

Models of Publishing and Opportunities for Change: Representations in Harlequin, Montlake and Self-Published Romance Novels

Claire Parnell

ALL publishing today is digital at least in part. Publishers, authors and readers are increasingly engaged in the digital literary sphere through the production or consumption of e-books, branding and networking on social media sites, discovering and buying books in online bookstores, or participating in book talk online (Murray). The affordances of digital self-publishing channels allow independent producers unconnected to established publishers to enter the literary field. These structural changes are features of John Thompson's 'digital revolution' (326) and Nick Levey's 'post-press literature'. Romance fiction is particularly active in the digital publishing sphere with its authors, readers and publishers embracing self-publishing and e-book technologies early and in incredible numbers. The contemporary digital publishing sphere is one of hybridity, convergence and messiness. Publishers exist in multiple forms within a connected ecosystem, making any drawing of sharp boundaries between them difficult. But does a diversity of publishing channels mean greater diversity of content? In this article, I address this question by first delineating the structures of and relations between Harlequin, Amazon's Montlake Romance, and self-publishing, as examples of powerful digital publishers. I then apply this model by conducting a qualitative analysis of the representations of gender, sex and class in ten contemporary romance novels published by these three publishing models.

Since the early twentieth century, the process of publishing has involved a relatively standardised practice of connecting intermediaries fulfilling specific roles, including agent, editor, publisher, printer, distributor and retailer. A

number of these roles have been reconfigured as technological innovations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries offer digital alternatives and additions. These changes have been conceptualised by Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires in their modification of Darnton's communications circuit of the book. In 'The Digital Publishing Communication Circuit', Ray Murray and Squires argue that new business models in the contemporary publishing industry resulting from the 'seismic shift from print and paper to digital ink' work to 'challenge the prevailing hierarchies of cultural gatekeeping' (4). Positions and roles in the field collapse or disappear, to be replaced in different manifestations, while new relationships emerge between agents and old ones shift or are 'short-circuited' (Ray Murray and Squires 19).

Legacies of twentieth-century publishing remain in a fragmented ecosystem of old and new business models. The processes of production, dissemination and reception in the contemporary publishing industry reflect a broader convergence culture. Henry Jenkins describes convergence culture as the intersection between top-down mass media and user-generated, grassroots media as well as the flow of media and audiences across platforms which increases access for content creators previously uninvolved in media production. In the digital publishing sphere, large publishing houses work to maintain their dominance through strategies such as cultivating digital-first or digital-only imprints and offering self-publishing services (Ray Murray and Squires). At the same time, entry to the publishing field becomes more straightforward for grassroots users, with authors no longer reliant on traditional publishing houses to publish their creative work as independent self-publishing becomes easier and cheaper.¹

Amazon is a particularly acute example of the confluence of the contemporary publishing industry, to such a degree that Mark McGurl designates the current publishing field the 'Age of Amazon' (447). Launched as an online bookstore in 1995 during the dot.com boom, Amazon.com has become one of the largest global retailers (Gensler) and has expanded its reach into contemporary book culture through innovative and extensive forays. The megacorporation owns and operates fifteen publishing imprints through Amazon Publishing as well as a number of online platforms including Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) (a self-publishing channel), Audible (a subscription-based dissemination of audiobooks), Kindle Unlimited (a subscription-based library of e-books), Kindle Scout (a crowdsource discoverability mechanism), Kindle Worlds (a publishing channel for licensed fan fiction, recently closed), and *Goodreads* and *Shelfari* (reader-review social media sites). Cumulatively, McGurl argues, these ini-

¹Self-publishing is sometimes referred to as indie publishing or indie authors. The term self-publishing is used in this article to avoid confusion with small, independent presses.

tiatives ‘represent a highly practical theorization of the literary field’ (450), although any delineation of the relationship between formats in the Bourdieusian sense falls outside of the scope of his study. While Amazon is certainly a key feature of contemporary publishing and other publishing entities must increasingly grapple with the giant, it is by no means the only player in the field.

Indistinct Publishing Channels

Harlequin, a formerly independent publisher now housed within the large multinational conglomerate HarperCollins; Montlake Romance, an Amazon imprint; and self-publishing may appear distinct but often operate in the same physical and virtual spaces. The ‘complex ecology’ of the new publishing field is demonstrated through the ‘contrasts and similarities, and also tangible points of operational contact’ between ‘large, small, and in between’ publishing companies (Ray Murray and Squires 9). Any exploration of the digital publishing sphere requires an allowance for multiplicity and contradictions as well as an understanding of the different types of publishing being examined, as outlined below.

Traditional publishing practices have undergone a number of dramatic and influential changes over the past half century including, most notably, the consolidation of ownership from the 1960s onwards and the digitisation of practices and formats since the 1990s.² Until the mid-twentieth century, the trade publishing field consisted of many independent publishing firms, predominantly in North America and the United Kingdom (Thompson). Since the 1960s, these companies have undergone processes of consolidation through a number of mergers and acquisitions, giving way to a few large players that dominate the field. The ‘Big 5’ – Hachette Book Group, Macmillan Publishers, Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins – exist as umbrella organisations under which many smaller houses and imprints operate with varying degrees of autonomy. The dominance of traditional publishers arises from a complex and interdependent mix of social, cultural, symbolic, human and intellectual capital and the profitable connection between established intermediaries in the book supply chain (Thompson). As suggested by Ray Murray and Squires, many of these connections are transforming in the digital age.

Harlequin is representative of the dichotomous structure of twenty-first-century publishing houses, at the same time governed by twentieth-century publishing and newer digital publishing models. Harlequin was established in 1949

²Traditional publishing is an unfortunately imprecise term for pre-digital publishing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

and has been shaped by two major consolidations since: in 1971 Harlequin Enterprises acquired UK-based Mills & Boon and in 2014 HarperCollins acquired Harlequin Enterprises.³ Harlequin has also established a number of digital-first imprints such as Carina Press and Escape Publishing. As both cultural and economic institutions, multinational publishers are unlikely to publish creative work without the promise of a large enough market. The burgeoning success of small publishers and digital-first (or digital-only) imprints of large publishers in recent years has begun to address smaller sectors in the market, publishing titles perceived as somewhat 'riskier' (Driscoll et al. 74). Kate Cuthbert, managing editor of Escape Publishing, Harlequin's Australian digital imprint, explains the adaptability of digital-first imprints under large publishing conglomerates: 'We publish anything from 5,000 to 250,000 words, any genre, subgenre, cross-genre, or new genre, as long as it's romance, and we're actively seeking stories that haven't been able to find a home in print: that is, riskier titles, niche titles, experimental titles' (Driscoll et al. 74). The role of the editor remains influential here in the selection, curation and shaping of the publisher list. This model, where the editor is an authoritative force in the gatekeeping of titles, is mirrored by Montlake Romance despite the image of Amazon Publishing as an unconventional publishing house.

Amazon's position in the contemporary publishing industry is substantial, stretching across the spheres of production, dissemination and reception. Holistically, the corporation straddles all forms of digital publishing practices, from traditional publishing to self-publishing through KDP and Kindle Worlds. Amazon launched as a publishing house in 2009 and it is its dual role as a traditional publisher and self-publishing platform that is of particular focus here. Amazon Publishing now has fifteen established imprints each tied to a specific genre; Montlake Romance (established 2011) publishes romance fiction while Little A (established 2013) publishes literary fiction, for example. Books published by Amazon Publishing are sold in print and e-book formats via their online store with most bricks-and-mortar bookstores unwilling to stock them (McGurl). The 'full-service' of Amazon Publishing operates in a similar way to other established publishers with professional roles for editing, acquisition, sales and public relations, author relations, cover design, and production ('Amazon Publishing Global'). John Thompson attributes the success of Amazon as a publishing press to the technological success of their Kindle e-reader, which facilitated their dominance over the market (Thompson 318); Amazon has held approximately a seventy percent share of e-book market since launching the Kindle in 2007, according to McGurl (448). Research into the contemporary

³Mills & Boon was established 1908 as a general trade publisher but has since become synonymous with romance publishing after it began to concentrate on romance fiction in the 1930s.

publishing industry is only beginning to survey Amazon's publishing ventures, for example McGurl's *Everything and Less*. The practices, processes and texts produced by Amazon Publishing provide significant opportunities for digital publishing scholars given Amazon's dominance in the digital publishing sphere.

Amazon also plays an important role in mediating the growing sector of self-published authors in the publishing industry. While self-publishing is not a new practice, the internet has opened up new channels that allow individuals access to the literary field and publish their work at faster speeds and reduced costs.⁴ Despite their nominal title, self-published authors rarely work alone. Rather, self-published authors are 'becoming increasingly adept at arranging a variety of publishing services and personal support systems to progress their project' such as cover designers, beta readers and copy-editors as well as through the formation of author groups (Baverstock and Steinitz 2). A more accurate way of thinking about self-publishing is as a process whereby authors take primary creative and economic responsibility for the production of their work (Baverstock and Steinitz; Laquintano). The process of self-publishing exists under a broader conceptualisation of post-press production, that is, literature 'created outside of the established circles of book production' arising at the 'intersections of the literary field and digital culture' (Levey). Post-press literature encompasses many forms of digital publishing including personal blogs, dedicated writing platforms such as Wattpad and LiveJournal, and creative writing on social media sites such as Twitter (known as Twitterature) or Instagram. Though these particular configurations are outside the scope of this paper, the complexity of the digital self-published landscape is worth noting in addition to the specific platform conditions under which post-press fiction is created.⁵

Digital publishing practices may be thought of as a continuum of processes, with self-publishing often positioned in opposition to traditional publishers. However, self-publishing is not defined entirely by disintermediation. As Timothy Laquintano notes, these texts are 'distributed across the digital platforms of giant corporations and small start-ups, through an emerging cottage industry of support services, and through the authors' mediated engagement with the peer-to-peer energy of readers' online (7–8). Amazon KDP in particular exerts a great degree of power over authors who choose to self-publish via this platform. KDP allows authors to publish and distribute their creative work, circumvent

⁴Ray Murray and Squires note that, 'Despite the ease with which digital texts can be produced, their delivery can still be an expensive and time-consuming process for smaller companies, and access is restricted to those readers who can afford the appropriate device to read the content' (13).

⁵These forms of publishing are generally perceived as particularly autonomous from traditional intermediaries and publishers, however their existence is predicated through the social media logics (Van Dijck and Poell) of the platforms on which they are published.

traditional publishers, as well as retain a high percentage of profits, and, at least theoretically, maintain a greater degree of creative freedom and control over their work. Amazon is not a neutral platform, though: as a powerful intermediary, it is able to impose its own guidelines, standards and hierarchies through its terms of use and algorithms, which are designed to give primacy to its readers as customers. Based on his inspection of Amazon KDP's terms of service, McGurl notes 'there may be frankly lower standards at KDP than at Knopf, but there *are* standards' (456, emphasis in original). Rather than explicitly subverting top-down models of publishing, self-published authors are implicated by their relationship to the (typically) large corporations which they rely on to publish and disseminate their work. Self-publishing is not indistinct from more traditional models of publishing and exists as a 'messy' plurality of activities.

Texts, authors and readers move through the contemporary publishing sphere with relative fluidity. Work that is self-published online for little to no cost may be acquired by a traditional publisher and new readers may discover or discuss it on dedicated bookish social networking sites such as *Goodreads*. In effect, no sharp boundaries exist around each publishing practice in a rapidly evolving digital publishing sphere. Levey, for example, shows how Andy Weir's science fiction novel *The Martian* exemplifies this; originally self-published in serial format online in 2011, the novel then obtained significant economic success when Crown Publishing, a subsidiary of Random House, acquired the rights and broadcast company Twentieth Century Fox optioned the film rights within a week of each other in March 2013 (Weir). The participatory cultural logic that underpins digital self-publishing practices suggests there is a potential for a more heterogeneous offering of narratives, discourses and representations that are unique and fit niche preferences. This premise indicates a positive answer to the question of whether a diversity of channels means a greater diversity of content. But is this realised?

The provisional nature of this article's exploration must be noted from the outset. Digital publishing practices operate in a rapidly changing ecosystem of production and consumption. Digital technologies and the internet, and consequently digital publishing, are in a constant state of emergence and thus any examination of the phenomenon can only possibly point to larger trends. The following analysis is based on case studies of these three modes of production in the digital publishing sphere and must be treated as a snapshot of the conditions and potential output by large conglomerates, Amazon's imprints and self-publishing, with a focus on the production of romance fiction.

Contemporary Romance Fiction

Genre fiction is a leader in the digital publishing sphere, and romance fiction in particular is a powerhouse in every format. According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), novels within the romance genre must contain two basic elements: ‘a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending’ (RWA ‘The Romance Genre’). It is a genre that is female-centric, often lauded as being ‘by women, for women and about women’ (Berberich 54). Globally, romance is the most profitable genre of fiction and regularly occupies the largest market share (Regis xi); its estimated total US annual sales in 2013 were \$1.08 billion and in 2015 it represented 34% of the US fiction market (RWA ‘Romance Fiction’).⁶ As the largest traditional print publisher dedicated solely to romance, Harlequin Mills & Boon has been responsible for much of the genre’s high publishing output throughout the twentieth century. Now, Harlequin states that the company publishes upwards of 110 titles a month in both print and digital formats and sells in a number of international markets and languages (RWA ‘The Romance Genre’). Due to this reach and their longitudinal success, scholarship into the genre typically focuses on Harlequin, ‘[t]he world’s most iconic romance publisher’ (Driscoll et al. 73).

Genre fiction broadly, and romance specifically, dominate e-book sales in the United States. McGurl suggests that ‘one might go as far as to say that fiction in the Age of Amazon *is* genre fiction’ (460, emphasis in original). The numbers certainly support its prominence in digital publishing: genre fiction (romance, mystery and detective, thrillers and fantasy) collectively account for 50% of US e-book sales in 2014 with 24% owing to romance titles, according to data by Nielsen. Additionally, the number of authors self-publishing is growing at a rapid rate: in an Australian context, Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll and Kim Wilkins suggest that romance fiction accounts for the largest increase in output of self-published titles (Fletcher et al.). As a cost-effective alternative, digital publication in Australian romance publishing has resulted in a growth in experimental titles by digital-first romance imprints of big publishers as well as a larger market share for small press publishers and self-publishing authors (Driscoll et al.). The success of romance fiction in the twenty-first century has been attributed to its willingness to diversify content and experiment with multiple subgenres and hybrid genres, cultivate online channels for reader communities and adopt e-book technologies early (Tapper). Romance has been at the forefront of digital adoption in the publishing field, from participation in online communities to utilisation of e-books, boasts a large proportion of authors who are self-publishing, and has held a large percentage of market share of adult fiction in recent years. The romance genre varies greatly; it includes a vast array

⁶Figures originally from Nielsen BookScan/PubTrack Digital 2015, cited on the RWA website.

of categories and subgenres, each exhibiting their own generic conventions and tropes. This paper focuses on novels in the contemporary romance subgenre, which aims to reflect contemporary heterosexual⁷ romantic relationships and includes explicit descriptions of sex.

In early scholarly research into the romance genre, Tania Modleski and Janice Radway each argued that romance texts often interact with and reflect the real-life concerns of women, such as work, identity and power in relationships, in multiple ways. Harlequin, for example, typically offers an idealised depiction of heterosexual love⁸ through the generic convention of the happily-ever-after (HEA) ending, for which marriage is a popular textual shorthand. While romances may be considered conservative forms of media, and overwhelmingly conventional in their representations, Radway contends that romance readers use these texts in many meaningful and oppositional ways. Almost thirty years later, Catherine Roach agrees that contemporary romance novels offer a means for female readers to negotiate their fundamentally paradoxical relationship toward men in a patriarchal society and wrangle the idealised versions of love presented to them. Online reader communities, including more formalised groups on *Goodreads* and porous discussions on social networking sites, offer readers a space to publicly express their acceptance or rejection of representations of characters, narrative choices and implied views by the author. As a result, Roach suggests, ‘the category of what is culturally acceptable in love and romance has – at least in some quarters – grown much bigger’ (7). What this extension of culturally acceptable love entails beyond the traditional Western heteronormative representations, however, has only recently started to be explored (see, for example, Kamblé; Teo; Uparkar). Despite the potential of this transformative conversation, Roach’s research shows that narratives in most romance novels still depict love as a redemptive force: the HEA ending works to stabilise and reaffirm the foundation of heteronormative masculinist culture despite many contemporary romance novels featuring strong and empowered heroines.

The romantic relationships and gendered characterisations of romance protagonists are often reflective of specific socio-historical contexts. Tracking changes in the representations of men in Harlequin romances since the publisher’s launch, Jayashree Kamblé examines the ways in which the hero is constructed in relation to capitalism, war and patriotism, heterosexuality, and white Protestantism. Perhaps most relevant to analyses of the contemporary

⁷Contemporary romances may feature couples who identify as queer or LGBTQIA, however these are typically categorised as LGBTQIA first and contemporary second, which alters its subgenre position on Amazon.

⁸Harlequin now publishes novels featuring same-sex couples, most notably through Carina Press, one of its digital-first imprints.

romance subgenre are her insights into the ways in which strict heterosexuality has been employed repeatedly in Harlequin novels in reaction to various gay rights movements and conflicts related to class divisions within capitalist societies. The popularity and indeed inscription of the Alpha hero can be viewed as mirroring anxieties about hidden homosexual desire in society, particularly around times of changes in legislation (Kamblé).⁹ Issues of capitalist class relations are often invoked through the trope of the rich hero and working-class heroine, as exemplified in the popular billionaire romances in the 2010s. Analysis of the titles of romance novels suggests that the gendered characteristics of protagonists, particularly heteronormative masculinity and upper-class positioning, are a key feature of the texts. Through an examination of word frequency and thematic analysis of Harlequin titles between 1949 and 2009, Anthony Cox and Maryanne Fisher found that the professions most likely to occur in titles were male-dominated roles which could be ordered into two primary themes: resource-based (for example, doctors, CEOs, kings) and athletic (for example, cowboys, professional athletes). Their study is predicated on the assumption that because titles are a major influence on buying decisions – and have presumably developed based on consumer preferences – they would reflect the romantic preferences of the novels' primarily female readers. The findings by Kamblé, as well as Cox and Fisher, suggest that representations of male characters in contemporary romance novels tend to fit within an archetype of dominant heteronormative masculinity, where power, danger and wealth reign supreme. However, I would argue that popular trends in romance are more complicated than this correlation suggests; legislative changes that recognise same-sex marriage in a number of nation states, including particularly large romance publishing territories such as North America and the United Kingdom, have coincided with more conservative heteronormative themes such as billionaire and paramilitary heroes, but also with queer romance.

Romance novels started to become more explicit in describing the sexual relationships of characters around the 1980s and today it is a key aspect of the representation of the protagonists' relationship. As such, many of the recurrent themes explored in romance novels, including gender dynamics, acceptable love, class and power, are developed in the sex scenes. The representations of sex and sexual relationships have consequently been a key point of analysis for many romance scholars (for example, McAlister; Ménard and Cabrera; Roach). Using sexual script theory, a predictive framework that views sexual behaviour as socially learned interaction, as a comparative apparatus, Dana Ménard and

⁹The Alpha hero is a construction of heroism that has remained the dominant archetype in Harlequin novels since the 1950s when a policy was introduced stating that Harlequin heroes should be 'powerful and dangerous, with their only weakness the love for the heroine' (McAlister, 'That Complete Fusion' 308-09).

Christine Cabrera's study of twenty RITA award-winning romance novels, an award bestowed by RWA each year, found that these novels typically offer narrow conceptualisations of sexuality, including overwhelmingly more depictions of male agency and female passivity and receptivity. At the time of its development – introduced in the 1970s and further developed in the 1980s – William Simon and John H. Gagnon's sexual script theory departed from the mainstream sexuality discourse that focused on biological, evolutionary and individualistic models of sexuality. Instead, they argued that sexuality is learned from socio-cultural ideas of normative sexual behaviour. Sexual scripts are cognitive schemas, or maps, that allow individuals to contextualise and understand their sexual behaviours. In particular, sexual scripts give insight into the 'how, when, where, why and with whom to be sexual' (Irvine 489). Sexual scripts are culturally-specific as well as gendered. Since men and women inhabit different social locations and are socialised based on gender – usually the gender conventionally associated with their sex – they learn different scripts (Weiderman). Male sexual scripts suggest men are typically the initiators of sexual situations while women maintain the role of gatekeeper – though according to the theory, initial refusals by women are likely to be taken as tokenistic, reinforcing a system wherein the sexual desires of women are seen as secondary and they do not have autonomy over their desire or own bodies. Male sexual scripts also involve elements such as 'actively seeking out sexual partners; endorsement of sexual exploits by peers; uncontrollable sexuality once aroused; and seeking sex as a source of pleasure for its own sake' while female sexual scripts, in contrast, include 'passively waiting to be chosen rather than actively seeking out a partner; desire for affection or love rather than sex; and the desire to please men' (Frith and Kitzinger 214).

Drawing on discourses within romance novels beyond individual sex scenes, Jodi McAlister has found textual representations of love and sex are inextricably intertwined in romance fiction. McAlister introduces the term 'compulsory demisexuality' ('That Complete Fusion' 300) to describe the governing paradigm within romance novels whereby a character only experiences sexual attraction to someone with whom they have an emotional connection, arguing that it is confirmed in the romance genre through its intersection with the one-true-love narrative. In her theorisation, heroines are characteristically portrayed as demisexual, while heroes generally only become demisexual upon encountering the heroine. As such, compulsory demisexuality is a gendered paradigm. Real-world findings by American sociologist Elizabeth Aura McClintock indicate that 'women's sexuality may be more flexible and adaptive

than men's'.¹⁰ It is conceivable to expect that romance novels, a genre written primarily by women and for women, would reflect McClintock's findings, however, overwhelmingly this does not seem to be the case. Overall, there is a tendency within the romance genre to represent characters and romantic relationships that reflect cisgender, heteronormative constructs, as well as sexual behaviours and relationships that are congruent with sexual script theory.

Despite the overarching heteronormativity of the romance genre, the representations of sex and sexuality have been shown to change as the sociocultural, legal and organisational context in which they are produced transform (Markert). John Markert has argued that the structural publishing industry changes in the 1960s and 1970s, and the substantial growth of romance publishing in the 1980s, coevolved with changes in the depiction of sex in romance novels. Most notable, he concludes, was the 'transition from the sexually chaste "sweet" romances of the 1970s to the more sexually frank "liberated" romances of the 1980s' (70). Laura Vivanco's literary studies analysis of feminist themes in twenty-first century Harlequin novels concludes that explicit sex scenes in contemporary romances are frequent, 'complete with multiple orgasm, positions and techniques', compared to those analysed a few decades ago where orgasms were 'always vaginal, always single, simultaneous with the man's and experienced in the missionary position' (1066). There is a need to further explore whether the changing environment of the twenty-first century, including the lowering of barriers to participation in romance publishing and influx of new voices and published material, has affected the depiction of sex in romance novels.

Method

This paper uses sexual relationships in romance novels as points of analysis and sexual script theory as a conceptual apparatus to examine whether these areas, previously identified as receptive and resistant to change in uneven ways, are transforming alongside digital publishing. My research sits at an interdisciplinary standpoint between media and publishing studies and combines quantitative content analysis with close textual analysis. The objects of study in this paper are novel-length contemporary romances, sampled from two Amazon bestseller lists for August 2015: 'Bestsellers in Harlequin Blaze' and 'Bestsellers in Contemporary Romance'. Harlequin formulates its own categories or 'lines' instead of delineating their novels within generic subgenres.

¹⁰McClintock's paper, entitled, 'The Social Context of Sexual Identity', was presented on 25 August 2015 at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL. Her longitudinal study is based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent and Adult Health and tracked 5,018 women and 4,191 men as they matured from adolescence to young adulthood.

Textually, Harlequin’s Blaze line is stylistically similar to the contemporary romance subgenre, portraying similar conventions and degree to which sex scenes are explicitly described (‘Write for Harlequin’) and were consequently chosen as the counterpoints to the contemporary digitally published novels sampled.

As a ubiquitous platform that hosts books, no matter their publishing method, in a relatively flattened way, Amazon is useful in discerning comparative popularity between the two groups. However, Amazon bestseller lists are by no means straightforward: yearly bestseller lists are not aggregated for romance, and Montlake and self-published romance novels are deliberately not distinguished from those released by established publishers. Harlequin Blaze novels were sampled from the ‘Bestsellers in Harlequin Blaze’ list with relative ease while self-published and Montlake titles were sampled from the ‘Bestsellers in Contemporary Romance’ list after differentiating their publishing method. The sample includes five Harlequin novels, representative of a traditional print publishing house that has adopted digital publishing practices, and five novels from digital-native publishers, including three Montlake Romance novels and two self-published novels. For the purpose of this discernment, self-published novels were deemed to be such if the listed publisher contained the word ‘self’ (for example, ‘self-published via Amazon’ or ‘self-published via Kindle Direct Publishing’¹¹), if the publisher and author are the same, or if the works were published by third-party self-publishing services (such as Smashwords and Lulu Enterprises). Harlequin box sets (four books by the same author, although not necessarily linked in a series) were excluded from the case study due to the possibility of skewing the results of the small sample size. Authors that appeared more than once in both the Harlequin and contemporary bestseller lists were also excluded from the second time onwards. The sample, including publisher and narrative notes, is outlined below (Table 1). It is important to reiterate that the discussion below is based on case studies and cannot be generalised to fully describe the digital publishing field.

Table 1: Sample of novels from Harlequin, Montlake and self-published

Harlequin (HQN)

Title	Published	Notes
<i>A Cowboy Returns</i> , Kelli Ireland	2015	High-powered attorney hero, Eli, returns to his hometown and rescues his family ranch, and rekindles a past love with veterinarian heroine Reagan.

¹¹See McGurl for a discussion on the influence of Amazon on books published through KDP.

Title	Published	Notes
<i>Spontaneous</i> , Brenda Jackson	2011	A fake-fiancé arrangement turns serious for heroine Kim and private detective hero Duan. African American representation.
<i>Body Check</i> , Elle Kennedy	2015	Hayden, the daughter of a hockey coach and proclaimed good girl, falls for Brody, the star of the team and bad-boy ready to settle
<i>Wicked Secrets</i> , Anne Marsh	2015	Former military pilot Mia reconnects with an old flame, Navy rescue swimmer Tag while stranded on Discovery Island.
<i>Rolling Like Thunder</i> , Vicki Lewis Thompson	2015	Workaholic microbrewery owner Finn returns home to his family ranch with his colleague, marketing guru Chelsea.

Montlake Romance (Amazon Imprint)

Title	Published	Notes
<i>It's in His Heart</i> , Shelly Alexander	2015	Widow and secret erotic romance writer, Ella falls for her deceased husband's best friend, physiotherapist-turned-bartender, Cooper.
<i>The CEO Buys In</i> , Nancy Herkness	2015	Self-made billionaire Nathan falls for his office temp receptionist Chloe when he falls ill and they work from his home while he recovers.
<i>The Forbidden Billionaire</i> , J. S. Scott	2015	Billionaire investor Jared falls for shop-owner Mara in his small Maine hometown.

Self-published

Title	Published	Notes
<i>Property of the Bad Boy</i> , Vanessa Waltz	2015, Olive Tree Publishing LLC ¹²	From opposing organised crime families, an arranged marriage brings Jack and Beatrice together – featuring normative marriage discourse combined with a non-normative sexual relationship.
<i>Arrogant Bastard</i> , Winter Renshaw	2015, Winter Renshaw	In his last year of high school Jensen leaves the house of his abusive father, moves in with his mother and polygamous step-father, and falls for his step-sister, Waverley.

I examined and compared gender differences in the characters' construction of sexuality as well as the number of elements in the novels' sex scenes that 'fit' (or reflect) typical sexual patterns as outlined in Simon and Gagnon's sexual script theory. Fully-described sex scenes, including the lead-up to sex, were identified and coded to produce a quantitative analysis. If more than one sex scene between the same characters was fully described, each instance was coded separately. Behaviours within sex scenes and the degree to which the scenes fit sexual scripts were calculated as percentages – for example, if a novel had 10 fully-described, individual sex scenes and nine started with kissing and ended with intercourse, then 90% of scenes within that novel fit sexual script predictions. A critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer) was conducted to develop a more nuanced reading of the themes and discourses embedded in the novels relating to various constructs of romantic love. Previous research into representations of gender and class in romance novels informed the textual analysis of these constructs, including Kamblé's discussion of heroic masculinity in Harlequin novels, and Cox and Fisher's survey describing prevalent occupations in titles.

Constructions of sex and sexuality

Representations of sexual relationships were more explicit in self-published romances: the five Harlequin novels sampled had a collective total of 25 sex scenes; the three Montlake novels had a total of 14; and the two self-published titles contained a total of 19. On average, Harlequin novels had 5 sex scenes per title, Montlake had 4.6, and self-published novels had 9.5, all of which were heterosexual couples. Harlequin and Montlake titles depicted sex exclu-

¹²Olive Tree Publishing LLC is the small business name for Vanessa Waltz.

sively between the hero and heroine protagonists while one self-published title also included an explicitly described sexual encounter between the hero and another person (somewhat problematically, his step-mother). Quantitatively, Harlequin and Montlake titles were more likely to follow sexual script predictions compared to self-published titles: 88% of sex scenes in Harlequin, 78.6% in Montlake, and 57.9% in self-published novels began with kissing and escalated to some kind of touching before concluding in intercourse. Of those scenes that culminated in intercourse, the missionary position was depicted most frequently in Harlequin novels, reflecting previous findings by Ménard and Cabrera, while Montlake and self-published romances depicted a greater variety of positions.

Previous analyses of sexual relationships in romance novels have demonstrated the way traditional gender roles are reinforced in narratives depicting heterosexual love (see McAlister, 'That Complete Fusion'). In this vein, to survey the gendered nature of the sexual relationships within the differently published titles, coding categories were employed in these case studies, such as the gender of the character who initiated and dominated sexual encounters. In Harlequin, Montlake and self-published novels alike, male protagonists were represented as more sexually active and experienced prior to meeting the heroine, whereas the female protagonists were typically portrayed as sexually inexperienced or chaste. As sexual scripts predict, all sampled titles showed heroes to be the more active party in sex scenes and heroines as more likely to be the receptive party. This was most evident through the categorisation of the character who initiated sexual encounters: male characters initiated sexual encounters at a much higher rate of 36% in Harlequin titles (or 9 out of 25), 64.3% in Montlake titles (or 9 out of 14), and 100% of the applicable scenes in self-published titles, except for one which was coded as 'Not Clear'.¹³

The gender dynamics of power within sexual relationships was further coded through representations of dominance. For the purpose of coding, dominance was defined as actions or words that could be considered more active, organisational or instructional combined with actions or words that describe the other character in a more passive role. Based on this, heroes were consistently depicted as having a more dominant role in sexual encounters: Harlequin heroes were coded as dominant in 40% of scenes (or 10 out of 25), Montlake heroes dominated 64.3% of scenes (or 9 out of 14), and self-published heroes dominated 81.3% of scenes (or 12 out of 16 applicable scenes). Heroines were rarely shown to be exclusively dominant, though this was more likely in Harlequin novels: 12% of scenes in Harlequin novels, one in a self-published novel, and

¹³The number of sex scenes here is smaller than the total number coded as three of the original nineteen involve only one of the protagonists performing masturbation.

none in Montlake novels. There is a clear pattern of gender dynamics here. Overwhelmingly, these romance novels place women in receptive roles, as passive objects rather than active subjects of sexual desire. Montlake, so far, is also the least progressive on every metric: there are fewer sex scenes overall and, when they appear, men tend to initiate and dominate the relationship. This suggests that, despite its newness as a publisher, Amazon Publishing's Montlake is more closely aligned with traditional publishers like Harlequin.

Self-published novels, on the other hand, tended to depict more varied and niche representations of sexual relationships, including instances of sexual script non-conformity. Non-conforming behaviours in the novels included depictions of masturbation, both in the presence of a partner and alone, bondage, domination, submission and masochism (BDSM), and simultaneous oral sex, with the latter two only portrayed in the two self-published novels. Joel Gwynne emphasises that 'the eroticisation of power is, of course, divisive territory' (377) and it is through a closer reading of the discourses surrounding these encounters that a more nuanced picture is formed of the gendered construction of sexuality in these novels. Power is typically operationalised in romance novels through the loss of control or loss of rational thought in the face of feelings of strong sexual desire, and this convention is certainly utilised in the Harlequin, Montlake and self-published novels alike. However, the two self-published novels explore power through a more overt form of submission. In Waltz's *Property of the Bad Boy*, the protagonists engage in BDSM, performing behaviours such as spanking, 'rules' (Waltz, loc. 1008), sexual threats, and control and punishment. Although often indignant and infuriated by the hero's chauvinistic declarations, and believing she should not like it, the heroine enjoys this dynamic. *Property of the Bad Boy* raises questions around female sexual agency, consent and pleasure that are prominent in postfeminist discourse and similar to the polarising global discussions ignited by E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). In her sociological analysis of that series, Eva Illouz argues that the sexual relationship James represents offers a kind of 'emotional security through the depiction of a protective patriarchy' (59). McAlister further explicates the popularity of this narrative within the romance genre, suggesting that '[t]he fusion of apparently incompatible generic forms [that of pornography and romance] allows female readers a covert access to explicit and titillating literature, because it is contained within the boundaries of the [romantic] discourse: the sex might be cyclical, repetitive, and frequent, but it takes place within a romantic context' (*Breaking the Hard Limits* 31). The narrative of Waltz's novel supports a similar postfeminist reading wherein the heroine finds pleasure in sexual submission and gains a certain kind of power through the dynamic, that of emotional power over the hero.

In the second self-published novel, Renshaw's *Arrogant Bastard*, sexual submission is juxtaposed against religious submission within the Apostolic United Brethren (AUB) church, a Mormon fundamentalist group that promotes polygamy. By escaping her father's house, defying his insistence on marrying an older member of the AUB church, and conducting an intimate sexual relationship with her stepbrother, the heroine subverts religious submission by submitting to her sexual desires. Throughout the novel, acting on her sexual desires is centred on the notion of choice, which is reinforced through the emphasis on other choices in her life including choosing whom she marries and attending university. The theme of sexual freedom is underscored further through the representation of unaccompanied masturbation in the novel. This representation of sexual pleasure outside the context of romantic relationships is not typical of romance novels, which often portray sex as an expression, or at least foretelling, of love (McAlister *Breaking the Hard Limits*). While the couple does end up together, and the act is accompanied by fantasies about the other, therefore not precluding it entirely from the context of a romantic relationship, masturbation is additionally represented narratively as a part of sexual self-development reflective of a postfeminist sensibility that centralises female pleasure and desire (Gill).

On the surface the representations described above, with women being the recipients of the majority of sexual encounters, seemingly suggests a privileging of female pleasure, however, it also works to reaffirm heteronormative sexual scripts, reinforcing the privileging of women's sexual value over their sexuality in contemporary culture. Applying a postfeminist reading to these novels may go some way to thinking about the ways in which self-published novels, due in part to their timely production with quicker lead times, are both informed by and contribute to non-mainstream conversations about female sexuality. In his analysis of erotic non-fiction memoirs, Gwynne attributes their recent success to the current 'climate of active female sexual expression and a more inclusive feminist discourse' (373), an interpretation that is very amenable to non-hegemonic sexual representations in self-published contemporary romances.

The dominant-submissive and inter-familial relationships depicted in the two self-published novels sampled are the two most unconventional representations of a romantic relationship in the sample and are examples of how romance is increasingly portraying alternative characterisations of what constitutes acceptable love (Roach). The progressiveness of these sexual relationships, in a postfeminist sense, is furthered through the representation of marriage in *Arrogant Bastard* but complicated in *Property of the Bad Boy*. These self-published novels are the only ones to portray marriage in ways that differ from being simplistic shorthand for the HEA ending. Renshaw juxtaposes the thread of

an arranged marriage within the context of the AUB religion with the textually more conventional narrative of unmarried but heteronormative domesticity. Waltz also uses an arranged marriage in *Property of the Bad Boy*, a romantic trope more often employed in historical and non-Western romances and is unique among the novels sampled in including a wedding on the page. This is done in the cynical voice of the heroine who had dreamed of marrying for love and at one point describes herself as being a ‘live-in whore’ (Waltz, loc. 739). Later in the novel, the heroine brands herself with a tattoo proclaiming ‘Property of Jack’ (Waltz, loc. 1928), developing the marriage of convenience plot into one that is embedded in romantic love and consequently reaffirming Western conceptualisations of marriage. These significant differences are emblematic of the tensions of postfeminism which is marked by dramatic changes in social relationships and agency, which Gwynne notes are ‘often only surface changes that have, at their core, internalised patriarchal values’ (379). These texts explore the tension in reconciling a postfeminist sexuality and heterosexual romantic love which necessitate more traditional gender roles.

Construction of gender and class

Traditional gender roles are further embedded in the characterisations of the heroes and heroines in the novels sampled through the depiction of domestic and professional spaces. Traditional female gender roles are more prominent in the self-published novels, which feature groups on the fringes of society – the AUB religion and an organised crime family. Renshaw’s and Waltz’s female characters in these two novels exist almost exclusively within the domestic space. Within the context of the AUB religion in *Arrogant Bastard*, women are ‘supposed to be sweet and kind, void of opinions and allergic to conflict’ (Renshaw, loc. 499) and in *Property of the Bad Boy* the heroine feels that pregnancy and childbirth are the surest, if not only, way for her to solidify her position within the hero’s life. Much of the conflict in Renshaw’s *Arrogant Bastard*, however, is focused on the heroine breaking free of the traditionally gendered world in which she was raised. These are the two most extreme examples, though women are linked to the domestic in some way, and more so in comparison to the hero, in most of the Harlequin and Montlake novels also. Across the self-published, Montlake, and Harlequin texts, male characters are initially depicted as stoic and determinedly unemotional, an affect that is typically described as a behaviour learned from their fathers and undone upon meeting the heroine. Neatly summarised in Jackson’s *Spontaneous*, heroes are ‘calm, cool and collected . . . not willing to show emotions’ (Jackson, loc. 373) and in this way emotion is almost always coded as feminine.

While all heroes across the three publishing channels are represented in vary-

ing ways as stoic, a distinct pattern emerged between the novels in terms of the vision of masculinity constructed through the representation of professional work. Consistent with previous research by Cox and Fisher, the heroes' occupations can be categorised as either resource-based or wealth-based professions. Harlequin heroes were more likely to have traditionally masculine occupations that are physically demanding, while Montlake and self-published novels idealised a version of professionalism in which heroes succeeded in wealth-based occupations. The physicality-based occupations underpinning the idealised version of masculinity in Harlequin novels, including two cowboys, a private investigator, a professional hockey player and a Navy officer, are congruent with surface-level understandings of the Alpha hero. The distinction between the kind of traditional masculinity that is portrayed in the Harlequin novels and the version of capitalist masculinity of the Montlake and self-published novels is further demonstrated through the two heroes who occupy both traditional (athletic) and wealth-based occupations in the novels – the 'cowboy professionals'. Eli is a successful lawyer in Austin, in Ireland's *A Cowboy Returns*, and Finn owns his own brewery business in Seattle, in Lewis Thompson's *Rolling Like Thunder*. The novels begin with their return to their respective hometowns in rural America and it is their cowboy personas, removed from their capitalist lifestyles, that the narrative favours by allowing them to obtain their HEA endings. These narratives thus emphasise and reward a traditional masculinity over a capitalist one and stand in contrast to the Montlake and self-published narratives that portray wealth-based occupations positively and traditional masculinity as damaging. The latter novels tended to more thoroughly explore the ways in which the current patriarchal socio-political environment impacts men, as well as women. Pressure to act in accordance with traditional masculine gender roles and instances where systematic patriarchal oppression was shown to have an explicit emotionally or physically damaging effect on men were exclusive to the Montlake and self-published novels. In the two more explicit instances, the heroes cite their fathers as the sources of oppression, both of whom represent a form of traditional masculinity in the forms of a disapproving army sergeant and a physically abusive priest.

The heroes of the Montlake and self-published romances reflect the characterisation of what Kamblé terms the 'capitalist prince' (59); the Montlake heroes in this sample include entrepreneurs and businessmen, a professional doctor and a member of a crime family (which arguably occupies both categories). That is, they are inherently tied to a capitalist ideal that prizes self-made wealth. This reflects the myth of American capitalism and positions the hero within a '“working-class” capitalism' that, Kamblé argues, works to provide 'a reassuring protectionist economic system' (56). The Montlake and self-published

novels that contain a capitalist hero also often depict class divisions between the hero and heroine and money and class as barriers to their true love. The threat of the solely-profit-driven capitalist is neutralised in these novels through the representation of altruism by the hero, including buying the heroine gifts. Kamblé's assertion that a crucial pleasure derived from the capitalist hero for readers is that 'heroines do not actively participate in this consumerism and often chide the hero for imposing on them' (58) remains true in the novels depicting a rich hero and working-class heroine. Conflict over money is explicitly referenced in the two Montlake novels which depict the most exaggerated examples of capitalist heroes: the heroine in Scott's *The Forbidden Billionaire* refuses to let the billionaire hero fund her new business venture without the implementation of contracts; and the heroine re-negotiates her hourly pay rate a few times while working for the billionaire hero in Herkness' *The CEO Buys In*. The conflict instigated by the disparity of wealth between the hero and heroine is not evident in the traditionally published novels in this sample, mainly because disparate wealth is not an issue in most. However, this does not mean that this trope is excluded from Harlequin novels entirely. As Kamblé found in her more extensive research, 'Capital-land' (59) is the *mise-en-scène* for a significant portion of the genre. Although the type of hero varies between the sampled Harlequin, Montlake and self-published novels, all capitalist heroes still reinforce the same hetero-normative masculinist culture in which a woman must be under the protection of a man.

Conclusions

Amazon Publishing and self-published authors have become prominent players in the contemporary digital publishing landscape, existing alongside established large and small presses. The various intersections and key points of difference between each of these models of publishing mean that clearly defining the different contexts of production in the digital sphere is difficult for digital publishing scholars. This article explores digital publishing as a continuum, with more autonomous authors operating further away from institutional traditional presses. The responsiveness of the romance genre specifically – and genre fiction more broadly – in adopting digital publishing technologies proves commercial publishing to be a rich area of inquiry in digital publishing studies. Previous scholarship into romance fiction suggests that established publishers such as Harlequin largely reaffirm heteronormative representations of gender, sex and romance. This paper draws these two areas of scholarship together to ask: does a diversity of publishing channels in the digital sphere mean greater diversity in content available?

This research analysed ten romance novels selected from Amazon's best-

seller lists, including five published by Harlequin, and five by new digital publishing methods: three by Amazon's Montlake Romance imprint and two self-published. Using Simon and Gagnon's sexual script theory as a framework to analyse representations of sex and romance, as well as a textual analysis of gender and class in the novels, this research has shown that all ten novels are largely congruent with Western sexual scripts. The self-published novels tended to portray more digressive, postfeminist representations of sex, but more conservative representations of gender. The heroes of the Montlake and self-published romances also followed the archetype of Kamblé's 'capitalist prince' (59), a kind of heroism that emphasises extreme wealth and business prowess. Their upper-class positioning is contrasted by the working-class position of the heroine, which gives rise to much of the romantic conflict between the protagonists.

Although it is impossible for the novels explored in this paper to be representative of similarly produced works given the small sample size compared to the massive scale of the romance fiction industry, the two self-published novels here suggest that those authors who work at the more autonomous end of the digital publishing continuum are able to publish stories that deviate more distinctly from some norms and extend or play with generic conventions. However, the duality described above, of digressive representations of sex combined with conservative representations of gender, shows that this reworking is not straightforward. As digital self-publishing is a relatively recent phenomenon in the much longer history of commercial publishing, further research into the production of these works and the digital publishing sphere under which they are produced is required. Scholarship into different kinds of digital publishing platforms is also necessary to properly explore the ways textual and authorial inclusion may be expanding in the digital publishing sphere. Reworkings of genre conventions, as well as more diverse representations and authorial inclusion, may be more evident on participatory digital platforms that represent other points on the continuum of digital publishing practice not explored here, including commercialised work on Radish Fiction¹⁴, user-generated content on *FanFiction.net*, and hybrid forms on *Wattpad* and *Shanda Literature*.¹⁵ Harlequin, Montlake Romance and self-published romance novels may be conceptualised as existing on a continuum of publishing practices, more or less connected to or controlled by established intermediaries and processes. Any approach, however, must ac-

¹⁴A mobile reading application that produces royalty payments for authors based on the number of reads and number of readers purchasing 'coins' that enables them to read new chapters immediately as opposed to waiting (the paid equivalent of the 'Skip Ad' button on *YouTube*).

¹⁵A collective of three Chinese web-literature platforms – Qidian, Hongxiu, and Jinjiang (see Ren; Ren and Montgomery).

knowledge the fluidity of digital publishing, and the uneven development of new textual and industry norms.

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