

# Living the Romance through *Castle*: Exploring Autoethnography, Popular Culture and Romantic Television Narratives

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BECKETT: Why are you here? You don't care about the victims, so you aren't here for justice. You don't care that the guy's aping your books, so you aren't here 'cause you're outraged. So what is it, Rick? You here to annoy me?

CASTLE: I'm here for the story.

BECKETT: The story.

CASTLE: Why those people? Why those murders?

BECKETT: Sometimes, there is no story. Sometimes the guy is just a psychopath.

CASTLE: There's always a story. Always a chain of events that makes everything make sense. ("Flowers for Your Grave")

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The scene: March 2009. My life as I know it is over. My life-partner of eight years declares he is leaving one month after the miscarriage of our child. Our child is gone. He is leaving. I am somehow expected to function. It is at this moment, one of my darkest moments, that ABC

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releases a mid-season replacement – *Castle*. Similar in structure to other television crime procedurals (e.g., *Moonlighting* or *Bones*), the show pairs NYPD Detective Kate Beckett with popular mystery writer Richard Castle as partners who solve murder cases. The series operates primarily as a crime drama but the romantic connection between the main characters is a large part of the show’s popular appeal. During the regular television season, Castle shadows Beckett and then “writes” a novel about his experiences. ABC’s sister publisher, Hyperion Books, releases these novels just before the beginning of the new television season. The series immediately captures my attention, and I tune in week after week to the tough-as-nails Kate Beckett and campy Richard Castle. It is fun, light-hearted – everything missing from my daily narrative that consists of unending sadness and layers of deeper and darker depression. I watch (and re-watch) each episode waiting for the next one to appear. I will myself to hope.

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BECKETT: Well, guess this is it.

CASTLE: Well, it doesn't have to be. We could go to dinner. Debrief each other.

BECKETT: Why, Castle? So I can be another one of your conquests?

CASTLE: Or I could be one of yours. (“Flowers for Your Grave”)

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Ever since Radway’s germinal work on women reading romantic fiction, our academic discussions of women’s relationship to romantic narratives in popular culture center on the process of “reading” or “using” these

narratives as “equipment for living” (Burke 594; see also Crane; Dubino; Johnson). My purpose in this essay is to suggest that although these metaphors have a place in how we understand popular culture, they fail to recognize the symbiotic nature popular culture plays in personal identity. Our identities are not only informed by popular narratives/representations, but are often an intricately constructed bricolage (Hebdige 103-104) where the “pop” and the “real” become inseparable (Boylorn; Herrmann).

This is particularly true of consumers of romantic narratives. Many humans aspire to create and maintain romantic pairings throughout the life-course, and for many, engaging romantic fiction is part of that process. According to the Romance Writers of America, romantic fiction generated over \$1 billion in sales in 2013 comprising 13% of total fiction sales (“Industry Statistics”). Romance reading is so widespread that Dugger argues, “Even those who don’t partake in it usually know and respect someone who does” (16). Yet, academic discussions of romantic narratives often focus exclusively on published novels and literacy, failing to account for the myriad of popular romantic narratives occurring in visual outlets such as television.

To expand our academic discussion of romantic narratives in popular culture, I offer an autoethnographic layered account (Ronai 396) of my identification as a *Castle* fan and its impact on my romantic imaginary. For many individuals, the line between popular culture (aka fiction) and lived reality (aka real life) is best conceptualized as a fluid ether where our identities bleed, shift, transmute, and collide in our day-to-day interactions with culture. In my story, I illustrate how the romantic fiction created in the *Castle* universe (through the television show and the book series) shaped (and continues to shape) the romantic narrative of my life. I then discuss the implications for autoethnography and popular culture, particularly how the romantic imaginary functions as a liminal construct between mediated discourse and interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, I argue that both popular culture scholars and autoethnographers should

concentrate on mapping unspeakable love, joy, and happiness through and in our lived realities.

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“Hey,” he says, with an air of familiarity. Since my life took its darker turn, I spend several nights at bars, usually ones that have karaoke. Over the past year, I’ve cultivated a group of karaoke friends – a network I can go to with no questions asked. We don’t talk about our personal lives. We don’t wallow in our sadness, though we are all sad in our own way. We put sadness aside. We drink, we laugh, we sing. I am the oldest of the karaoke crowd, a not-quite-so-badge of honor for a thirty-something. It’s acceptable for the twenty-somethings not to have things figured out. I enact a self-imposed psychosocial moratorium (Erikson 156) and allow myself not to be bothered by this.

“Oh, hi James,” I say. James went to high school with several of my karaoke friends, and we’ve met before. He is tall, slim and handsome in a boyish way. He wears his hair slightly long, in that floppy look made popular by teen film and television stars. His smile draws attention to his cheeks, which have a baby-faced sort of quality.

“How have you been?” he asks. Phatic communication, obviously. But I’ve just left the lawyer’s office drawing up separation agreements and talking through legal implications of eight years of shared financial lives. I am not okay.

“Eh, okay,” I say, “what have you been up to?” We chat briefly about writing. James is an aspiring writer. He’s finished his third novel and is working on editing. I am finishing the semester and looking forward to writing more in the summer.

“Well, we should get together and write sometime. I’d like that,” he says.

“Sure,” I say, “I usually work better if someone holds me accountable for my progress anyway.” He pauses, “Yeah, we can talk too, you know, if you need to talk about anything.” I clam up. We end the conversation. I assume this writing date will not actually happen. I might see him out and about at the bars. I might not.

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Autoethnography and popular culture are often conceptualized as incompatible scholastic undertakings. As Herrmann observes, popular culture studies examine “culture and identity from the outside in,” while autoethnography examines identity “from the inside out” (6). In many ways, the proscription for evocative writing contained in autoethnographic methodology suits it to difficult cultural subjects such as depression (e.g., Jago), abuse (e.g., Ronai), illness (e.g., Moore) and death (e.g. Ellis). The overwhelmingly serious emotional focus of autoethnographic work can, to many, leave an “impression that there is no point in doing autoethnography if everything is fine” (Uotinen 165). On the other hand, popular culture is often conceptualized as frivolous and light – a way to pass time and enjoy life. Thus, why do autoethnography of popular culture? Because autoethnographies remind us that cultural representations *matter deeply* in the lives of those who turn to popular culture as a way to understand their identities (Neumann 191). Popular culture is intricately linked to individual and group identity, and its location should be central to autoethnographic explorations.

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My ex is coming over to move out the rest of his belongings. I begin to panic. I don’t want to be here, don’t want to watch him take his things and leave. But I also don’t have anywhere to go. He’s coming first thing in the

morning. Bars won't be open. The karaoke crew is still sleeping. My work colleagues and "adult" friends offer to take me in – but I can't. So many of them have young children, happy marriages. The last thing I want is to hang out with children who would only remind me of the one I lost. The last thing I want is to see couples working together.

The night before, I get a random Facebook message from James – "Some friends and I are hitting the beach tomorrow. Want to come?"

I stare at the screen. This offer comes somewhat out of nowhere. I haven't spoken to James since our brief conversation a few weeks ago. The beach isn't exactly the writing date we'd talked about. But I can't help feel the universe is offering me something – a chance to escape maybe.

"Yes," I reply, "Come pick me up." I give him my address, and he promises to be there first thing in the morning.

My ex shows up, with a sad, pathetic look on his face. And I can't take it. We were so good on paper. How did we end up here? I can't breathe. But James honks the horn. I let my ex in. "Take your things and go. Lock up when you leave. I don't know when I'll be back." I grab my beach hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and a romance novel. I run to a car full of people I don't know except James. I escape.

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CASTLE: Nice guy. I can see how it wouldn't work, though.

BECKETT: Really?

CASTLE: Sure... Handsome, square-jawed, by-the-book.

BECKETT: And that's a bad thing?

CASTLE: Yeah, he's like the male you. Ying needs Yang, not another Ying. Ying-Yang is harmony, but Ying-Ying is... a name for a panda. ("Little Girl Lost")

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The weather is beautiful – the perfect 80 degree day with a slight breeze rippling the water. Sitting on the sand, breathing the salt air deeply, slowly, I feel my muscles start to relax. The boys are horsing around in the water. The girls are sunbathing and chatting about fashion and swine flu. I feel woefully out of place, hanging out with a crowd of people nearly a decade younger than I am. So I leisurely read my romance novel, looking up from time to time to observe the carefree existence I wish I still had.

As I look up, I see James rising out of the water, water dripping slowly from his chest. He runs both hands across his face and through his hair, slicking back his drenched locks. He shakes the water out of his eyes, and I watch the light catch each minute movement of his body. *He is like a gorgeous dolphin*, I think to myself, and then promptly groan inwardly. I can't believe my inner monologue sounds worse than the prose in the book I'm reading. The boys bound back toward the towels on the beach, so I quickly snap out of it. The girls trade places with them, and head into the water. Although I am invited to join them, I decline and stay firmly planted in the sand.

"I'm pretty sure this relationship is going to be over after the summer," Josh says while watching his current girlfriend and another woman splashing around in the water. "What about you and Katie?" he asks James. James glances to the water, and I ascertain that the woman with Josh's girlfriend must be Katie.

"Eh. It is what it is," he replies cryptically. "I'm looking for something more." I think when he says this that he looks at me, but I am probably imagining that. Josh turns to me and asks, "What's your story?"

I hesitate, not wanting to cross a line of disclosure that would warrant me talking about the whole mess. "I'm ... single. It's, uh, ... complicated. I'm just getting out of a pretty serious thing," I reply. It feels weird to characterize myself this way.

After a few hours, everyone has had enough of the sun and we start to pack up. Mentally, I am thinking through where I will go from here. My ex won't be finished moving things and I don't want to go back home. As I am running through options in my head, James says, "So, do you want to go home now? I can take you back."

I should probably say yes, but I say, "No." He pauses, reads my face and says, "You know, we were just going to hang out the rest of the day anyway. Probably go shoot some pool, play some poker. I mean, if you need a place to hide out or anything."

A wave of relief washes over me, "That sounds great. Count me in. I suck at pool, but I'm an excellent poker player."

"Well, that should work out well then because I'm a decent pool player, but a terrible poker player. Especially after I get a couple drinks in me." He smiles at me and I feel my face flush. I'm pretty sure he's flirting with me, but I am preoccupied with what's happening outside of this temporary reality – the end of my "real" life.

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We fail to truly understand romantic discourse in popular culture when we specifically and purposefully label "romance" as a certain type of cultural trope, wedded to a particular kind of formulaic fiction. Radway explains that the process of reading to escape one's present is "neither a new behavior nor one peculiar to women who read romances" (89); Cawelti observes that formulaic types of fiction (such as romance novels) are commonly defined by scholars as "subliterature (as opposed to literature), popular art (as opposed to fine art), lowbrow culture (as opposed to highbrow), or in terms of some other pejorative opposition" (13). But the metaphors of escape and formula fail to account for the everyday pleasure of popular culture:

The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded; top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder. These antagonisms, these clashes of social interests are motivated primarily by *pleasure*: the pleasure of producing one's own meanings of social experience and the pleasure of avoiding the social discipline of the power-bloc. (Fiske 47 *emphasis added*)

Romantic narratives are pleasurable because they enable a romantic imaginary – a set of “one's own meanings” tied to our interpersonal expectations of romantic relationships. Popular culture produces multiple points of entry into a variety of potential romantic scenarios. As more “blended” narratives appear, mixing traditional romantic fiction with other genres (e.g., mystery, Westerns, sci-fi, etc.), more nuanced readings of popular narratives of romance will need to extend beyond the romance novel as genre and into more complicated discussions of popular romance (Thompson, Koski, and Kolyfield 447; see also Meyer, “*Charmed*”).

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After the initial crisis of my ex leaving, I was still left with the (re)adjustment to my new life alone. Going home was eerie. I've always been an introvert, and I typically relish time to myself. But this was different – the isolation wasn't self-chosen or rejuvenating, it was forced and surreal. I spent several nights scrolling through phone contacts, considering calling. Sometimes I did. More often than not, no one picked up the phone. I was left alone.

James shared an apartment with two twenty-something males, and it quickly became my haven, a safe space. It was one of the filthiest places I've ever seen – boxes upon boxes of random stuff stacked in the main

room, dishes piled up with (several) days old food, laundry thrown asunder so that you couldn't tell what was clean and what was dirty. But someone was always there, or would be there soon, and after hanging out with these guys after the beach trip, they decided I was cool enough to have a standing open door invitation. The door was never locked.

One night, I went over to watch TV in a space that wasn't my house – my house full of eight years of memories slowly suffocating me. All of the guys were out. I'd just started up *Castle* when James walked in from his shift. "Hey," he said with a smile, "Whatcha watching?"

"Ah, it's this new show – *Castle*. It has Nathan Fillion in it. I added it to your DVR last week. Hope you don't mind."

"Isn't he that dude from *Firefly*? I loved that show!"

"Everyone who bothered to watch it loved that show," I said.

"Hang on a sec – I'll take a shower and join you," he said. And then mischievously added, "Or you could join me..."

He's joking – clearly he is joking, but suddenly I'm not. Months of flirtation, that gorgeous body. Roommates not home. I pause the show and stand suddenly, stripping off my shirt. *What am I doing? This is going to be so embarrassing in a minute.* But he crosses the room quickly to meet me, before I can change my mind, pulling me into an embrace and kissing me deeply. He smells of sweat and smoke and kitchen lines and char-grilled steak but I don't care.

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Whatever worry or uncertainty or conflict she'd felt before, she pushed it aside as too much thinking. At that moment, Nikki Heat didn't want to think. She wanted to be. ... The flickering of the candles gave the room a feeling of motion, the way it looked to Nikki when the plane she was in flew through a cloud. She pressed herself down to him and he came to meet her, the two of them not so much moving as drifting weightless toward each other, attracted

by some irresistible force in nature that had no name, color, or taste, only heat.

And then what began so gently took on its own life. They flew to each other, locking open mouths together, crossing some line that dared them, and they took it. They tasted deeply and touched each other with a frenzy of eagerness fired by wonder and craving, the two of them released at last to test the edge of their passion.

(Castle, *Heat Wave* 104)

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“Merry Christmas,” James says, handing me a package that is clearly a book. The summer has come and gone, and what seemed like a brief summer fling somehow morphed into a full-on relationship. At the end of the summer, James’ lease was up and his bachelor buddies were moving on to other places. That started the “what if” game – What if we didn’t break up at the end of the summer? What if we moved in together to see if the relationship could be long term? What if all of this is *completely and totally insane*? An eight year age gap. My career situated as a professor, stable. His, starting out as a sous chef. My days are a constant war between the rational, adult voice in my head and the hopeless romantic who can’t help but wonder if he is “the one.”

I feel the package and hold it up, shaking it briefly. “It’s a book!” I declare without opening it. “Next present.”

“Ah, come on now – you have to open it,” he says. I tear away the bright red wrapping paper and reveal the treasure underneath.

“NO FUCKING WAY!” I exclaim. I’m holding *Heat Wave*, the first of the ghost-written *Castle* books designed to be the “inspired product” of TV character Richard Castle’s interaction with Kate Beckett. The show has become a staple for us and this adds to my excitement.

“I thought we could read it together,” James says. We’ve been experimenting with reading aloud to each other when we have books that we both want to read. It’s a way to connect at the end of the day, curled up tight under the covers. But we haven’t read a romance together – and I’m pretty sure I’m going to be embarrassed about the kind of fiction I typically enjoy alone.

“Okay,” I say, “but if you ruin all the juicy sexy parts by laughing at it, I will never read a romance with you again.”

“I won’t laugh,” he says and winks at me, “I might groan...and then we can groan some other kind of way.” I smile and kiss him.

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“What is your ideal dream of earthly happiness?” Heat paused only a moment to think. Then she said nothing, but stood and slid out of her panties. Rook looked up to her from the couch with a face that she couldn’t resist, so she didn’t. She bent down, taking his mouth in hers. He met her hungrily and pulled Nikki into his arms. Soon, the rhythm of their bodies answered that last question. She didn’t think about it but found her lips to his ear whispering, “This... This... This...” (Castle, *Heat Rises* 99-100).

\* \* \*

James comes home after a double shift at the restaurant. I’ve been in my pajamas all day binge watching a television show I’m currently writing an essay on. Taking notes, transcribing passages that will become part of the argument. I’ve been so focused I haven’t even taken a shower. But I have taken time in between watching and working to make dinner – roast chicken with potatoes. Simple, but smelling the rosemary and lemon for

the last several hours has me salivating, so I start to plate the food the minute he walks in the door.

“Man, I had a crap day,” he says, “Let’s go out to eat.”

I stare at him – clearly dishing out food I’ve just made. “I already made dinner. We can eat here.”

This begins half an hour of bickering back and forth because James wants a particular sandwich from a particular pub near the beach. I am annoyed. I relent though, refusing to take a shower or dress up because this entire plan is ridiculous. We have to drive 20 minutes to eat when I already made a perfectly good dinner. I spend the entire drive salty.

When we get to the beach though, I relax involuntarily. I don’t know what it is about the water that does it for me, but no matter the body, a large expanse of water will calm my nerves almost immediately. I am distracted by my annoyance, but I go with James to the pub and we order dinner. I am engaged but not at the same time. He is recounting our time together, our first “date” as he calls it at this beach last spring. After dinner he suggests we walk on the beach because there is a full moon this evening, and now that I’m no longer starving, I agree. The water hits the shore calmly, the sky is crystal clear. The moon looms large creating shadowy patches in the sand. James is running through our favorites – beach days, concerts, quiet nights at home. I notice someone playing a cello on the sidewalk near the beach, which is a beautiful accent to the night sky. Without realizing it, I somehow had gotten ahead of him, and when I turned to point out the cello, he was on his knee in the sand, outstretched arms tapering to the small box in his hand. Inside is an elegant emerald cut diamond ring.

“Michaela, these past few months have been the best of my life and I want more. I want all of my days to be with you. Will you marry me?”

I am in shock. It’s too soon. I am not ready. He’s barely seen what my life as a professor really entails. I purposefully took a step back to deal with my personal life falling apart, but I’m going to have to go back to my

former workaholic hours at some point. He doesn't even *know* me yet. This simply cannot be real. It is a fiction I've created to help me cope with the reality surrounding me. Happiness, for me, is not this simple.

But people are staring now, and I feel awkward. I am waiting too long to respond, and it is not how the narrative is supposed to go. So I say, "Yes." Everyone claps and my heart races because James looks relieved, and I know I'm going to have to tell him my "yes" really meant "maybe." He is too young. I am too wounded. And although my heart aches because I wasn't ready to let go so soon, I know I am not ready. Maybe I will never be ready.

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BECKETT: Well she's right, you know. I mean, odds are it won't work out. She's just being practical.

CASTLE: Relationships aren't math problems. You don't solve them by being practical. I mean, what happens when she meets her soul mate and she doesn't risk it because it's not practical? ("Pretty Dead")

\* \* \*

I gaze at the small box sitting atop the dresser.

CASTLE: "I've been doing a lot of thinking about us. About our relationship, what we have, where we're headed. I've decided I want more. We both deserve more." ("Watershed")

*Why should I say yes?*

CASTLE: "Because of everything we've been through together! Four years I've been right here! Four years, just waiting for you to

open your eyes and see that I'm right here. And that I'm more than a partner." ("Always")

*But I can't say yes – I don't know how to give my heart away any more. It's been shattered too many times.*

CASTLE: "It's who you are. You don't let people in. I've had to scratch and claw for every inch." ("Watershed")

*And you will grow weary of it. Just like everyone before. And you will leave when you reach that point. I will break you – and you are too perfect to ruin.*

CASTLE: "There comes a point in our lives where we have to stop fooling ourselves into thinking life's going to be the way we want it to be and start seeing things for how they really are."  
("Watershed")

*Exactly! This is who I really am! I'm scared and insecure, and unable to imagine a relationship that won't entirely destroy me! Don't you know that?*

CASTLE: "Every morning I bring you a cup of coffee just so that I can see a smile on your face because I think you are the most remarkable, maddening, challenging, frustrating person I have ever met. And I love you Kate, and if that means anything to you, if you care about me at all, just don't do this." ("Always")

*I don't know.*

CASTLE: "Beckett, what do you want?"

BECKETT: "You. I just want you." ("Always")

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“I’ve been thinking about your proposal,” I say. We are driving on backed up streets. It is spring – one of those first lovely spring days where the sun is shining and the weather is finally warm after the dreary grey of winter. I’ve been brooding, and I’m finally ready to answer.

“Oh really?” he asks, turning his head slightly from the road to glance at me. Maybe that’s why I chose the car to start the conversation. I won’t have to look him in the eye.

“Yeah....so about that,” I say, “I’ve been through all this before and it didn’t work out so well for me. And I appreciate all the time you’ve given me to think things over and adjust.”

I pause. He doesn’t fill the space. He waits for me to continue.

“And I don’t know if I can ever be happy. Happiness seems so easy for everyone – easy for you. You see everything good about the world in every single moment. And I love you for that. But I’m not that way. I’m dark and twisty and broken and I don’t know why you’d want to be with someone like me.”

“Because I love you,” he says.

“But I don’t know if I can change. I don’t know if I can be happy. And you deserve all of that – someone who isn’t broken. If you want me, then you’ll have to take all of this crazy forever. And you’d have to be a crazy person to do that. So if you are still interested – I’m in.”

He doesn’t reply immediately. We are stopped at a red light, but he is not looking at me.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying? Because if you want me to propose again maybe you could give me some tips as to how to go about it – because I did the whole by-the-book thing, and it didn’t work out so well for me.”

“Oh God, don’t do that again. At this point, I’ve made you wait so long, you should just throw the ring in my lap and say ‘Marry me already bitch!’”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to call you a bitch,” he says, reaches into his pocket and tosses a jewelry box into my lap. “But I think it’s about time you marry me already.”

The box is different than the one on the dresser. I open it slowly and a stunning three opal ring stares back at me. Opal is my birthstone.

“What’s this?” I ask. My eyes begin to tear up because I already know the answer.

“Ring number two. If you don’t say yes soon, I might run out of rings.”

“Yes,” I say, “I’m saying yes.” The light turns green and we are finally moving forward.

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In my previous work on popular culture and romantic narrative, I conceptualized the romantic imaginary as a place “composed of unrealistic expectations in relationships and idealized notions of romance where the gendered other fulfills the missing part of any woman” (Meyer, “*Sex in the City*” 429-430). Recently, however, I have become wary of reductionist readings of women’s investments in romantic popular culture as mere escapism, misplaced desire, and ultimately, the process of cultural patriarchy impinging on women’s identities. Cultural critiques of romantic narratives in popular culture are anything *but* romantic, explaining the consumption of romantic popular culture as “heteronormative, relationship-seeking identity” established in a “capitalist structure” that “continues to limit the possibilities feminism affords” women (Stern 430). I would like to see scholars embrace the romance – the love and desire with which we live our lives, extending that same love and desire to our

dearest held popular narratives. Despite their common limitations as heteronormative, gendered, raced and classed, these narratives influence and shape the way romance appears in our lives – from our expectations of the romance, to its articulation, and in some cases, its dissolution.

Autoethnographic approaches to popular culture are one way to potentially give form to a more situated romantic imaginary, one intricately and simultaneously woven from personal experience and popular culture. Fluck captures this eloquently:

If an essential part of the romance consists in the quest for the expression of something that, by definition can never be fully known and directly articulated, then it must remain an important part of the discussion of the American romance to trace the wide array of attempts to give shape to the seemingly “unspeakable.” (425)

Instead of reducing women’s pleasure and desire interacting with popular romantic narratives to generic cultural critique, why not turn our attention to mapping the “unspeakable?” The hidden, secret desires of our hearts, and how they are illuminated by and through popular culture? Instead of simply condemning romantic narratives in popular culture as the culture industry capitalizing on the fears and anxieties of women who are pressured to improve their cultural capital through romantic pairings, maybe it is time to “move beyond apologetics, to understand how such apologetics have limited the scope of our work” (Horne 45). Romantic fiction and its centrality to our lived emotional lives need not be a hindrance, a treacherous terrain colonized by the forces of capitalism. It can be the unspeakable love, joy, and happiness that holds the fabric of our relational lives together.

Perhaps I imagine a different way of reading, a different way of living. Many people choose relationships of affection and care that are not necessarily loving “because they feel safer,” “the demands are not as

intense as loving requires,” and “the risk is not as great” (hooks 10). Does my desire for a romance that appears like it does on *Castle* – light hearted, balanced, supportive, unconditional – negate the affordances of feminism? Can I not seek what could be conceptualized as a heteronormative romantic imaginary and still maintain agency? If what I *want* happens to be a stereotypical, popular romantic narrative, what is inherently *wrong* with that? Romance novelist Jennifer Cruise captures this eloquently when articulating her joyous turn toward romantic fiction as a genre after years of doctoral training in “traditional” literature:

For the first time, I was reading fiction about women who had sex and then didn’t eat arsenic or throw themselves under trains or swim out to the embrace of the sea, women who won on their own terms (and those terms were pretty varied) and still got the guy in the end without having to apologize or explain that they were still emancipated even though they were forming permanent pair bonds, women who moved through a world of frustration and detail and small pleasures and large friendships, a world I had authority in...and two life-changing things happened to me: I felt more powerful, more optimistic, and more in control of my life than ever before, and I decided I wanted to write romance fiction. Anything that did that much good for me, was something that I, as a feminist, wanted to do for other women. (81-82)

Romantic fiction need not enable an *imaginary* unattainable in our lives. Rather it can inform our *reality* by assisting in the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships that improve our self-actualization. It shows us we need not suffer alone, that we can have sex without shame, and that we are worthy of a standard of love and care often missing from modern relationships.

Autoethnography offers researchers the ability to “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by,

being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 3) and provides a way of chronicling and critiquing “past experience to make better, hopeful experiences possible” (Adams 621). Perhaps my consumption of romantic popular culture, the pleasure and desire it enables, is a product of capitalist culture. But it is also a series of narratives that has made better, more hopeful interpersonal relationships possible. Popular culture is not my whole story, but it is an important *part* of my story. It is the chain of events that makes everything *make sense*.

\* \* \*

BECKETT: The moment that I met you, my life became extraordinary. You taught me to be my best self. To look forward to tomorrow’s adventures. And when I was vulnerable, you were strong. I love you, Richard Castle. And I want to live my life in the warmth of your smile and the strength of your embrace. I promise you, I will love you. I will be your friend. And your partner in crime and in life. Always.

CASTLE: The moment we met, my life became extraordinary. You taught me more about my life than I knew there was to learn. You are the joy in my heart. You’re the last person I want to see every night before I close my eyes. I love you, Katherine Beckett. And the mystery of you is the one I want to spend the rest of my life exploring. I promise to love you, to be your friend and your partner in crime and life, ‘til death do us part and for the time of our lives.” (“Time of our Lives”)

\* \* \*

The weather is beautiful – the perfect 80 degree day with a slight breeze rippling the water. Sitting on the sand, breathing the salt air deeply, slowly, I feel my muscles start to relax. The boys are playing in the water while I read one of my traditional beach romances. James is throwing our young son in the air and catching him just before he hits the water. He giggles uncontrollably, jabbering “aga, aga, aga,” which suggests he wants to do it again. I watch them and smile, a wave of contentedness washing over me.

I think briefly of the past few years. The Valentine’s Day where James reenacts one of my favorite scenes from *Love Actually*, cue cards written in purple paint declaring his love for me quietly. The bouquet of dandelions he produced shortly after we read the *Hunger Games*, the bright yellow bringing happiness instead of destruction. The birthday he interrupted my class to serenade me with balloons, and a series of other public serenades that remind me of Lloyd Dobbler in *Say Anything*. The ringtone from *Castle* he installed on my phone, so that every time he calls, I am reminded of our romantic television doppelgangers.

I am no longer *reading* the romance, I am *living* the romance.

I bookmark my progress and set the novel down. It is time for me to swim.

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