

Romancing the “Illegal” Immigrant

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Romance is the most lucrative genre of fiction in America. According to the Romance Writers of America, romance fiction is a billion-dollar industry with an estimated annual total sales value of \$1.8 billion in 2013. Other genres do not come anywhere close to the sales of romantic fiction. This astonishing figure may well point to the undeniable fact that even in difficult times the formula of love, sex, and happily ever after still appeals to romance book buyers, most of whom are women. However, over a period of time there have also been changes to the conventions of the romance genre, as its writers (again, mostly women) get more attuned not only to the changing gender roles and the realities of women’s lives, but also to the pressing socio-economic and cultural issues of the time that often serve as backdrops to the love stories. This paper looks at a recent romance novel, *Yours to Keep* by Serena Bell whose protagonist, Ana Travares, is a woman of color and an undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic. Borrowing insights from Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, this paper will undertake a cultural and literary analysis of *Yours to Keep*, focusing particularly on its narrative potential and its limitations, and the way its author, Serena Bell, attempts to reconcile the grim realities faced by undocumented immigrants in America with a more traditional romantic set-up.

Keywords: romance, immigration, undocumented, popular culture

Introduction

The shunning of the romance genre by academic scholars as a serious subject of study, let alone a worthy pursuit of pleasure and recreation, is not a secret. From a socio-historical perspective, the roots of the disparagement of popular culture are to be located in the 1930s. Mass culture in this decade began to be seen as a key indicator of the decay of Western civilization and the mass-produced cultural forms and artifacts, such as popular fiction, were regarded as obstacles in “the way of political enlightenment and cultural enrichment of the citizens” (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991a, p. 27). To a large extent, this negative view of popular culture persists even today in the halls of academe. However, there are some who have broken the taboo of examining the popularity of the romance genre in spite of the disdain that the scholarly elites hold for it.

Romance is the most profitable genre of fiction in America. While the genre of romance has been around for as long as the written word, it has seen a consistent upturn in its popularity and sales in contemporary times. According to the Romance Writers of America’s website, romance fiction is a billion-dollar industry with an estimated annual total sales value of \$1.8 billion in 2013 (RWA, “Romance Fiction Statistics,” 2017). Other

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genres such as science fiction/fantasy, mystery, and literary fiction barely come close to the numbers of the romance genre in popular fiction. So the bottom line is that romance fiction sells and it is clearly a genre worthy of scholarly scrutiny. However, despite its lucrateness and the upsurge in interest, the genre remains in the academic hinterland and still struggles to come out of the shadows to be recognized as a worthy subject of study and inquiry. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why popular romances dealing with immigration-related themes will also not be considered deserving of serious analysis.

The disregard for mass-produced literature with immigration themes becomes even more conspicuous when compared with the phenomenal popularity of immigrant literature, particularly literary fiction. Since 2006, the debates around immigration reform and policy, the upheaval around deportations and detentions of undocumented immigrants, and the rising anti-immigrant sentiments the world over, have renewed interest in immigrant issues and identities. In light of these developments, immigrant literature and immigrant studies have now found reputable niches in many departments in humanities and social sciences. Through memoirs, diaries, autobiographical novels, poems, and short stories, writers have raised the awareness and introduced many readers to the often-poignant world of immigrants and their struggle to not get lost in translation. Today, works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Junot Diaz, Laila Lalami, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat, to name just a handful, are staple readings in many English departments, helping us to make sense of race, class, gender and other thorny issues in American society.

Following Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* first published in 1984, I examine the immigrant experience in the romance genre. Hers was a path-breaking investigation of reader-responses to romances of a group of middle class, white, married women in a mid-western town. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway offers a reader-focused analysis in a sociological study of literature, taking the act of reading itself to be a process grounded in socio-cultural realities of society. She examines the interpretations and the reasons romance readers themselves offer about their readings. Not only is Radway's work a welcome corrective to the bias against popular culture, she also deploys in it a feminist frame of reference through which she reads the responses of female readers. She also is very attuned to Mikhail Bakhtin's admonition in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) to analysts about focusing excessively on stylistics which privilege "private craftsmanship" and forsake the social life of discourse outside of the artist's study, or, in this case, outside of the author's study. A subject matter that is disconnected from the fundamentally social modes in which it lives, according to Bakhtin, can come across as monotonous, unreal, and "abstract" (Bakhtin, p. 259).

Radway's hypothesis is that "the language of romances and their formulaic character offer a dominant message that urges women to accept as natural the oppressive gender relations to which they are accustomed" (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991b, p. 51). While conceding that romance literature is essentially escapism for its readers, she also concludes that the act of reading itself allows women to "carve out for themselves private time" in the face of demanding family obligations, offering a refuge from the "oppressive demands of everyday life" (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991b, p. 51). However, what is interesting to Radway is not just the finding that reading romances allows women to cultivate "fantasy" rather than groom them for defiance and disobedience, but also the way reading romances permits them to liberate some time and space in their quotidian lives, in which they prioritize their own pleasure and fulfillment over that of others. And, despite these not very radical or feminist motives of her respondents, Radway reserves the bulk of her scorn towards those who disparage the readers of

romances, thereby clearly hailing the power of reading over the art of writing (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991b, pp. 51-52). For this author, however, Radway’s primary contribution with *Reading the Romance* was not in recognizing the limitation of the romance genre, but in making a tenable case for studying popular culture seriously to understand the topography of political and social conflict (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991b, p. 1).

It is in this spirit of Radway that I undertake the analysis of a romance fiction, an e-novel that foregrounds key immigrant issues and concerns. *Yours to Keep* by Serena Bell, which features an immigrant undocumented heroine, was published online in 2013 by Loveswept, an imprint of the Random House Publishing Group. The novel’s popularity may have something to do with its accessibility as an electronic publication. Its author, Serena Bell, a “former journalist” is described on the *Goodreads* website, which is a forum for readers, as a “USA Today bestselling author and RT Reviewers’ Choice Award nominee” (Goodreads. (n.d.). Goodreads Author). *Yours to Keep* was one of the first romance novels to set the immigration issue in the U.S. The novel is also spotlighted in other category lists on the Goodreads website such as “Popular Fiction With Latino Leads,” “Best Interracial Contemporary Romance,” “Interracial Romance E-books & Print,” “Romance Novels Capturing the Immigrant Experience,” and “Interracial Romance with Non-White Interest” (Goodreads. (2018). Lists). The book came out at a time when the United States was experiencing its highest levels of immigration. Furthermore, given the impassioned and tempestuous nature of debates on immigration policy, particularly the rancorous ones around undocumented immigrants, I did not expect to find a heroine of a romance to hail from this reviled group of immigrants and to be a woman of color from the south of the border.

While the immigration crisis in 2018, both in rhetoric and in policy, has clearly intensified under President Donald Trump’s term, it needs to be noted that in 2013, under supposedly a more liberal reign of Barack Obama, the controversies around immigration were only marginally less vehement and acrimonious. This is particularly true of the vitriolic discourse around the real and imagined distinctions between “legal” and “illegal immigrants” that is and was even then constantly whipped up by the media and political actors. Under these circumstances, it is remarkable that a popular romance published at that time focuses on the story of an “illegal” immigrant Latina woman. Nearly five years later, it is still not clear whether the emerging genre of immigrant popular romance can be labeled a trend. However, what can be said with some certainty is that *Yours to Keep* was one of the first romances and e-book to deal with the issue of immigration in any serious or meaningful way, that is, not only as a context of the romance but also by telling the stories of immigrants who are its lead characters.

While I borrow insights from the study of Janice Radway (1991) in this paper, I need to clarify the limits of both the scope and the depth of my analysis. My reading of *Yours to Keep* does not set out to do an extensive reader response study. Even though I do cursorily look at reader responses to understand the popularity of this particular novel and its appeal to its audience, my aim is to undertake an analysis of *Yours to Keep*, focusing particularly on its narrative potential and its limitations, and the way its author, Serena Bell, attempts to reconcile the grim realities the undocumented immigrants encounter in America with a more traditional romantic set-up, which is the trademark of the genre. In other words, my endeavor here is to unpack how Bell attempts to navigate the controversial terrain of immigration while also following the conventions of the genre of a popular contemporary romance. I explore the representations of immigrants in the novel, considering their conflicting portrayals and the tightrope Serena Bell walks to break new ground and still retain the mass appeal of the genre. Bell does this at the expense of not just reinforcing certain racial and gender stereotypes, but also

by re-drawing the lines between legal and illegal, desirable and undesirable immigrants.

The Story

Ana Travares is a smart, beautiful Latina in her late twenties whose life is completely shaped by her immigration status. She came to the United States from the Dominican Republic at the age of seven with her mother and older siblings, Cara and Ricky. The family is able to come to the U.S. because Ana’s father secures a teaching job in a college in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, things don’t go according to the plan. Ana’s father has to stay back in the DR, though he somehow manages to send the family over on derivative visas, promising to join them soon. However, he doesn’t show up, and effectively, abandons the family in the States. Ana’s mother dies of cancer after a few years of their arrival (without filing for renewing their visas), and Ana and her siblings have to fend for themselves in an unfamiliar country since they have no family in America and no resources to return to the Dominican Republic. The siblings stay together in Massachusetts. Since their visas had long lapsed and regularizing their status entailed the risk of being deported, the lives of the Travares siblings for twenty years or so is largely conducted in the shadows and lived in the margins. Despite the hardships, in the last 20 years, Ana and her divorced sister Cara (who has three kids now) and her older brother Ricky have all managed to get modest jobs to make ends meet and built a life together in a tiny apartment in a working class immigrant neighborhood.

Ana, although unable to go to college, tutors Spanish to high school students in a wealthy suburb nearby. She also teaches ESL classes after work hours to other adult immigrants. When the story begins, Ana is in a state of panic because Ed Branch, the smarmy administrator at the high school where she tutors, asks her to produce her social security number, her court arraignment records called CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information), and other documentation pertaining to her work authorization. The opening words of the novel set the tone of fear and suspicion, and urge the reader to step into the shoes of Ana:

Ana Travares had let her guard down. She’d stopped hearing her brother’s voice in her head, warning her not to say too much. Telling her not to make friends too easily. Reminding her that she—that they—didn’t have the luxury of trusting other people. Ever. (Bell, 2013, Chapter 1)

Ana has a strong hunch that Ed suspects that she can’t produce these documents because she doesn’t have them, and enforcing policy was his way of pressuring Ana to give in to his sexual demands. While groping her in his office, he tells Ana he can make the problem “go away” if she lets him have his way. Ed knows that Ana desperately needs his referrals to remain on the Recommended Tutors list of the school. Ed’s sexual advances disgust Ana, but “she made herself think of her niece and nephews. Her tutoring money paid for vital groceries like milk and cereal, and school supplies, clothes. There was no margin of error in her household, no room for screw-ups” (Bell, 2013, Chapter 1). Just as the sexual harassment of Ana begins to get out of control, the hero of the story, Ethan Hansen, bursts through the door and comes to rescue her from the clutches of Ed.

Ethan Hansen is a well-respected, handsome (of course!) pediatrician, who is a widower and the father of a 15-year old boy, Theo. Ethan happens to be in school that day to volunteer at a parents’ event, only to find out from Theo’s stern teacher that his son had dropped out of Spanish classes by forging Ethan’s signature. Thinking that his son may be experiencing the customary bouts of teenage rebellion against him, Ethan assures Theo’s Spanish teacher that he will find a tutor who could help Theo catch up on his Spanish lessons. It is on the teacher’s advice he makes his way to Ed Branch’s office to get a Spanish tutor from the school’s recommended

list for Theo. Bell portrays Ethan Hansen sympathetically. He is a warm, sensitive man who given his single (widower) status has more than his fair share of women, both married and single, enamored of him. Indeed, more than one woman in Beacon, a small fictional well-to-do town in MA, is trying to bed him and or to trap him again into the bonds of matrimony. Bell perhaps emphasizes Ethan’s compassionate masculinity to invoke in her female readers a sense of envy and longing. Being a pediatrician makes Ethan very much a woman’s man, even though he acknowledges that,

It was an awkward thing being the only man in a roomful of women. Conversations stopped dead when he showed up, which was just as well when the moms were talking about hair-removal strategies, husbandly inattentiveness, or a gathering...Not only was he not plagued with sagging breasts or unwanted hair, but he also didn’t have a spouse to complain about. It was a double whammy, being a widower in a town of two-parent families. (Bell, 2013, Chapter 1)

Ana and Ethan are attracted to each other at first sight. Again, instant chemistry is a rudimentary convention of the romance genre. Ethan asks Ana to come to his house to tutor Theo. Ana also forms an instant bond with Theo who, incidentally, lies to a police officer about Ana being his stepmother after getting into trouble, foreshadowing the three of them forming a family unit later in the story. Moreover, Ana is also an excellent tutor who makes learning Spanish fun for Theo. The plot has its usual and predictable twists and turns, which also necessitate Ethan’s agonizingly slow comprehension of why Ana remains so tight-lipped about her family and about where she resides. Since the romance does not deal with class issues in any significant way, it is interesting to note that Ethan concludes that the reason for Ana’s reluctance to get involved with him and take the relationship further is because of her embarrassment about being poor and living in cramped quarters with her siblings and her niece and two nephews. At one point he even suspects that her cagey behavior might be because she is already married and hiding from an angry spouse. Even when “each revelation she made hid more mysteries” (Bell, 2013, Chapter 7), Ethan, surprisingly, never suspects Ana of being undocumented, not even when his own brother James raises that possibility. Ethan’s failure to comprehend Ana’s situation is a very weak link in the plot of the novel as it is the most obvious explanation given Ana’s circumstances and her behavior towards Ethan. After he accidentally comes to know that Ana is undocumented, he still offers her marriage to make her his wife because, as romance readers would understand, he loves her, and his son needs a mother, not to mention a good Spanish tutor. Perhaps more than that, the marriage offer would save Ana from the threat of deportation and bestow upon her immigration status, the stamp of legitimacy and legality.

However, the offer of marriage to Ana creates further problems as Ricky, Ana’s brother, threatens to hurt Ethan and Theo if Ethan does not leave Ana alone and rescind the marriage offer. He does not trust Ethan to make Ana an honest woman and fears that their romance will further jeopardize the Travares family’s already uneasy existence in the country. More formulaic and predictable plot lines later, the misunderstandings are cleared, apologies are offered, and obstacles to the union of Ana and Ethan are finally removed. Ana and Ethan apply for Ana’s citizenship along with their marriage license. Ethan with the help of his lawyer friends assures Ana that her siblings will be protected from the long arms of the state while at the same time promising to undertake steps to legalize their status as well. The story ends with the Travares and Hansen families sharing a happy Christmas meal, with Ricky bonding with Ethan’s brother and father over sports, Ana’s sister Cara and Ethan’s mother sharing recipes, and Theo hanging out with Ana’s niece and nephews. As far as Ethan and Ana are concerned, they are in each other’s arms, presumably, from then on living happily ever after.

The Strengths

Much is well-written by Serena Bell in the novel. While availing herself of the happily-ever-after formula, Bell also keeps pace with the changes in the conventions of the romance genre. The revamp of the genre entails an appealing fusion of the typical romance novel with an empowering story, and needless to say, a happy ending. In terms of characters, the major change has been in the heroines of popular romances. No longer do the readers have to endure the weak and submissive heroines of the 70s and 80s. In the present day conventions of the genre, both the female and the male lead are strong individuals but not domineering or subservient in their relationship. The protagonists improve their incomplete lives by coming together, falling in love, and managing to develop a strong relationship without compromising their fundamental essence. This is particularly important now in the evolution of the heroine, whose sense of self and identity is enriched through the romantic liaison, rather than squashed.

Since my focus is on immigration issues, I refrain from rehashing here the whole debate between those who locate a "feminist turn" in the romance genre and those who don't see in it a serious challenge to patriarchal structures, if any at all. Suffice it to briefly summarize the position of Carol Thurston, a proponent of the "feminist" orientation of the genre. She argues in *The Romance Revolution* (Thurston, 1987) that romances impart feminist ideas to women and empower them to challenge traditional sex stereotypes, thus making way for strong female potentialities. This effect is especially germane, according to Thurston, to the community of female readers of romances who normally would not call themselves feminists nor identify with the agenda of the women's movement. As the subtitle of Thurston's book "Erotic novels for women and the quest for a new sexual identity" suggests, she concentrates on discussing how women are reading erotic historical romances in order to explore and perhaps assume new, liberated, and nonconformist sexual identities (Thurston, 1987). Janice Radway, on the other hand, disagrees with not only the "implicit definition of feminism" (Radway, 1991a, p. 219) as only related to sexual identities, but also Thurston's claim that the "message of the romance is *identical* [emphasis in original] to that of the women's movement" (Radway, 1991a, p. 219). Nevertheless, Radway also acknowledges that it is important to seriously investigate Thurston's claims, which, she points out, were also included highly approvingly in the *Romance Report*, the newsletter of the Romance Writers of America. To Radway, this validation by romance writers "suggests strongly that changes in the perception of women and of their abilities *are* [emphasis in original] being generated in romance writers and readers, who, until now, have been criticized as wholly traditional, if not reactionary" (Radway, p. 219). Radway is unsure of what is prompting this shift in the acceptability of "different ideal personalities for men and women" (Radway, p. 219), but to her it reflects a clear embracing of "a few of the least dangerous challenges to patriarchy into a literary form once thought to be a purely conservative reaffirmation or legitimation of it" (Radway, p. 219). Let's see how these ideas of changes in women's sexuality play out in *Yours to Keep*.

Serena Bell's depiction of Ana's sexuality in the novel is consistent with the noticeable tendency of romances now to engage with certain, albeit limited, feminist agendas. Ana Travares is definitely a working woman of independent character. She may be reserved and secretive in her dealings with Ethan because of her immigration status, but certainly not coy. Ana owns her sexual desires, and Bell foregrounds and even valorizes Ana's sexuality, even though in the novel it is stereotypically, thus problematically, linked to her being a "hot

Latina” (more about such contradictions and compromises later). Furthermore, Bell also shows no restraint in depicting graphic sex scenes between Ana and Ethan. It is not just kisses and caresses that stimulate emotional sensations, but the explicit illustrations of the mechanics of libidinous sex, not confined to the missionary position, that seek to arouse carnal desires and fantasies of its female readers. The author makes the point quite effectively and often that Ana lusts after Ethan as much as he desires her, thereby incorporating in the romance “a more explicit sexuality into the ideology of love” (Radway, 1991a, p. 17). Thus, in terms of equalizing gender relations in the sexual arena, romance writers can claim to have donned the mantle of feminism.

The equalizing of gender relations is evident in Bell’s characterization of the hero, Ethan Hansen, as very different from the macho male stereotype that was constant at one time before the feminist shift in romances. Radway mentions Carol Thurston’s contention, which is also approvingly quoted by the Romance Writers of America in its newsletter, the December 1981 issue of *Romance Report* (as cited in Radway, 1991), that romances now portray “androgynous” heroes and heroines who challenge both male and female stereotypes. Interestingly, in her own research too Radway found that Smithton women thought romances with cruel and violent treatment of the woman by the man to be “poorer versions of the genre” (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991a, p. 481) and “ideal heroes, it seemed, were also a good deal more androgynous... in that they combined masculine strength and power with a more feminine sensitivity and tenderness” (Mukerji & Schudson, p. 481). Bell’s treatment of Ethan also fits in with this feminist shift. He is “tall, big...like a very professional, clean shaven Viking” (Bell, 2013, Chapter 3), but also caring and warm-hearted. Being a pediatrician, his profession is nurturing—not only of children but also of women. Ethan understands women and knows very well that “desperate mommies”—“the mothers of infants and toddlers” (Bell, Chapter 3) are an occupational hazard. He had learned over the years that these women felt,

ugly and unattractive because of post-pregnancy body changes, insecure because the dynamics in their household had shifted radically, and bored because they were smart and highly educated but they’d been forced to spend long hours playing Candy Land and watching sesame street. It all added up to a terrible case of frustration, and he was, unfortunately, an outlet. (Bell, Chapter 3)

Ethan’s concern is not just a matter of professional behavior, but a testament to his sensitivity and compassion. It is he who urges Ana, after finding her in the lecherous clutches of Ed, to file a complaint. He tells, Ana, “if you want to report him, I’ll vouch for your side of the story” (Bell, Chapter 2). Because of her fear that her undocumented status will become known and get her into trouble, Ana refuses. Unaware of Ana’s secret, he gently pushes Ana to do the right thing by asking “Are you sure? That was sexual harassment, what he was doing to you. It’s illegal. He might be doing it to other people” (Bell, Chapter 2).

While a small feminist bent is noticeable in the romance genre, it is also an orientation riddled with contradictions, according to Radway. These contradictions are also evident in *Yours to Keep*. Borrowing insights from Nancy Chodorow’s revisionist readings of Freud and psychoanalysis theory, Radway attempts to understand the responses of the romance readers in Smithton—both in terms of what the women consciously said and/or what they unconsciously divulged in their psychic evaluative processes. She found that while they were “clearly taken” with the hero’s “spectacularly masculine phallic power in their voluntary comments,” “in their revealed preferences they emphasized equally that his capacity for tenderness and attentive concern was essential as well” (Radway, 1991a, pp. 13-14). This predilection for wanting tenderness in men represents to Radway

desire for motherly nurturance in women along with the “power and autonomy associated with the Oedipal father” (Radway, p. 14). Radway relies substantially on Chodorow’s theory to explore the psychological aspects of the “act of romance reading” (Radway, p. 14) in which, ironically, the ultimate fulfillment of female subjectivity is in reverting and adhering to the most traditional gender roles, or as Radway puts it, “romance is an account of a woman’s journey to female personhood *as that particular psychic configuration is constructed and realized within patriarchal culture*” (Radway, p. 138, emphasis in original).

In a popular romance, the fanciful resolution of the heroine’s journey—her achievement of “adult autonomy, a secure social position,” (Radway, 1991a, p. 14) and complete satisfaction is also made possible not only by the nurturing romantic hero, but fundamentally, only through the heroine’s role in a heterosexual monogamous relationship leading to becoming a wife and mother. This exact scenario plays out in Bell’s romance quite literally between Ana and Ethan. Ana comes out of the shadows (of her “illegal” status) through the love, care, and protection that Ethan offers her. And, it is her marriage to Ethan towards the end that provides Ana with the ultimate autonomy and freedom to be what she really is. It is the marriage certificate—the document that terminates Ana’s “illegal” status and puts her on the path to American citizenship. It is Ethan who offers Ana lawful protection from the state that typically engages in discipline and surveillance of the likes of her. Moreover, not only is Ana able to claim her identity as an American citizen with full rights, she also reclaims her social status and identity as a “complete” woman—as the mother (of Theo) and the wife (of Ethan). Her own Dominican family (siblings) can offer her love but not status or rights or protection or freedom from fear and persecution. In fact, her own family is cast as the obstacle in Ana’s path. It is only this heteronormative union with Ethan that supposedly can unleash the potential for Ana to attain motherhood, a family, sexual fulfillment, and also a career (of teaching Spanish legally).

There are other aspects of the romance narrative that are well done and enhance the appeal of the story to the readers. Bell competently captivates the reader by the discreet charm of the exotic but undocumented Latina and her alien and unfamiliar world that contains more than a hint of danger that is ever present in the form of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) and indeed, other forms of sexual and economic abuse. One example of a sympathetic depiction by Bell is of Ana’s evening ESL class in the community center where she teaches a very diverse group of adult and senior immigrants. The response of a Salvadoran woman called Nati on the day Ana teaches a lesson on talking about emotions in English is very moving. Instead of choosing an emotion just to practice English conversation, Nati talks about being sad because her only daughter was arrested and deported for being undocumented and how she would have to be a mother to her grandchildren. Nati’s story is not an uncommon one in the daily lives of the undocumented. Nati explains later when Ana asks for more details that her daughter was pulled over for a minor traffic violation, but since she had no driving license or her immigration papers, she was immediately deported back to El Salvador, even though her daughter had a job and had been living in the U.S. since she was three years old. She despairs that her daughter,

doesn’t know anyone there...All our family is here. There are people there who will take her in, but she has to start over there. It’s not a good place for her. Very poor, very unstable. We can’t see her, because we can’t travel. (Bell, 2013, Chapter 7)

Nati's misfortune triggers Ana's own fears and insecurities as she realizes that this could very well be her fate or that of her loved ones. Just because she, like Nati herself, had managed to “fly under the radar” (Bell, Chapter 7) didn't mean that she or her siblings would always succeed in avoiding deportation. Bell's description of the harsh realities of Ana's and other immigrants' daily life and work may evoke sympathy and compassion in the readers who are unaware and unfamiliar with the world of immigrants, especially the world of the undocumented ones. Below is a very small selection of readers' comments about the “realistic” nature of Bell's depiction of immigrant lives (*Goodreads*. (n.d). Community Reviews):

This book opened my eyes to the fear and adversity that illegal immigrants suffer through everyday. Although I was aware of some of what they go through, I do not think that I realized the extent of it. Bell approached this controversial topic in a very realistic way. She explains at the end of the book, that she actually interviewed illegal immigrants to get real insight on their world. I think she did a wonderful job of bringing this subject to light. (Becca, Feb. 14, 2014)

I loved Ethan and Ana's story. It is unique to me in that it deals with the issue of a long term(sic) illegal immigrants and the harsh realities of their everyday lives in America. You are pretty much invisible (and want to stay that way). No ID, Bank Account, Drivers License, Credit Cards.... (Claire Robinson, Nov. 1, 2013)

I was so impressed by the roller coaster of emotions I experienced reading this work. Racial, classist, stereotypical, prejudicial highs and lows that made me angry, happy, sad, thoughtful and then back around again. Bell WENT THERE, unafraid, unapologetic. (Nakeesha, Oct. 9, 2013)

What a pleasant surprise—a contemporary romance novel that tackles the issue of undocumented immigration with an impressive amount of realism. (Susan, Nov. 3, 2013)

I found it sad to read about the struggles and the fear that Ana and her family lived with. It made me empathize with what many immigrants must go through in reality. (Michele, Nov. 2, 2013)

It must be noted, as does Radway, that the aforementioned comments of the readers belie the charge that is often leveled at popular romance, of creating a universe in its pages which “is a fantasy world bearing little resemblance and no applicability to the reader's own” (Radway, 1991a, p. 188). Furthermore, per conventional criticism of popular romance, the readers are not looking for realism but a chimerical bubble that will transport them to another world that is free of the very real problems they face in their lives. However, Radway's study demonstrates that there is no merit to such disparaging views. She points to many a preface of romance novels where the writers “constantly thank librarians and archivists for their assistance” in researching the historical and physical backgrounds and settings of their stories (Radway, 1991b, p. 474). Indeed, Bell, too, acknowledges her gratitude to “the undocumented immigrants, ESL/ELL teachers, and immigrant advocates” who helped her to “understand what it's like to live in the shadows” (Bell, 2013, Acknowledgements). The women readers, according to Radway, understand that the books are works of fiction, but they use them “as primers about the world” and “romance for them is a kind of encyclopedia, and reading, a process of education” (Radway, 1991b, p. 474) and their “romantic universe is identical to the universe inhabited by real women” (Radway, 1991, p. 188). Here, I should also mention the example of the author Serena Bell's attempt at making the language of the novel reflect the realities of the characters. Colloquial Spanish is used sometimes, but mixed more often with English when Ana is communicating with her sister Cara and her brother Ricky. After all, the native tongue of Ana and her siblings is Spanish. Bell also thanks her Spanish tutor and editor in the acknowledgements. It seems that Bell's attempt to make the language and the setting of the novel more realistic has not gone unnoticed as many

aforementioned positive comments and reviews by readers reveal. Romance readers, evidently, are not looking to escape from disagreeable realities, but seem heartwarmingly open to learning about harsh truths of other people's lives.

The Limitations

Notwithstanding the strengths of *Yours to Keep*, particularly in terms of its risky undertaking of immigrant issues as the setting and an undocumented, woman of color as its heroine, the romance also has serious limitations. The contradictions, the kind that Radway found in the feminist agenda of romances, can also be seen in other facets of the novel. These aspects, while dispelling some minor myths about immigrants also result in reinforcing some detrimental stereotypes of them. Most striking of the shortcomings in the novel is the establishment of the binary of good and bad, desirable and undesirable immigrants.

First, let's take the example of the circumstances that bring Ana and her family to the U.S. Their situation, emphasized at every juncture in the narrative, is framed as unfortunate and inadvertent, making the point that the Travareses are the good kind of immigrants, even though their stay in the U.S. is illegal. As Ana later in the novel explains her immigration status to Ethan, "If it matters, I'm out of status. I stayed too long. We didn't come illegally" (Bell, 2013, Chapter 18). So, the intention was not to dupe the American state, but it happens because the family itself was victimized. Ana and her siblings come to the U.S. with their mother on derivative visas. Ironically, it is Ana's Dominican father who got a teaching position in a college in Massachusetts twenty years ago, but for some reason could not accompany them at that time. He sent his wife and children ahead, promising to join them soon, but for some pressing reason didn't. Much later in the story we are told that Ana's father stayed back to be with the woman he actually loved and raised another family. Waiting for their father to join them and not having any financial resources to return to Dominican Republic is a dubious and implausible plot set up by Serena Bell. While things on the immigration front have become considerably worse than the time Bell wrote the novel, it still seems very unlikely that the U.S. immigration would have let the family in without the father who actually was the primary recipient of the visa to stay and work in the U.S. Furthermore, Ana's mother's depression following the abandonment by her husband, later her illness, and finally her death are presented as the main factors leading to the family's failure to file for visa renewals. These justifications are so contrived that the readers who have even a basic understanding of U.S. immigration laws will not find them to be realistic.

Moreover, there are other serious problems with the explanation about the Travares family's lack of documentation. In one way it is interesting to see overstaying visas is emphasized in the story, because many people take for granted that undocumented immigrants always cross a border without proper visas. However, in this scenario of overstaying versus coming in without documentation, Bell presents the former as somehow less illegal and ethically better than the latter, lending credence to the false binary of good and bad immigrants. As if failure to renew your visa due to adverse circumstances deserves the sympathy and understanding of Americans more than the poor and the marginalized who cross the borders without papers to earn decent livelihoods. Curiously, Bell also does not develop the plot around the Dream Act and other legislative efforts being floated at the time, which made the key argument that children should not be punished for the behavior of the adults and pathways must be found to grant them legal status. Bell's disinclination to use the legislative initiatives of the time as the context of her novel can be overlooked, because she is not writing a case history of an immigrant

family, but a fictional romance. Nonetheless, the inconsistencies in the details of the context of immigration do diminish the novel’s credibility.

Similarly, the way Bell handles the question of race also highlights the contradictions that abound in the romance, which ultimately reinforce the dichotomy between desirable versus undesirable immigrants. It is undeniable that negative attitudes towards immigrants are not only motivated by economic anxiety but also by racial and ethnic prejudices. This fraught intersection of immigration, race and ethnicity in the U.S., bleeds into the novel as Ana, the Latina heroine from the Dominican Republic, has to be constructed by the author as a more desirable immigrant. In order to be the heroine in a romance novel and be the love interest of the all-American, white hero, Ana must possess mitigating qualities that make her more acceptable to readers. One of the redeeming characteristics of Serena Bell’s Ana is that she has “pale caramel” skin, “thick dark hair and big brown eyes” and we are told a “phenomenal hip-to-waist ratio” (Bell, Chapter 3). In other words, she perfectly fits the stereotype of the hot and sexy *senorita*, except that she is not fiery and tempestuous but quiet and reserved. However, what is lacking in her outward behavior, Ana more than makes up for it in the bedroom where she unleashes her carnal desire and unrestrained passion with Ethan and only with him. Bell herself does not shy away from sexualizing and eroticizing Ana. One example of such stereotypical sexualization of Hispanic women is reflected in Ana’s inner dialogue when she is fighting off the sleazy supervisor’s advances in his office. She thinks to herself that

he knew she was Latina—her name proclaimed it, and she’d been told until she was sick of hearing it that she looked like this or that Latina actress, only “skinnier” or “with lighter skin” or “with straighter hair”—but she didn’t fit most people’s stereotypes of an undocumented person. (Bell, Chapter 1)

Serena Bell, clearly, is aware of the matters of race, class, and gender that cluster around immigration, as she often raises these issues in the novel via dialogue. What is noteworthy though is the superficial way she deploys the issue of race, and more problematically, simply reverts to upholding the vantage point of white Americans rather than complicating it. Similarly, the hard and difficult experiences of black and brown immigrants are barely unpacked in the novel, and when they are, it is to subordinate them to the vagaries of the real and imagined moral dilemmas of the main white characters. Let me illustrate this point by providing a few examples from the text that are indicative of Bell’s good/bad binary, and how it covertly engages with the racial stereotypes of Hispanic immigrants.

Only in the last quarter of the book, does Bell reveal that Ana is the “whitest” one in the family and both her siblings are black and have “kinky hair.” Until that moment, readers assume that both her siblings, whose physical appearances are not mentioned in racial terms in most of the novel, like Ana, belong to a light-skinned Latino family. Cara’s physical appearance is described as “bulky” “mocha-colored” and with “thin, tight braids” (Bell, Chapter 3), but Ricky’s, not at all. The readers, however, already know Ana to be an attractive, tan-skinned woman with straight hair. When Ana and Ethan begin to feel the strain of her undocumented status on their relationship, only at that point in the story does Bell provide the full backstory of the racial split in the Travares family. The readers only then get to know that Ana’s father was “white” and she looked like him, whereas her two siblings took after their black mother. She asks Ethan,

you wouldn't know it to look at me, right? I could be white Dominican. But they *look* African-American [emphasis in original]. Kinky hair. Dark skin. If you saw my sister and me together, you might not guess she was my sister. (Bell, Chapter 21)

With this nod to the notion of racial passing, Ana's subsequent remarks become even more disconcerting. She informs Ethan that Cara is “jealous that I got white-girl hair. She relaxes hers and straightens it and gets extensions, but it's not the same” and later concurs with Ethan that “Genes are weird” (Bell, Chapter 21). These words by the heroine about her sibling reflect, perhaps, not only Bell's own racial fears and anxieties, but also insinuate that white physical attributes are superior and preferred by mainstream society. The idea of society here metonymically invokes the concept of Americans, particularly white Americans, whose approval Cara needs to be accepted among them, if not become one of them. Bell thus casts Cara as Ana's racial other.

There are other places in the novel where Bell configures Ana's “whiteness” by juxtaposing her physical attributes alongside her mental and emotional dispositions with other immigrant characters. The only other American man besides Ethan that Ana dated was Walt, who was also white. Walt breaks off his relationship with Ana abruptly after he found out that she is undocumented. However, it is made clear that Walt's rejection is due to Ana's undocumented status and the problems it may entail, but not because of any clash of cultures or values. It is actually Ana who, in many ways, is represented like an alien among her own kind—the black and brown immigrants—in her poor, working class neighborhood. For instance, until Ana meets Ethan, she despairs that she would never find a good man:

She had given up. The men from her neighborhood, the ones who could handle the news that she was undocumented, found her strange—too brainy, too American, too self sufficient for their tastes. And as for men she met on her own, outside the confines of her family's approval... Well, there were only two ways they ever responded to finding out that she was living in the United States illegally—the way Ed had, by taking advantage of her, or by running for the hills. As Walt had. (Bell, 2013, Chapter 2)

Ana, it becomes clear in the romance, is more (only?) attracted to American and white men. What is interesting about Bell's writing is that the characters she chooses to voice reservations about the interracial romance between Ana and Ethan are Ana's siblings, Cara and Ricky. Ironically, and it is clearly intended irony by Bell, that Cara expresses her misgivings about her sister's interracial romance by calling Ana a “trouble maker,” asking her “Why can't you quit with the *border crossing*?” (Bell, Chapter 3, emphasis added). The use of border crossing as an analogy for romancing of a white person by a person of color becomes more problematic when a brown woman voices it in the novel. Drawing this parallel betrays recognition on Bell's part of the unease that many people, perhaps also the author herself, experience with the intersection of race and immigration. Similarly, when Ricky gets to know that Ana and Ethan are serious about each other, he castigates Ana for being “a charity project” for Ethan who, according to him, had “a savior complex” (Bell, Chapter 23). Ricky also warns Ana that Ethan's interest in her won't last long and she would only be a “spicy-spice girl, hot Latina girl, exotic dark skinned private-stripper girl...” to Ethan (Bell, Chapter 23). Ricky predicts that the outcome of the “racial border crossing” would be that when “the spice wears off” for Ethan, he divorces Ana “and marries one of those skinny rich bitches so he can have white babies” (Bell, Chapter 23).

Interestingly, both Cara and Ricky, despite their love and support for Ana, are primarily reduced to exemplifying the most clichéd perceptions of Afro-Latinos. Elsewhere in the story, Ana talks to Ethan about

Cara’s emotional breakdown and reckless attitude after their mother’s death that resulted in Cara getting pregnant when she was sixteen. Her three kids, reveals Ana, “have three different fathers.—*Marco’s dad’s white*, Angel’s dad is a Dominicano, and Leta’s dad is Mexican” (Bell, Chapter 11, emphasis added). It is puzzling why then Cara censures Ana about the metaphoric “border crossing” when she herself had walked the very same path more than once. Or, are we supposed to conclude that none of the men Cara had babies with were Americans (even if one was white)? Ricky, too, cannot escape the taint of being a typical “macho” man who bosses around his sisters and nieces and nephews. He is cast into a mold of a Latino man who epitomizes machismo, misogyny and patriarchal values.

Serena Bell shifts the onus of racism onto immigrants of color by portraying them as the conveyors of racist ideologies. It is even more troubling because such examples of transference in the novel are evinced almost exclusively when Ana discusses her family members with Ethan. When Ethan makes the decision to offer marriage to Ana to legalize her status, Ana warns him of the obstacles that Ricky would pose to their marriage. She bemoans, “Ricky is going to hate this whole thing so much—that you’re white. There’s a stereotype that Dominicans are racist, and Ricky isn’t helping to break it” (Bell, 2013, Chapter 21). Ana here refers to racial tensions in the Dominican Republic with regards to Haitians who often cross into the Dominican Republic to look for work. Therefore, “Dominicans are incredibly suspicious of Haitians, who are black,” declares Ana (Bell, Chapter 21). But why would Ricky who is also black, a Dominican of African descent, harbor racial prejudices against those who face similar problems as he does in the United States? Bell does not provide any clarification or context to her convoluted and confusing words, except for a self-serving explanation by Ana (again!) to Ethan that Ricky’s racist feelings were “personal” (Bell, Chapter 21) due to the family’s abandonment by their white father and his subsequent marriage to a white woman. “Nothing will convince Ricky that race didn’t play a role in that,” complains Ana (Bell, Chapter 21). Racism, thus, is reduced to an individual’s feelings and conduct rather than a societal and structural problem. Besides, even in the limited sense of individual feelings and behavior, the blame in the novel largely falls on Ricky, the black immigrant, who supposedly cannot overcome his irrational bitterness and anger. Why Ana lets her white father off the hook for abandoning his wife and kids in an unfamiliar country without any means to support themselves is an intriguing question, but Bell’s Ana does not even remotely grapple with the initial cause of the Travares family predicament. Indeed, Ana’s “border crossings” in matters of love depict her white lover as considerate and kind while implicitly casting her siblings in unfavorable light.

Furthermore, from early on in the romance, Bell shapes Ana’s character as not just physically embodying whiteness, but also, and more importantly, as a person who intrinsically feels more American. This is distinct from the sense of the European immigrants of the past who came to America and were then considered not quite and not yet white. The European immigrants, like the Irish and the Italians, had to learn to “become white” through social, cultural, and economic processes (Roediger, 1991) in order to be accepted as Americans. Ana’s desire to become American, on the other hand, has more to do with her having always innately being predisposed to belonging in the U.S. With Ethan’s offer of marriage on the table, Ana dreams of the day she would be able to teach high school without fear; she dreams of having a bank account; and she dreams of being married to Ethan, of the future when “she’d belong to someone and she’d belong to her country, the country that would always be hers, even if so far it hadn’t owned her” (Bell, Chapter 20). Bell yet again contrasts Ricky’s negative immigrant experiences with Ana’s propitious ones. Ricky, the explanation goes, was 15 years old when the family came to

America and so he was “beyond the reach of schoolteachers, stubborn about choosing Dominican friends, unwilling to learn English” (Bell, Chapter 9). He became “angrier and more entrenched when their father failed to join them in the United States, when their mother died.” Ana, on the other hand, had “always been an American” (Bell, Chapter 9). She had been at the top of her class in school and,

Her best friend had been a little blond-haired white girl, whose house she spent more time in than her own, playing Barbies and eating American meals and glomming onto the sophisticated English patterns of her friend’s highly educated parents. She couldn’t choose to live in Ricky’s world any more than he could choose to live in hers. (Bell, Chapter 9)

Bell also puts a high premium on the ability of immigrants to speak English. She seems to give credence to the erroneous belief, like many proponents of English proficiency tests for immigrants on their path to citizenship, that good immigrants can be distinguished from the bad ones based on how well they speak English. A few times in the romance, Ethan comments on Ana’s good English, in terms of both her ease with the language and her exotic accent. When she expresses anxiety about her English-speaking abilities, he compliments Ana by saying, “You’re beautiful and funny and sexy, and you have a better grasp of English than people I’ve known who’ve been speaking it their whole lives” (Bell, Chapter 30). And, as he begins to fall in love with Ana, he daydreams of her “With her voice, creamy calm and cool, containing only the slightest trace of her native island, the slightest hint that English was not the only language she’d ever known” (Bell, Chapter 17). At one point, Ethan is embarrassed when he recognizes how bigoted his assumptions are about undocumented immigrants. He is mortified that the possibility of Ana being one never entered his mind, even though, he concedes, she gave him plenty of hints:

What was wrong with him that he hadn’t put the pieces together? It was the power of denial, that’s what it was. And, he admitted, the skill with which she spoke English. People like her—God, had he thought those words?—were supposed to be barely bilingual. Barely literate. Not articulate, not skilled teachers, not well read. His prejudices had snared him. (Bell, Chapter 18)

Again, it is clear in the abovementioned lines that Serena Bell is well aware of the prejudices about immigrants and English, yet she still harnesses them to create portraits, on the one hand, of a sensitive, kind, all-American hero who needs something novel and exotic in his dreary life, and on the other, of a good Latina immigrant who speaks flawless English with only a trace of foreign accent, and who deserves to become American.

Conclusion

Bell’s juxtapositions of “good” and “bad” immigrants not only serve to underline her heroine’s “whiteness” but also cast other immigrant characters in a negative light, and deem them as unworthy of becoming Americans. Bell is not alone in her misplaced espousal of only “worthy” or “desirable” immigrants. Many people who seek to advocate for taking in “good” immigrants, advertently or inadvertently, create binaries that can be devastating for the undocumented, the most vulnerable of all immigrants. In a recent sociological study by Abigail Andrews, she examines the effects of the binaries on the perceptions of immigrants themselves, particularly in terms of their feelings about belonging, solidarity with other immigrants, and political leanings. Interestingly, she finds,

To the extent immigrants identified as “good”, they credited the US with offering them “freedom” and hoped for political inclusion. At the same time, in what I call *moralizing regulation*, they also performed “good” behaviour and

distinguished themselves from those seen as “bad”. Some also tied “good” behaviour to femininity and “acting white”. At the extreme, they blamed other migrants for inviting state mistreatment. (Andrews, 2017, Abstract, emphasis in original)

The binary discourse on immigration is a running thread throughout the novel. The American characters, including Ethan’s family, are portrayed by Bell as supportive and well meaning, albeit naïve and clueless at times. This portrayal would have been viable if they also didn’t turn out to be the only people in the story who provide Ana with the solutions to her immigration problems. While Ana’s character does project agency and action, she is also always bailed out from difficult situations by the generosity of American citizens. Legal immigrants or the numerous supportive immigrant networks do not have any presence, power, or influence in Bell’s story. Thus, the underscored message of the story in regards to immigration seems to be that immigrants can gain only through the magnanimity and benevolence of the U.S. born white citizens around them. This depiction also does a disservice to those immigrants, documented or otherwise, who help themselves and each other under dire circumstances. Like Radway’s notion about romances offering dominant messages that exhort women to accept as natural the oppressive gender relations to which they are habituated, Bell’s romance also indirectly urges its readers to accept as normal the unequal and oppressive race and social relations to which they are accustomed. In conclusion, the romance and its message may resonate with those who are unfamiliar with immigration issues and immigrant experiences, but it is likely to miss its mark for those who have experienced or familiarized themselves with the ruthless realities of the lives of undocumented immigrants. In this sense, *Yours to Keep*, as an artifact of popular culture, does tell us something important about the preoccupations and sensibilities of our times regarding immigration. It encapsulates both the customary and the creative potential, the limitations and the possibilities of the romance genre. Admittedly, the realities of immigrant lives may be challenging and perhaps even inconvenient to represent robustly in a popular romance. However, if Serena Bell can venture into the uncharted territory of creating an undocumented Latina immigrant as the heroine of her novel, it is not outside the realm of possibilities and expectations of readers that she and other romance writers can also ensure that they portray immigrants accurately—not just as victims at the mercy of white saviors but also as agents and active participants in changing their own lives. This dose of reality, I believe, will be compatible with the “feminist turn” of the romance genre, and can change the ideas and perceptions of its readers about the marginalized and misrepresented immigrants. What is needed perhaps is not just the willingness to take risks, but also a bit more imagination and creativity and a lot more research and education.

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