The Wild Heart of the Continent:

Love and Place in the Silk Road Novels of Sherry Thomas

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Introduction

In 2012 a trio of geographers urged their colleagues to "put love on the geographical agenda" (Morrison et. al. 2012: 505). A corresponding turn has put geography "on the agenda" in the study of popular romance fiction, a genre that is centrally concerned with the subject of love. Without losing sight of the fundamental premise that "romantic stories cannot do without their romantic locations" (Pearce 2004, 532), twenty-first century scholarship no longer treats the genre's uses of space, place, and transit simply as efforts at product differentiation: gestures of "pseudo-individualization" designed to mask the fundamental sameness of romance novels as standardized commodities (Adorno 1976: 31, see Modleski 1998: 57 and Bly 2012: 11). The fantasy spaces carved out by the romance novel have been particularized and demystified in critical accounts of the "Arabiastan" of Anglo-American "sheikh" romances (Jarmakani 2015; Teo 2012), the Highlands of *Outlander* and other American novels set in Scotland (Hague 2014), the "timeless" people and places of the genre's Italy (Pierini 2020), an archipelago of tropical, desert, and coastal islands (Rodríguez 2019; Crane and Fletcher 2017), and more. Issues of place

often dovetail with questions of race (e.g., Young 2016), colonialism (Teo 2003), and national identity (Teo 2014; Vivanco 2016). They also, however, invite psychological and philosophical consideration, as critics attend to "the links between spaces and selves" in a particular novelist's use of domestic interiors (Gleason 2016: 81) or, in a related move, as scholarship unfolds the disparate metaphors of love that are implied by the genre's houses (Vivanco 2011: 158-164), gardens (Vivanco 2011: 165-169), and narratives of relocation (Pearce 2004).

In this essay, I will analyze the relationships between space, place, and romantic love in three novels by the American writer Sherry Thomas: her first book, *Private Arrangements* (2008), which is set in Belle Époque England and (briefly) New York City; her third, *Not Quite a Husband* (2010), which is framed by scenes in London and Cambridge but predominantly set on the North-West frontier of the British Raj in 1897; and her final historical romance, *My Beautiful Enemy* (2012), which moves among late-nineteenth-century English, Chinese, and imperially-contested Silk Road settings. Scholarship has noted Thomas's interest in nation, empire, and transculturalism (Kamblé 2020) without, however, linking these to ideas of love as such. To tease out these ideas, I will attend to both the geographical and the *compositional* spaces of each novel: the places that each book describes and its own architecture as a story. We speak of narrative progress in spatial terms—a plot is linear, circular, wandering, etc.—and a novel can also be envisioned "from above," with blocks of material (scenes) balancing one another in symmetrical or asymmetrical arrangements. Such patterning of plot and scene is just as integral to how each novel thinks about what love is, how it feels, what it asks of us, and what it can (and cannot) do as the author's more immediately obvious choices of plot, protagonist, allusion, tone, and location.

To speak of a popular romance novel as the site of some "thinking" is, of course, to depart from the usual sense of these novels as both artless and mindless. As I will demonstrate, however, Thomas's novels use different spaces in different ways, and these evince different ideas, despite the fact that they are all published by mainstream, mass-market houses, sharing not only a subgenre (popular historical romance), but also an author. "Novels that fall under the rubric mass-market romance are often studied together due to the perception that the rules dictating the genre are more important – and more influential – than a specific author's work," Mary Bly has observed (2012: 62), but attending to spatial nuance can illuminate the "unlikeness" even of a single author's novels, each to each. Bly quotes Adorno's dour observation that in pop songs, "Complications have no consequences…the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally new will be introduced" (Adorno 1998: 198; qtd. Bly, 2012: 62), yet in Thomas's work, the complications brought to each text by its uses of space and place *do* have consequences, both in the ideals of love that each book espouses and in the unfamiliarity of experience that *Not Quite a Husband* and, especially, *My Beautiful Enemy* open up for the reader. Setting aside the question of whether it introduces something "fundamentally new" to the genre, *My Beautiful Enemy* is certainly something quite rare: an explicitly Buddhist romance novel designed to give its readers an affective understanding of what otherwise might seem arid or abstract concepts, including the nature of emptiness (*sunyata*) and the degree to which romantic love can promise to provide an "indestructible grounding" (May 2011: 6) in a world that rests on the "shifting, changing ground" (Batchelor 2015: 62) of impermanence, suffering, and dependent origination.

Echoing Similarities: The Spaces of *Private Arrangements*

Place plays an important role in Sherry Thomas's authorial backstory. Born in Qingdao, China in 1975, she moved at thirteen into two contrasting spaces: first Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where her mother was a graduate student; and then, as soon as she could manage, into the fictive space of American popular romance. "I had a vocabulary of about 200 English words — likely less — when I got off the jumbo jet," the author recalls in a blogpost (Thomas 2008a: u.p.). "I'd read thousand-page wuxia [martial arts fantasy] novels for breakfast back home, and here I was, stuck trying to decipher 10-page picture books about puppies. So as soon as I could, I moved on to bigger and better things": specifically, to the historical romance novels of Rosemary Rogers, Johanna Lindsey, Jude Devereaux, and Judith McNaught (Thomas 2008a: u.p.). By the time she turned eighteen, armed with the "vocabulary of a Victorian old lady," she could assuage her estrangement from American high school life by knowing the relative prize-value of historical romance heroes ("a marquess was ranked higher than an earl, who was ranked higher than a viscount" [Thomas 2008a: u.p.]). By twenty-one, married, already a mother, she found refuge from child-rearing stress and post-partum depression in the "transport" (Thomas n.d.: n.p.) and "escapism" (Thomas 2006b: n.p.) of reading and, later, writing popular genre fiction.

The solace and allure of genre fiction are bound up in its uses of space and time. In a passage that echoes key terms from Thomas's blogpost, "transport" and "escapism," Lisa Fletcher observes that

> For proponents and critics alike, genre fiction offers readers escapism; genre novels, especially fantasy and romance, promise to transport readers beyond their mundane reality or allow them to temporarily inhabit an imaginary elsewhere. Genre novels feature heroes and heroines who, like engrossed readers, pass through a portal or gateway to an other or a secondary world; genre writers are routinely described as experts in world-

> building for their skill in crafting plausible imaginary geographies and histories. (Fletcher 2016: 3)

The "other" or "secondary world" of a thriller, mystery, romance, or other popular genre novel is rarely conjured *ex nihilo*, Fletcher observes. Rather, each new novel's setting (or "chronotope," as these pairs of time and place are called in literary studies) generally reiterates the ones that readers have come to expect: the settings where thrillers happen, or police procedurals, or couples falling in love. Popular genres "rely on prevailing and powerful associations between types of settings and types of stories to achieve their defining narrative and emotional effects" (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 22), and with rare exceptions, if an author flouts, evades, or undercuts those associations, the world elsewhere that the novel imagines will not provide the escape that its reader desires.

The settings of Thomas's first novel, *Private Arrangements* (2008), establish her ability to "transport readers beyond their mundane reality" (Fletcher 2016: 3) by playing on some of the most "prevailing and powerful associations" (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 22) between love and place in American historical romance. The novel is set in a genre-familiar world of late 19th century privilege, its town homes, gardens, and grounds belonging to a white, upper-class, and mostly English version of "Society" (Thomas 2008b: 1). In a common move for American romance, our protagonists are "capitalists in aristocrats' clothing" (Kamblé 2014: 42), but matters of business never burden or preoccupy them. Lady Tremaine (Gigi, to her husband) may have what Thomas calls "an abiding interest in commerce, in the making of goods and money" (Thomas 2008b: 31), yet although we read that her engineer employees are busy designing and building the London Underground, we see Gigi at work only once, and this is in her secret position as the head of a lending company for working class women ruined by circumstance or

men. Lord Tremaine (Camden) likes to “work with [his] hands” (Thomas 2008b: 63) and he has put in twelve- to fifteen-hour days, we’re told, establishing a reputation as a designer of racing yachts. Of the two times when we spy him working, however, the first shifts quickly into a love scene on his writing desk and the second segues from a conversation between the two about his refinements of an internal combustion engine (marking them as intellectual equals) to a reminiscence about his designing a ball gown for his sister (“couture was just the softer side of engineering” [Thomas 2008b: 170]) as this laugh-lined “man in his prime” offers what Gigi thinks of as “a declaration, not necessarily of love but of great fondness” (Thomas 2008b: 170). In this fantasy space, then, hard work—artistic, technically-detailed work, albeit with his hands—exists primarily as the occasion for masculine attractiveness.

Spatially speaking, *Private Arrangements* invites its readers into a world of beauty and symmetry. The “world-building” (Fletcher 2016: 3) in this novel depends on a contrast between public spaces—front parlors, drawing rooms, cottage gardens, the grounds of an estate—and the romantic and other “private arrangements” made in private spaces, notably bedchambers and sitting rooms. At first these spaces contrast one another, both in their décor and in what happens in them, bodying-forth the contrast between public façade and private failure in the protagonists’ marriage. The novel opens, for example, with Camden returning for the first time in a decade to his London town house and his long-estranged wife, whose requests for a divorce he is now prepared to grant, once she supplies him with an heir (the “private arrangement” of the title). He finds that she has decorated the town house in the “understated” (Thomas 2008b: 6) way that he prefers, although understatement in this context entails adornment with a mix of inherited Old Masters and more recent acquisitions by Morisot, Cassatt, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne, and Surat. Although the artists are named, Thomas otherwise describes the décor only through

comparisons to other places Camden remembers: a diegetic version of the reader's experience of being reminded of other romance settings. When Camden reaches his own bedchamber, however, this layered, consoling sense of place evaporates. The room, he finds, has been emptied out, leaving it "as vast and empty as the American West" (Thomas 2008b: 6).

For this marital house to be set in order, that bedroom needs to be filled and the underlying contrast between public and private spaces must be resolved. To the "genre-competent" romance reader (Fletcher, et. al. 2018), the seeds of that resolution are already planted in the first few pages. Camden notes that the public spaces of the town home bear an "uncanny resemblance" (Thomas 2008b: 5) to a villa in Turin where he once stayed as a youth ("the only place, other than his grandfather's home, where he'd felt at home" [Thomas 2008b: 5]) and also an "echoing similarity" to "his own town house in Manhattan" (Thomas 2008b: 5): signals that Camden's emotional at-homeness with his wife is rooted in who he was long before they met and that it endures, however buried, in the present. Sure enough, in the final chapter, we find a mirror-image scene where Gigi arrives unannounced at that Manhattan town house, just as Camden had at hers in London. Just as Camden wondered, at the start, whether he would "find her perfumed and naked on his bed when he threw open the door to his bedchamber" (Thomas 2008b: 9), at the end, Gigi interrupts a dinner party, flirts shamelessly with her husband, shocks the guests by heading upstairs early, and does indeed wait in his bedroom naked until Camden makes his own exit to follow. The "courteous marriage" (Thomas 2008b: 1) the two enacted in public at the start of the novel has at last become a visibly "vulgar" (Thomas 2008b: 1) love match that, through their sexual banter, brings private concord into public view.

Such structures of symmetry and reprise are nothing new in the popular romance genre. In Northrop Frye's classic account of Romance as a literary mode they help distinguish Romance

from Realism. (Realism hides its compositional designs, Frye contends, while Romance wears them on its sleeve [Frye 1957: 139-40].) If there is an innovation in *Private Arrangements*, it lies in how Thomas weaves this spatial structure into the novel's recursive temporal structure, and thereby into its focus on remarriage as the test of love. Where the popular romance genre generally centers linear narratives focused on getting a couple together (Fletcher 89), this novel moves back and forth between two timelines: one where the protagonists meet, fall in love, and disastrously marry (a union "begun in lies and sealed in spite" [Thomas 2008b: 264]); another where they reunite under the shadows of divorce and recrimination, realize their enduring love, and end in mutual pleasure. In both timelines, falling in love (or back in love) happens quickly, as though what interests Thomas were not what love is or feels like, but rather what one does in love's name. In each timeline, each partner faces identical moral dilemmas: Hold to an aging promise and stay with a different partner, or cause pain and more on? Manipulate a beloved into (re)marriage, or risk loss? Let the burden of choice to be removed by love or fate, or insist on choosing, even wrongly, whatever the consequences? The symmetrical architecture of the novel makes this pattern so visible that even the characters themselves make note of it ("Was this how she'd felt all those years ago?", Camden wonders, late in the text [Thomas 2008b: 294]). In this novel real love, or at least narratively *interesting* love, never happens for the first time, but always as a reparative re-arrangement, partners turning and turning until they come round right.

"Far, Far Away"

At first glance, Thomas's most innovative touch in *Private Arrangements* would seem to concern not space but time. Staying within the genre-familiar nineteenth century, Thomas eschews the Regency and mid-century Victorian periods most common in American romance

and embraces the late-century Belle Époque. Thomas extols the "fascinating tension" of this period, where new technologies (the telephone, the automobile) and new opportunities for women butt up against "a system of etiquette and rules that are still quite antiquated in our eyes" (Thomas 2012b: n.p.). In *Private Arrangements*, however, this tension seems peripheral, and nothing in the novel's use of this period complicates its pop-cultural presentation of the nineteenth century, early or late, as a time when "social distance and reserve lent romance an exciting aura of transgression" (Illouz 1997: 94) and when love itself had a weight and depth and significance that modern and postmodern love are often said to lack (see Gornick 1997). For her third book, *Not Quite a Husband*, Thomas stuck with the flashbacks, fin-de-siècle time-frame, and reuniting lovers that had won her accolades, but took greater advantage of the historical period, weaving actual events from the end of the nineteenth century into the novel's plot and taking them as the opportunity to make a more radical shift in both setting and structure.

The setting of *Not Quite a Husband* was sparked by Thomas's desire to write a couple whose relationship "had ended so badly that any initial reconciliation could only happen far, far away" (Thomas 2009b: n.p.). This "far, far away" would be a liminal space of escape and transformation: a version of the fictive space of the novel itself (Fletcher 2016: 3); an echo of fairy-tales, as when the film *Shrek 2* names a kingdom "Far, Far Away" after the "traditional opening line for many children's stories: *Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far, away....*" (WikiShrek n.d.: u.p.); and an allusion to how travel often is marketed as a chance for lovers to leave care behind and access a truer, more authentic romantic selfhood (Illouz 1997: 92-4). Structurally speaking, all of these "far, far aways" are versions of the "green world" of metamorphosis, dream, and desire that Northrop Frye traces from Shakespeare's comedies to Romance writ large (Frye 1957: 182-4) and that Stanley Cavell, following Frye, spots in

Hollywood comedies of remarriage, where the mundane state of Connecticut functions as "the world elsewhere" that gives estranged spouses "a chance for perspective and reconciliation, emotional and intellectual" (Cavell 1981: 253) once they cross "the border from dailiness to comic enchantment" (Cavell 1981: 255). (As it happens, Lord and Lady Tremaine talk of going to Connecticut after their reconciliation—I do not know whether Sherry Thomas knows Cavell's work, but other romance authors do [see Rosenthal 2013: n.p., comment 14].)

In any case, Thomas wanted the "far, far away" of her new novel to have a different resonance than the escapist settings of her previous novels. She wanted a place that was "dangerous at the end of the 19th century," yet also where her heroine, an English doctor, might believably have been living (Thomas 2009b: n.p.). After considering Central Asia, South Africa, and New Zealand, her thoughts turned to "those places that are currently [ca. 2009] hospitable to Osama Bin Laden, in the mountainous regions of Pakistan. Bad-ass terrain, yes. An armed populace, yes. A history of conflict with colonial powers, yes" (Thomas 2009b: n.p.). With that setting in mind, Thomas sorted through lists of potential source-texts, settling on three: "*A Sportswoman in India: Personal Adventures and Experiences of Travels in Known and Unknown India* by a big-game hunter named Isabel Savory who went to India in 1899"; *The Risings on the North-West Frontier*, which "detailed a spate of uprisings that happened from 1897-98 at the very extremity of the British Raj"; and *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, a history of the Swat Valley Uprising of 1897 by the young Winston Churchill (Thomas 2009b: n.p.).

If we focus only on its effect on the protagonists, the setting of *Not Quite a Husband* can certainly be read as a "green world" of amatory possibility (Frye 1957: 182) or as the romantic "liminal zone" hymned by travel agents and advertisers: a utopian space where egalitarian relationships blossom and authentic selfhood can flourish (Illouz 1997: 92). The opening chapter

finds our protagonists in the "*Rumbar Valley / Chitral Agency / North-West Frontier of India / Summer 1897*" (Thomas 2009a: 11) and as they wind their way from there to the British fort at Chakdarra we watch them reflect on their marriage gone wrong and reconnect, both emotionally and sexually, in tents and encampments along the way. This reconciliation is clinched during the siege of Chakdarra, during which both serve (she as doctor, he as a makeshift soldier) and although the couple do not remarry until they have separately crossed the "unromantic waters of the English Channel" (Thomas 2009a: 295) which mark their return to the world of "dailiness" (Cavell 1981: 255), the novel takes pains to demonstrate that their future life together will retain the attributes of motion, liminality, and transition that marked their sojourn in the world elsewhere. To borrow a lovely oxymoron from a scene late in the book, they will enjoy a "festive normalcy" (Thomas 2009a: 305), and the final paragraphs of novel's epilogue, set some years in the future, sketch that life in a flurry of locations and figures in motion. When Leo travels abroad to give lectures at Princeton (motion 1, location 1), he insists that his lecture audience be informed of four things: that he lives with his wife in Cambridge (location 2); that every weekday she commutes to work as a surgeon in London (motion 2, location 3); that the highlight of his own weekday consists of meeting her at the station when she returns (motion 3, location 4); and that "*On Sunday afternoons, rain or shine, Professor and Mrs. Marsden take a walk along The Backs* [motion 4, location 5]*, and treasure growing old together"* (Thomas 2009a: 338). A distant, peaceful recapitulation of their journey through the embattled Swat Valley, this Sunday walk brings the "green world" home (Frye 1957: 182).

To read the novel's use of space only in this structural way, however, does not do it justice. Thomas's treatment of the Swat Valley setting, the site of roughly three-quarters of the novel, highlights its historical / political specificity as a white-ruled colonial space at the edge of

the Raj: a setting that has its own long history in the romance genre, specifically the traditions of late-19th and early-20th century British colonial romance fiction. Romance was "the quintessential colonial literary form" (Stafford 2016: 64), and in novels from the Victorian era well into the 1930s "the empire provided an exotic space of romantic love and female adventure, a locus sometimes idyllic and pastoral, at other times fraught with danger from 'the natives'" (Teo 2003: 282). In *Not Quite a Husband*, the wit, grit, and resolve of white English protagonists shine forth not only in contrast to the physical labor of the "coolies" (Thomas 2009a: 28) and "ayah" (Thomas 2009a: 48) and "native cooks" (Thomas 2009a: 339) who enable their adventure (see Illouz 1997: 99), but also because the pair find themselves quite literally under siege, threatened by rebels led by "the Mad Fakir" (Thomas 2009a: 169). (This would be the Pashtun leader Sa'dullah Khan, but the novel uses the sobriquet the British gave him.)

As a rule, Thomas takes the British colonial version of this region at face value. Apart from one brief moment when we learn that Bryony is "not wholly without sympathy for the local population's desire to be free of the British" (Thomas 2009a: 87)—she muses that "the English themselves idolized Boadicea, the great queen who fought against the Romans" (Thomas 2009a: 87)—the book embraces imperial nostalgia. Bryony dismisses the thought that the "fist-shaking imam" leading the current uprising is a leader of Boadicea's caliber (Thomas 2009a: 87); she has no qualms about Leo's inheriting "gold wealth pouring in from South Africa" (Thomas 2009a: 58); and colonial policy is mentioned only as a topic that Leo's variously liberal and conservative brothers can argue about "good-naturedly" in the abstract, demonstrating the world of expansive familial affection into which Bryony will (re)marry rather than reminding the reader of any particular conflict (Thomas 2009a: 312). (The Second Boer War is on the horizon, but that is not the novel's concern.) Much of this attitude no doubt derives from Thomas's

sources, but some may stem from Thomas's twenty-first century associations with the region: from 2007 to 2010, the years when the novel was written and published, battles raged in the Swat Valley between Pakistani government forces and the Taliban, and Thomas's treatment of the "Mad Fakir" and his followers might well be shadowed by this context, as well as by her sense of the of the area as "currently hospitable to Osama Bin Laden" (Thomas 2009b: n.p.).

Hard Lessons Learned

Critically speaking, *Not Quite a Husband* was a triumph. It won a RITA award from the Romance Writers of America for Best Historical Romance, was praised by reviewers, and promptly appeared as #18 in the All About Romance reader's poll of the Top 100 Romances of all time. Commercially, however, it was a failure, and the novel's "unusual setting" was blamed (Hunter 2014: n.p.). Wal-Mart, then a make-or-break retailer for American romance, declined to stock the author's next release, no matter its content or setting (Thomas 2012a: n.p.), inspiring Thomas's publisher to suggest that she drop the name "Sherry Thomas" so that they could "relaunch" her career under a new pen name (Hunter 2014: n.p.). "Hard lesson learned," Thomas turned back to more familiar and marketable genre tropes and chronotopes, and she "stayed away from unusual settings for a good long time" (Hunter 2014: n.p.).

What accounts for this reception? Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher offer a useful approach, identifying two sets of rules that a work of genre fiction must obey in order to seem engagingly "realistic": "the rules of the genre (generic verisimilitude) and prevailing public opinion (doxological verisimilitude)" (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 14). From the first perspective, the setting of *Not Quite a Husband* was realistic for a love story, because the "rules of the genre" (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 14) allow the Swat Valley to be a "green world" (Frye 1957: 182) and

a nostalgic, white-imperial space. However, since “prevailing public opinion” (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 14) then associated the Swat Valley with the Global War on Terror, the setting bore a distinctly unromantic “doxological” association with Bin Ladin, the Taliban, and military conflict, rendering it not just an unusual setting, but an *unrealistic* one for the story at hand. Indeed, after the death of Bin Ladin in 2011 took the region out of American headlines, sales improved, and have remained strong ever since..

Writing in *USA Today* about the “cautionary tale” (Hunter 2014: n.p.) of *Not Quite a Husband*’s initial reception, , Madeline Hunter attributes Thomas’s decision to return to Asia for *My Beautiful Enemy* to “the long tail of that first book” (Hunter 2014: n.p.).: a publishing term for ongoing sales. This may have been the argument that Thomas presented to her publisher, Berkley Sensation, but in truth, *My Beautiful Enemy* had its start in the early 2000s, well before Thomas landed her first book contract. The author’s blog preserves her effusive query letter for the book, then called *Heart of Blade*: a “martial-arts action-adventure epic” that fused her childhood love of Chinese wuxia fiction and film with her later appreciation of American romance (Thomas 2006a: n.p.).

> Dear Ms. Agent,
>
> Catherine Blade is a woman of uncommon beauty, great intelligence, and deadly martial arts skills. She is also the illegitimate child of an English adventurer and a Chinese courtesan, the disgraced mother of an illegitimate child of her own, and a servant in perpetual bondage. And now she has been given the one chance to serve her country, earn her freedom, and redeem herself.
>
> She travels to England to recover stolen relics, clues to a legendary treasure. But standing in her way are three men: a new enemy bent on arresting

> her for espionage, an old foe out for blood, and the lover she thought she had killed long ago.
>
> *Heart of Blade* is a quest, a book of thrilling martial arts action, and a perilous love story. But above all, it is the tale of an extraordinary woman, set in the waning days of the Qing Dynasty, the glitter and glamour of fin de siècle Victorian England, and the deserts and mountains of Eastern Turkestan, at the height of the Great Game. It is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* meets *The Forsythe Saga*, a book unlike anything available in the marketplace at this moment. (Thomas 2006a: n.p.).

Whether because it was too unlike the rest of the marketplace or simply too sprawling or raw, this manuscript failed to land her a contract. By the time it was published, eight years later, Thomas had split it into a Young Adult coming-of-age story called *The Hidden Blade* and a romance novel, *My Beautiful Enemy*, in which she had dropped the heroine's "new enemy," left most of the "old foe" scenes on the cutting room floor, and turned her heroine's lover into a figure as "extraordinary" as she is, albeit in a contrasting, quieter way (Thomas 2006a: n.p.).

My Beautiful Enemy

That *My Beautiful Enemy* can be read both as a standalone volume and as a sequel to *The Hidden Blade* suits a book that that is built, itself, on paradoxes, doublings, deconstructed binaries, and irreducible multiplicities. A comparison to *Not Quite a Husband* brings this structural logic into stark relief. As we have seen, *Not Quite a Husband* is structured through contrasts—England and the Swat Valley; the Raj and the rebels; marriage and annulment; London and Cambridge—and this pattern recurs at other levels of the text. (Thomas returns

again and again to the shock of white in Bryony's black hair; she contrasts the polytheistic Kalasha with the "sea of Islam" that surrounds them [Thomas 2009a: 21]; characters are repeatedly categorized by food they can or cannot eat, and so on.) In *My Beautiful Enemy*, however, every binary opposition is subverted or undercut, and every separate, self-existent category that is named—be it ethnic, religious, political, historical, gendered, generic—gets unmasked as irreducibly plural.

Let me briefly illustrate this pattern. The heroine of *My Beautiful Enemy*, a woman of many names, is the illegitimate daughter of a Chinese courtesan and an absconding English adventurer, making her simultaneously *both* and *neither* "English" and "Chinese." (Kamblé says that she is "neither fully white nor fully Chinese" [Kamblé 2020: n.p.], but this phrasing depends on the idea that some "fullness" of identity is actually possible, and my sense is that the novel resists that construction.) The heroine's national and racial multiplicity is marked by the name given to her by her mother, Bai Ying-Hua, meaning "Bai England-China," but the reader encounters this name and its meaning only quite late in the novel, nineteen pages before it ends. Until then, we have known her variously as Ying-Ying (her Chinese nickname, which paradoxically signifies "England-England"), as Catherine Blade (the English name she got from her father, which she uses on a mission in London for her Chinese stepfather), and as an anonymous figure, "the Kazakh": the designation given to her by the novel's hero, the British spy Leighton Atwood, when he first meets her on a mission in Chinese Turkestan. She passes, there, for a Kazakh man, just as he is in disguise as a Persian Muslim, and during their time together there she repeatedly praises him for his womanly domesticity while he lauds her manliness—it's a running joke, but a tender one, through the middle of the novel. As he leaves, she gives him an ointment that is both a salve and a poison; a coded message in Chinese

characters turns out to be transliterated Pali, and thus in two languages at once (one to the eye, one to the ear); a carved flock of birds on a decorative tablet is described as either gathering or dispersing, with no way for the viewer to tell which; a Buddhist cave late in the novel at once does and does not hold treasure, depending on what kind of "treasure" you have in mind, and so on. In *Not Quite a Husband*, sides must be chosen, but in *My Beautiful Enemy* the impulse to define anything as *just one thing* always plays out as a form of violence, whether it's the T'ang era repression of Buddhism as a non-Chinese import from Western (that is, Indian, Persian, and Central Asian) barbarians, or the 19th century British racism that sees mixed-race people like Catherine as "abominations" (Thomas 2009b: 249).

What core idea or compositional logic generates this pattern, and what are its implications? The first of these questions is the easiest to answer, and appropriately enough, two answers come to mind. One has to do with the novel's genre, or rather its *hybridity* of genre, which Thomas's query letter summarizes as "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* meets *The Forsythe Saga*" (Thomas 2006a: n.p.). (By the time the book was published she would update this to "meets Downton Abbey" [Thomas 2014a: back cover].) Kamblé has thus argued that *My Beautiful Enemy* should be read as a "culturally hybrid novel" which "uses the tropes and character types of the Chinese wuxia genre—both the millennia-old knight-errantry literary tradition and twentieth-century wuxia cinema" as well as those of Anglo-American popular romance (Kamblé 2020: n.p.). Just as "Ying-Hua/Catherine is a hybrid character, putting on or taking off one of her many selves depending on the nation-space in which she finds herself," Kamblé observes, the novel likewise incorporates "transcultural components" (Kamblé 2020: n.p.). Indeed, although Kamblé does not mention this, the book is dedicated to two wuxia creators, Hong Kong novelist Louis Cha, OBE (who published as Jin Yong) and Taiwanese

novelist / filmmaker Gu Long, each of whom has been said to combine Chinese conventions with Western influences (notably Ian Fleming's James Bond and *The Godfather*). This makes genre hybridity part of the ongoing and evolving wuxia tradition, and suggests that the novel at hand will be replicating that earlier transcultural move, this time from the Western side.

Kamblé's reading of *My Beautiful Enemy* details its debts to the wuxia tradition, and it offers a persuasive account of how the novel's hybridity bodies forth broader personal and political issues. "Ying-Hua's journey," she writes, "functions as an allegory of present-day women's self-restructuring when faced with multiple cultures and differing expectations": a restructuring that cannot be reduced to Thomas's experience as a Chinese immigrant, but which surely derives from it (Kamblé 2020: n.p.). There are, however, other allegorical energies loose in the novel. To locate these, we need to shift our attention back to issues of spatiality, including not only where some crucial things happen in the novel but how those places are described.

Of *Jianghu* and the Silk Road

Geographically speaking, the spaces of *My Beautiful Enemy* fall into three categories. There are scenes that play out in what we might call "China proper"— places that are represented as securely part of Ch'ing (Qing)-dynasty China at the end of the 19th century, notably in Shandong province in the east of the country, "Ning-hsia" (Ningxia) province in the north-central region, and Peking (Bejing), again in the east. There are scenes in England, where sometimes London is specified in a chapter heading. Finally, in flashbacks, we find scenes in Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), specifically in and around the Taklamakan desert, which borders on Kashmir, Tibet, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. This region is presented to us as a contested space: "currently controlled by the Ch'ing dynasty" (Thomas 2014b: 21), but restive,

such that our heroine works undercover there to keep an eye on local warlords while our hero spies there for the British. Here our protagonists meet and fall in love; here they escape from bandits; here they find an ancient cave decorated with Buddhas and bodhisattvas where they shelter and have sex, leaving her pregnant; and here each discovers the other's deception, so that Ying-ying gives a poisonous salve to Leighton for the wound he received when rescuing her: a decision she believes will leave him dead after their parting.

Kamblé reads this Central Asian space through the wuxia tradition. "The deserts of Turkestan—a fantastic enough setting that allows romance readers, unused to the locale and history (and perhaps unacquainted with contemporary Xinjiang politics), to suspend disbelief—function effectively as *jianghu*," she writes (Kamblé 2020: n.p.). Literally meaning "lakes and rivers," in wuxia fiction and film *jianghu* refers to "an underworld distinct from the quotidian political state" (Kamblé 2020: n.p.), and Kamblé uses the term both as a spatial / social designation (e.g., entering or leaving *jianghu*) and as a shorthand for the life one leads as a martial artist and "knight errant" in such texts ("the *jianghu* warrior life") (Kamblé 2020: n.p.). The novel, however, offers a different figure for this region. It is, Thomas writes, "the heart of Asia" (Thomas 2014b: 25) and "the wild heart of the continent" (Thomas 2014b: 136). What are we to make of this metaphor?

First and foremost, calling this region a "heart" aligns it with the idea of love. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, one of Thomas's reference points, Chinese Turkestan is the site of the doomed romance between bandit Lo (Luo Xiaohu) and martial artist Jen (Yu Jiaolong), and the portions of the novel set in here likewise lack the happy ending that defines Anglo-American popular romance fiction. In the novel as a whole, of course, the happy ending *does* arrive, which means that Chinese Turkestan also functions like the Swat Valley in *Not*

Quite a Husband as a "green world" or liminal space where love is made possible, but which lovers must leave in order to find their lasting happiness in the quotidian world. (I will return to this idea in a moment, as the type of love that blossoms in Chinese Turkestan—and, specifically, in the Buddha cave there—seems different to me, in tone and emphasis, from the loves we see elsewhere in Thomas's work.)

Unlike the Swat Valley, however, the "wild heart" of Asia turns out to be a liminal space in ethnic and socio-political ways, and not just in romantic ones. Leighton can pass for Persian here because "in the heart of Asia there existed natives with eyes of sky and forest and every color in between" (Thomas 2014b: 25). The "Great Game" in whose shadows he and the heroine fall in love (Thomas 2014b: 171) is, in this novel, just one more chapter in a history of shifting borders and empires, such that local bandits chafe at the memory of battles with Manchu Chinese forces a century before. This may be a region of East-West contact, but "East-West" in this novel includes not only Chinese exchanges with Europe, but with *all* points western, so that a moment after we learn that "Marco Polo had drunk the same sweet, cool wine as that in Leighton's cup, made from oasis-grown white grapes," we are reminded that "a thousand years before that, Buddhist missionaries from India had braved the same perilous paths" (Thomas 2014b: 21), followed in turn by "great enlightened masters from central Asia [and] Persia"(Thomas 2014b: 237), and even earlier, "precious bolts of Chinese silk" had crossed "the vast steppes of central Asia to the coast of the Caspian Sea, to Antioch, and finally to Rome, to feed the empire's ever ravenous desire for luxury fabrics" (Thomas 2014b: 21). Chinese Turkestan, that is to say, is a Silk Road space—and this connection bears on what Crane and Fletcher would call its "doxological" associations (Crane and Fletcher 2017: 14).

Since the late 1990s, the Silk Road has often served as both an instance of and a metaphor for "the ongoing process of culture arising interculturally" (Guo 2010: 74). This process invites us to set aside a "conceptual framework of 'us versus them' in understanding contemporary political issues" (Guo 2010: 76) and, in particular, to exchange the "tired and wooly" rhetoric of a "Clash of Civilizations" (Parrish 2010: 70) for something more peaceable and more attuned to connection, cosmopolitanism, and hybridity. Such buoyant rhetoric elevates the speeches by Colin Powell and the Aga Khan that opened the Smithsonian Institute's Silk Road Festival on the Washington Mall nine months after the 9/11 attack (Aga Khan Development Network 2002: n.p.); it is central to *Teaching the Silk Road: A Guide for College Teachers* (published the same year, 2010, as Thomas's *Not Quite a Husband*); and it is implicit in ventures like the Silk Road Ensemble founded by Yo-Yo Ma, which, according to their website, "creates music that engages difference, sparking radical cultural collaboration and passion-driven learning for a more hopeful and inclusive world" ("Silkroad" n.d.: n.p.). Doxologically speaking, we might say that Thomas's American readership has learned to have precisely the opposite associations with the Silk Road (and thus with Chinese Turkestan) from the ones it had with "those places currently hospitable to Osama Bin Laden" (Thomas 2009b: n.p.) at the time when Thomas planned *Not Quite a Husband*. (Whether American news coverage of the Chinese government's treatment of the Uighur population of Xianjing will change these associations remains to be seen.)

If the Silk Road space of Central Asia signifies "culture arising interculturally" (Guo 2010: 74), it maps onto *My Beautiful Enemy* itself as a wuxia / romance hybrid. This suggests that popular romance fiction, the genre that "heart" signifies, can also be a space of intercultural hybridity. But Thomas's references to this space as the "heart of Asia" (Thomas 2014b: 25) and

the “wild heart of the continent” (Thomas 2014b: 136) align this region with another “heart” mentioned repeatedly in the novel. When we first meet Catherine Blade on her way to England, she is tasked with retrieving the missing piece of a jade triptych: the final clue her foster-father needs to locate a treasure hidden by Buddhist monks during the T’ang dynasty suppression of Buddhism. The tablet was taken to England after the First Opium War (Thomas 2014b: 8), and Da-Ren wants the Buddhist treasure to fund a modernization of Chinese navy, which he hopes will let China resist Western colonialism. Here is the moment when she finds the tablet:

> When she had pulled aside the protective tissue paper, nestled inside was the exact object she sought. At its center was a goddess, her eyes half closed in joy, her pliant back arched, and the ribbons on her flowing robe dancing all about her, as if lifted by a gentle breath. To her left and right were the famous words of the *Heart Sutra*. *Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness is exactly form*. (Thomas 2014b: 107)

Not only is a passage from the *Heart Sutra* engraved on the tablet, but the triptych’s clue, when deciphered, tells the reader to go to a particular mountain and “Use Heart in Your Search” (Thomas 2014b: 257), a reference to the spot on this mountain where the full *Heart Sutra* text has been carved. To read this novel well is to reflect on how Thomas brings these three hearts—the *Heart Sutra*, the “wild heart of the continent” (Thomas 2014b: 136) and the heart as a symbol of love—into alignment.

Three Hearts Beat as One

As the “best known” and “most popular of all Buddhist scriptures” (Red Pine 2004: 16, 18), the *Heart Sutra* would, perhaps, be the natural choice for an author of popular fiction who

wanted to name-drop a Buddhist text without estranging her audience. Just as a reference to seeing things "through a glass darkly" would do in a Christian context (1 Corinthians 13:12), the sutra's verses proclaiming that "*Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form"* (Thomas 2014b: 107) locate the novel in a world of discourse without demanding precise theological knowledge: they are "famous words," as the novel helpfully notes (Thomas 2014b: 107). That said, the more one learns about the *Heart Sutra*, the more appropriate it seems, refining our sense of the novel's ideas and themes.

Geographically speaking, the *Heart Sutra* makes an ideal reference point for a novel set in the "heart of Asia." Not only is the first record of this text "a Chinese translation made by a Central Asian monk sometime between A.D. 200 and 250" (Red Pine 2004: 18), but it was given the name "Heart Sutra" ("Xīn Jīng") by the later T'ang-era monk Xuán Zàng (Red Pine 2004: 8), whose journeys along the Silk Road from China to India and back were brought into popular culture by the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (Red Pine 2004: 17). Ancient copies of the *Heart Sutra* were preserved in the vast repository of Buddhist, Taoist, Zoroastrian, and Nestorian Christian manuscripts that were discovered in the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, another famous Silk Road site (Tanahashi 2014: 64; see Taam 1942: 693), and Thomas has said that the image on the novel's jade tablet—a goddess with "her pliant back arched, and the ribbons on her flowing robe dancing all about her" (Thomas 2014b: 107)—comes from images in these caves (Thomas 2018: n.p.).

Like the dance that those cave images capture, the "Sogdian whirl" (Houseal 2016: n.p.; see Whitfield 1999: 74), the *Heart Sutra* exemplifies the ability of Chinese culture to embrace and be reshaped by art and thought from elsewhere. By making this sutra central to her novel, Thomas thus suggests that not only Chinese Turkestan, but *all* of China, ought to be seen as a

space of cultural hybridity. Since our English hero Leighton is fluent in Persian, passes for Muslim, speaks to Ying-Ying (as "the Kazakh") in Turkic, and has been fascinated since childhood by "the history and the propagation of the teachings of the Buddha" (Thomas 2014b: 240), the same is true of England. Indeed, since historians and commentators have disputed whether the *Heart Sutra* was composed "in Bactria (Afghanistan) or Gandhara (Pakistan) [or] perhaps in Sogdia (Uzbekistan) or Mathura (India's Uttar Pradesh)" (Red Pine 2004: 21), it makes less sense to think of this novel as a *transcultural* book, in which different cultures meet in some liminal third space, than as a *heterocultural* text: one which "does not posit two pure, autonomous cultures between which transmissions or crossings can occur…but instead complicates the very conceptual integrity of monolithic concepts of culture altogether" (Stalling 2010: 7).

As it happens, "complicat[ing] the conceptual integrity of monolithic concepts" (Stalling 2010: 7) is a core agenda of the *Heart Sutra*, making Thomas's choice of this sutra conceptually, as well as geographically, relevant. This is even more true if we focus on the phrases that Thomas quotes: "*Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness is exactly form*" (Thomas 2014b: 107). Other phrases might have been chosen, including such equally "famous words" (Thomas 2014b: 107) as the sutra's closing mantra, traditionally left in Sanskrit: "*gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi svaha*." Spotify offers multiple recordings of this mantra, in styles from Tibetan chant to Chillout electronica, from American folksong to reggae-inflected punk rock. Why, then, does Thomas instead choose to focus on "form is no other than emptiness," and so on?

As Jonathan Stalling notes in *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry*, the book from which I borrowed the concept of heteroculturality, "emptiness"

is an elusive concept. "Trying to explicate the term 'emptiness' even within its most explicitly 'Buddhist' occurrences … might require a critic to trace the term through at least three distinct Japanese schools of Buddhism (Soto and Rinzai Zen and Kegon) before it further bifurcates into Chinese and Indian schools," Stalling writes (Stalling 2010: 8). "Such intertextual travels reveal 'emptiness' to be a heterogeneous nexus of potential meanings every bit as contentious as, say, 'truth' or 'beauty' in Western philosophy and literature…." (Stalling 2010: 8). That said, popular commentaries on the *Heart Sutra* generally coalesce around the idea that "emptiness" (*sunyata*) means the same absence of separate selfhood or discrete identity that we observed in the concept of heteroculturality. "Nothing exists by itself, and nothing exists as itself. There is no such thing as a self," writes translator Red Pine (Red Pine 2004: 68); "'Emptiness' means empty of a separate self" explains Zen teacher Thich Naht Hanh (Hanh 2012: 421); as the Dalai Lama avers, "emptiness does not imply non-existence"; rather, emptiness "implies dependent origination," with "dependence and interdependence" as "the nature of all things" (Gyatso 2002: 117).

Returning to the novel, we now see that the doubled gender performance of Leighton and Ying-Ying in Chinese Turkestan underscores the "emptiness" of each of these categories, even as it echoes the genderfluidity of the *Heart Sutra*'s presiding bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, a male figure in Indian iconography who was integrated into Chinese religion as the goddess Guanyin (see Yü 2001: 224). The narrative structure of *My Beautiful Enemy*, which swirls between past and present, likewise gives the reader an affective appreciation of the otherwise abstract notion of dependent origination. As Leighton muses to Ying-Ying in the Buddha cave, each particular in their story is the result of impersonal and unguided "forces of destiny" that "have been gathering momentum for years, perhaps even decades" (Thomas 2014b: 152). Although the reader senses he is right, his timeframe is not nearly vast enough. T'ang dynasty

religious politics are as crucial to this novel unfolds as the fin-de-siècle rivalry of Great Britain and Imperial Russia; a 100-year-old battle in Turkestan proves pivotal, as do the First Opium War, an Beijing woman's gambling addiction, and the sexual shame and suicide of an English gentleman, Leighton's father, half a world away.

The idea that "emptiness" means "all phenomena lack a 'self-nature,' or 'autonomous essence,'" such that they are "not nonexistent…but are simply 'conventionally real'" (Stalling 2010: 14) derives from the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150 – c. 250 CE). According to Stephen Batchelor, however, in the Pali Canon and other early sources, the Buddha speaks of emptiness less ontologically and more pragmatically. Bachelor's account begins with a quotation from the *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* in which Gotama asserts that "I mainly dwell by dwelling in emptiness" (qtd. Batchelor 2015: 7). The Pali word translated here as "dwell," Bachelor explains, is the verb form (*viharati*) of the noun *vihāra*, meaning "dwelling" or "abode." If we understand emptiness as "a condition in which we dwell, abide, and live" (Batchelor 2015: 7), then rather than an "ultimate truth" (Batchelor 2015: 8) it would seem to be "a sensibility in which one dwells" (Batchelor 2015: 8), a "way of being in this poignant, contingent world" (Batchelor 2015: 7). To dwell in emptiness, according to Bachelor, means to give up "the futile hope of finding existential security in a profoundly insecure world" (Batchelor 2015: 60), and this, in turn, entails no longer identifying with one's *place* in the world (*ālaya*)—"a race, a gender, an ethnicity, a culture, a nation, a city, town, or village, a social position, an employment, a political party, a religion (or lack thereof), not to mention a psychological and emotional identity as 'me'" (Batchelor 2015: 60)—so that one can experience oneself as "balanced on a shifting, changing *ground*" (*thāna*) (Batchelor 2015: 60, my emphasis). The goal of such a paradigm shift, a shift from place to ground, is not to find a new form of existential

security, but rather to learn how to act, respond, and flourish precisely within a world that lacks such assurance (Batchelor 2015: 62). Through the repeated practice of "letting go of self-centered reactivity" and dwelling in emptiness, Bachelor explains, "a person gradually comes 'to dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity'" (Batchelor 2015: 22, quoting *Aṅguttara Nikāya* iii: 65). Those four qualities, in Buddhist thought, are identified as the *Brahmaviharas*, or "divine abodes," of mettā (lovingkindess), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity): another spatial metaphor, since as they are abodes, one can abide or dwell in them.

Just as we find a tidy conceptual fit between the "no-self" idea of emptiness and the structures and motifs of *My Beautiful Enemy*, there is a striking *tonal* fit between the notion of "dwelling in emptiness" and the poignant mood of the novel. The expansive and intricate web of cause and effect that grounds this love story sometimes brings our protagonists joy—they are happy together, for a while, in the Buddha cave, and they will end up together, in the end—but sometimes it brings ineluctable sorrow, as when the couple's baby is murdered partway through the novel, and nothing restores or compensates for that loss. Likewise, the novel often raises the question of how to live well and love in a world that is insecure, dangerous, disappointing, and ultimately tragic, a world where no one has the rootedness and stability that one's *place* once seemed to promise. The answers it gives resemble the four "divine abodes" I listed a moment ago. Herbert Gordan, who was Leighton's father's lover, preserves his core trait of lovingkindness even after his beloved is driven to suicide, bestowing it both on Leighton and Ying-Ying in *The Hidden Blade* and remembered for that quality by others in *My Beautiful Enemy* (Thomas 2014b: 80). As she convalesces in the Buddha cave, cared for by Leighton, Ying-Ying is drawn to his "mesmerizing tranquility" (Thomas 2014b: 125) and "equanimity"

(Thomas 2014b: 124)—neither a frequent source of attraction in popular romance—as well as to his sympathetic joy as her strength returns. As for compassion, we need only remember that their first lovemaking happens in the Buddha cave under the painted eyes of a bodhisattva who watches them with "gentle, steady compassion" the whole time (Thomas 2014b: 132).

Conclusion

One of the first scholars to take seriously the settings of popular romance, Lynne Pearce, writes of the "unerring recourse to exotic / strange / "other" locations" in both high-art and popular love stories (Pearce 2004: 531). That these settings are often not strange at all, but familiar from other novels makes little difference to the reader; as Pearce puts it, "that such 'romantic locations' are experienced by us in mediated, hyper-real, and hyperbolic form does nothing to undermine their significance" (Pearce 2004: 532), perhaps because our experience of romantic love is, itself, a knot of immediacy and cultural scripting, authenticity and stereotype (see Illouz 1997: 260-265). Indeed, Pearce argues, so strong is the association between romantic locations and romantic experience in media and commodity culture that the popular romance novel often treats its setting as "a 'lifestyle statement' which is (in part) the undisguised *object* of the romance" (Pearce 2004: 533): a treatment that exemplifies the genre's "commodification of romantic love" and distinguishes it from the complex, reflective, metaphorical uses of setting in more literary love stories (Pearce 2004: 533; see Crane and Fletcher 2017: 89).

Pearce's account of popular romance settings suits the elegant, escapist world-building of Thomas's *Private Arrangements*—but as we have seen, once that novel's compositional symmetries are addressed, the novel appears more playful, self-conscious, and deliberate than "commodification" would suggest. The treatment of setting in *Not Quite a Husband* likewise

resists reductive analysis, and in *My Beautiful Enemy* the uses of geographical, compositional, and metaphorical space invite and reward sustained attention from multiple angles, such that neither my "heart of Asia" / *Heart Sutra*-based analysis nor Kamblé's focus on the novel's geopolitical and wuxia aspects has exhausted it. (Neither of us, for example, addresses Leighton's propensity for quoting some, though not all, of Rumi's famous Ghazal 911, "On the Day of My Death," a gesture which brings both the Persian language and Islam into the mix.) The novel's conceptions of love seem to be equally plural, since the happy ending of the novel must be read not only in the genre's usual terms of true love as a combination of sexual pleasure, a sense of home, and the promise of futurity, but also in the terms implied by its Buddhist subtext, in which pleasure is impermanent, home illusory, and the form of love that lasts is the "gentle, steady compassion" (Thomas 2014b: 132) that sheltered the couple in the Buddha cave.

Although the study of space, place, and transit in popular romance fiction has been underway since the late 1990s, it has, in fact, scarcely begun to address the varied and disparate ways that romance authors have put these to use, even in mass-market, mainstream novels. Although they may be used at times as superficial gestures of product differentiation, the different settings, locations, and compositional structures in popular romance novels can also *make* and *signal* differences in the visions of love that these novels espouse and the pleasures they offer their readers. To disaggregate these novels by Thomas, distinguishing one from another, is one small step in the larger project of disaggregating—and, thus, really reading—popular romance.

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