in original).

While Doctor Fallon is a charlatan and not an actual medical doctor, this scene illustrates the way ableism prevents Emily from being legible as a legitimate subject by refusing to read her beyond her disability. In her blog post on disabled characters in romance, Ridley cites Fiona Kumari Campbell’s definition of ableism as “a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (“Some Thoughts”). Ridley then explains that ableism perpetuates the idea that “[a]nyone whose body differs from this [standard]

in form or function is defective. Not ‘different.’ Defective. This is a cornerstone of the medical model of disability, where disabled people are patients in need of therapies and cures and success is defined by returning somebody’s body back to the typical ideal” (“Some Thoughts”). Doctor Fallon refuses to read beyond Emily’s body, insisting that he is the ultimate source of knowledge on the workings of her own body. The repeated misreading of Emily by those in power illustrates the ways she is subject to precarity by systems of power that invest others with authority over both her body and her autonomy.

Similarly, Anjan is misread by those in power on the basis of his skin color. Milan’s narrative covers two instances in which others refuse to read beyond Anjan’s skin color. In the first instance, he is perceived as a threat to the purity of white womanhood. This scene occurs during Emily’s escape from her daily nap, only to realize that she is about to experience a seizure. She enters the closest pub she can find and sits down at the first table she sees available. This table, however, is occupied by Anjan, who asks her to please not sit at his table. In the middle of a seizure, Emily replies that she cannot move, and a barmaid soon comes to what she believes is Emily’s rescue:

“Are you well? Is this man bothering you?” [...].

“Not at all. I felt faint, and had to sit down. He has been solicitous. Very solicitous.”

“Pushing himself on you?”

“Quite the opposite,” Emily said. “I’m afraid I intruded at his table without so much as asking his leave.”

He—whoever he was—hadn’t said a word in this exchange, as if he were used to not having his opinion consulted. To being discussed as if he were not there. (53).

The casual racism of the barmaid highlights the racial dynamics of the situation, reminding the reader that as a man of color, Anjan is viewed as a threat to Emily, particularly in regard to her white femininity. The barmaid's remarks reflect the kind of protection Western culture has given and continues to give white (middle and upper class) femininity and the suspicion often cast on men of color simply by virtue of their skin. Dyer observes that "[t]here are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women *vis-à-vis* sexuality" because white women are the conduits through which whiteness is reproduced (*White* 29). If white women choose non-white men as their sexual partners, the power of whiteness is threatened.⁴¹ Anjan gives voice to this concern when he mentions that he wishes he could see Emily safely home after their initial meeting, but that he "do[esn't] think [he'd] get more than a hundred paces" with her before being "pummeled" for the crime of walking with a white woman (56). In this instance, Milan illustrates the precarity of Anjan's position as a man of color interested in a white woman. As Ruth Frankenberg observes, men of color are often portrayed as "violent, dangerous, or sexually threatening [...] as rationale or pretext for white hostility" (61). By characterizing Anjan as always already a threat, any violence he faces from the white community is justified. Though the racial system is intent on painting Anjan as a threat, Milan shows that it is actually Anjan who faces the threat of physical punishment from those invested with power via white supremacy.

The second instance of misreading skin color in *The Heiress Effect* comes via Anjan's classmates at Cambridge, who perceive him to be content with and consenting to colonization. For example, his classmates refuse to call him by his given name and instead Anglicize his name from Anjan Bhattacharya to John Batty. Anjan reflects on this change: "Anjan was *Batty* because

⁴¹ In many narratives (both fictional and historical) of interracial sexual relations between white women and men of color, the sexual act is represented as non-consensual. Dyer writes that rape of white women in white race fiction "is represented as bestiality storming the citadel of civilisation" (26).

Bhattacharya had too many syllables. He'd told one man his first name; the fellow had blinked, and then had immediately dubbed him John. That's who they thought he was: John Batty. These well-meaning English boys had taken his name as easily, and with as much jovial friendship, as their fathers had taken his country" (160, emphasis in original). Through his experiences at Cambridge, Milan reveals how the Anglicization of Anjan neutralizes him as a threat to the stability of whiteness and, by extension, colonialism.

Reading and Recognition

Though Emily and Anjan are each misread because the governing systems of power and domination do not recognize them as legitimate subjects, this does not mean that they immediately understand each other and never question the other's position. Emily often identifies readily with colonial authority, and, by extension, white privilege, and doesn't see its issues until pointed out to her. Anjan, on the other hand, favors a patriarchal worldview in which the opinion of an older male family member is meant to be valued, not understanding the ways patriarchal authority limits Emily's freedom and agency. In acknowledging the ways the other is limited by these systems of power, the narrative points to intersectionality as a tool for social change.

Emily and Anjan learn to read one another through the conversations they have with one another over the course of the novel. The most important conversation that reveals the investments both have in patriarchy and colonialism begins with a discussion of English law. Anjan questions a British court's decision to not grant a bequest to an elderly woman with the court reasoning that she could have conceived a child after the will was drafted. Anjan tells Emily this decision makes no sense as a woman of such an age does not bear children, and Emily

counters that in the Bible, Sarah had children in her elderly years. Anjan then questions the fact that the Christian Bible is considered as a source of authority in a court of law:

“I assume that if I mention the *Bhagavad Gita*, the response would be hostile.”

“What is that?” Emily asked curiously.

“You might call it some of our Hindu scripture.”

She contemplated this. “I do not consider myself an expert on English law, but I believe you are safe in assuming that citing Hindu scripture in an English court may not be the best choice.”

“English law is incomprehensible. Your scripture is the only valid argument that can be made, and even then, it is used only when it is convenient to support an argument, but not otherwise. How does that make any sense? There is no guiding principle.”

“I think, Mr. Bhattacharya, that you understand well enough,” Emily said. “Your problem is not one of understanding. It is one of acceptance.”

“You have it backward,” he said, calm and unruffled. “I *accept*. But how am I to apply illogic? And you claim that English law is the pinnacle of civilization” (116, emphasis in original).

This conversation reveals the ways Emily is complicit with the system of colonialism and white privilege that governs her life. Emily tells Anjan that he must simply accept English law because it is the law of the land. She does not feel that he should attempt to challenge the validity of the law. Anjan, however, understands the law’s foundation upon Christian scripture, but argues that this scripture should not be held valid source of legal authority. In Anjan’s resistance to Christian scripture as a source of authority, Milan’s narrative references the way whiteness and Christianity have often worked in conjunction to be considered universal.

Just as the narrative reveals Emily's complicity with maintaining a system of white privilege through this conversation, so too does it reveal Anjan's complicity with patriarchal authority. Emily takes Anjan's remark about English law being the pinnacle of civilization personally, stating

"I haven't claimed anything about English law. English law says that I can't make my own decisions, that even though I'm old enough to marry and have children of my own, that I cannot choose who I live with and who touches my body. English law says that I must abide by my uncle's wishes, when he would have me confined to my room" [...]

"I'm not sure you should be defying your uncle. He's family. That isn't just law; it's good sense." (115-116, emphasis in original)

Just as Anjan questions Emily's investment in maintaining the power of whiteness, so does she question his trust in patriarchal authority. Though Anjan questions the Christian hegemony of Britain, he seems to find little fault with its patriarchal structure. Anjan brushes off Emily's protestations of her guardian's care, trusting in the patriarchal structure that grants Titus authority over Emily's body. For Emily, much of her questioning of the law has to do with her body and the rights to it that she is denied. Though she has reached the age of consent for marriage, she has not reached the age at which she can have governance over her person. As such, she has little say in how her body is treated and used.

In this conversation, both Emily and Anjan challenge the ways each understands their world, illustrating how they both misread one another. In order for the two to be rewarded with the happily-ever-after of the genre, they must not only acknowledge their misreading, but learn to read one another in new ways. For Emily, this occurs in the course of the conversation discussed above as the discussion takes a turn toward a subject's rights under the law when

Emily compares patriarchal authority to “a tyrant like Napoleon.” This then prompts Anjan to ask “what was so terrible about Napoleon?” (116). Emily calls Anjan “ridiculous” before “her mind race[s] to a conclusion ahead of her,” suddenly understanding that Napoleon’s desire to conquer the whole of the continent is not any different from Britain’s conquering of the Asian subcontinent (117). Anjan expands upon this new knowledge by referencing the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, and how his eldest brother was killed in the Rebellion for aiding the British. In light of this, Emily asks if Anjan is in favor of Home Rule for India. He responds that he can’t, that he “dream[s] of the things [he] can achieve, not the ones that are outside [his] grasp. [...] If [he] dreamed of home rule, [he] could accomplish nothing” because he would “be too radical to stomach” (118). Because of her earlier misreading, Emily encourages Anjan’s honesty, desiring his assistance in making himself readable to her and proclaiming her willingness to read him correctly, stating that being with him is the “one thing [she] do[es] that makes the rest of the day worthwhile” and that she wants to serve as the same sort of refuge for him.

Anjan learns to read Emily correctly later in the novel, when Emily reveals to him the extent of the medical treatment endorsed and inflicted upon her by Titus:

“He has had me shocked with galvanic current,” she said, undoing a second button [on her sleeve]. “He had a man hold my head underwater. There was the man with a contraption. It utilized leverage to apply bruising force to my leg when a convulsion started.” She undid more buttons as she spoke. “We stopped use of the machine after it broke my femur. [...]“A doctor had me burned with a red-hot poker,” she said. “He thought it would disrupt my convulsions. It did not.” (227-228).

Though Anjan knows that Emily’s guardian is strict, he doesn’t understand until this moment the kind of torture to which her uncle has subjected her in the hope of curing her epilepsy. He

reflects on this new knowledge: “Barbaric, that’s what it was. It was barbaric. And how had he not known this? All those weeks they had walked together, and she had not said a word. He’d lectured her about family. About doing as her uncle told her. He felt a fury rising in him” (227). In this moment, the narrative holds the white, colonial, patriarchal West in contempt as it links the oppressive systems of patriarchy, the Western medical establishment, and colonialism. Under colonial logic, Anjan, by virtue of his race, is seen as always already barbaric. The narrative turns this logic on its head through the revelation of Emily’s scars as only a barbaric society would torture a young girl to enforce the norms of the society. Through Anjan’s use of the term “barbaric,” the narrative suggests that the white, colonial, patriarchal West is the truly barbaric society. As Emily’s body testifies to her suffering under patriarchal authority, Anjan recognizes his misreading of Emily and her situation. The narrative insists that for both Emily and Anjan to learn to read one another correctly, they must abandon their trust in the systems of power and privilege that govern and organize the world.

After learning to read and recognize each other, Milan then allows Emily and Anjan to begin the process of imagining the possibility of marriage. For both Anjan and Emily, marriage signifies being accepted and recognized by society as legitimate subjects. For Anjan, marriage to an English woman is an added benefit to his plan to carry out his older brother’s dying wish to push back against colonialism on English soil. He tells Emily that his brother

always intended to go to England [...] In India, they never saw him as anything other than another soldier, another fellow with brown skin. ‘There are so many of us here,’ he said, ‘they never see us as people.’ He told me that if things were going to change, he would have to go to the English in their home country. He’d planned to move here when

he was twenty-five, to set up a business. To live here the rest of his life. To know them, and have them know him. (135)

Anjan, however, is quick to let Emily know that while he is courting her, he is not yet asking her to marry him. Rather, he is “just telling [her] a story” of what their lives *could* look like (136).

While Emily initially hesitates to participate in this story-telling, she eventually agrees: “I’ll consider your story [...]. For all the difficulty I see in it, it would have its rewards” (137-138).

This scene speaks to Judith Butler’s argument in *Undoing Gender* on the importance of fantasy.

Butler writes that fantasy “moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable. The struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy, and the foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing for the social death of persons” (28-29). In the course of the narrative, Emily’s consideration of Anjan’s “story” indicates that she, too, is willing to consider defying the social norms surrounding romance and courtship. On a broader level, Milan’s representation of Emily and Anjan breaks the norms of heterosexual couples portrayed in popular romance and insists that narratives of love and romance do not belong exclusively to white, wealthy, able-bodied individuals.

Conclusions

In a blog post entitled “Can We Talk About Black Women in Stock Photos?” Courtney Milan expresses her frustration with finding an appropriate cover image for her latest novella due to the lack of available images of black women in wedding dresses looking both beautiful and happy. She writes that it is “horse shit” that “there are disproportionately fewer pictures of black women in wedding dresses [compared to white women], and a smaller percentage of that tiny number [actually] intend[s] to send the message that black women deserve to look beautiful and

be happy” (“Blog: Can We Talk About Black Women in Stock Photos?”). Through her social media presence and through the narratives of her romance novels, it is clear to me that Courtney Milan is committed to creating a new romance that insists on diverse representations.

Thanks to her status as a self-publisher, Milan has an enormous amount of freedom to say what she wants and to write characters that the romance industry often discourages authors from writing for fear that novels about characters of color or characters with disability or characters with non-normative sexualities will not sell. In doing so, Milan engages with Judith Butler’s theories of performativity and precarity and reminds the romance industry of the importance of representation. Butler writes of the importance for fantasy for the drag community, which is under the constant threat of violence. In her discussion, Butler notes that “[f]antasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (216-217). I believe that Courtney Milan does something similar with *The Heiress Effect*. In writing characters who are non-normative—who face threats of violence for refuting gender and class norms, for being non-white, and for being disabled—Milan envisions a society where those without power succeed.

CONCLUSION

The novels studied in this dissertation represent only one part of the romance industry. To truly understand how the industry grapples with race, one would need to interact with authors and readers to understand how interracial romances are created and received. Currently, romance authors of color have initiated a push on social media to get books featuring diverse characters onto the To Be Read shelves of (primarily white) readers. Author Kwana Jackson started this movement when she modified the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks (first popularized by authors of young adult and children's literature) to one suited to romance: #WeNeedDiverseRomance. Jackson has several goals for the #WeNeedDiverseRomance movement beyond merely raising awareness. She writes "I think the fix will take a not so subtle shift of the norm being truly diverse catalogs put out by publishers. And by diverse, that means having more than 1 or 2 offerings by authors of color a month and consistently giving equal presence and retail marketing money to authors of color. [...]. It would be great to also address the lack [of] POC [people of color] staffing in publishing" ("WeNeedDiverseRomance...tweet on"). Authors seem to have a clear direction for how to develop racial diversity in the genre, which is heartening.

Readers have not been exempt from this conversation, especially as the issue of diversity within the genre has been hotly debated within recent years on several popular blog sites. Some readers blame publishers for segregating African American and Multicultural romance fiction from mainstream romance fiction (via shelving practices or by relegating novels featuring characters of color to designated multicultural lines rather than including them under broader designations). However, other readers aren't so sure that they'd read romances featuring nonwhite characters even if they were shelved as romance, full stop.

An intriguing example of this debate among readers comes from a July 6, 2012 post on the *All About Romance* blog by staff member Lynn Spencer. The *All About Romance* blog issues a monthly themed reading challenge to readers with the goal of working through their respective To Be Read lists. The themes of challenges range from reading a novel with a word meaning “light” (sun, bright, shine, etc.) in the title, to reading a novel in the contemporary romance subgenre, to reading a romance novella. Readers are often eager to share their challenge picks and discuss the novels. However, Lynn Spencer’s Melting Pot challenge was met with hesitation from some readers. Spencer asked readers to choose a novel that had nonwhite characters as major players in the novel.⁴² Commenter Leigh, the first commenter on the post, expressed some trepidation about Spencer’s challenge:

I have no problem reading about any type of heroine or hero if I am interested in a book. I think many authors have included ethnic characters in their stories for a while although mainly secondary ones. Like a mother begging a kid to try a new vegetable, I understand what you are saying [*sic*] However, I hate the idea of thinking “I should” read a book because of its ethnicity. I hope that doesn’t make me sound like an “Ugly American” but reading is my escape, and my entertainment. I don’t want to compromise on that.

(comment on “The Melting Pot Challenge”)

Leigh goes on to note that she’s not opposed to reading books with nonwhite characters, but that she doesn’t want to deliberately seek them out. While Leigh faced pushback from some other commenters (primarily via Ridley from *Love in the Margins*), other commenters agreed with her. Commenter Maggie AAR (who I believe may be *All About Romance* senior reviewer Maggie

⁴² After issuing this challenge in July, Spencer continued her Melting Pot theme as a reading challenge with the following challenges: August was devoted to India and Indian characters; September to Hispanic characters; October to Jewish characters; December to African American characters (November was for “Books with a lot of Buzz”).

Boyd) supported Leigh's position, saying "I don't really like the idea of picking a book by race either. It feels a bit too close to **not** reading a book simply because the race of the characters. That probably sounds convoluted but a part of me feels like when we start *thinking* about race, we maybe head down a dangerous path" (comment on "The Melting Pot Challenge, emphasis in original). Maggie AAR goes on to say that she did participate in the challenge because she wanted to push back against those saying that the reading habits of romance readers are racist.

To me, both these comments represent the kind of verbal gymnastics many romance readers engage in when asked to justify their racially homogenous reading habits. Leigh maintains that romance reading is her fantasy/entertainment space, and, as such, she does not want anything that could remotely signal the ugliness of racism in that space. By default then, this means an absencing of characters of color from the narratives she reads. Maggie AAR voices a nearly textbook postracial narrative in her comment: when we think about race, or seek to make environments more racially diverse, we are racist. Though Maggie AAR did complete the challenge, it seems that she did so not so much with the goal of diversifying her reading habits, but to prove a point that good multicultural romance is available for readers who seek it out. Both these comments indicate that for some romance readers, even the *idea* of reading about nonwhite characters is uncomfortable.

Therefore, I think that to more fully understand how the postracial narrative operates in romance, one of the next areas of investigation for scholars would be to look at how readers receive and understand diverse romance. This would not only advance the field of popular romance, which has exercised caution in analyzing readers, but would be a modernization of Janice Radway's work. Ideally, such an investigation would be done using a variety of texts for analysis. Surveys, reader interviews, blog posts, and reader discussion boards would all

illuminate different aspects of the following questions: How do readers engage with diverse romance? What role do prominent online bloggers play in recommending romances about nonwhite characters to their audiences? How is diverse romance resisted? What kind of verbal strategies do romance readers use to justify why they'll read romances between vampires and werewolves where the ostracization of one group is a key component of characterization, but not realistic pairings of nonwhite human characters? It is evident from the texts composed, consumed, and critiqued that romance authors and readers see the power of romantic love as a healing force for all kinds of social ills. Why is it, then, that a large number of romance readers sees racism as exempt from the healing power of romantic love?

By examining the texts produced by the romance industry, I have illustrated several of the ways interracial relationships in twenty-first century historical romance novels challenge the dominance of the contemporary postracial narrative in the United States. The authors discussed in this dissertation have utilized the colonial encounter between Britain and India to oppose the overwhelming whiteness of the romance genre through their interracial couples and to envision the possibility of a future that promises racial justice through romantic love. These authors have used popular romance, a genre read by many, to rewrite both history and historical stereotypes to illustrate that history could have taken a different path and that it is up to those in the present to choose a path that is more egalitarian.

Through different tropes and elements of the romance genre, these authors engage with different aspects of postracial rhetoric. Theresa Romain's novel expands the romance genre's understanding of what makes a hero through her poor and mixed-race hero. She also challenges patriarchal standards for femininity through the masquerades undertaken by her heroine. However, the novel ultimately espouses the neoliberal belief in the importance of the individual

to ending systemic oppression like racism and patriarchy, thus endorsing postracial and postfeminist worldviews. By making barriers to power personal issues rather than structural ones, the narrative endorses the bootstraps rhetoric so common to neoliberalism. Romain's narrative suggests that structural hindrances to power and privilege can be overcome so long as an individual visualizes and truly believes in her/his success.

Unlike Romain, Meredith Duran draws on the similarities between the systemic oppressions of racism and patriarchy spark her heroine's (and by extension, her readers') understanding of racial injustice. Through the novel's interracial couple and the violence to which they are subjected, Duran's narrative historicizes the power of whiteness and implicitly demands that its readers consider the legacy of white supremacy today. The narrative does not shy away from the violence of colonization or excuse the actions of the white colonists. While Duran's narrative renders clear the violence perpetuated by the white colonial powers, its focus on white women eventually encompasses the narrative and largely silences subaltern voices, particularly in the second half of the novel. In terms of contemporary understandings of race, Duran's narrative specifically evidences awareness of white privilege and systemic oppression, but demonstrates (color) blindness in regard to the way the postracial narrative often absents race as a social category through an emphasis on class.

Finally, Courtney Milan's narrative makes the strongest challenge to the postracial narrative through her focus on intersectionality. By examining each character's various avenues to power based on multiple facets of her/his identity, Milan's narrative insists on recognizing structural barriers to agency based on often immutable physical characteristics, and thus offers a critique of not only white privilege, but also of misogyny and ableism. Characters granted privilege via structures like patriarchy and white racial hegemony are required to reject these

structures in order to attain the genre's requisite happily ever after. As such, Milan's narrative shows a more sophisticated understanding of systemic oppression than her peers.

Studying the treatment of race in romance novels is important because the romance genre is one of the few places in popular culture where interracial romances are portrayed not as tragedies, but as triumphs. By incorporating racial justice into the emotional justice promised by the genre's happily ever after, authors ask their readers to envision a society of greater racial equality. Analyzing readers' reception of these texts and their general feelings about racial diversity in the genre has the potential to discover the extent to which readers believe in the possibility of a society that is racially just.

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