

**DISCURSOS E IDENTIDADES EN LA FICCIÓN ROMÁNTICA.
VISIONES ANGLÓFONAS DE MADEIRA Y CANARIAS /
DISCOURSES AND IDENTITIES IN ROMANCE FICTION.
ANGLOPHONE VISIONS FROM MADEIRA AND THE CANARIES**

Edited by María Isabel González Cruz

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PALOMA FRESNO CALLEJA

Universitat de les Illes Balears

paloma.fresno@uib.es

<<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2094-7536>>

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Romance novels have historically enjoyed remarkable levels of popularity, but the genre is currently receiving unprecedented attention, as attested by seemingly inexhaustible popular demand, booming global sales and enthusiastic traditional and social media coverage. After decades of academic neglect, popular romance has also finally begun to receive long-due scholarly consideration. The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR), established in 2009, and its associated publication, the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, have been decisive in providing a solid infrastructure to the burgeoning field of popular romance studies, which is considered to be in its third critical wave (Teo 2018). As proposed by Frantz and Selinger (2012), the first wave of romance scholarship is considered to start with the publication of the first full-length monographs: Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), Kay J. Mussel's *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*, and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). Although these works approached the genre as worthy of academic attention, they reiterated generalised perceptions of romance novels as escapist fantasies, irremediably harmful for women readers because of their underlying patriarchal ideology. The second wave of scholarly work was marked by critical responses from romance authors themselves (Krentz 1992) in their attempt to offer insights into the workings of the genre (Teo 2018) and prove its feminist potential. Pamela Regis's ground-breaking *A Natural History of*

the Romance Novel (2003), which explores the genealogy and building-blocks of the genre, is often seen as initiating the more interdisciplinary and productive third wave of criticism (Frantz and Selinger 2012; Gleason and Selinger 2016; Roach 2016; Vivanco 2011). Only in the last five years, a substantial list of specialised publications—including research companions (Kamlé et al. 2020; Brooks 2022), single-authored monographs (Allan 2019; McAlister 2020; Vivanco 2020; Fernández-Rodríguez 2021; Arvanitaki 2022; Kamlé 2023), and edited collections (Ramos-García and Vivanco, 2020; Pérez-Fernández and Pérez-Río 2021; Fanetti 2022; Pryde 2022)—has appeared to prove the strength, relevance and diversity of the field. *Discourses and Identities in Romance Fiction. Anglophone Visions from Madeira and the Canaries*, edited by María Isabel González Cruz, can be seen as a relevant addition to this array of critical studies.

This collection of essays is devoted to the exploration of a large corpus of contemporary romance novels set in the islands of Madeira and the Canaries and written by Anglophone authors from the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s. The works under analysis reflect long-held perceptions of these Atlantic islands as strategic locations for British imperial expansion and, after the growth of international travel and tourism in the nineteenth century, as exotic places of recreation, adventure or artistic retreat. These Orientalist tourist discourses were invigorated from the mid-twentieth century by romance publishers like Mills & Boon and Harlequin, which directed their attention to these enticing insular settings with a view to attracting new readers and securing high sales. As explained in the introduction, this comprehensive corpus of primary sources (listed at the end of the collection) was compiled and studied in the context of a competitive research project financed by the Spanish government and led by Professor María Isabel González Cruz of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. This team of Spanish and international scholars have pioneered the research on popular romance in our country, thus contributing to the expansion of a critical tradition so far dominated by North American, British and Australian critics (Kamlé et al. 2020: 9-11). In fact, one of the strengths of the collection is its bilingual character—the eight chapters appear in both English and Spanish—which guarantees that the book will appeal to an international audience, while also enriching the still scarce list of critical studies on popular romance written in Spanish (the best-known of which is Nattie Golubov's comprehensive introduction to the genre, *El amor en tiempos neoliberales: apuntes críticos sobre la novela rosa contemporánea*, published in 2017). The inclusion of a final pedagogical section with practical exercises and questions about each of the chapters is another original and useful feature of the volume. Although the number of questions devoted to some of the chapters (Chapters 3 and 7, in particular) are fewer and less elaborate than the rest, this pedagogical section will surely serve as an effective teaching tool both in university

courses and in non-academic forums, such as book clubs and other activities targeting non-specialised audiences.

The volume is well-structured and shows a clear sense of direction, thus avoiding the thematic dispersal often found in edited collections of this kind. In the Introduction González-Cruz outlines the project's objectives, defines the key concepts guiding the textual analysis, and contextualises the chosen corpus of romance novels according to their thematic and discursive recurrences. Additionally, the Spanish version of the chapter clarifies the editor's preference for the term *ficción romántica*, instead of the often disparaged *novela rosa*. These initial terminological considerations are expanded in Chapter 1, "Popular Romance Novels: Past, Present and Future", by Inmaculada Pérez Casal (in itself an excellent teaching aid to introduce students to the genre). This chapter nicely frames the rest of the volume with its succinct but informative discussion of the history and cultural impact of romance novels and its overview of the main critical waves of romance criticism. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the future of popular romance, particularly in what concerns current moves to incorporate more diverse voices and inclusive perspectives, leaving behind the whiteness that has historically characterised the genre.

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This call for more diverse and intersectional approaches suitably sets the tone for the rest of the chapters, devoted to the analysis of novels which perpetuate Orientalist discourses of the islands and their local populations and calcify the contrasts between the supposedly superior cultural values and identity markers of the Anglophone heroines and those of the local population. With its focus on the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Canaries, the volume offers a geographically and culturally specific reading of a very popular trend of exotic romances which, almost uninterruptedly since colonial times, have narrated the story of a white western woman who travels to a remote location to experience personal transformation and discover true love. In taking up the analysis of this specific corpus of island romances, the collection comes to integrate a solid body of criticism focusing on representation, Orientalism and exoticism in novels set in various historical moments and geographical locations. This work was initiated by Hsu-Ming Teo's ground-breaking *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (2012), and further developed by subsequent studies (Jarmakani 2015; Fletcher and Crane 2017; Ramos-García and Laura Vivanco 2020; Pérez Fernández and Pérez-Río 2021). Building on the works of these authors, Chapters 2 and 3 specifically focus on the island of Madeira. Maria del Mar Pérez Gil discusses Mills & Boon romances by Margaret Rome, Katrina Britt, and Sally Wentworth and their ethnocentric construction of Madeira as both an idyllic and an "imperfect paradise", a site of lush beauty and otherness. Aline Bazenga's chapter explores

how the sociolinguistic and cultural aspects of the island of Madeira are articulated around what she defines as “the tourist chronotope”, an ambivalent place of encounter and conflict, which favours the British heroines’ perspectives and assumptions about the exotic other.

The rest of the chapters move on to the discussion of romance novels set in the Canary Islands. In Chapter 4, María Jesús Vera Cazorla adopts a more panoramic and, at times, a somewhat descriptive approach to her corpus, exploring how the novels exploit, often in limited or superficial ways, the most recognisable symbols or cultural icons of the islands (Mount Teide, Timanfaya National Park, the Gomeran whistle, or carnival), with surprisingly little variation between novels written in the 1950s and contemporary romances produced at the turn of the twenty-first century. Chapter 5, by María del Pilar Gonzalez-de la Rosa, offers a feminist reading of various Mills & Boon novels by looking at how they variously reflect or resist changing discourses on gender, particularly through the depiction of independent female travellers who engage in relationships with more conservative Spanish men. Chapter 6, by María Teresa Ramos-García, one of the strongest in the volume, discusses two Gothic romances by Louise Bergstrom published in the early 1970s. Ramos-García argues that the stereotypical depiction of the few Spanish characters that appear in the novels reflects anxieties about interracial relations and miscegenation related to the US context at the time of the novels’ publication, and that proves the suitability of the Gothic mode to articulate such concerns.

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The last two chapters delve into linguistic aspects and illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of the collection, as well as the multiple angles from which popular romance can be approached. Chapter 7, by Susana de los Heros, discusses the use of Spanish in Mary Stewart’s *The Wind off the Small Isles* (1968), set in Lanzarote, from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. Through a discussion of the use of Spanish words and the depiction of Spanish speakers, this chapter reiterates some of the common findings of previous sections, particularly in what concerns the novels’ articulation of otherness. Chapter 8, by María Isabel González Cruz, “Interdisciplinarity in Romance Fiction”, aptly closes the volume by illustrating through a wide range of examples how the chosen corpus can be approached from the perspectives of Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics or Applied Linguistics, and how the conclusions extracted from these particular novels can be clearly applicable to other geographical or cultural areas experienced through similar cultural encounters.

Collectively, the volume encourages readers to think of popular romance as more than a mere commercial or escapist genre and highlights the value of the cultural, sociological and linguistic information included in these novels as a clear indicator

of persistent or changing discourses on gender, race, and national or cultural identity. The volume will appeal to literary scholars in general, and to those working in the fields of gender, postcolonial or cultural studies in particular; it will also open up new paths to academics who have never considered the immense potential of popular romance for their research or for their teaching.

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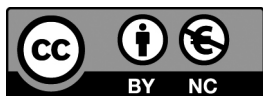
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