

Listen for the Sound of Love: The Queer Romance Missing in Audio Drama

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It has been a long time since I began to love audio drama. It was just “podcasts” when I started in 2016—though if you were to put a row of podcasts together and ask someone to pick out what I’m talking about, you’re more likely to hit than miss. We have all matured more since then, and we can now distinguish ourselves amongst other “podcasts.” It is even my job now, writing, producing, and just general contributing to this medium I call home. So when I was asked to write this paper on Young Adult romance pieces, I went straight to audio drama to write about it. After all, I can name almost half of my favourite romantic relationships just from audio drama alone.

I looked up “romance audio dramas,” trying to get an understanding of what is popular, understand what has really hit its stride in the genre. The first result I got was a Reddit post titled “Romance-ish Audio Dramas?” It has sixteen upvotes (JanuaryDaphne). The rest of the results were click-bait, top-however-many, blog articles that were banal and written so dryly that it would make the most stalwart romance fan drop, stone dead—not to mention the ones that did not even have any romance in their lists. I could find the shows I was looking for—sure, I knew a few off the top of my head and could research to find more. But in a medium where productions like *Welcome to Night Vale*, *White Vault*, and *Limetown* can skyrocket in popularity and break into pop culture all on their own and have some of the most memorable relationships in pop fiction, where did all the good romance go? Why is it that romance as a genre has not broken out as much in audio drama?

And how did we get here? Since about the 1940s, radio drama had been in a bit of a lull. Ever since major broadcasting companies started to shift funding into television, radio had been left to die in North America. In this dry well of funding in the broadcasting arts, Richard Imison writes that there was a belief that the

effective death of radio drama was a “a serious loss to American²⁴ cultural life” (Imison 289). Then two major developments happened in the twenty-first century: a powerful, mobile, cellular device was put into the hands of almost every adult on the planet with a built-in application that downloads podcasts, and the show *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-) began broadcasting. *Welcome to Night Vale* is not only a turning point in radio drama—now audio drama—but also in the lives of its audience. While we can describe the show itself as a surreal gothic take on local radio news, what it represents is far larger. In her piece on Queer audio drama, Ella Watts characterizes *Night Vale* as “the first flush of social radicalism enter[ing] the podcast fiction DNA” (Watts 438). The clearest example being how the “protagonist of *Night Vale*, Cecil Palmer, is an openly gay Jewish man who declares his love for another man in the first episode” (Watts 438). There are so many more examples of diversity in its cast, but the point that Watts makes, which I will return to later, is “*Night Vale*’s primarily teenage and young-adult fans were not interested in” the story, but rather in Cecil and Carlos, the main Queer couple of the show. The show itself puts Cecil and Carlos at the forefront of its identity, from having Cecil’s love declared in episode one, to having their relationship expanded or celebrated on the show’s anniversaries. Watts puts their relationship at the centre of the show, saying their being “at the heart of the podcast is fundamental to its charm.” However, while the love of Cecil and Carlos leads the ship²⁵ on *Night Vale*, it is still defined as a horror audio drama, not romance. Danielle Hancock writes that *Night Vale* is incredibly important as a piece of horror, saying in her paper that “*Night Vale* arguably brought horror podcasting from the niche corners of the Internet to global prominence” (Hancock 220). Regardless of its classification, *Night Vale* was a trailblazer of a show that charted a new trajectory for audio drama in the years to come. But what is important about *Night Vale* is it reshaped audio drama to become a safe haven of a medium for the Queer and open minded, especially in terms of love.

That brings us to today, where the medium as a whole is very horror-oriented popular fiction: for the past decade, horror audio dramas have been the ones breaking past the core audience of the medium and reaching out into the popular culture. *Night Vale* is the most obvious, but there is also *The White Vault*, bringing its production company into such fame that it can get Jeff Goldblum to do

²⁴ I ended up choosing to focus on North American radio and audio drama, while still using sources from the United Kingdom, because to go into British radio drama history and interpretations and audience would be beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁵ Pun intended

celebrity appearances on their roleplaying podcast (Grebe). Or *Limetown*, which garnered so much attention that an entire television adaptation was made of it (Andreeva). Horror has the market cornered right now in audio drama, and some believe that it is the natural environment for horror, anyway. Richard J. Hand, writing for the *Companion to American Gothic*, says that in the language of sounds—the use of spoken words, music, soundscape, etc.—is a “form with limitless potential to tap into the imagination of the listener” (Hand 655). Because of audio horror’s ability to allow the audience’s imagination to come up with the horror on their own, “the fertile imagination of the audio listener has meant that the Gothic has always been an immensely important genre” (Hand 655). Thus, horror makes its nest in the audio drama sphere, but of course there is more than just horror here. I interviewed a producer in the industry, Karma Light of Lanterns Aura productions, on the current state of the industry. They say that while *Night Vale* “is a horror,” some would argue that the romantic subplot is just as important “because Cecil is the main part of Welcome to Night Vale, and Carlos is a big part of his world” (Light). In other words, the horror of *Night Vale* is not what is important to its audience, but instead the romance of its protagonist. This perspective stretches out to other dramas such as *Alice Isn’t Dead*, produced by many of the same people as *Night Vale*. While some would argue that *Alice* is primarily a gothic horror drama, Karma argues that “*Alice Isn’t Dead* would not have happened if there wasn’t a love plot in there.” So, what we are left with is a medium that is in love with horror, but also one primed for romance.

If the ground for romance is so fertile, then why is there no good romance growing? Karma herself was enamoured seeing a Queer romance depicted in an audio drama. When they started to listen to audio drama, it was “the first time that I was exposed to just unashamed Queer romance, like in *Welcome to Night Vale* was the first time that a main character was gay.” This is a medium that can best deliver the kinds of Queer romance that young Queers have yet to experience. In addition, audio drama is believed to deliver a kind of intimacy with the story that other mediums cannot. In her piece on radio drama staging, Elissa Guralnick says that people personalize an audio drama more than other mediums. She says that what an “audience is seeking and is at a loss to find in any other medium, including movies and the stage, is an intimacy, a personal dimension, that makes every encounter with radio drama an encounter with one’s own imagination” (Guralnick 79). To bring this to our contemporary context, a Queer audience seeks intimacy with a Queer story that is personally relatable to their own experiences. This brings us back to the original question, though: why are there no

romances that have not only been produced—because they are out there—but have also reached beyond the Queer audience, into the wider world?

One reason may be that the medium is too young. When I asked Karma why there is so little romance-dedicated audio dramas, they suggested that audio drama in its modern form is too new:

If I take a guess, I'd probably say it's because fiction podcasts as a medium, as we know it, because obviously radio dramas have been around for a while, is relatively new. And because the first one that I can think of that was really popular was *Welcome to Night Vale*, people have been kind of unconsciously copying that throughout and *Welcome to Night Vale* is a horror. (Light)

What that means is that break-out romance stories may be yet to come for the audio drama sphere, and their absence is just due to how new the revitalized medium is, relative to its peers such as audio books or radio drama.

However, a more subversive problem—and a reason it could take a while for any break-out romance audio dramas to be produced—is that the tools writers use for audio drama make it hard to create them. In writing theory, there is a process called visualization, which applies very much to radio. Visualization, as James O. Connelly puts it, is “the process of forming mental images depicting the content of the product” (746). Basically, visualization is the process of creating images based on the writer’s prose. All listeners of audio dramas have to visualize, so one of the consequences of this is that each listener has a personal image of what they see based on what they hear. This goes back to how listeners of horror personalize the horror and imagines things that would be far scarier for them personally than anything the writer could make. To quote Imison again, audio drama “alone can produce pictures which are tailor-made to the taste and experience of each individual listener” (Imison 290). Here is where I think this becomes a problem for romance writers in audio drama especially, because the romance genre audience can be very territorial with interpretation. In a genre loaded with shippers and die-hard romantics, interpretations on how specific relationships are forming or how they should form abound within the romance genre community. How does a listener fill in the intimate silences between two characters? How does the writer tell their audience this silence is a platonic one and not a romantic one? Karma has this issue in their work, saying “it’s an audio medium, which means that like when I make my podcast, like I have a rule that if it doesn’t make a sound, it doesn’t exist, so it would be difficult to make a romance into a podcast.” This is not to say that writers exclude romance as a whole from audio drama: there are still romance subplots. But rather, it is much

easier to fill a small subplot with a romance when the overarching plot is the main focus and bulk of the writing. Speaking personally, it is tricky to get people to believe that a relationship is one thing or another without explicitly stating what their relationship is. I submitted an audio drama script to an editor for feedback, and he asked a question about two of my characters, who are platonic. He asked “so what is the relationship between these two? Is it romantic? Platonic? I can’t tell.” I had not even written any dialogue between the two that was not expository, or how one felt of the other, so it was not a failure of my writing. He had come up with that from just the script alone. I ultimately realized that, as an audio drama writer, even for platonic relationships, there is a certain amount of steering you have to do to keep the audience on the same page of a character’s love life. Connelly would agree with me, saying that “the writer is responsible for creating the stimuli that trigger the visualization response in the audience” (746). In other words, I am somewhat responsible for telling the audience what is and is not romance. This is not to say that romance audiences are mindless drones who see a love plot even between their kitchen appliances, but that interpretation and visualization are a subconscious part of the viewer and will happen with or without writer input.

Audio drama writers may be swimming upstream to work against the strengths of the medium to create romance, but also it may be that the romances that **do** work just do not fit within the current definition of romance. Guralnick says that audio drama production and engagement ask different things of its creators and audience respectively. She says that it “makes totally different demands” when compared to something like theatre (81). In our case, though, when compared to a medium like television or movies, audio drama is its own beast. Television and movies do not require much, if any, visualization for example. So having a genre audience—such as that of romance—swap to a medium that requires almost entirely visualization is a hard jump to make. But it is not just in visualization, it is fundamentally a problem with genre conventions within the medium. Karma has a point on this, saying that the romance genre may not be built for audio drama unlike horror is,

because a lot of horror is what you can’t see. And if the whole medium is you can't see the thing. And also, it’s never going to describe it to you, because it’s not a book or a movie. Then it lends itself really well. Whereas romance, I think lends itself way more to being in books and movies. (Light)

But does that mean that romance stories are strictly impossible for audio drama? That is a stretch, but stretching is exactly the point I am trying to make. The issue

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is not with audio drama, but with the way we collectively define the romance genre. We need to stretch the boundaries of genre conventions to include these new ways of conveying love. Let me give an example of how a romance audio drama escaped the romance genre. I was listening to an anthology audio drama called *Within the Wires*, specifically its second season, where the plot revolves around a relationship between an artist and her critic. What makes this plot so unique and ineffable for the romance genre, though is the narrative is told through an audio tour of the artist's work by the critic. The plot and romance is told between the lines of the audio tour as the critic slowly reveals her feelings and plot in her narration. This is the kind of romance that is present in audio drama, and ultimately why audio romance might escape the boundaries of genre romance: it is so hard to define. Karma puts it far better than I do when it comes to another show they define as "romance," *Alice Isn't Dead*:

I guess if you're looking for them actually falling in love and then them going on dates and then that type of thing, then I guess *Alice Isn't Dead* wouldn't be that. Off the top of my head, I don't believe I could think of one where that is the case, where it's two people falling in love and going on dates afterwards and exploring that. (Light)

In terms of a traditional romance, audio drama is mostly bare of pure romance dramas. But for non-traditional or experimental romance, the field abounds with them.

But I hear you cry, "so what? It's romance, who cares? We can get our fill of Queer romance elsewhere, audio drama is fine." Sure, audio drama does not need romance, and the audience seems content with the subplots that we have today. Karma herself says that a romance audio drama "would be so different from everything else that everyone is listening to, that it would either go into absolute obscurity, or it would literally be the only thing of its kind." So, there is possibly no audience for the genre-only dramas, and any audio drama requires a "committed audience" (Guralnick 80). However, audio drama stretches to an extremely diverse audience, and a very young audience at that. Having people see different forms of love being depicted, that it even can be depicted, influences Queer people and especially Queer youth. Karma's first experience seeing Queer romance being depicted was audio drama:

That was the first time I've ever seen that in anything. I never saw them on TV shows and cartoons, obviously. And since then, basically every single audio drama I listened to has some sort of queer romance in it, which is pretty cool as someone who is queer. And when I was in high school, that was just not a

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thing you talked about. And then after graduating from high school, was like, oh, there's this whole world of audio drama that has relationships that I relate to more than the ones that are on TV or in most books that were published at the time. (Light)

So, to say that romance is inconsequential is misleading. Especially now, when audiences see audio drama as a haven for Queer and diversity narratives, it is vitally important that we in the medium work to show more representation of Queer and open-minded romance stories.

What is next? Obviously, there should be more Queer romance written, main or sub plots. This may sound odd, but the best answer may just be to wait. Not until someone smarter figures it out, but rather until a larger audience grows up and can bring more support into the genre and can change what the romance genre means. Karma—who for the record is much older than I—says they “think it will definitely get there where people are going to want to listen to romance, especially with the rise of romance in YA in general.” They continue by saying that with the growing rise in Young Adult romance books, “it’s not going to be a far leap for someone to think, ‘hmm, maybe we should write a romance as a podcast.’” So it is only a matter of time until the audience is at a critical mass for the genre to explode, and a writer to strike the match. What is great about audio drama though, compared to television or movies, is that not only can you create truly experimental stories, but that the turnaround time and production costs are small. There are two obvious consequences for this: a lot of audio dramas can be made and the barrier to entry is low. Karma agrees, saying this means

people could really, really be very creative with whatever romance that they want to do, and they didn't have to be approved or have people say like, oh, no one's going to listen to this because of these reasons, like they could really do whatever they wanted, which lends itself to having like tons of different types of romance. (Light)

Personally, I think the potential to create something wonderful is something to aspire to. While I do not write romance stories, I do believe they are the most raw form for character passion and interaction. I look for well written love when I can, because it is what I think is at the core of a story: two characters in conflict and love. Besides, it would be hypocritical to lampoon the lack of romance stories in audio drama and then not commit to write a few of my own. After all, I may not write romance, but all connection is a love. So, what can I do then? Well, now I do the only thing I can do, write a whole bunch.

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