

## (Loves) Me, (Loves) Me Not: Unbuilding of Selfhood in the Romance of the Present

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**Abstract:** This article explores the construction of the self in romance fiction written today and argues for a reading of romance and selfhood through a negativist lens, suggesting that romance is best understood as participating in the relational selfhood as the means by which happily-ever-afters are achieved. To that end, this article first surveys broad approaches to reader-centric scholarship of the romance from Janice Radway to the present and concludes that such scholarship understands the romance as working to build or construct a sense of social self for its characters and readers. This article argues that this understanding, while foundational to the field and useful in its own moment, face problems as the genre evolves in the present. Sketching some queer theoretical approaches to problems of identity from which this article takes its cues, this article then offers a negativist alternative. To that end, this article explores the negativist, disruptive potential for selfhood through romance fiction either disseminated on or written about the internet, and explores how the negativist lens evades the theoretical problems discussed earlier. Finally, this article concludes by offering a close reading of the 2020 novel *The Love Study* by Kris Ripper as a case in which a romance novel featuring the internet deconstructs its hero's selfhood to enable his happily-ever-after.

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## 1. Introduction

The story of the contemporary romance genre has been the story of advocates and detractors fighting over its worth. Escalated by the rise of the category romance in the mid-20th century and compounded by second-wave feminist thought, romance is a cipher onto which countless variants of this fight are projected, from the value and purpose of “low culture” to what is (and is not) empowering for women.[1] Janice A. Radway’s 1984 book, *Reading the Romance*, proved to be both an intense flash point in these disputes about romance as well as the foundational text of critical study of the romance today. In her book, Radway explores romance through the lens of reader response theory, especially drawing on Stanley Fish’s concept of the interpretive community. The result is an ethnography of a small community of women romance readers in a Midwestern town (given the name Smithton by Radway), and it is romance books’ reception by these readers—what they like and dislike, what they think about different generic conventions, etc.—from which Radway makes her critical observations of the genre (Intro.). The text is a flash point because nobody seems to be happy with Radway’s conclusions. Radway gives voice to women readers of romance but remains skeptical of the genre’s liberatory potential. She concludes that the genre only allows women a “partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture” and that the generic convention of the happy ending slips those same gender roles in through the unconscious back door (ch. 6). It is this conclusion especially that has drawn the most criticism, ranging from Radway’s “condescending approach to romance readers” to her asking too much of the literary form while underestimating the freedom and power of readers to think and behave outside of the confines of the texts they read (Philips 913n8; Regis 13).

I linger on Radway in this introduction because of how firmly her work fixed the critical conversation in a “reader-oriented” tradition: even the broad categories of pushback to Radway I’ve presented here are intensely interested in the romance genre’s relationship with and effects on its readers. The basic conclusion at which Radway arrives and criticism of that conclusion both point to the more specific stakes of this “reader-oriented” debate. Specifically, the debate about how romance affects its readers has historically circled around how romance readers use the genre to better understand themselves and their lives, to emotionally or psychologically escape the social circumstances in which they find themselves, and to empower themselves to better those circumstances. In short, existing scholarship suggests that the romance either helps readers by encouraging the development of healthy, liberatory senses of relational self[2] or hurts readers by encouraging the marriage of one’s sense of self to dominant social roles.

In this article, I want to press on an assumption that drives this debate and offer an alternative framework for understanding the romance’s effect on the self. Instead of taking it for granted that romances of our present moment are concerned with building a sense of self, I argue that they are more concerned with the evacuation of the self. In this article, I examine what I call internet-oriented romances as an instantiation of this unbuilding, but, importantly, I do not limit my argument to internet-oriented romances. By internet-oriented romance, I mean either works whose plots are primarily set on or concerned with the internet, works that are primarily distributed via the internet (such as fan fiction), or both. I will first take fuller stock of what I call the positivist view of romance, and then offer

what I call the negativist view as an alternative. I will then conclude by reading the 2020 romance novel *The Love Study* by Kris Ripper as an example of an internet-oriented romance primarily concerned with unbuilding the self as part of its generic commitments.

## 2. Gender and Positivist Romance

To understand more readily what I mean by the romance genre constructing (or deconstructing) a sense of self, we might use gender as a conceptual stepping-stone. As discussed in my introduction, the romance genre's historical gendering as feminine—meant to be read by women and populated by women protagonists—implies high stakes for the genre's relationship to the self. Radway's book, including *patriarchy* in its subtitle, never loses sight of the context in which women read romance novels, and suggests that these novels are how women construct their own social selves. She identifies this self-construction less in the text of individual romances, but in "*the act of romance reading*" itself, and that this act of reading is connected to her interviewees' "understanding of their roles as wives and mothers" (ch. 3). Emphasizing "the act of romance reading" turns our attention to the emotional experience of Radway's "Smithton women" as they encounter certain patterns and tropes in their favorite romance novels, as well as the fact that they set aside time at all to read those novels. That primary emotional experience, Radway argues, is escapist and fantastical, a form of emotional self-management in the face of the patriarchal subordination and neglect they face in their day-to-day lives. On one hand, Radway argues, romance reading creates "a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own." This is the escapist function of the romance. On the other hand, she writes, in that free space, women "escape figuratively into a tale where a heroine's similar needs are adequately met. As a result, they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who requite emotional sustenance and solicitude" (ch. 3).

At first blush, one may think the escapism Radway describes is the very self-unbuilding I discuss in this article. However, in closely reading several of the Smithton women's favorite romance novels, Radway suggests that the escapism and vicarious living are simply the mechanisms for internalizing and concretizing—even if unconsciously—a prescribed way of being a successful woman-partner in a romantic relationship:

[T]he romantic narrative demonstrates that a woman must learn to trust her man and to believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary... [O]nce she manages such trust, he will reciprocate with declarations of his commitment to her... The romance's conclusion promises her that if she learns to read male behavior successfully, she will find that her needs for fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love will be satisfied perfectly. (ch. 4)

The escapism romance offers, then, is not a mindless means of truly escaping the self, but a temporary oasis in which social rules are reinforced with the happiness felt by the reader through the heroine offered as reward. We can thus think of the romance, according to

Radway's analysis, as a kind of bait and switch for the heterosexual woman wherein the reader is invited to surrender their sense of self and climb into the skin of a heroine, only to have that heroine demonstrate the ideal social role the reader must perform. This is a cynical interpretation, but nevertheless a positivist one: the romance insists on a particular, prescribed, gendered self, and in reading a romance novel, a woman reader, despite her escape, ritually constructs that self.

Contrary readings to Radway, despite insisting on a more optimistic view of romance's effect on its readers, nevertheless invest that view in a positivist construction of self. Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* offers one vigorous example of this argument, suggesting that it is the liberation of the heroine—and vicariously, the reader—that drives the spirit of the genre. Regis argues that the romance “is, finally, about freedom and joy... [Romance novels] feature women who have achieved the ends fostered by affective individualism, control over their own property, and compassionate marriage. In other words, romance heroines make their own decisions, make their own livings, and choose their own husbands” (207). And, as a near-direct answer to Radway's argument about the effect of the genre on readers, Regis offers a refrain that bridges the divide between the liberated heroine and the reader: “The heroine is not extinguished and the reader is not bound. Quite the contrary. The heroine is freed and the reader rejoices” (15). Here Regis moves the romance into a less prescriptive space than Radway, suggesting that it takes a “hands-off” approach to the selfhood of both its heroine and reader wherein both are free to dictate the contours of their lives. However, Regis's insistence on the reader being unbound is only true within gendered confines. Regis's definition of *romance novel* that frames her argument makes this clear: “A romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19).

This definition suggests a positivist view of selfhood in romance, because gender becomes a matrix on which a reader is compelled to concretize their sense of self. The heroine's freedom is only meaningful if and because she is a woman, and the reader's joy is only meaningful if and because she is a woman, and both are true only because womanhood links the reader to the heroine. Put more simply, Regis suggests that the romance frees women from societal barriers, but this freedom depends on the development of a social self, a social identity, that must be freed. Thus, we have, on both sides of the debate about the romance genre's effect on women, the same assumption: that the genre, in effect, consolidates and builds a reader's social self, what I've been calling the *positivist view*.

But why might this approach be problematic? I have three broad objections, which are interrelated. First, identifying the social self romance fiction builds is too value-laden a project—that is, it asks too much of the genre. Second, changes in technology—both technology featured within romances written today and the technology used to distribute such romances—and changes in readership demographics call for a conceptual broadening of the groundwork laid by Radway and others. And third, romance narratives organized around the building of self run the risk of contravening the spirit of the genre and ignoring core features of relationality in our present moment.

First, there is the problem of the positivist view overloading the romance genre with respect to relational selfhood. Although it makes intuitive sense that the genre is intrinsically entwined with how individuals relate to each other, a problem emerges when the work of building a social self is embedded into the genre's very form. If the romance

genre is instrumental to social self-making, such self-making depends on standards such a self must meet, and, to use Regis's view as a case study, these standards are often dangerous. Regis optimistically reads the loving union of a man and woman in the romance as liberating, but to build an identity around the freeing power of one's love backfires easily. E. M. Grosz suggests that "the 'Love Conquers All' discourse makes it difficult for women to acknowledge abuse," and that "the tremendous value our culture places on 'happily ever after'... [is] blinding" (91). If the romance's purpose is to reframe the gendered experience of heroines as using love to free themselves—and so, to encourage a reader to see herself do the same—such a reframing is unreliable in its goal at best and reinforcing of oppression at worst.

Second is the problem of inflexibility on the part of any given positivist view. My discussion of gender is one especially vivid example. Radway and Regis understandably concern themselves with the relationship of the romance novel to womanhood in their respective studies because, as both discuss, the romance novel has been conceived as a form fundamentally about and read by women since its inception. But even this long-standing figuration is changing. Although the Romance Writers of America still maintains a "happily-ever-after" as one of the two essential elements of a romance novel, the other element, its central love story, need only be about "individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work."

Conspicuously absent is a requirement that a heroine be involved at all. And, while the RWA still cites the current romance readership as being 82 percent women, it makes pains to identify "the younger emerging readership" as the genre's future. Young readers are specifically identified as being both more "diverse in sexual orientation and ethnicity" as well as being "more male" (Romance Writers). Thus, increasingly robust accounts of romance are called for as they pertain to selfhood, because the selves of the genre's readership are growing ever more diverse.[3] Radway herself, in the 1991 preface to her study, seems to predict this need, writing that ethnographies of romance readership should also study "how other social variables like age, class location, education, and race intersect with gender to produce varying, even conflicting, engagements with the romance form" (Intro.). Radway's admission of the possibility of conflicting engagements casts further doubt on the flexibility of a positivist reading of romance.

If my concerns hold water, where do we go from here? The answer, I will now argue, is not that far from the path Regis, Radway, and the tradition of romance criticism they represent here have forged. In the introduction to a collection of articles by romance writers about the genre, Jayne Ann Krentz argues that identification is a fundamental feature of the genre: "[B]oth reader and writer slip easily in and out of the skins of the two main characters as the romance progresses... Seductions in well-written romance novels are especially powerful because the reader experiences them as both seducer and seduced" (7). This slippage between identities—reader and writer, seducer and seduced—gestures at the destabilizing of relational selfhood I argue to be one of the functional cores of present-day romance, and for the rest of this article, I will argue for that model.

### 3. A Brief Queer Interlude

If my specification of social and relational selfhood as the site of present-day romance's destabilizing power rings a bell, then the identity-slippage I discuss above sounds an alarm. Indeed, queerness looms above, under, and within the objections I raise to the positivist romance in the previous section and the possibilities offered by the negativist romance I offer in the following section. This is signaled explicitly by the evolution I cite in both romance content and romance readership from its historical aiming at heterosexual women, but the debate over the value of relationality—something at the heart of the romance genre—to queerness and queer politics is long-lived among queer theorists.[4] While I present this article as a contribution to the study of romance and not queer theory as such for reasons I will discuss in a moment, we should briefly take stock of the queer theoretical conversations with which negativist romance might intersect. In so doing, we will situate the gendered considerations of romance in a theoretical context whereby selfhood and identity are destabilized, as well as see how the unbuilding of identity has useful sociocultural consequences.

Gender's centrality to the historical figuration and study of romances means we cannot avoid Judith Butler's foundational argument that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34). This collapsing of the distinction between identity and expression calls into question the ontological stability of gender identity in general, but it also accounts for the fluidity of identification Krentz describes happening in romance novels. The multiplicity of expressions—both those in the service of seduction but also those of the experience of being seduced—might, if we extend Butler's ideas, in turn constitute the very identities of seducer and seduced, identities in and out of which readers and writers are invited to slip. Beyond Butler, of course, the body of scholarship exploring the relationship between queerness and fluid social identity is so vast that could not be accounted for in a monograph, let alone a section of an article.

But to continue following the thread of identification I unravel here, José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification is at least one other worth naming. Muñoz defines disidentification as a process whereby minoritized subjects—specifically queer people of color—strategically adapt dominant cultural texts and values in a way that "scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message" to open a space for their own survival (*Disidentifications* 31). Disidentification is a complicated psychic/political/cultural strategy for minoritized subjects but at its heart is a negotiation between the selves of those subjects and the majoritarian selves assumed to be the objects of dominative narratives and norms—a negotiation that arcs toward the opening of spaces where an assumed self once was. Indeed, the diction Muñoz deploys of "scrambling," I argue, is a bedfellow of the unbuilding I describe here. I do not mean to say that self-unbuilding is disidentificatory, though such an inquiry might be fruitful for another exploration. Instead, I only mark disidentification as one queer theoretical genealogy of my thinking about selfhood and identity in this article.

I now wind down this interlude by laying the groundwork for the upshots of the model of negativist romance I will offer in the next section. My very brief gesture at queer theory is not merely an exercise in offering background but a preview of the stakes of a

negativist model. To that end, I will introduce one final queer theorist's thought: Jack Halberstam's discussion of queer failure. In many respects, romance novels written today, I wager, fail to affirmatively construct a social self to which their readers might aspire. But as Halberstam himself argues, the failures bound up with the queer experience in the face of heterosexist norms provide negative space for "resistance through failure," and for alternatives to extant forms of success that exclude (97, 89). Indeed, Muñoz also argues not just for queerness's embrace of failure, but its outright "rejection of a here and now" as the site for utopian possibility (*Cruising Utopia* 1).

Taken together, the nodes on my whistle-stop tour of queer theory form a constellation offering a theoretical backdrop to my ideas about the romance novel in three ways: first, the ontological instability of gender suggests an instability to one's social selfhood; second, such unstable selfhood is conceptually useful for minoritized subjects; and third, such instability fits into broader conversations about the value of negating entrenched social values. This backdrop is also concretely useful given the fact that the novel I choose to read in the final body section of this article is explicitly queer on the level of character and plot but is also written by a nonbinary author.[5] But does my argument about selfhood in romance—or indeed, even the resistive possibilities offered by unbuilding of selfhood—only have purchase with queer romance written today as opposed to today's romances more broadly? I don't think so. As Radway and Grosz both suggest, the negative externalities of normative standards for relational selfhood extend beyond the realm of queerness and into heterosexual gender norms as well. Moreover, the examples of negativist romance I discuss in the following section are themselves not indexed to queerness—one is heterosexual romantic fan fiction, and the other is a narrative phenomenon that is not confined to romance (but nevertheless is germane to understanding the genre, as I will argue). If there is a unifying feature here other than our contemporary moment as the period of production, disruption of gender norms—whether heterosexual or queer—is one possibility. However, whether the romance of our present moment gives rise to resistive narratives or whether resistive narratives have greater currency in our present moment is a question of causation best left for others to inquire. Instead, the theoretical background and resonances to my observations briefly explored, we should end our detour and turn our attention more squarely to the negativist model of romance I offer.

#### **4. The Internet, Transindividualism, and Negativist Romance**

In contrast to the views discussed in my section on positivist romance, I now argue that contemporary romance—specifically, internet-oriented romance fiction—tends to take up as a central thematic concern the unbuilding of selfhood on the part of both the reader and characters within the fiction. I believe this negativist view, as I've called it, both evades the theoretical problems with the positivist view, and actively serves the core feature of romance fiction, the central love story. First, we should establish what exactly I mean by the unbuilding of the self, and how contemporary modes of romance writing enable it. By unbuilding, I do not mean something as literal as suicide nor something as radical as complete ego death, but instead gesture at a disruption of a stable self-identity

with stable and inviolable borders. The purpose I see such disruption of the self and its borders serving is intimately bound up with the ending all proper romances share: “In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love” (Romance Writers). The process of unbuilding the self in a romance, I argue, enables that reward by unbuilding those aspects of relational selfhood that preclude union with another person.

To understand how this unbuilding can occur and how it might function, I turn to the internet. The internet is a worthwhile site of analysis, offering a model of the romance for our contemporary moment, because the internet is an increasingly significant mode for the distribution and consumption of romance fiction (Romance Writers; Tripler). This trend reflects the internet’s enmeshment with modern experiences of love (Witt 37) as well as its enmeshment with expressive culture more broadly, especially among young people (McCracken 152). Here, I consider two forms of internet-based writing: fan fiction and role-play.[6] These modes of writing are not exclusive to the romance genre, but associations between fan fiction, internet role-play, romance, and erotica are well established.[7] The practice of fan fiction, as a transformative narrative practice, inherently possesses the capacity to subvert source material, as, in offering “alternative scenarios” in which characters from the source material appear, “allow[s] [those] characters to transform, develop, and embody different codes of behavior” (Al Thobaiti 4). While the presentation of different iterations of a character offers a range of possibilities for expressions of romantic generic content, pertinent observations arise from Fatmah Al Thobaiti’s analysis of one fan-fictional, gender-swapped re-creation of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, called “Dusk: the Twilight Saga,” featuring a female version of Edward Cullen (as Eliza) and a male version of Bella Swan (as Ben). Edward’s character, in Stephenie Meyer’s source material, embodies a very traditional “hegemonic masculinity of the romance hero,” something more in line with the kind of hero taken up in the criticism of Radway, Regis, and others (Al Thobaiti 8). In this representative example, Eliza maintains the power qua vampire Edward enjoys in the source material, whereas Ben occupies a similar submissive role to Bella. For Al Thobaiti, this subversion both “invites readers to question the extent to which these traits seem natural when attached to the heroine rather than the hero” as well as is the force which brings about the requisite union in the romance: “Ben is not punished for challenging gender roles; on the contrary, Eliza approves of his version of masculinity and he achieves his happy ending” (9-10). In this fan fiction, as an artifact of internet writing, the re-created characters of Eliza and Ben disrupt the previously stable gendered versions in *Twilight*. However, this disruption becomes another means of reaching the “happily-ever-after” that marks the work as romance fiction. In reading Eliza as another version of Edward and Ben as another version of Bella, moreover, Al Thobaiti implies a fluidity to the archetypes Edward and Bella represent, and by extension, the relational selfhoods are changed substantively (by offering disrupted visions of masculinity and femininity) without changing their romantic link.

The example of fan fiction demonstrates the disintegration of a stable self on the part of characters in a romance, but the internet also provides an opportunity for the disruption of selfhood on the part of the reader-as-writer/participant in storytelling, as evidenced in K. Shannon Howard’s discussion of Tumblr role-playing. Unlike traditional methods of producing prose fiction, the process of internet role-play is inherently collaborative, relying on participants to not only provide narration and dialogue for their



characters but to also coordinate with other role-players to construct a holistic narrative. To describe this process of collaboration, Howard imports the term *transindividualism*, which she defines in this context as “a phenomenon during which players work beyond, across, within, and among boundaries of self until such boundaries become porous” (2.1). Although internet role-play does not exclusively enact romance narratives, its presence on the internet and its instantiation of transindividualism nonetheless make it a useful example to elaborate my concept of self-unbuilding. Howard identifies transindividualism manifested primarily in the yielding of authorial agency on the part of “any one ego” (6.4). Because the responsibility for a story’s shape lies not with any one individual, this form of narrative expression, mediated by the internet, is one that builds in an “embrace [of] powerlessness” suggesting the resultant story is not the product of particular selves, but something else that subordinates, sublimates, and so, disrupts those selves in the service of the construction of a larger narrative (Howard 5.1). Howard concludes her article by observing that the transindividual effort made in the role-play process ultimately has the end of “forg[ing] meaningful connections across and among ideas and beings” (Howard 6.4). In this move, transindividualism’s import for the romance genre becomes clearer. This form of internet-based expression works to undermine the rigid boundaries of self in the service of its storytelling, and in the process, connections between participants, as both readers and writers, become embedded into the very fabric of the narrative. If the romance genre is defined by the fantasy of individuals forming lasting, loving attachments to each other, then internet role-play offers one model of how an internet-based story at once disrupts its readers’ sense of discrete individuality while also fostering a sense of closeness to others.

This brief discussion of fan fiction and internet role-play represents only two strategies of disrupting otherwise rigid senses of self in the service of engendering connection between individuals, and really, this is the point of my turn to the negativist view of romance. Rather than offering a definitive panacea to the problem of selfhood and its connection to others in romance, I suggest that these modern modes of expression—in these cases, on the internet—traffic less in constructing definitive modes of selfhood and rigid means of connection, and trade more in possibility. By disrupting presupposed boundaries that define the self, I see these direct and indirect participations in the romance genre as creating space wherein different selves may meld and mingle. The two primary methods of disrupting the self I’ve observed in this section are: first, the subversion of archetypes (especially gendered archetypes) on which the positivist view of romance depends, and so the creation of space for different kinds of characters to connect with each other in meaningful ways in the absence of traditional divisions; and second, by encouraging participants to lean into a transindividualist ethic wherein stories emerge as part of an interpretive and narrative process, a negotiation with other participants in a story. To fully illustrate my ideas in this section and their more concrete implications for romance, I now finish this article with a close reading of *The Love Study* by Kris Ripper as a contemporary romance that fulfills its love story through the deconstruction of its hero’s sense of self. The novel achieves this by enacting a transindividualist ethic with his love interest and arrives at its happily-ever-after through the creation of a negative space in which love flourishes.

## 5. “I Still Can’t Be This Person”: A Negativist Reading of Kris Ripper’s *The Love Study*

The title of Kris Ripper’s *The Love Study* signals its content up front: even for a romance novel, it is obsessively fixated on the nature of romantic love. The novel is as much a study of love itself as the fictional YouTube miniseries one of its heroes runs with the same name. This metatextual concern with love and loving—as well as its technological contemporariness in plot—are what present Ripper’s novel as an ideal exemplar of contemporary romance’s psychology. In this section I read *The Love Study* as a romance novel concerned with the unbuilding of self, and in the process, illustrate features of a negativist romance through example that may have been only implicit in my theoretical sketching.

The hero and narrator of *The Love Study* is Declan, a queer man in his late twenties who finds himself at a romantic crossroads. As we learn in the novel’s first lines: “Here’s how my friends describe me to people: ‘This is Declan. He left his last boyfriend at the altar, so watch out.’ It’s mostly a joke. Mostly. Not that I left my last boyfriend at the altar—that part’s definitely true. But *watch out* is just a playful warning. Besides, I swore off romance after that. No one really has to watch out for me” (Ripper 7). In these very first moments, Ripper establishes two things: first, that Declan is frustrated and defeated as a romantic, and second, that this failure to marry his ex-boyfriend *defines* him. That is, Declan’s romantic status *constitutes* his social self. It is this very introduction that a friend uses to introduce Declan to Sidney, Declan’s eventual love interest, a genderqueer YouTuber who runs an advice channel called *Your Spinster Uncle*. Their first words to Declan after this introduction are as telling as their show’s name: “I’m not interested in altars, so you’re safe from the temptation,” they say, and then say explicitly soon after, “I don’t date people” (8-9). True to generic tradition, Declan is awkward and bumbling and attracted to Sidney, his awkwardness matched by Sidney’s wryness and wit. Nevertheless, Declan and Sidney meet under the assumption that neither is particularly interested in romance. After some conversation, Sidney invites Declan to participate in a miniseries on their YouTube channel, wherein viewers volunteer to go on dates with Declan, and he debriefs on Sidney’s channel. The goal of this collaboration is to “explore dating and queerness and all the complexity therein through the lens of one person’s personal experience” (Ripper 28).

From here, to anyone familiar with the genre, the rest of the novel proceeds as expected for a romance novel, so a whistle-stop tour should suffice for summary. Declan’s dates range in success, but all fall short of proceeding beyond a first date. Eventually, Declan works up the courage to confess his romantic interest in Sidney, who reciprocates. After a successful first date (which gets discussed as an episode of *The Love Study*) and eventual sexual intimacy, Declan has a panic attack triggered by the pressure of things going well and suddenly breaks things off with Sidney. After a period of isolation and intervention from his friends—including his ex-boyfriend Mason—Declan reconnects with Sidney, apologizes, and they reconcile, rekindling a romantic connection after agreeing to redefine what romance means to them.

Recalling the RWA’s criteria, *The Love Study* is squarely a romance: (a) a central love story, check; and (b) an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending, check. However, Ripper has a remarkable ability to sneak thematic concerns in through the back door. As

the broad outline of the novel's plot suggests, this is on one level a straightforward romance. But, as I opened this section by observing, *The Love Study* is also highly analytical. Ripper accomplishes this primarily through his characterization of Sidney, who, at every turn, psychologizes romance. Declan describes Sidney's way of talking about his experience on his first experiment-date as "diagnos[ing him]," and Sidney then suggests that they "end each episode with the same three questions, in order to have a standard sort of metric by which to judge the date" (Ripper 55). And, when Declan and Sidney reconcile (a moment I will revisit soon), Sidney says, as part of their reconciliation, that "I've thought a lot about this, and I wonder if maybe 'dating' as a conceptual framework isn't really for us?" (234). Both within the Love Study miniseries and the romantic arc on which Sidney and Declan find themselves, Sidney is invested in a project of not just *feeling* romance but *understanding* it. And, in the resolution of the novel, Ripper uses the *deconstruction* of established frameworks for romantic attachment as the means of not only better *understanding* romance but fostering the happy ending at which Sidney and Declan arrive.

I believe Ripper makes the same kind of conceptual move—that is, deconstruction as a means of progress and a means of access—with respect to selfhood in *The Love Study*. Although Declan and Sidney put on the miniseries to better understand what romance and love *are*, it is the *destruction* of their preconceived senses of self that allow them to romantically connect. This is most obvious with Declan. Recall my earlier observation—the fact that he left his ex at the altar is the core feature that defines him. To be Declan is to be the man who got cold feet. As we discover later in the novel, this identity has metastasized for Declan into a conviction that being the man with cold feet disqualifies him from love. As his anxiety over how well things are going with Sidney intensifies, Declan's narration recursively fixates on his failures as a romantic partner. In the moment when he decides to end things with them, Declan says of their potential romance, "I would fuck it up. If not tonight, then tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the next time they planned a wonderful, romantic cookie date, and no matter what I did I couldn't feel it, I couldn't be deserving of it. No" (205).

After breaking things off with Sidney, Declan makes his self-assessment even more explicit when talking things over with Mason: "I still can't be this person... This person who someone else can trust! This person who deserves to fall in love!" (221). The primer for Declan's internal conflict, the thing that drives a wedge between himself and Sidney, is specifically his insistence that the *kind* of person he is is not someone who deserves romance. The identity he has fashioned for himself, the one concretized—even if as a joke—by his friends, is defined by romantic dysfunction and a consequent lack of self-worth. The person Declan is explicitly *not* is the person who can be trusted or fall in love. This self-assessment is so intense and so rigid that it even shapes Declan's perceptions of others and causes him to project constructions of self onto them. In the same conversation with Mason, Declan insists that he "destroyed" him by leaving him at the altar, which Mason immediately responds, "Um, hi, do I look destroyed to you right now? Don't make me into the stick you use to beat yourself, okay?" (221). In this brief exchange, Ripper suggests that Declan's sense of self—someone undeserving of love, a fuckup—depends on an identity constructed for another, in this case, Mason as the emotionally devastated ex-boyfriend. However, Mason's explicit challenge to that sense of self is one small step in disrupting Declan's own, one small step in his reconciliation with Sidney.

Ripper puts the rejection of preconceived selves and identity-standards at the heart of Sidney's and Declan's reconciliation. If Declan was convinced that he is not the kind of person Sidney deserves, *The Love Study* overcomes this obstacle by challenging the very idea that such a kind exists at all. Let's return to Sidney's doubt about the framework of dating. While that evidences their analytical personality, it is also the moment at which they embrace negating, eliminating, *un-defining*, their and Declan's senses of romantic self, and indeed, eliminating what they assume dating ought to be:

I think in a way we both sort of tried to walk a path that wasn't ours [...] My favorite times with you are the times we didn't approach like they were dates [...] I'm grateful to *The Love Study* because it brought us together [...] but I also think it kind of... shunted us into a dating metric that we wouldn't have otherwise gotten into as quickly as we did. Like, on our own I think we'd both be happy—I'm pretty sure I'd be happy—hanging out a lot, and sharing food, and watching documentaries, and listening to podcasts, and just talking. And having sex. (234-236)

Sidney's moment of revelation and emotional forthrightness does the exact work I mean when I speak of negating the self. Ripper locates the barrier between Sidney and Declan and their romantic connection on precisely this "path" they took to be a prescription, and the project of *The Love Study*, in its aims at defining romance, excluded the love between Sidney and Declan by presuming such a definition existed at all. When we recall Declan's insistence that he is not the kind of person who deserves to fall in love, the "dating metric" Sidney identifies is the very metric against which Declan defined himself. Early in the novel, Sidney described their dissatisfaction with dating as often coming down to it "feel[ing] like it's part of a script," and people "playing a role" (75). This artificial construction of a dating-self, bound to a path and a dating metric, gets in the way of happiness which Sidney and Declan can arrive at *on their own*. Even on the level of grammar, Ripper evacuates the self from that happier romantic arrangement Sidney envisions, consisting entirely of activities rather than states of being, of verbs rather than adjectives.

Thus far, I hope to have demonstrated the centrality of undefining the self to *The Love Study's* love story. However, before concluding this article, I want to briefly discuss one element that has been missing so far. With Sidney's YouTube miniseries at its center, Ripper's novel manifestly centers the internet. But how does the internet's portrayal in this novel square with my presentation of it before? Sidney's speech suggests that *The Love Study* encouraged the *construction* of a romantic self instead of deconstruction, but here again, Ripper demonstrates his thematic concern with conflicting effects and competing narratives. It may be true that the formal aspect of *The Love Study* as a weekly segment—see Sidney's desire for an objective metric for the miniseries—boxed Sidney and Declan in, but Ripper associates the social dimension of the internet as something that disrupts Sidney's preconceived ideas about themselves. On their date with Declan on Valentine's Day, Sidney explains that they have always thought of themselves as "a drop of soap [in water]," having difficulty making connections with people "as if [their] very presence made people move in the opposite direction."

However, after starting *Your Spinster Uncle*, and especially after starting their miniseries with Declan, Sidney was confronted by a competing version of themselves: "When I

barely spoke to anyone in the house where I was renting a room, I was exchanging emails with and having conversations with a lot of people I knew from YouTube [...] I think... watching you figure out dating, and asking you questions, has clarified for me some of my... um, what I might potentially want” (192-193). Just as Declan must deconstruct his self-image as *the fuckup* to succeed as a romantic hero, Sidney must deconstruct their self-image as *the loner* to do the same, and it is through connections with their audience mediated by the internet that Sidney’s self-unbuilding occurs.

Interestingly, Sidney also names their interactions with *Declan* during broadcasts as helpful. These interactions particularly, I believe, have a transindividual character. By helping Declan to think through the nature of romance “on air,” Sidney thinks through romance, too. This process, therefore, is one of blurring the discrete lines between Declan’s thoughts and Sidney’s, and their selves are made porous. It is only through this making porous, and through the creation of negative space where old selves used to be, that Declan and Sidney fall in love.

## 6. Conclusion

My goal in this article has been to map a new way of thinking about the romance genre’s relationship to selfhood. As a genre whose central conceit is the establishment of loving connections between people, romance fiction naturally explores questions of relational selfhood. Much criticism of the romance debates its effects on its readers, particularly, from the midcentury to the present, from a feminist lens. However, on both sides of this debate—whether romances are empowering or disempowering for women—there exists the assumption that the function of the romance is to aid in the process of constructing a social self. This assumption is problematic for both its value-ladenness and its conceptual inflexibility (one example at which I gestured is the gendered view of the romance increasingly becoming outdated with the rise of queer romances and readership). I have instead argued for the converse view: the romance genre primarily functions to unbuild or undefine the social self in the service of enabling loving connections. Such unbuilding has resonances in established queer theoretical conversations but is not confined to the queer romance—instead, I locate resistive potential in present-day romance more broadly. Through the lens of “internet-oriented romance”—either traditional romance novels with the internet as a key feature, or genres of writing disseminated online, often with romantic themes—I have demonstrated how a work of romance fiction does the work of deconstructing selfhood. Through the challenging of predetermined social types, and acts of transindividualism, a negativist romance engenders the possibility for true love.

I will end with a question I asked early on: Why does it matter from which angle we understand the romance, either positivist or a negativist? There are, of course, theoretical problems for the positivist view I state above, but we must remember that the romance genre bears genuine stakes. All critics who consider the genre recognize its massive traction on the literary market and in the social fabric of our lives, a traction that continues to grow, undeterred by global catastrophe or pandemic (King). Even in the most fantastical subgenres of romance, and even when read as a means of escape, readers identify with and

negotiate self through the stories told. But negotiation is kneecapped by prescription. A romance story interested in the affirmation of a specific relational self is a story that prescribes. Sidney's and Declan's core emotional conflicts in *The Love Study* are very real despite the fiction in which they exist. So, too, is how those conflicts are shaped by their assumptions not only about what romance *is*, but what kind of romantic people they *are*. At the beginning of *The Love Study*, Declan is introduced in social settings as the man who left his ex at the altar—a failed romantic. That self haunts him, and it is a self over which his love story with Sidney trips. But the final lines of the novel—echoing the first—find joy in the negative space where Declan's old self used to exist. I can think of no better way to end this article, for it is in Declan's joy where we find all to be gained from romantic self-unbuilding: "When Sidney introduces me to people, they say, 'This is Declan.' And I can't help grinning at them like they're the only person in the world" (241). Declan's happily-ever-after comes with that old self stripped away. Declan is only Declan, and he couldn't be happier.

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[1] There are many entries—academic and popular—in these debates, which are beyond the scope of this article. In addition to the sources I discuss in the body of this article, also see examples in Klugman, Luther, Philips, and Taylor.

[2] I will refer to *relational self* simply as *self* unless otherwise specified.

[3] It is not just the RWA acknowledging increasing diversity among romance writers and readers, and it is not just greater conceptual flexibility that is needed to account for it. See Alter for an example of a mainstream news outlet reporting on diversity in romance and the industry's slow embrace of it, and see *The Ripped Bodice* for one quantitative analysis of racial diversity in romance publishing.

[4] It is, of course, impossible to name the history of relationality in queer theory, but for some examples of relational and anti-relational queer theoretical works, both foundational and recent, see Chen, Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, Bersani, and Edelman.

[5] Ripper, the author of *The Love Study*, uses *ze/zir* gender pronouns.

[6] By role-play in this context, I refer to collective fiction storytelling by one or more internet users.

[7] See Chamberlain and Enriquez & Lippert as two examples.

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