

Introduction

Imagine a family living in Pasig, a district in Metro Manila that hosts a mix of office buildings, upscale housing, large shopping malls, museums, cathedrals, and parks that hold markets on weekends. Three generations of women in this family live together in a large apartment and share a love for romance fiction.

Despite their common interest in the genre, as romance readers and consumers, they are very different. The eldest of the three women reads romance novels written in Taglish (a code-mixing vernacular of Tagalog and English) that she purchases at the local convenience store down the street. Her favourites feature young girls from poverty-stricken areas of the Philippines being swept off their feet by rich heroes from the heart of Manila.

Her daughter, who benefited from a middle-class education in the late twentieth century, prefers more progressive romances. A few years ago, a friend of hers shared a Facebook post about an event at Estancia, their local mall, hosted by a local self-publishing community, where actors read passages from contemporary romance novels. She attended with her friend, bought some of the books being sold on a table at the side of the room, and began reading as soon as she was home. Now, she buys most of her romances published by this group from their website. She reads them avidly – when she's not worrying about the amount of time her daughter spends on her smartphone.

But when she's on her smartphone, her daughter is also reading romance. She's in her second year of high school, so she doesn't have a lot of disposable income to spend on the paperback books her mother and grandmother read, but everyone in her school is *obsessed* with a new romance story on Wattpad. She reads it on her phone as she walks to school, between classes, at lunchtime, and late at night once she's finished her homework. She's considering posting her own story to the platform under a pseudonymous username. For inspiration, she's planning to buy a copy of a book by her all-time favourite Wattpad author at the National Bookstore at Estancia, which was published in paperback form through a partnership between the platform and a traditional Philippine publishing house.

Here, we can see a glimpse of the dynamism of the Filipino romance publishing landscape, which encompasses very different practices of creation, production, distribution, and reception. There are numerous distinct kinds of popular romance fiction in the Philippines, ranging from traditionally published Tagalog pocketbook romances to self-published English-language romances produced by #RomanceClass; traditionally published English-language chick lit to young adult (YA) romance published on digital platforms in a variety of Filipino languages and dialects.

These distinctive publishing modes are frequently entangled. For example, many of the large traditional romance publishers in the Philippines have partnerships with and/or run their own digital platforms for the purposes of discoverability, acquisition, and/or sales. Similarly, some self-published authors in #RomanceClass began their careers publishing chick lit with traditional publishers. In other instances, though, these publishing modes are quite dispersed, sometimes defined in opposition to one another. Romance fiction in the Philippines is also closely connected to the platform and entertainment media industries and encompasses diverse and unique Filipino reception practices. Providing a detailed picture of this complicated sector of publishing and book culture is a primary aim of this Element.

This Element represents the first extended study of romance fiction in the Philippines in the twenty-first century. Previously, Patricia May B. Jurilla examined Tagalog romance fiction in the late twentieth century as part of her book history of bestsellers in the Philippines, examining its emergence from other Filipino popular genres like metrical romances (2008; see also Reyes, 1991). Jurilla's study, which concludes in 2003, serves as a foundation for this Element. We take up where she left off, examining Filipino romance fiction publishing in the 'long twenty-first century', a term that Rachel Noorda and Stevie Marsden have argued is appropriate in order to capture the organisational and technological developments of the late twentieth century that have significantly shaped book publishing and culture in the twenty-first century (2019: 6). As we will explore, romance in the Philippines is closely connected with traditional media institutions and platform companies. As such, our research combines a book history approach with contemporary publishing studies as it intersects with media

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and platforms studies: a new and, we hope, exciting set of intersecting approaches to popular romance. This is also among the first pieces of sustained scholarship to focus on a romance publishing ecosystem outside of the dominant Anglo-American publishing industry. By examining Filipino romance fiction published in the Philippines for a mostly Filipino market, we hope to contribute to decolonisation efforts in publishing and popular romance studies through decentring the West.

Researching romance fiction in the Philippines is not without its challenges. It encompasses a dispersed ecosystem of production models, media forms, and reception sites and practices. In addition to this dispersion, there is little research on romance publishing, or even book publishing more broadly, in the Philippines. Jurilla notes that the history of the book in the Philippines ‘has not yet arrived. It is a territory that is still largely unexplored if not totally unheard of in Philippine scholarship’ (2008: 5). This presents significant challenges but also exciting opportunities to scholars who seek to investigate any part of this industry landscape. As Jurilla describes, ‘the terrain to cover is immense, the journey quite lonely and rough at this point’ (2008: 10). There are significant gaps in the scholarly literature and an ‘enormous amount of basic archival and bibliographic work remains to be done on all aspects of print and publishing throughout Philippine history’ (Jurilla, 2008: 10). Romance fiction suffers a double invisibility in Philippine book publishing scholarship, often overlooked in favour of more serious and canonical literature. However, despite the minimal attention paid, Filipino romance publishing is a vibrant and thriving sector of book culture – as we intend to explore here.

Researching Romance Fiction

Romance is a significant genre for study. Globally, romance publishing is a billion-dollar industry, and the sheer volume of romance novels published is something often emphasised in scholarly discussions of the genre, frequently as a justification for taking them seriously (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019; McAlister *et al.*, 2020). Their popularity in the Philippines is likewise reflected in their bestselling status. As Jurilla notes, romance novels have been the nation’s literary bestsellers (2008).

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However, the fact that romance books are popular and sell in high numbers is not the only justification for their study: as Wilkins *et al.* argue, romance, and genre fiction more broadly, ‘is more than a commercial phenomenon’ (2022: 23). The romance fiction sector has been at the forefront of technological innovation and is highly adaptive to industry changes. The genre has adapted more swiftly to changing technological and market practices than any other genre (Markert, 1985; 2016; Tapper, 2014). It leads the way in the number of self-published titles and was a principal factor in the uptake and popularisation of e-books and e-readers (Driscoll *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher *et al.*, 2018; Parnell, 2018). In Australia, for instance, romance fiction has experienced the highest rate of growth in self-published titles from 2000 to 2016, compared to fantasy and crime fiction (Driscoll *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). Scholars and industry practitioners attribute the genre’s willingness to diversify content, experiment with multiple subgenres and hybrid genres, and cultivate new readerships and online channels for reader communities for its continued growth in the early twenty-first century (Cuthbert, 2021; Parnell, 2021; Wilkins *et al.*, 2022).

A key part of romance fiction’s growth has been in ‘diverse’ romance: that is, romance which features characters from racially and/or otherwise marginalised backgrounds, often written by authors from that background. Alongside this has been the growth of a body of scholarship which focuses on it, usually centring on textual representations in various subgenres: for example, desert or sheikh romances (Bach, 1997; Burge, 2016; Burge & Folie, 2021; Jarmakani, 2020; Taylor, 2007; Teo, 2012), Indian romance (Bohidar, 2021; Kamblé, 2007; Rudisill, 2018; Uparkar, 2014), African American romance (Dandridge, 2010; 2022; Hendricks, 2022; Hendricks & Moody-Freeman, 2022; Huguley, 2022; Jackson, 2022; Moody-Freeman, 2020; 2022; Pritchard, 2022; Tindall, 2022), Muslim romance (Abdullah-Poulos, 2018; Parnell, 2022), Chinese web fiction romance (Feng, 2021), and, of course, Filipino romance fiction (Barrios, 2001; Jurilla, 2008; McAlister *et al.*, 2020; Parnell *et al.*, 2021a; Parnell *et al.*, 2021b; Santiago, 2009). However, with only a few exceptions, these studies still tend to be rooted in the dominant North American publishing industry, centring authors and readers in an English-speaking Western context. Indeed, this is arguably inherent in the idea of ‘diversity’ itself: the paradigm it seeks to

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complicate is one of hegemonic, usually American, Whiteness. While it is impossible to escape the influence of the dominant Anglo-American industry, in this Element we hope to make a different kind of contribution by approaching the Filipino romance publishing ecosystem in its own context and on its own terms: specifically, as a distinctive genre world.

*The Social, Economic, and Political Context of Filipino Romance
Publishing and Reading*

The historical and current social, economic, and political conditions of the Philippines greatly impact its publishing culture. The country's history of colonisation and its ongoing impacts on class and language, the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos (1965–86) and implementation of martial law (formally 1972–81), as well as the unequal wealth distribution that is deeply ingrained in Filipino society, all influence how romance continues to be published, distributed, and received.

The Philippines has one of the highest wealth gaps between high and low socio-economic populations in Southeast Asia, and this is further widened by the country being prone to climate change disasters and the related socio-economic losses (Ong, 2015: 3). A five-level classification system (Classes A–E) is often used to describe the various socio-economic income segments of the Philippine population, which are based on 'income, wealth, assets and overall living conditions' (Deinla & Dressel, 2019: 17). Classes A and B are used to refer to those who belong to the upper class; Class C describes those who are part of the middle class, which is further divided between C1 (upper-middle class) and C2 (lower-middle class); and Classes D and E those who are among the lower class (Uy-Tioco, 2019: 159). Various classes are often combined in statistical data depending on their relative size and political power; Classes A and B (and sometimes C), for example, are often counted together due to the small number of upper-class households in the Philippines (7 per cent in 2019, according to the Social Weather Stations survey) (Mangahas, 2022). As with several other countries worldwide, working- and lower-class citizens make up the majority of the population in the Philippines: Class D represented 75 per cent of the population in 2019 and Class E 18 per cent (Mangahas, 2022).

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The socio-economic make-up of the Philippines has been an influential factor in the production and reception of romance fiction throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Tagalog romance fiction has become a hugely popular genre due to publishers enthusiastically targeting readers from Class D and E income segments. This target market has contributed to romance's commercial success because of the sheer numbers in this market, despite their relatively low purchasing power (Ong, 2015). Conscious of their readers' spending capacity, traditional Tagalog pocketbook romance publishers have been strategic in their inclusion of particular narrative tropes, production design, and pricing in order to make them widely accessible to the majority of the population. According to the 2017 National Book Development Board (NBDB) Readership Survey, 75.7 per cent of Filipinos were willing to spend PHP 199 (US\$3.58) for non-school-related e-books, and 72.54 per cent were willing to spend the same for books published by Filipino publishers. Bookware Publishing Corporation, a leading publisher in Tagalog pocketbook romances that launched in 1992, is emphatic in its intention to maintain My Special Valentine Romances – its flagship series/imprint of Tagalog romances – at 'price points at levels that are affordable to a greater segment of its target market – the C, D and E income groups' (Bookware Publishing Corporation, 2022). At the time of writing, Bookware's catalogue shows a range of romance novels priced between PHP 29.00 (US\$0.51) and PHP 199.75 (US\$3.49). They also offer more affordable 8-peso (US\$0.14) e-books on their online store. Although the country has a 'patchy' economic record 'with regular boom and bust cycles' (Deinla & Dressel, 2019: 1), Tagalog pocketbook romances continue to make affordability and accessibility for their audience a top priority, providing enough remuneration for their authors and profitable ventures that make business expansions possible for their publishers.

In addition to price, there is also a complex interplay of language, class, and taste between the romance genre and its Filipino audience. Writing in English has been an established mode of literary production in the Philippines, rooted in America's colonisation of the country in the first half of the twentieth century. The first book to be printed entirely in English was published just twenty years after colonisation (Abinales, 1981: 19–20). English was the primary language of instruction in formal educational

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settings between 1901 and 1974, which resulted in English-language titles – historically produced for and marketed to middle- and upper-class audiences who could afford this kind of education – dominating the publishing industry until the late twentieth century (Gonzales, 2004; Tupas, 2019). English has maintained its ‘class-ifying’ and ‘stratifying’ role in Filipino society (Tupas, 2019: 538), with the language often seen as a ‘wedge’ that separated ‘educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen’ (Constantino, 1970: 24). At present, this divide operates not just in public spaces – where wet markets, neighbourhood stores, and middle-class establishments such as Robinson’s and SM malls use Filipino, whereas five-star establishments, hotels, and restaurants use English (Gonzales, 2004) – but also in reading spheres, between the audiences of Tagalog pocketbook romance and Filipino romance in English. The ability to speak, read, and write in English has historically reflected a privileged social position in Filipino society and this legacy remains to various degrees in different spheres of cultural production. While some Tagalog romance authors can achieve tremendous popularity – a kind of ‘rock star’ status among readers – writers who publish in English still receive a greater level of respect (Radyo Katipunan 87.9, 2021).

The Genre World of Filipino Romance

The genre worlds model, as theorised by Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll, and Lisa Fletcher, examines popular genres through a tripartite focus on inter-linked parts: industrial processes, social formations, and textual conventions (2022). Put simply, a genre world is a ‘textual, social and industrial complex in which people work together to create and circulate specific types of books’ (Wilkins *et al.*, 2022: 16). This framework builds on Howard S. Becker’s work in *Art Worlds*, in which he argues that art is produced by a network of collective and cooperative activity, rather than by a sole individual (1982). This decentralisation of the genius figure of the author allows for an examination of the ‘radiating network’ or ‘cast of characters’ and their contributions to the production, circulation, and appreciation of art (Becker, 1982: xxiv). Extending this premise, the genre worlds model examines the ‘collective activity that goes into the creation

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and circulation of genre texts and is particularly focused on the communities, collaborations, and industrial pressures that drive and are driven by the processes of socio-artistic formations' (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018: 998).

This literary sociological approach allows us to 'move away from the taxonomies and defenses that have dominated the field and see genre texts as the results of human creative collaboration, as the products of commercial negotiation and strategy, and as levers for social connection and engagement' (Wilkins *et al.*, 2022: 2). This relatively holistic approach to the study of genres supports our aim of mapping romance fiction in the Philippines, a large and diverse sector of the local publishing industry that is evolving at a rapid rate, as well as the forces that contribute to its evolution. As Wilkins *et al.* note, '[w]hile close and comparative reading of genre texts and their paratexts – book covers, blurbs, titles – is an important part of mapping the operations of genre worlds, so too is attending to the collaborative social and industrial networks in which genre texts arise' (2022: 16).

Wilkins *et al.* introduce this model by examining the genre worlds of romance, fantasy, and crime in Australia, but their framework is highly applicable to other local publishing territories and considers the global publishing context in which local book cultures are increasingly situated. Exploring different publishing territories through this lens highlights the locally specific ways in which genre worlds arise and the forces that contribute to the development of distinctive social, textual, and industrial characteristics. As in Australia, the Filipino romance genre world consists of unique social practices, textual conventions, and industry structures, which also interact in distinctive ways. By examining the Filipino romance industry, a key social formation in #RomanceClass, and a selection of the texts themselves, we are thus adopting a multistrand, multilayered approach to genre: one which enables us to understand not just what is in Filipino romance novels but how they are produced and received and why they are so popular.

Methods

The romance publishing industry of the Philippines is highly complex and entangled. Several organisations compete in this space, employing various business models, courting various audiences, and engaging in the

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production of different kinds of romance fiction, each with its own unique history. We examine several different sectors and aspects of the Filipino romance genre world in our exploration of industrial landscape, social formations, and texts. However, each of these is worthy of its own book-length study, which we do not have the capacity to do here.

Therefore, we have combined this broad look at the genre world with a case study approach. Specifically, we are using #RomanceClass, a Filipino romance self-publishing collective, as a focal point for navigating this complex landscape. They are an ideal case study for this kind of work because they are a grass-roots initiative, and many of the different practices they have adopted for navigating the Filipino romance genre world are solutions to problems this genre world has created – thus offering bigger insight into its nature as well as specific insight into the collective.

We use mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative and primary and secondary data, in order to capture a substantial part of our multi-site field of analysis. The data for our case study is drawn primarily from fieldwork we conducted at and around the 2019 #RomanceClass October Feels Fest event. This included eighteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with #RomanceClass community members, including authors and actors that perform at the live reading events. These were conducted in person in Manila in 2019, ranging from thirty to ninety minutes. Most interviews were conducted one-on-one but some were conducted in a small group at the request of the participants. In addition to the longer in-depth interviews, we conducted ‘vox pop’-style (very brief) interviews with twelve attendees at the October Feels Fest. Some of these attendees were other authors in the community, audience members, and artists. These short interviews ranged between two and five minutes.

In addition, as part of our ethnographic case study approach, we explored physical locations of significance to the community. For example, we interviewed Mina V. Esguerra at Spiral, a restaurant at Sofitel Philippine Plaza in Pasay, Metro Manila, which featured prominently in one of her novels. We met Tania Arpa, another author, at Commune Café in Makati, where a previous live reading had been held, and our first group interview with a few other authors was conducted at The Podium, a mall in Ortigas where the first workshop with actors was held. We took ourselves on field

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trips to bookstores and malls to get a sense of the broader sites of book distribution and culture in the Philippines. Engaging with sites associated with the community's history was important in locating the community networks we were investigating, as well as mapping the Filipino romance book ecosystem more broadly.

Several of our #RomanceClass participants have previously been published by traditional publishers. Our interviews thus provided some data regarding the broader local romance publishing industry, as well as a broader sense of the problems it had engendered – which, as a community, #RomanceClass sought to solve, at industrial, relational, and textual levels. To develop a more detailed picture of the Filipino romance industry beyond #RomanceClass, we consulted grey literature, including industry reports and news, as well as other secondary data, including scholarship.

This Element covers a large, multilayered, and highly productive sector of the Filipino publishing industry. It explores the distinct genre histories of the different kinds of romance that have flourished in this territory and the social, political, and technological contexts that have shaped their development. It analyses the close connections forged between romance publishing and other media sectors in the Philippines and the unique reception practices that ensure the success of romance adaptations, offering a picture of a complex and distinctive genre world.

About This Element

In Chapter 1, 'The Filipino Romance Publishing Industry', we outline the industrial formation of the Filipino romance genre world and explore the field's increasing intersection with platform economies and the entertainment media industry.

Chapter 2, 'Filipino Romance Texts: From Tagalog Pocketbooks to #RomanceClass', we examine the texts themselves. Looking at two distinctive kinds of Filipino romance – Tagalog pocketbooks and English-language #RomanceClass novels – we analyse their different textual conventions and the different markets they address, and the ways in which the latter provides alternatives to the former.