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Romancing the Caribbean Sea: Size, Mobility and Sustainability in Cruise Ship Romance Fiction

Abstract: Popular romance novels taking place on Caribbean cruise ships work through the two main elements characterizing the cruise industry: ever bigger ships and their movement across the Caribbean sea's paradise locations. Size and mobility matter for romances such as *Caribbean Cruising*, *Santa Cruise* and *Onboard for Love*, which offer a unique vista to the Caribbean seascape from the deck and the cabin of the luxury cruise liner sailing usually from the US to places like the Cayman Islands, Puerto Rico, and St Kitts. Popular romance is produced for readers' escapist pleasure needs, not to preach or politicize. But it is clear, that they must contain elements that readers want from their books, such as value consistency. Beyond the paradise discourse lies the industry's sustainability dilemma: factors like climate change and overtourism force sustainability front and centre. There is every reason to believe, that these values might also seep into romance literature, as the texts suggest that the environment matters for romance. This scrutiny into the conjuncture of the literary and cruise industries through a consideration of cultural sustainability, suggests multimodal and mobile readers with their value-needs could ultimately influence industries across the board for more sustainable literary futures.

Key terms: popular romance, Caribbean, cruise industry, size, mobility, sustainability

Introduction: Big Ships and Romances Moving through Caribbean

Paradise Seas

An illustrative image published in the *New York Post* shows a present-day cruise ship superimposed on the *Titanic*, showcasing the doubling in size of the cruise liner in the past hundred years or so. The cruise industry is marked by perpetual growth (Wood 2000; Pattullo 2005; Pinnock 2014; Vega-Munoz et al. 2020) as cruise lines are in constant competition for the biggest and best ship. Of the big three cruise lines (Royal Caribbean, Norwegian and Carnival Cruise), Royal Caribbean's *Icon of the Seas* is currently in the lead at twenty decks

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high, whereas the *Titanic* was only ten decks high.¹ Size matters, but also mobility, as it is by way of its moving across the Caribbean Sea that the cruise operates as a unique experience for this hundred billion global industry with over twenty million annual passengers (Adams 2017: 60).

Size and mobility also matter in popular romance literature, a genre very much tailor-made and fit to size – and the bigger the better applies here too. The explicit titillation of readers is at the heart of this genre; they are meant to be *moved* by the reading experiences. This article looks at the curious subgenre of shipboard cruise fiction set in the Caribbean and geared towards Western readers. These novels use the cruise ship, water and the seascape and movement as their key components. Titles such as *Caribbean Cruising* (2004/2009), *Onboard for Love* (2017) and *Santa Cruise* (2021) offer a unique vista to the Caribbean seascape from the deck and the cabin of the luxury cruise liner. Cruise ship fiction serves as an example of how (e)motions figure in popular literature to *move* readers, titillate them, and offer relaxation like the luxury cruise. This conjuncture of mobility and intimacy in these novels showcases how the romantic, cruiseboard experience is tied to a particular pattern of mobility. The way we humans move leaves its mark on the kinds of literature we produce (Davidson 2017), something mobility studies has traced in recent years.

Size and mobility are joined by a third evocation, sustainability. Using Caribbean seascapes for the purposes of commodity fiction, invites us to consider water as a commodified space, “something used for capitalist purposes like the tourism and cruise industries” (Valovirta 2024: 12). Popular romance is a part of that framework: we consume and use water for romance as an investment. Hence, it is important to also meditate on the repercussions of such a use of the Caribbean Sea and seascapes for audiences’ reading pleasures. The books are figuratively romancing the Caribbean Sea, evidencing how we cannot escape the ways in which we are all interconnected by the waterways we use – for leisure or for necessity (Valovirta 2024: 12).

The Caribbean archipelago is a mythical paradise location for Western tourists and marketing materials. As Polly Pattullo, author of the seminal book, *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean* notes, there are “enduring visions of the Caribbean as a place of sex and romance” (2005: 175). To be sure, the cruise and vacation industry in the Caribbean is predominantly a couples’ market, ideal for the setting of a big, earth-moving romance which is

¹ The Royal Caribbean’s *Icon of the Seas*, like the rest of the ships in that fleet, were built in Turku, Finland, some ten kilometres from where this article was written, showcasing how our Caribbean connections reach far and wide, yet often ringing close to home, wherever in the world it might be.

“selling sunshine” like the cruises, only in literary form (Honey 2019a). Yet, beyond the paradise discourse lies the industry’s sustainability dilemma: two interrelated factors, climate change and overtourism, forces sustainability front and centre of the industry’s future (Honey 2019b: 144). The Caribbean is one of the regions where climate change emerges most rapidly and forcefully, including but not limited to rising sea levels and temperatures, decreased rain fall, and a host of other factors such as the ones chronicled by Mimi Sheller: “distressed coral reefs, loss of seagrass beds, severe beach erosion, saltwater intrusion, and deforestation” (2020: 11). Cruise tourism is hardly innocent in this regard, directly contributing to the loss of fragile island ecologies and, as a result, economies.

A concern for the cruise industry’s environmental impact and, by extension, romantic literature engaging with Caribbean cruises, raises not only questions of sustainability to the environment, but relevant to literature and culture (Zapf 2019). Romance literature runs the risk of becoming yet another way in which “Caribbean people have had to survive neo-liberal economies of exploitation” (Sheller 2020: 147). All literary texts are embedded in the environment where they are set and very often, our encounters with marine environments like oceans happen through mediated, aestheticized narratives, such as photos, books, films or websites (Alaimo 2014: 191). Likewise, the cruise holiday can only function as an aesthetic experience if the environment in which it happens can provide those natural marvels to gaze at; there is no paradise holiday without a paradise location. This means that literary fiction, like romantic cruise fiction, coincides with and contributes to the survival of the Caribbean and its seas in the Anthropocene.

It hardly makes sense to claim that reading romance fiction directly impacts sustainability or is able to undo ecological damage; literature (and its critical inquiry) has long tended to eschew such instrumentalist views – perhaps to its own detriment (Levine 2021). But all literature is embedded in values; both value as capital in a booming industry, but also values in terms of content, such as healthy relationships and notions of “a good life” or “well-being” (Meireis and Rippl 2019: 4). In terms of value, Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins (2018: 1013) write in connection with the production processes of contemporary Australian popular romance, that their study’s “findings underscore the value of romance fiction as an adaptable and dynamic sector of the publishing industry, as well as a source of social connection and creative nourishment for its participants”. There is every reason to believe, that these values might also feature sustainability, because the texts suggest that the environment matters for romance: stories must take place somewhere, but certainly not anywhere. In the case of this article, the way these novels emit their values are through size and mobility, leading to

sustainability questions, as the ever-growing ships' movement through the Caribbean archipelago challenges the fragile marine and island biodiversity as if the axiom of perpetual growth in the size of the ships, number of tourists, and the use of Caribbean locations had no bearing on the sustainability of the whole business to keep functioning in this trajectory. The ensuing scrutiny points to pitfalls and potentialities within this scenario by suggesting a deep entanglement between humans and the waterways we use and romance, both in tourism and in our reading practices.

Popular Romance Novels Romancing the Caribbean

The corpus for this paper consists of a small but representative sample of popular romance novels taking place on Caribbean cruise ships. One of the big romance writers (perhaps second only to Nora Roberts), Fern Michaels, combines two festive occasions, Christmas and the holiday cruise, in her *Santa Cruise* (2021), which features a *Sex and the City* like foursome of adult women embarking on a holiday-themed singles cruise. This chick-lit romance highlights a cruise on the fictional ship, *Medallion of the Seas*, sailing from Miami to the Caribbean. As Frankie, the mastermind and group leader explains in the advent of the trip: "We'll have luxury staterooms with balconies. First stop is Key West, on to Cozumel, Belize City, then Grand Cayman." (Michaels 2021: 31). Like in single girl chick-lit, the focus here is on friendship, shopping and self-actualization rather than just romance (Pearce 2007: 183–184). All four eventually find a partner in the end of the novel, along with one of the protagonists, Amy's, divorced, but saint-like single father William.

As in Michaels' novel, friendship and family relations are important in one of the first (if not the first) examples of the cruise ship romance, Rachel Hawthorne's *Caribbean Cruising* (2004/2009).² The protagonist, Lindsay, has to leave her best friend, Julie, behind, as she has to work when the *Enchantment* sets sail from Galveston, Texas on a specially tailored cruise to the Caribbean with destinations including St Thomas, Cozumel and Cayman Islands. Before the ship's departure in Galveston, Lindsay's mother marries the wealthy Walter – who is later revealed, incidentally, to own the cruise line – in a shipboard wedding followed by a luxury honeymoon cruise. On a quest to lose her virginity on the cruise, Lindsay finds fleeting friends in a group of guys and Brooke, the superficial new friend who is no match to the trusted Julie left behind. The main attraction, however, is Ryan, Walter's bestman and godson, who is given

² Subsequent references will be made to the 2009 Kindle ebook version.

the task of accompanying Lindsay on the cruise. Hardly surprisingly, the two find romance and Lindsay's quest for losing her virginity is fulfilled.

A considerably more chaste narrative compared to the previous two examples, is offered by Cami Checketts' *Onboard for Love* (2017), where the divorced couple of an eight-year-old son take a cruise from Fort Lauderdale in Florida once again to the Caribbean, including Labadee, Haiti, St Kitts and San Juan, Puerto Rico. The wealthy racecar driver, Travis, and the middle-class lawyer, Alicia, have been divorced since the birth of their son, Preston, due to an alleged (but non-existent) affair with his assistant. The couple reconnect on the cruise and are brought together by their son's appendicitis, which forces him to be helicoptered off the cruise in an emergency. The Christian romance highlights praying together for Preston (Checketts 2017: 96) and abstaining from extra-marital sex despite having a son together. As Travis is focalized, the narrative explains: "Ally and he both honored the sanctity of marriage and he wouldn't do more than kiss her until they exchanged vows again" (Checketts 2017: 63). In all these three novels, the cruise ends happily ever after, as the ship returns to port and the narrative restores order, obeying the universal rule of the popular romance; love conquers all. Love's magnitude is comparable to the gigantic ships on which the love stories develop. Big ships equal big love, as demonstrated next.

Questions of Size: Building (E)motion

The current cruise ships' size illustrated by the *New York Post* image emerges in all research literature as well as the novels discussed in this article. Everything is big in this context: the growth in business, the size of the ships, the cabins, the entertainment, the drinks, the men and the romance. In the fifty or so years of cruise tourism, passenger numbers have grown fortyfold, resulting in phenomenal growth (Honey 2019b: 145). In the early 2000s, the industry was growing twice as fast as tourism overall (Wood 2000: 347), and is now reaching maturity (Pinnock 2014: 129), although the sector's ongoing growth was still recently remarked in a review article (Vega-Munoz et al. 2020: 1). The tendency has been to build "larger and still larger ships" (Wood 2000: 349), and as Pattullo notes: "the bigger the better" (2005: 195). According to Adams (2017: 66) the "number of ships continuing to be built increases and the size of the ships is expanding", attesting to this idea of perpetual growth in number and size of the ships in the industry. Nowhere is this more obvious than in cruise romances, which marvel at the ships' sizes and the level of luxury on offer – oftentimes in tandem with the other main attraction: the male protagonists' sizeable bodies.

Onboard for Love begins with Alicia and Preston, her son, approaching the cruise ship in the port of Ft Lauderdale, when Preston points at “the massive, white cruise ship” (Checketts 2017: 1). He exclaims: “There it is! It’s huge! Oh this is going to be epic” (Checketts 2017: 1). Likewise, *Caribbean Cruising* notes on its first page the size of the ship, which is “huge and luxurious” (Hawthorne 2009: 1). The first-person narrator, Lindsay, muses that “it would take all ten nights of the cruise simply to walk from one end of the ship to the other” (Hawthorne 2009: 1). *Santa Cruise*, for its part, makes the point that “the ship was massive but not as large as the mega liners” (Michaels 2021: 139), but the staterooms where the women are staying are “large enough to accommodate two people” – although the women decide for privacy and space, another comfort offered by the ship’s largeness.

All narratives proceed to describe in detail the comforts on the ship and in its staterooms: all rooms depicted must have a balcony, minibar, large bed and a large-screen television. Lindsay describes her accommodation in awe: “My cabin had a king-sized bed, a large sitting area, and an awesome ocean view. Or at least it would be, once we were surrounded by nothing but ocean” (Hawthorne 2009: 10). A similar sense of awe comes across in *Santa Cruise*, where the somewhat more mature ladies than *Caribbean Cruising*’s young adult heroine, take in the ship’s lounge bar: “A wall of windows surrounded the large lounge from floor to ceiling, with glass panels creating a large part of the ceiling. No matter where one sat, one could see thousands of glittering stars over the dark sea” (Michaels 2021: 178). The ocean view here is central as it instantly showcases the prime attraction and luxury component of the cruise: it is all about vast, open spaces and glimmering sea views. This attention to detail is similar in all books: the readers need to glean enough information about the surroundings to fully appreciate the ships’ opulence and thus partake in the luxury experience.

Detailed information is elicited about the ships’ grandeur, but another key element in popular romance writing is the description of male love interests’ physical features, including size. When the newly formed group of young adults on the cruise in *Caribbean Cruising* go rock-climbing on the ship, Lindsay and Brooke exchange observations while Ryan exhibits his climbing skills: “He is, like, totally in shape” (Hawthorne 2009: 163), says Brooke. Meanwhile, Lindsay thinks to herself “The muscles in his legs and arms looked almost as hard as the wall he was scaling” (Hawthorne 2009: 163). In Checketts’ novel, Travis, the successful racecar driver, is self-conscious about his physique when comparing himself to Henry, an activities guide on the ship: “Did Alicia think big, burly guys were attractive? Henry looked like he could be a bodybuilder or something. Trav worked hard to stay fit, but he wasn’t bulky like that” (Checketts 2017: 21).

The men in romance are invariably tall (even Amy's senior aged father, William, is described as six foot) and nobody is bald: for example, Frankie's eventual love interest, Giovanni has a "full head of thick black wavy hair stylishly groomed" (Michaels 2021: 72) – a fact remarked twice more in the novel with two other men and their hairdos (Michaels 2021: 149, 188). The quality and quantity of all good things has to be perfect, whether it be the most luxurious stateroom in which to stay on the cruise, to the full head of hair the romantic hero must possess. Without these details, the romance cannot fulfil its main purpose, moving its readers. Details ensure romance builds up and moves readers, making mobility a central factor along size in the creation of these narratives.

Questions of Movement: Mobile Courtship

Besides the focus in the novels on material things onboard the ship and their size, the other key factor in the cruise experience is, naturally, the passengers' and the ship's movement from port to port amidst sea days, that is, journeying across the Caribbean. Mobility is, according to Martha Honey (2019b: 144) the industry's main asset, as the ship "can be repositioned from troubled regions to more lucrative markets" and thence eschew unpleasant disturbances such as political unrest, earthquakes or hurricanes. Going on a cruise, in other words, is marked by mobility, and the same can be said for courtship on board the ship, where various activities in the novels aid the development of the romance.

The days on the cruise are paced by various stops in ports and activities on the ship, which are naturally very diverse (Pattullo 2005: 205); there are ice rinks, rock-climbing, basketball, movies, entertainment and of course, shopping, one of the main attractions of cruise tourism. The ships have become destinations themselves (Honey 2019b: 146). In *Onboard for Love*, Preston exclaims: "Did you know there's an ice-skating rink on this boat and a flow rider?" (Checketts 2017: 6), while in *Caribbean Cruising*, the protagonist describes, how walking around the ship "was like touring a gigantic mall – one of my favorite places to hang out. With so many people mingling around, it was like a bustling city floating on the ocean. I was a little overwhelmed by the crowds and the vastness of the ship" (Hawthorne 2009: 2). The idea of the ship as a combination of hotel and entertainment industries finds its counterpart in Wood's definition, that "cruises are floating resorts" and that they are more like "floating theme parks than ships" (2000: 350, 353, 358). In other words, as put by Séraphim and Butcher (2018: 256): "The cruise ship acts as a floating enclave: its boundary with the islands it visits is clear,

and of course accommodation and other facilities remain on the ship”. This idea of control is central to the floating enclave-theme park.

When all the affective experiences – such as the “thrills, chills, and wows” that the industry’s leading ship, *Icon of the Seas*, advertises on its website – take place onboard, everything is controlled by the cruise company, and the revenue stays in-house (Pattullo 2005: 204). Despite the freedoms afforded by the leisure and pleasure of the cruise, mobility is still very constrained, as the travel is tied to the ship’s sail from port to port and its schedule of guided activities, tours and meal times. Likewise, the set duration of the cruise limits the romance narrative: something must happen before the end (the duration of the cruise, from eight to ten days, is explicitly told to the reader in each case). Tracking time means the long-term stays outside of the cruise ship novel, and “the patterns of movement courting couples perform” (Pearce 2019: 788) must be very short-term; the romance must develop its full cycle sooner rather than later.

The ship sails from port to port as the romance turns. A Bakhtinian chronotope par excellence, the narrative follows the time-space continuum of the seven to ten days’ voyage. On the cruise, titillating liberties are taken but the narratives are also regulated by strict audience expectations. The story faithfully follows the ship’s cruise at sea and confines it to the novels’ pages, during which time and space the romance develops, speaking once again to the commodity nature of this type of literature but also the tourism and cruise industry and its links to cultural production.

Movement, therefore, plays its role in developing strong emotions: the romance turns as the ship navigates the cruiseline’s route from the departing port back to the destination and dry land. Lindsay’s experience of parasailing showcases the way the romance develops by movement during the ship’s cruise as well as the physical exercise within the Caribbean environment: “I had a bird’s-eye view of the island and the ocean. It was incredible. “Look down,” Ryan ordered. I obeyed, and my stomach did a little somersault. [...] The Caribbean waters were so clear that I could see the outline of coral reefs. [...] I was totally in awe” (Hawthorne 2009: 133). The scene culminates in a kiss, which demonstrates how affective experiences, like the view from the air while parasailing, push the romance forward. As Pearce (2018: 789) notes, these “mobile practices – and the landscapes through which they pass – become the blueprint by which a relationship is defined and the means by which it evolves and endures”. To these landscapes, one must add the seascapes through which the story passes – the Caribbean, and its role in the turning of the romance. The romance born out of water must address the setting as a time-space continuum vital to romance.

The fascination of reading romance writing (Radway 1984) coincides with findings by tourism researchers on Caribbean cruise ship passengers' "motivations to cruise" (Jones 2011); both activities are undertaken for the same purposes: pleasure and leisure. In studying cruise tourists' motivational factors, Rory Jones (2011: 36) has found the leisure motivation most prominent: cruises provide physical and mental relaxation. This ties in with our *uses of literature*, which Rita Felski has explored as escapism (2008). In the context of cruise ship romance, psychologocial and moral dilemmas abound, as the romance narrative depends on dilemmas and obstacles. Pure hedonism is hardly possible, as both the cruise and the fictional onboard romance are full of constraints and control.

Questions of sustainability in terms of the environment and benefits to Caribbean nations are under discussion towards the end of this article, but the question of control is central throughout the cruise experience. Along with the range of activities portrayed by the novels, there are further concerns when it comes to the ship's offerings. The particularly aspirational protagonist, Linday, of *Caribbean Cruising* has even prepared a list of activities she plans to undertake during the cruise: "+ Soak up the rays. + Drink margaritas by the pitcher. + Dance all night. + Climb a waterfall. + Snorkel. + Kiss a lot of cute guys. + Sleep with a guy for the first time" (Hawthorne 2009: 12–13). The protagonist's to-do list links aquatic and sexual activities as her missions on the trip. Furthermore, she muses on the balcony of her lavish stateroom: "I so wanted to no longer be a virgin" (Hawthorne 2009: 14). The cruise proves to be her chance to move in terms both physical, sexual and mental.

The idea of movement and mobility in literary studies, by and large means that how and why people move informs literary readings as writers have dealt with the topic from Shakespeare to Kerouac and beyond (Davidson 2017: 548). Characters change as a result of the journeys they take, meaning that mobility is transformative and it changes both people and stories (Davidson 2017: 548). In the context of cruiseboard fiction, as is the case of other types of mobilities, we have a need to come to terms with technology from a human point of view as our modes of transport develop (Pearce 2019: 4). This is the motivation behind the relevance of mobility studies in relation to cruiseboard fiction; industry developments need the human perspective.

In addition to technology, types of geographical movement are involved in the development of interpersonal relationships (Pearce 2019). As Pearce (2019: 8) notes, the consideration of movement in the context of love and romance has largely been absent until recently, even though mobility is a key player in the creation of romantic love. One such example of love and mobility is the British nineteenth century romantic courtship of walking

together (Pearce 2018). The cruise courtship is more transient and casual in nature than the dedicated date-walk, but likewise formal in the sense of narrative construction: the formula of romance governs the narrative. In this formula, as in Pearce's examples, courtship is tied to modes of transport, evidencing how "the routes, journeys and transportation employed during courtship" (2018: 778) form our intimate relationships.

Cruise courtship, in other words, is marked by mobility. Like the road narrative, the route taken means the text is an event and "a mobile form" (Davidson 2017: 553), not by walking out or sharing car rides like in Pearce's examples, but by cruising on the sea and doing waterside activities like snorkeling, scuba diving, swimming or parasailing. Mobility by and through water becomes the time-space of romance here, when the enclosed space of the cruise ship offers a shared perception of the world in the "cocoon" like mode of transport like the car in the "mobile tryst" (Pearce 2018: 782) But popular romance is very fixed in form, therefore lending itself easily to the confined, regulated and curated adventure of the tourist cruise. So it is a very different form from the experimental forms Davidson explores, but the idea he purports is very much applicable to different texts, as people's mobility in the world has increased and that leaves its mark on the kinds of texts we produce (Davidson 2017: 557), including cruise romances. Instead of the often-involuntary movements people take, the cruise returns home and safely restores order. But at what cost to the environment?

Questions of Sustainability

Mimi Sheller chronicles the Caribbean's sustainability challenges frankly and succinctly:

The Caribbean remains a crucial global site for multiple complex transnational processes including cross-border flows of tourists, migrants, diasporas, refugees, remittances, laundered money, smuggled goods, drug and gun trafficking, and sometimes violence and political unrest, not to mention viruses (Sheller 2020: 18).

The transnational circulation of the aforementioned processes embedded in Caribbean societies alone are enough to cause wicked problems in the region. The flow of tourists Sheller refers to include those brought to the area by the cruise industry, which is a prime example of "globalization at sea", where Caribbean people themselves have been largely excluded from the profits (Wood 2000: 360). The cruise industry's business model is US based, but it benefits from legal loopholes in maritime law, as well as flags of convenience (Honey 2019b: 145; Wood 2000: 351).

The cruise lines increasingly visit their own private islands and ports, most notable of which is Labadee in northern Haiti, the resort enclave owned by Royal Caribbean and cordoned off from the rest of the country with high fencing, inaccessible to the nation's population (Wood 2000: 361; Pattullo 2005: 204). Checketts' novel touches upon the site, by describing passengers "enjoying the view of Labadee, Haiti, as the boat slowly pulled into port—the lush, green mountains and tan, sandy beaches with true blue waters were beautiful" (Checketts 2017: 36). There is no mention of the fact that technically, they are not in Haiti. Like in the case of Labadee, everything in the cruise industry is non-Caribbean, from ownership to labour force and a very small amount of revenue seeps to the Caribbean, alienating host nations from profits but requiring their public funding for infrastructure construction (Pinnock 2014: 132). These questions, naturally, hardly emerge in the cruise romance novels, but they are central concerns pertaining to the romance genre as a part of the leisure industry.

It is no wonder that cruise tourism's benefits to the Caribbean and the effects on tourism on the islands and its people been questioned (Pattullo 2005: 196). Recently, the industry is increasingly working to remedy its sustainability challenges, as it has been slow to do so for an industry sector that has already reached maturity (Vega-Muñoz et al. 2020: 1-2). In fact, the cruise sector has lagged behind hotels and airlines in adopting sustainable operations and green technologies (Honey 2019b: 147). However, as Pattullo (2005: 214) notes, the 2000s saw "the region even more aware that its waters are a vital component of its patrimony". This idea of patrimony protection means that sustainability must permeate all processes and all stakeholders (Adams 2017: 67), romance writing and fiction being one of them.

Tourism is the biggest economic sector in the Caribbean, and it "depends on discourses and imaginaries of geographical and social mobility" (Sheller 2020: 135). Nowhere are these discourses and imaginaries as visible as in popular romance fiction about Caribbean cruises. The paradise discourse and cruiseboard romance imaginary are inextricably linked with questions of survival in the Caribbean Anthropocene, a topic which Mimi Sheller has comprehensively explored in connection with Haiti and its survival after the 2010 earthquake. Rather than see the Caribbean region as the victim of neo-colonial forces, however, we would do well to remember, how it has also "generated multiple visions of alternative development" (Sheller 2020: 147). After all, "The people of the Caribbean have been surviving genocide, colonial violence, labor exploitation, cultural suppression, natural resource extraction, and environmental destruction for more than five hundred years" (Sheller 2020: 147). Sustainability challenges are therefore imprinted in Caribbean people's history and alternative

futures can be and are being imagined by Caribbean-invested thinkers (Sheller 2020: 151), including myself.

Sheller's idea is to reconnect humans by "transitioning our own [that is Western] economies toward more just agroecological, decolonial, nonextractive, and nonviolent principle" (Sheller 2020: 157). One way to do this, as I suggest here, is by considering how cultural production like literature may play a part in sustainable development, something often neglected in sustainability discourse (Meireis and Rippl 2019: 3). Cultural sustainability is not just about political decisions, but about the ways in which literature and other cultural products may incite changes in perception and awareness about the environment (Meireis and Rippl 2019: 6). The way this takes place is through values, as cultural products "function as important means for the representation and mediation of societal problems and anxieties" (Meireis and Rippl 2019: 6) even when not overtly preached by narratives that touch upon these issues. The potential lies in utopian thinking.

As romance envisions utopias and utopic scenarios in finding one's happily ever after, and centres human actors as experiencing strong affects and embodied experiences on the water, their reading may also offer a possibility for utopian thinking and imaginary possibilities of how things could be rather than how they are. This provides an opportunity for development in the same way as another field of recent development, ecotourism (see for example Honey 2019b: 148) does. Romance literature is very quick to pick up on recent trends, not least thanks to the large impact of readers as active agents of change in the industry (Fuller and Sedo 2023).

In this framework that sees mundane, material activities as meaningful for global power relations, such as reading a romance novel about Caribbean cruises, a seemingly apolitical genre of literature is put under scrutiny. It forces us to consider, among other things, questions of sustainability and human-sea relations. The sea, water and seascapes are vital to popular romance and its dissemination. This means that there is a need to develop more sustainable conceptualizations of water and marine environments in the Caribbean and its literatures. The modest contribution this exploration of cruiseboard romance novels suggests to make is to join the growing body of literature calling for more holistic approaches to the industry (see for example Vega-Munoz et al. 2020; Honey 2019b: 144) in an effort to fully come to terms with cruise industry's inner workings. The field is quite scattered now, but all co-operation is needed (Vega-Munoz 2020: 9).

Because romance literature mostly depicts wealthy individuals looking for the next luxury getaway with the best luxury component, there is no reason that it cannot in future be a more ecologically and environmentally sustainable retreat in the high seas. As Fuller and Sedo

(2023: 5) argue, readers of bestselling fiction today are multimodal and very active, networked global consumer-readers eager to promote, recommend and connect in various ways with their co-readers. Readers not only engage with other readers, but they also have values relating to sustainability in a larger sense. Empirical readers usually have progressive values (Kraxenberger, Knoop and Menninghaus 2021: 10). The texts themselves suggest that readers prefer sexual health such as safe sex or environmentally conscious heroes and heroines, as previous explorations into the values of romance suggest (Valovirta 2021; 2024).

Similarly, the values change in tourism, such as the rise of ecotourism, provides an opportunity for cruise tourism in the Caribbean (Honey 2019b: 148). These opportunities include public funding leading to public as opposed to private benefits, mega cruise ships staying at sea, thus eschewing overtourism-loaded historic ports, more rigorous and independent data analysis and reducing carbon footprints (Honey 2019b: 150–156). Such concerted collaboration between different stakeholders in the industry would potentially lead to common interests and responsibilities.

Popular romance, in turn, is a form of cultural production which arises “in collaborative networks” (Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 2018: 1008, 1000). Popular romance does not exist without its audiences, networks and collaboration, a factor mentioned time and again in literature on the topic (Larabee 2014: 1076; Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 2018). Authors themselves do not publish or write in a vacuum: “there is always a collaborative network that supports the author’s capacity to contribute to the genre” (Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 2018: 1007). Romance writing very much relies on sociality and interaction across a wide network of actors (Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 2018: 1008). Readers, too, are interactive on discussion boards and author pages both on social media and websites like Goodreads or TikTok. Readers of bestselling fiction are active, networked global consumer-readers eager to promote, recommend and connect in various ways with their co-readers. In fact, an overwhelming majority of 85% of readers discuss the novels they have read with other readers, as revealed by Kraxenberger, Knoop and Menninghaus in their empirical study of erotic romance readers in Germany (2021: 4, 9). This exchange of reading experiences among readers shows, how what we read matters to what we talk about and to whom, in turn potentially impacting our visions and ways of being in the world.

Whenever literature depicts the environment – and to an extent, it inevitably does – the texts become “ecological metanarratives” (Zapf 2019: 150) which may point to if not solutions then at least entanglements between humans and ecosystems. Hubert Zapf (2019: 141) explains

the relationship between literature and sustainability by way of describing how the ecology of literature works somewhat similarly as any other ecological force:

Literary texts have staged and explored the complex interactions between culture and nature in ever new scenarios, and have derived their specific power of innovation and cultural self-renewal from the creative exploration of this boundary. Since the beginnings of literature, cultural narratives of personified natural forces, human-animal symbioses, hybrid trickster figures, and nature-culture metamorphoses have shaped the literary imagination, and have supplied body and nature-connoted alternatives to instrumental reason and to an increasingly self-referential anthropocentric civilisation.

Romance illustrates the alternative provided by literary imagination particularly well: it is removed from rational logic and challenges strict anthropocentrism, as it is by default concerned with affective sensations, otherworldly reasonings and bodily forces. As true love is profoundly transformative (Pearce 2007: 5), it can be likened to the types of natural forces Zapf explains to be at the root of literary ecology: even if romance is a man-made construction, its effects and reverberations are felt in the lived body, impacting readers most profoundly and causing them to impact other readers in return. In my exploration of this interesting conjuncture of the literary and cruise industries, there is every reason to believe that multimodal – and mobile – readers can potentially influence industries across the board and for the better, more sustainable experience. At the very least, according to the idea of cultural sustainability, readers are ecologically entangled with the environments they encounter or immerse in while reading.

The Good Romance Promoting Sustainability?

Popular romance fiction depicts good people living good lives, as best-selling romances have to follow codes and formulae in order to *work*. As is obvious, undesirable elements do not enter commercial fiction because without those carefully curated ingredients, the novels would not sell. The narratives are guided by audience expectations and often co-created by authors and readers together, making romance the primary innovator in publishing (Brouillette 2019: 456, 454). Part and parcel of this maxim of the romance genre catering to its audiences, is the potential male love interest's make-up: he may be edgy at times, but he has to be a good man, like the environmental lawyer whom Nina meets while speed dating onboard the cruise ship *Santa Cruise*: "He was one of the good guys who went after the bad guys. The ones who polluted the rivers and groundwater" (Michaels 2021: 24). The good men in romance must be

environmentally friendly, and as we can see from the example, go after those who pollute our waterways.

The overt detail in which the carefully constructed romantic hero in popular romance is depicted, shows that the environment and environmental issues matter for romance. Similarly, the romantic heroine may have her moment of environmental consciousness, even if she by and large remains oblivious to the jeopardized Caribbean ecosystems she roams. When Lindsay in *Caribbean Cruising* is marveling at the clarity of the sea while swimming with stingrays in the waters of the Grand Cayman, she becomes cognizant of the ocean's environmental fragility: "So many colorful sea creatures swam around us. I knew we weren't supposed to pet them, but it was so tempting. Touching them could remove their protective layer, causing them to get an infection. I thought it would be a real shame for any of this to be destroyed" (Hawthorne 2009: 242). Showing concern for the surrounding nature helps characterize the 'good' person in the romance narrative; she is decent while Brooke, the cruise buddy, has no concern for anything other than the next fling. The search for true love, in other words, goes hand in hand with sustainability.

While cruise ship romances barely touch upon environmental issues in an overt manner – romances must not be preachy – they contain depictions of values and insights of what desirable relationships, love interests and their world views are. They are hardly revolutionary or radical, but they might be seen as sustainable, if we heed Caroline Levine's idea of mundane or formulaic narratives with happy endings as potentially conservationist instead of conservative (2021: 244). Superimposing these conservationist values on the images of leisure and romance projected by today's cruise romances, like the *New York Post* image of the *Titanic* and a modern cruise ship, denotes that the values might as well be sustainable, should readers so desire. At the very least, the value projections of popular cruise ship romances help showcase, how literature and sustainability are always already inextricably linked.

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