

Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction

Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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1 Introduction

Travel and Colonialism in Twenty-First Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?*

Paloma Fresno-Calleja and Hsu-Ming Teo

Romantic fiction often involves stories of travel. In narratives of the journey towards love, “romance” habitually translates into encounters with “exotic” places and peoples. When history is invoked in such stories, the past itself is exoticised (Rousselot 2014) and treated as “other” to the present to serve the purposes of romanticisation: a narrative strategy by which settings, characters, costumes, customs and consumables are made to perform a luxuriant otherness that amplifies the experience of love. This volume discusses a recent corpus of Anglophone romantic historical fiction which depicts stories of women’s journeys to, and sojourns in, various exoticised locations. The travels that feature in the novels are also journeys into traumatic pasts characterised by war, conflict, colonial exploitation or post-colonial political struggles—contexts in which the protagonists also experience romantic love. This compilation of essays builds on the work of our previous co-edited collection, *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History* (2024), where we argued collectively that the narrativisation of the past through romance can be conducive to reparation and healing, but not without certain social, political or historiographical costs. In this companion volume, we revisit the reparative function of romantic historical fiction to ask: can plots of real travel (and even time travel, as discussed in one of the chapters) empower women while narrating stories of healing for the wounds of the past? Is this work equally reparative for the women who travel as well as for those they encounter in these remote locations? Does the romantic nature of these novels and their exoticist qualities facilitate or hinder a reparative reading of the past? As indicated by the question mark in the title, the work of reparation carried out in the novels is often partial or problematic.

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Our discussion of romantic historical narratives is situated within the growing field of popular romance studies which critically analyses romance fiction in all its complexity and from various disciplinary perspectives including the literary, historical and sociological, and using conceptual frameworks including postcolonialism, critical race theory, and gender and queer theory, among others (Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo 2020). Romance fiction is conventionally expected to include two main components, according to the oft-quoted definition by the Romance Writers Association of America: “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (Romance Writers of America). For some decades now, critical appraisals of the romance novel have refined this definition and discussed the historical origins and structural scaffolding of the formula. In her foundational study *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Regis talks of eight essential structural elements configuring the romance novel, including the meeting of hero and heroine, the presentation of the barrier that prevents their love from succeeding and the eventual overcoming of those obstacles concluding with the happy ending, which Regis calls the betrothal (19). In this volume, we take a more flexible approach to our corpus and choose to collectively define the novels we discuss as “romantic” rather than “romance fiction”, a decision which is supported by writers’ associations outside the United States (Romantic Novelists’ Association; Romantic Writers of Australia). Some of our contributors certainly identify Regis’s structural elements in the romantic novels they analyse, but we also recognise that much romantic fiction that explores love relationships does not necessarily end “happily ever after” with the romantic protagonists united and flourishing in love. More specifically, we refer to our corpus as “romantic *historical* fiction” to highlight the fact that the authors and novels examined do not simply use the past as a picturesque backdrop for a modern-day love story; rather, they attempt a serious representation of or engagement with history. Consequently, an optimistic love story might be incompatible with the specific historical events and circumstances recreated by the authors. In some cases, as we shall see, an unhappy ending works as a more plausible or ethically desirable solution for the protagonists’ love story.

Within the growing body of popular romance scholarship, Catherine Roach’s *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (2016) is key for our purposes. Roach sees popular romance as reparative because its “transgressive and empowering” (11) qualities that help women readers negotiate the complexities and ambiguities of the patriarchal world they inhabit. For Roach, these stories constitute “a creative respite for women, an imaginative play space to roll around in the fields of fantasy with sister readers of the genre, all the while affirming the reality of love as a force that can work good in the world” (13). These romantic “fields of fantasy”

are expanded both historically and geographically in the novels discussed in this volume, as readers partake in the reparative and transformative force of love through the protagonists' experiences, travelling with them back in time and out into remote and enticing locations. Yet, some of the contributions in this volume question the unexpected ramifications of Roach's thesis, instead asking how the romanticisation of travel, the exoticisation of painful historical events and the perpetuation of Orientalist depictions of certain places and peoples may actually interfere with the allegedly reparative function of the romantic story for women. Do these reparative narratives operate according to the logic of a zero-sum game, where (mostly white) women's gains come at the expense of those they encounter in what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) calls the "contact zones" of travel, "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4)?

Our edited collection also builds on scholarly studies on the complex and ever-expanding corpus of women's historical fiction (Bergmann 2021; Cooper and Short 2012; Fletcher 2008; Hughes 1993; Wallace 2005), a genre in which women authors have been immensely prolific for over 200 years and which continues to enjoy huge popularity in the twenty-first century. The category of women's historical fiction is wide-ranging and heterogeneous and, thus, notoriously difficult to define. In everyday usage, "women's historical fiction" may refer to historical narratives of various kinds, including popular historical romances, one of the most popular subsets of romance, as well as so-called "literary" historical novels centring women's experiences. Our collection avoids the commonplace division between popular and literary historical fiction and moves away from traditional understandings of historical romance as an escapist genre, capable of offering lavish ornamental detail but inadequate to reassess the past. Instead, we show that both popular and literary fiction has the capacity to engage in serious historiographical work while centralising women's experiences of love (Teo and Fresno-Calleja 2024). As Jerome de Groot argues in *Remaking History*,

The popular historical text has a sense of its own ethical purpose and position, an awareness of its intervention into historiographical debates, and yet a keen understanding of the potential of fiction to achieve something ineffably beyond the scope of mainstream historical enquiry. (2016, 42)

We borrow De Groot's notion of historical genre fiction as an effective form of popular historiography and, in particular, of romantic historical novels as affective interventions into the past. There is a "double enjoyment"

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(De Groot 2016, 154) at play in the novels we discuss, as readers immerse themselves in the fantasy of the past time and faraway place while partaking in a process of revision committed to “historical awareness, engagement, narrativisation and comprehension” (6). Our interests lie in exploring how these novels engage with complicated historical periods through fictionalisations of romantic relationships unfolding in faraway locations and mediated by different experiences of travel, from forced migration to recreational tourism.

In *The Women’s Historical Novel* (2005), Diana Wallace argues that the particular narrative and thematic choices women writers make in approaching a specific historical period have clear “ideological and political implications” and need to be understood “in relation to women’s engagement with history and not dismissed as ‘unhistorical’, ‘factually inaccurate’ or merely ‘irrelevant’ according to a male-defined model” (15). That women novelists have shaped history differently to their male counterparts, often focusing on more private, apparently unimportant or even taboo topics, does not preclude, as Wallace argues, a serious commitment to the past. The centralisation of women’s experiences and preoccupations, the questioning of gender roles, the revision of received versions of history and the recovery of silenced voices and unrecorded perspectives are all central concerns for women historical novelists. Because of the narrative possibilities it affords, Wallace sees the historical novel as “a liberating space” (8) for women authors and readers. This liberation occurs in historical fiction of various kinds but is particularly intense in popular historical novels, especially historical romances, which circumvent the realist male tradition to refocus and rewrite history by emphasising “the arena of private emotion” (17), an angle which has been traditionally ignored in conventional historical narratives. The novels we discuss in this volume share this emotional engagement with the past and narrativise key historical conflicts and events through love and romance, a move which, going back to Roach, is in itself transgressive and empowering for women.

The contemporary romantic historical novels we discuss here can then be situated as part of a continuum which encompasses “not only texts that are set in the past on the story level but also novels that discuss problems of historiography or question the possibilities of a representation of history” (Bergmann 2021, 52). These metafictional engagements with the narrativisation of the past are evident in authors who mobilise previous genres and conventions, like the pirate adventure story, the colonial romance, the migration novel or the war narrative. We contend that in engaging with these formats and textual traditions women authors reflect on problematic topics such as racism, colonialism, slavery, war or violence, bringing these difficult conversations to twenty-first-century audiences through stories of women who struggle for independence and search for

love while enduring or fighting against various hierarchies of domination. In invoking such legacies of historical conflict set in remote locations, as several contributors suggest, authors often find themselves caught between replicating touristic discourses of leisure and pleasure to meet the escapist expectations of contemporary readers, and, conversely, a genuine desire to denounce violent histories of plantation slavery, colonisation or militarisation and historical legacies of labour and sexual exploitation. On many occasions, these historical novels are narrated in ways that purportedly challenge the colonial, racist and sexist past but, through their exoticist and romanticised depictions, they inadvertently reinforce the very colonial discourse, including Orientalism, that underpinned historical systems of domination. Collectively, then, contributors read their corpus of romantic historical fiction in relation to the long tradition of western Orientalist fantasies, women's involvement in the production and consumption of such fantasies, and the politics involved in contemporary re-enactments of such visions in popular works produced and consumed by women (Lewis 2002; Teo 2012; Yeğenoğlu 1998). We question the function and significance of these twenty-first-century fantasies of escape, the extent to which each author reinforces or refutes the textual legacies of Orientalism, and consider how well-meaning interventions may consolidate or clash with a feminist agenda which sidelines non-white subjects.

Travel, Romance and Exoticism

Historical fiction often involves a double journey because it transports the reader to the past as well as to distant and unfamiliar places. If going back in time allows readers the temporal distance to critically review their present circumstances with greater detachment and objectivity, the geographical distance encompassed in travel intensifies such process. In the same way that women novelists have used history to insert themselves into the record and create liberatory fantasies about the past, women's stories involving journeys of some kind have provided similar opportunities for transgression and empowerment because they have allowed women authors to destabilise traditional gender norms by placing their characters in locations and cultural contexts where different rules operate.

In the Anglophone novels we analyse, the protagonists leave the familiar for the foreign, which is mostly located in another country or geographical region, and encounter romance in various forms. They fall in love with enticing and colourful lands and experience emotional maturation and sexual awakening in tropical islands, lush jungles, frontier colonial settlements or war zones. The heroine who travels to or sojourns in a foreign land also encounters two other forms of "romance" that are medieval in origin: firstly, "a quest, whether for love or adventure", and secondly, an experience of the

marvellous, the exotic or the fantastic along their journeys (Fuchs 2004, 4). “Romance” can be identified by its formal qualities and plot structure, but it can also be “a recurrent textual strategy [with] many manifestations and transformations throughout literary history” (9). The historical novels discussed in this volume employ both the formal structural elements of plot as well as use tropes such as travel and the exotic to create the reader’s experience of the text as romantic. The travel experiences of the protagonists (as tourists, migrants, settlers or adventurers) allow readers to partake vicariously in such disruptions and to establish connections between different geographical scenarios and their own social circumstances.

Travel has been intrinsic to history (Leed 1991, 4) and to the evolution of the novel as a genre (Adams 1983). Eric J. Leed argues that there is no history without travel, because “[r]ecorded history—the history of civilization—is a story of mobilities, migrations, settlements, of the adaptation of human groups to place and their integration into topography, the creation of ‘homes’” (1991, 4). The narrative of such mobilities has been shaped in history, travel writing, poetry and prose fiction. In these stories, however, travel is overwhelmingly represented as a gendered activity—men travel and women stay at home. Indeed, women are synecdochic with hearth and home, and in classic stories the return of the male traveller is in many ways a romantic journey towards home and the next phase of domestic life is seen as the years after the adventurous wandering is abandoned. This narrative arc is exemplified by Odysseus, who “wanders on a long, frustrating journey toward home, personified by Penelope, the territorialized and virtuous woman whose exclusion of suitors preserves that home” (7–8).

Women played limited roles in both real and fictional travel narratives and were generally seen as “the objects of desire or destination points rather than active co-travellers” (Bassnett 2022, 225) because, before the eighteenth century, recreational travel was limited to aristocratic or privileged women, and normally restricted to very specific circumstances. After the 1700s, written accounts of women’s travels started to appear in English because some British women began to embark on experiences such as the Grand Tour, mostly around Europe, but sometimes to the Ottoman empire. Others began to venture to more remote destinations, across the Atlantic or in various parts of Asia, often travelling as wives of foreign diplomats, military personnel or civil servants in newly established colonial outposts. Many of these women chose to record their experiences in formats such as letters or journals which were considered particularly appropriate because they were personal, intimate and private, rather than intended for publication. Travel writing by women began to grow substantially from the 1770s with the posthumous publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montague’s *The Turkish Embassy Letters* in 1763 which gathered observations of her life in

Constantinople in the 1710s as wife of the British ambassador. Maria Riddell's account of the Caribbean, Anna Maria Falconbridge's narratives of west Africa, or Lady Maria Nugent's journals of Jamaica and India are also among some of those early examples (O'Loughlin 2018, 11–12).

In the nineteenth century, women's travel increased dramatically across the non-Western world as British imperial expansion made travel safer for women. Settler colonialism brought about a new impetus to migration and permanent settlement and created the infrastructure that facilitated the leisurely journeys of the wealthy. British women's travel, recounted in the many published narratives that appeared especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, was transgressive in an era that valorised Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house" and insisted on a rigid gender binary that defined women as physically and mentally weak and helpless in contrast to men's physical prowess, daring and intellectual capabilities. To be a woman who went abroad, especially by herself, was deemed so remarkable a feat that W.H. Davenport published an admiring account of these intrepid heroines in his book, *Celebrated Women Travellers of the Nineteenth Century* (1883). A century later, a spate of feminist scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s extended this laudatory and largely uncritical account of Victorian women travellers, performing the painstaking work of uncovering dozens of hitherto forgotten women travellers and analysing their travelogues.

Emerging from the demands for sexual, professional and economic equality espoused by second-wave feminism, books such as Alexandra Allen's *Travelling Ladies: Victorian Lady Adventuresses* (1980), Leo Hamalian's *Ladies on the Loose: Women Travellers of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (1981), Dea Birkett's *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers* (1989), Jane Robinson's *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers* (1990), Shirley Foster's *Across New Worlds: Nineteenth-Century Women Travellers and their Writings* (1990) and Maria Frawley's *A Wider Range: Travel Writing by Women in Victorian England* (1994) generally imply that middle-class women who travelled abroad were proto-feminist in many ways. These were courageous women who defied the social expectation that women's lives should be narrowly circumscribed by the domestic sphere, and who, in their travels, endured and overcame hardships and maintained standards of genteel femininity even as they proved themselves just as capable as men. Indeed, this image of the Victorian woman traveller may be said to be the ideal for twenty-first-century romantic heroines in the historical fiction analysed in this volume: they are conventionally feminine but extremely capable, and more than the equals of the men they encounter on their journeys.

In the 1990s, the work of Billie Melman (1992), Sara Mills (1993), Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and Alison Blunt (1994) began to take a more critical, post-colonial approach to nineteenth-century women's travel writing.

These scholars interrogate Victorian women's travelogues for traces of colonial discourse, especially Orientalism, that racialised and reproduced non-western peoples as the inferior others of Europeans, ripe for supposed benefits of colonisation—namely, Christianity and civilisation. However, they argue that the full-blown, racist colonial discourse that characterised British men's travel writing during the same period was somewhat mitigated by what Mills calls the "discourses of femininity". Mills's main contention is that travel narratives authored by women are traversed by contradictory discourses: they reaffirm conventional gender notions while complicating expectations of domesticity and received notions of femininity operating during the period in which they were produced. These accounts therefore generate ambivalent viewpoints regarding colonialism, revealing the complicity of women travellers as privileged colonial agents, as well as their inability to fully embrace an imperialist standpoint. Where the accounts of British men who travelled as the agents of the British government, or British business, were authoritative and uncertain as to the imperial mission and how it positioned subject peoples, British women mostly encountered colonised peoples in their capacity as private subjects, ones who were, moreover, regarded as "the weaker sex" in their own country. Consequently, Mills argues, women's travel writing tends to display a more intimate and "less authoritarian stance" (1993, 21) than men's accounts. Bassnett similarly contends that many women travel writers approached their subject matter placing a "strong emphasis on the personal" (2022, 231) precisely because they were "in full knowledge of the absence of a tradition into which they could insert themselves with any absence of comfort and familiarity" (231).

This array of 1990s critical studies, however, fails to present a fully comprehensive picture of the travel writing produced by women in later periods. Hsu-Ming Teo (1999, 2002) suggests that the thesis that women were unable to reproduce fully or articulate authoritatively the colonial discourse typical of men's contemporary travel writing is sustainable only if we confine the study of women's travelogues to the nineteenth century. In her examination of early twentieth-century British women's travel writing, especially the volumes produced during the interwar years—the golden age of travel and tourism for British men and women, facilitated by the zenith of British imperial reach—Teo observes a marked change after World War I. In Britain, women's experiences of doing men's jobs during the war, and the attainment of partial suffrage in 1918 (for women over 30) and full suffrage in 1928, transformed their understanding and representation of themselves in their writings as modern women travellers, rather than Victorian "lady tourists". In the age of the famous female aviators Amelia Earhart or Amy Johnson, who flew solo from England to Australia in 1930, or British filmmaker Stella Court Treatt, who in 1924 raced across the African continent from Cape Town to Cairo in a

motor car, British women who travelled did so in the belief that they were men's equals in deeds and words. No subject, not even sex and politics and certainly not colonised peoples, were off-limits in their writings. A concomitant side effect of this discursive entry into subjects previously considered "masculine" in travel writing, such as imperial governance, was an imitative reproduction of racist, colonial discourse and especially of Orientalism. What David Spurr (1993) calls "the rhetoric of empire" spilled over from women's travel writing and into their fiction, especially their romantic fiction.

A significant number of British women who had published travelogues also drew upon their travel experiences to publish romantic fiction set in the "exotic" lands to which they had journeyed. Australian-born travel writer Mary Gaunt, who travelled widely through Africa, China and Jamaica, co-authored three romantic and overtly racist colonial novels set in West Africa, two of which—*The Arm of the Leopard: A West African Story* (1904) and *Fools Rush In* (1906)—were published before she ventured into non-fiction with her travelogue, *Alone in West Africa* (1911). Beatrice Grimshaw wrote two books about her travels in the South Pacific—*From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* (1907) and *In the Strange South Seas* (1907)—before turning to romantic fiction for Mills & Boon with *When the Red Gods Call* (1911). Rosita Forbes, one of the most widely travelled women of the interwar years who became famous for her journeys in the Middle East, published nine travelogues and two memoirs about the places she visited between 1919 and 1946, but she also began writing romantic fiction in the 1920s. Her novels *If the Gods Laugh* (1925), *Sirocco* (1927) and *Account Rendered* (1928) drew on her travels, romanticising and Orientalising the Middle East as a backdrop for stories of British love. In a reverse trajectory, Edith Maud Hull, author of the bestselling desert romance fantasy, *The Sheik* (1919), which Pamela Regis (2003) describes as the "ur-romance of the twentieth century" (115), made enough money from sales of the novel, its sequels and their film versions that she could finally fulfil her dream of actually travelling to the Middle East, after which she wrote her travelogue, *Camping in the Sahara* (1926).

These women travel writers turned to romantic fiction because there was a ready market for love stories set in the "exotic" parts of the empire. The use of remote locations has been intrinsic to popular romantic fiction in its multiple varieties since the nineteenth century, as attested by a solid tradition of romantic novels set in virtually every corner of the world. Rather than accurate depictions of real locations, travel chronotopes function as "symbols of another life redolent with freedom, excitement, and the possibility of change" (Pearce 1998, 101). The insistent use of these settings speak of women's desires to fully participate in the adventurous lifestyle available to the traditional heroes of romance which,

Barbara Fuchs (2004) reminds us, originally referred to “an extravagant fiction, invention, or story” embodying “the adventures of some hero of chivalry” (3–4). The scholarship of Patrick Brantlinger (1988), Laura Chrisman (2000), Linda Dryden (2000) and many others on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial romances reminds us of the popularity of stories of masculine adventure in the empire produced by authors such as Joseph Conrad, H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling. From the end of the nineteenth century, women novelists adapted the conventions of the domestic novel and responded to the popular imperial narratives produced by men through their own romantic stories set in different colonies. Written primarily by women writers in the United Kingdom and throughout the British Empire, these novels inscribed and vindicated the role of women in the process of Empire building, commenting on pressing political and ideological concerns of the period (Teo 2016, 90). Teo refers to these novels as “imperial romantic novels”, rather than “colonial romances”, because they foregrounded imperial concerns during the zenith of empire but also after decolonisation and the achievement of independence in those countries (89). Raj romances, romantic adventures set in the “Dark Continent”, or narratives of colonial Australia or New Zealand, featured heroines who travelled to different parts of the empire following husbands, fathers or prospective suitors, experiencing a number of trials, and negotiating their complex position, across gender and racial lines. The novels served to play out the racial anxieties dominating their respective periods, and generally displayed a racist rhetoric both in their portrayal of the (passive, dangerous or sensualised) “natives” and in their tacit understanding of the impossibility of interracial relations which revealed fears of miscegenation and contamination, which often translated into tragic endings (Philips 2011, 128–129; Teo 2016, 97–98). Although many publishing houses produced imperial romantic novels in the first half of the twentieth century—Blackwood, Cassell, Hurst & Blackett, Hutchinson and Methuen among them—the genre rapidly became dominated by, and synonymous with, the British company Mills & Boon during World War II (Dixon 1999, 97).

When Mills & Boon, founded in 1908 as a general trade and fiction publisher, began consolidating its reputation as a purveyor of romance novels after World War I, it capitalised on what Paul Fussell in his classic study of literary travel, *Abroad* (1980), identified as the interwar desperation to escape dreary Britain for warmer, sunnier climes. Jay Dixon, whose book *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon 1909–1990s* (1999) surveys the changing tastes, topics and styles of Mills & Boon romances over the twentieth century, argues that romance novels “set abroad with travelling heroines who earn an independent living” were particularly popular during the 1920s. Joseph McAleer, authorised by Mills & Boon to write the

official history of the company in *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills & Boon* (1999), notes a similar trend after World War II, even after Britain began the process of decolonisation from the late 1940s until the end of the twentieth century. The 1950s saw an increasing “interest in foreign locations” and “[h]eroines travelled far and wide” (202–203), he observes, while “[o]ne of the hallmarks of the Mills & Boon romance in the 1960s was an emphasis on new and exotic backgrounds” (258). Examining the oeuvre of Lillian Warren who published 59 romance novels under three pen names with Mills & Boon, McAleer concludes, “[t]he foreign settings [of her novels] appealed to readers weary of wartime deprivation, and the independent heroine, making her way in a foreign land and conquering the hero, set a new style” (97). Other Mills & Boon novelists of the 1970s and 1980s confirm this, with Jay Blakeney—writing erotic romances set in exotic destinations under the pseudonym “Anne Weale”—commenting, “I always longed to travel. The English people did not travel much after the war” (quoted in McAleer 1999, 99–100). Such stories combining romance with travel and exoticism appealed equally to North American readers, much to the satisfaction of Canadian paperback company Harlequin Enterprises which bought Mills & Boon in 1971, as well as the New York company Avon which began publishing historical romances in the 1970s. Many of Avon’s bestselling erotic historical romances of that decade—Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), Rosemary Rogers’ *Sweet Savage Love* (1974) and *Wicked Loving Lies* (1976) or Joanna Lindsey’s *Captive Bride* (1977)—all feature romantic heroines who are swept away aboard ship to exotic lands where they experience sex and undergo adventures on their journeys before finding true love. By the turn of the twenty-first century, they also travelled to find themselves, reinvoking “the influence of Romanticism by celebrating the individual as a wandering free spirit on a self-quest” (Mulligan 2016, 323).

Narratives of travel often include the gaining of self-knowledge, and the consequent transformation of the traveller. In premodern times, the sufferings endured on the road or at sea, and the dislocation from social roles and communal ties, supposedly stripped the traveller to the bare essentials of the self and revealed fundamental character (Leed 1991, 8). But although self-knowledge was gained as a by-product of travel, it was not the main objective of travel. During the age of Romanticism, Leed suggests, the meaning and purpose of travel changed to become “a freely chosen opportunity to demonstrate an identity—freedom, self-display, and self-discovery” (13). This legacy of Romanticism still affects ideas of travel today. Maureen Mulligan observes that “Romanticism in its popular form has affected the whole structure of the tourist experience: the choice of destinations, the importance of the picturesque, the foregrounding of nature, the interest in local customs, the attraction of exoticism”

(2016, 324). But insofar as these experiences ultimately serve the purposes of self-reflection and a regard for the traveller's own emotional responses to external stimuli, "[t]his 'romantic' version of travel coincides with an atomized, identity-based feminist discourse which encourages privileged western women to elevate tourism into an art form and use travel as a backdrop to their personal crises, rather than as a chance to learn about the rest of the world" (324). Bestselling memoirs such as Frances Mayes' *Under The Tuscan Sun* (1996) and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006) bear out Mulligan's point that

[o]ften a foreign country provides a romantic backdrop, full of colour and exotic scenery, against which we are given a detailed account of an extended holiday by a writer who is privileged in terms of material goods, time, and the benefits of a Western passport. [...] The self-quest substitutes a wider interest in another culture.

(333)

Perhaps Mulligan resorts to exaggeration and generalisation to make her point, but in romantic historical fiction there is a kernel of truth to the observation that the journey abroad ultimately serves to enable the heroine's self-discovery and self-fulfilment, even if she helps others along the way. In this volume, for instance, Sarah Ficke's chapter on historical romances set in the Caribbean, Miquel Pomar-Amer's critical reading of Jo Eames' *The Faithless Wife* (2010) set in Menorca, and Paloma Fresno-Calleja's analysis of romantic historical novels set in the Pacific during World War II all conclude that these paradisiacal island destinations allow the novels' protagonists to escape their conventional and restrictive lives, and to find fulfilment by pursuing and achieving their individual goals.

Romantic fiction so often features travel because, as Eva Illouz (1997) argues, in the age of late capitalism, romance has become commoditised and inextricably associated with the consumption of adventurous experiences that generate intense emotions and excitement, of which travel, with its promise of "natural landscapes and exotic locales", is the most "iconic" (88). Thus, Illouz suggests, "[t]he ideal typical romantic moment occurs in a remote place, on an exotic island, near the sea, a dense forest, a serene lake—in short, in a space symbolically cut off from the industrial and urban world of work, offices, and business" (92). Travel and its more structured and packaged counterpart, tourism, are romantic because they are supposedly the opposite of paid employment and the banality of daily life. Like romance-reading, travel and tourism are an invitation to "abandon the linear temporality of work and dip into an intense present of pleasure and leisure" (90). The romantic fantasy being sold is of a utopian

space and time where “the foreign and the exotic” are conjoined through clichés such as “the sensual languor of tropical countries, thus creating a highly aestheticized vignette in which the longing for exoticism and perfect leisure mixes with the sensuality of lovemaking” (90). Since the nineteenth century, narratives incorporating travel have not only romanticised prospective destinations but also encouraged readers to think of tourism as akin to the experience of falling in love, as something that was natural to desire (Steward 1998, 89). And if the destination was perceived as exotic, this romantic appeal increased.

The intertwining of romance and exotic journeys has complex historical roots. In academic discourse, the word “exotic”—along with its various permutations, “exotica” or “exoticism”—is overlaid with pejorative connotations and is, moreover, almost invariably synonymous with “Orientalism” in postcolonial scholarship. Yet this was not always the case. Teo (2002) observes that “[t]ravel is always, to a certain extent, a search for the exotic which one then brings home—either in the form of stories or souvenirs—as a witness to strange sights seen and hardships undergone throughout the journey” (181). Nobody wants to read about another society elsewhere that is exactly the same as one’s own. Thus, travel writing has a fundamental methodology of comparing and contrasting the foreign with the local or domestic, but it is weighted towards an account of what is different and characteristic of the foreign: the “exotic” in its denotative meaning. As Mary Campbell (1988) puts it, “[t]he travel book is a kind of witness: it is generally aimed at truth”, but it also exists “to tell ‘some part of things that there be’” in other corners of the world (3). However, the exotic is a constantly shifting concept. Because of the increase in travel and global trade, objects, ideas and cultures that might once have been considered “exotica”—coffee, tea, chocolate or curry, for instance—might, through assimilation into one’s own society, in a later period become quotidian and commonplace. As Peter Mason (1991) observes, “the exotic is not encountered; it is produced. And the mode of its production is the invention of what cannot be reduced to the familiar” (170).

In premodern travel writing, the exotic was not necessarily associated with the denigration of another society or culture as somehow lesser, and therefore ripe for colonisation and civilisation. Sometimes, the exotic, the different, was simply strange and marvellous, and the account of travel to such places—such as the apocryphal fourteenth-century travel memoirs of “Sir John Mandeville” which were referenced as factual by both Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus—was a “romance” inasmuch as they were an “extravagant fiction, invention, or story” (Fuchs 2004, 4) of a heroic traveller undergoing adventures in foreign lands. The necessity of reclaiming the xenophilic possibilities of “exoticism” has been explored by Charles Fosdick (2001) in his survey of Francophone texts.

In Anglophone writing, however, two attitudes towards the exotic developed in the post-Crusade and post-Columbian encounter with the New World. On the one hand, Campbell argues that

When Europe finally found the Other World for which it had sought throughout the East, that “earthly Paradise” became the scene of the hugest genocide [of First Nations peoples in the Americas] the world has ever known [...]. It was almost as if Europe felt the need to scour the map [...] of all the chaotic, fertile, multitudinous splendors it had believed were “out there” and which threatened the hegemony of its conscious values.

(7)

Such an argument segues seamlessly into Said’s theory of Orientalism, where the difference and otherness of non-western peoples become the justification for their colonisation and the imposition of imperial rule, directly or by proxy, for “their own good”.

On the other hand, Benjamin Schmidt suggests in *Inventing Exoticism* (2015) that growing commerce with other worlds, new and old (from a Eurocentric perspective), introduced a flood of global exotica into Europe from the late seventeenth century onward. These products presented the foreign world, not as a space for the assertion of European suzerainty or colonisation, but as the purveyor of commodities for delight, for “agreeable” and “pleasurable” consumption. This process of importing and enjoying luxury items—“earthenware, imported porcelain, adorned with patterns and imagery evocative of the overseas world; woven tapestries, dyed and painted textiles, lacquered and inlaid furniture, adroitly embellished with exotic motifs; tropical woods, rare gems” (6), and specimens of flora and fauna—and creating visual and written texts about the non-European world produced a singular identity of Europe and Europeans as consumers of exotica; as people “who both engaged with and cheerfully accumulated the delights of this appealingly exotic world” (3). Both these attitudes towards the exotic—the perception of difference as an otherness that generates panic and must therefore be ruled and controlled, or pleasure to be consumed and enjoyed—are evident in the romantic historical fiction examined in this volume.

Because exoticism is not “an inherent *quality* to be found ‘in’ certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places” but, rather, a discourse and practice that manufactures otherness, that describes “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them” (Huggan 2001, 13), history itself can be exoticised and treated as “other” to the present (Rousselot 2014, 6). Conventional historical romance, Helen Hughes argues, “has never been

over-concerned with presenting a picture of the past as a time of historical change”; rather, “authors of women’s fiction have tried to create a seductive past world whose chief attraction is its essential difference from the present” (1993, 11). Despite exoticising the past, Hughes believes that women’s historical romances generally erased “features which are disturbing or obnoxious”, sanitising the past and making it “‘safe’ for the reader because it is ‘closed off’, ‘finished’” so that readers realised that we have progressed and changed since those deplorable times (7).

Neo-historical fiction, however, contains a “self-analytic drive” (Roussetot 2014, 1) that faces and confronts what is troubling about the past (Boccardi 2009; Bergmann 2021; Harris 2017). It is a type of fiction that “consciously re-interprets, rediscovers and revises key aspects of the period it returns to”, conducting an “active interrogation” of the past while “questioning prevalent cultural ideologies” of both past and present (Roussetot 2014, 2). To the extent that they exhibit a self-conscious, guilty awareness of historical injustices, and attempt in various ways to adjust their plots or protagonists to allow for reparative gestures, many of the romantic historical novels discussed in this volume can be considered neo-historical in intent. Yet the practice of exoticism continues to characterise various forms of neo-historical fiction. In her analysis, Roussetot contends many neo-historical novels “seem to rely on consumerist and conservative dialectics” with regards to the historical Other (9) and often “[come] perilously close to reproducing the same problematic cultural readings as those found in traditional travel narratives, for instance in its description of certain cultures or events” (7), or in their assumption that “such otherness is in fact ‘inferior’ to the present, and therefore ripe for cultural domination by the latter” (7).

Similarly, in her overview of contemporary historical romance novels, Sarah Ficke observes that this subgenre continues to feature white heroines and, whereas authors choose to set their stories in an increasingly diverse range of geographical locations, they still mostly employ these settings “as a simple exotic backdrop against which the white protagonists play out their idealised love story” (2020, 123). Several chapters corroborate that the use of these exotic chronotopes serves a central purpose: to better delineate the feminist politics of the texts. The novels reveal what Zonana calls “feminist orientalism” (1993) a rhetorical strategy whereby certain images of the Orient are used as a background to formulate and further the western feminist project (594–595). Zonana argues that through the use of “a fully developed cultural code implicitly shared with their readers” (602), eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors reinforced ideas about the “East” and the subjection of its women in order to reinforce its differences with the “West” and remove “the Eastern elements from Western life” (594). Our reading is thus alert to the ways in which

twenty-first-century authors adapt this rhetorical strategy for contemporary readers because they position the white protagonists in Orientalised settings ideal to formulate their feminist demands for independence, freedom and self-fulfilment where non-white women are simply absent. In this sense, the articles explore how white feminism might interfere with other liberatory agendas. We discuss how the novels may work as reparative fantasies for white women but also replicate colonial discourse, thus unintentionally positioning readers as neocolonial, neo-Orientalist cultural voyeurs as well as voyagers.

Although most of the novels seem to be allied with a contemporary post-colonial sensibility that acknowledges historical injustices and reclaim restorative justice, they often fall short of an effective revisionist take on the past, as argued by Irene Pérez- Fernández and Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez in their chapters. In *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Huggan talks about the proliferation of exoticised narratives “as an indication of the atrophying of historical consciousness in postmodern Western society [but also] as an instance of a neocolonial ‘othering’ process—of the process by which history, transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle, becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption” (2001, 115). Huggan discusses the commodification of the exotic by the current cultural and literary industries as illustrative of the tensions between “postcolonialism” and “postcoloniality”, which he defines as distinctive regimes of value; the former, “an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the fault lines of literary and cultural texts”; the latter, “a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange [which] is implicitly assimilative and market driven” (6). The two regimes of value are bounded to each other, so that “postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products” (6). Huggan’s reasoning applies primarily to how post-colonial authors are marketed for global consumption (see also Brouillette 2007; Ponzanesi 2015), but our volume is unique in that it explores the workings of post-coloniality in romantic historical fiction by Anglophone western authors who appear to operate under the logics of postcolonialism, in engaging and contesting painful legacies of violence, domination and abuses of power, but actually subsume the potential anticolonial and liberatory message of the story within the logics of postcoloniality.

Many of these narratives are also affected by what Renato Rosaldo (1989) defines as imperialist nostalgia, the paradox “where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (69). Back in the 1980s Salman Rushdie’s (1984) famously protested against the various British Raj revival stories, in the form of films and television productions, which perpetuated Orientalist and “glamorous” visions of the British Empire and whose success he ascribed to the rise of conservative ideology

at the time. In fact, Rushdie recalls Margaret Thatcher's triumphant words after the Falklands War describing Britain's former position as the country "who had ruled a quarter of the world" (1984), as well as her subsequent call for a return to the old Victorian values as an answer to what she perceived as the ills of her time (Mitchell 2010, 48). Significantly, this call coincided with the rise of the heritage industry and its celebration of what is often perceived as an ahistorical vision of the past (53). But Raj revival stories, discussed by Hsu-Ming Teo and Astrid Schwegler-Castañer in their chapter, are not unique to this particular period in which some British people were still mourning the loss of its former Empire; for Stuart Jeffries (2015) the current taste for "colonial style" Indian fashion, restaurants, cafés, package tours or film and television productions which have continued to proliferate attests to the unwavering "exotic nostalgia" which continues to dominate British society. A similar argument could be made of stories set in Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean or even the Mediterranean, all of which are areas discussed in the chapters included in this volume. Popular perceptions of these places are inevitably determined by a very long tradition of literary, tourist or filmic texts which continue to be refreshed in these contemporary romantic historical novels. In fact, in recreating the novels' key geographical and historical periods (the Caribbean from the age of piracy to plantation slavery; Africa and South Asia at the apogee of empire; Europe, America and the Pacific from the Irish Famine to World War II), authors draw on and contribute to the collective memory about these places. Popular historical narratives then register these affective forms of colonial nostalgia in their recreation of idealised landscapes and idyllic vignettes of colonial life, conveniently romanticised to serve as settings for the heroine's self-realisation. Although redolent with Orientalist stereotypes, these scenes are effective because they go beyond the description of a private experience; they appeal to collective and popular cultural understandings of those places and reveal that nostalgia, in the words of Janelle Wilson (2005), operates as a collective and cultural phenomenon which might serve to consolidate national traits and patriotic feelings, but also to "reflect selective remembering and selective forgetting that occur at the collective level" (31).

Romanticised and exoticised women's historical fiction not only serves the purposes of armchair travel but also creates experiences of "dark tourism" or "thanatourism" for readers. In these cases, the novels engage readers in a textual experience of touring an aestheticised, exotic past which might be both tragic and traumatic, but also idealised or filtered through a romantic lens. It is unsurprising that, just as tourism has evolved to include modes of dark tourism and thanatourism—visiting and consuming sites of battles and bloodshed, historical tragedy and death—romantic historical fiction in the twenty-first century increasingly co-opts historical

periods and events that, at first glance, are the opposite of romantic: histories of social struggle and conflict, colonialism, trauma, tragedy, war and even genocide. Like the “trauma tourist”, the textual tourist of history can be motivated by many different values and desires: “thrill seeking”, for instance, “akin to rubber-necking the scene of a car crash” in Sonya Andermahr’s (2013) words, reflecting on the rise of women’s middlebrow trauma fiction since the 1980s (14). Or a “form of emotional self-indulgence which [...] feeds a mawkish obsession with bad news and other people’s trauma” (14). However, Andermahr goes on to write, an interest in trauma narratives can also arise from an ethical concern with “listening to the pain of others” (14). As Elizabeth Wesseling points out, writers and readers can also be motivated by an ethical desire to “counteract the wilful forgetting of past offences and suffering” and participate instead in “collective acts of mourning and commemoration” (quoted in Rousselot 2014, 9). We suggest that all these motives are discernible in the historical novels examined in this volume, because that is what romance as a genre does: it exoticises, commodifies and romanticises but also attempts to bring (admittedly limited) healing and reparation to troubled histories.

The corpus of fiction we discuss in the following chapters is diverse and does not coherently or uniformly adhere to these nostalgic and orientalist trends. Some of the novels certainly contribute to delineating these exoticist maps with regard to the settings, communities and cultures they choose to portray without fully revising the exoticist tradition they inherit from older romantic genres; in that sense they can be accused of perpetuating idealised or glamorised visions of the colonial past. Other novels employ the more subversive exoticising strategies of neo-historical fiction, calling attention to the inadequacy of these representations, engaging in more nuanced discussions of colonialism and its effects and granting their heroines the anachronistic post-colonial awareness to question imperial power structures. Exoticism can thus be employed with different degrees of literality or subversion: as a straightforward marketing device guaranteeing escapism and enjoyment; or a strategy to call attention to the status of the texts as recycled fantasies of the past whose ongoing currency demands close scrutiny. The romantic historical novels we discuss in the following chapters allow for complex and ambivalent readings of these exoticising strategies, revealing their authors’ various forms of engagement with the experience of travel in its multiple forms and colonialism.

Chapter Overview

The volume opens with two chapters exploring romantic historical fiction set in one of the most popular locations in both women’s travel narratives and romance novels: the Caribbean. Sarah Ficke’s “Falling in Love

Outside of the Law: Piracy, Race, and Freedom in Caribbean Historical Romance” analyses contemporary variations of the classic pirate romances of the 1980s through a discussion of two recent romance novels: Beverly Jenkins’s *Captured* (2009) and Darlene Marshall’s *What the Parrot Saw* (2019). In contrast to earlier pirate romance novels which tended to rely on formulaic constructions of the Caribbean landscape, avoiding problematic issues like slavery or colonialism, these novels engage in reparative discussions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the workings of plantation economy, as well as their contemporary repercussions. Ficke demonstrates that Jenkins’s and Marshall’s novels overtly confront these painful and problematic historical legacies while creating satisfying romantic stories for their protagonists. They do so by featuring non-white protagonists, by playing with the traditional tropes of exotic travel and self-exploration which define Caribbean pirate romances and by establishing the pirate ship as a catalyst for social transformation.

Irene Pérez-Fernández’s chapter, “Caribbean Plantation Life Through Rose-Tinted Glasses: The Romantic Neo-Historical Novels of Sarah Lark and Michelle Paver”, analyses two family sagas set in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Caribbean: Sarah Lark’s *Island of a Thousand Springs* (2014) and *Island of the Red Mangroves* (2015), and Michelle Paver’s *The Shadow Catcher* (2002), *Fever Hill* (2004) and *The Serpent’s Tooth* (2005). The chapter argues that the novels attempt a partial post-colonial rewriting of the colonial history of the region by creating independent and resolute heroines who challenge the wrongness of slavery and question the racial, gender and class hierarchies of the colonial system. Nevertheless, unlike what Ficke concludes in her chapter, Pérez-Fernández contends that in the case of Lark and Paver, these attempts at reparation are more limited. In their effort to offer a more palatable version of this painful history to their contemporary readers, the novels reinscribe exoticist portrayals of the tropics, trivialise painful historical legacies and minimise the actual impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Exoticist depiction of the African continent, featuring prominently in women’s travel and romantic narratives, is the topic of Cristina Cruz Gutiérrez’s chapter, which centres on Jennifer McVeigh’s *The Fever Tree* (2016) and *Leopard at the Door* (2017), set in South Africa and Kenya. The chapter frames these contemporary romantic historical novels as contemporary variations of the long Orientalist tradition of texts responsible for the evocative depictions of African deserts, jungles and savannahs and dehumanised representations of African peoples. It also reads these novels as examples of dark armchair travel which fetishise the more painful histories of the continent, despite the author’s apparent intention to put forward a reparative and anti-colonial agenda. This chapter analyses the role of the novelist as an expert tour guide into

this aestheticised colonial past by exploring the contents of the reading guides designed to monitor group discussion and guide readers through specific questions which may ultimately serve to perpetuate long-held exoticist notions of Africa.

Considering the experience of forced migration and permanent settlement in combination with the narrative device of time travel, Pilar Villar-Argáiz's chapter discusses the tragic episode of the Great Famine in two romantic novels set in Ireland: *Galway Bay* by Mary Pat Kelley (2009) and *Now and Then* by Jacqueline Sheehan (2009). The topic of the Great Famine is still seen as taboo in Irish writing; yet American authors of Irish descent have ventured into this painful period of their history through romantic narrativisations of these events, in order to consolidate their collective memory as Irish-Americans and to establish a foundational utopian narrative which combines loyalty to their traditions and success in the host nation. In the novels, Villar-Argaiz argues, Ireland's tragic past is recovered as a source of certainty, and whereas the love stories may not end happily for the lovers, they still manage to experience happiness in the form of family comfort, communal support and cultural recognition.

The next two chapters explore the apparently unlikely interconnections between recreational travel and military conflict as seen in novels set on Mediterranean and Pacific islands. Paloma Fresno-Calleja's chapter "The Most Romantic Place on Earth": Exoticism, Militourism and Romance in Women's Historical Fiction of the Pacific War" studies two historical romantic novels, *Pacific* (2004) by Australian author Judy Nunn and *The Bungalow* (2011) by US author Sarah Jio, in the context of the long textual legacy (produced mostly by male writers) depicting the Pacific Islands as paradise. By centring the experiences of war-nurses and addressing a wide range of female concerns, including romantic love and friendship, the novels can be read as reparative interventions into the history of the region and the male literary tradition. Nevertheless, their revision of the regressive gender, sexual and racial politics of the period is limited to the white women and their engagement with the colonial and neocolonial legacies of exploitation still affecting Indigenous women remains incomplete because the novels eventually favour a "militouristic" approach to the past, romanticising these war zones as sites of pleasure and relaxation and occluding the neocolonial power relations which continue to operate in the region.

Moving on to the Mediterranean, and focusing on the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, Miquel Pomar Amer's chapter revisits the recent output of Anglophone romantic fiction set in various Spanish locations during the conflict in the context of claims for restorative justice and the recovery of historical memory. The chapter focuses on Jo Eames' debut

novel, *The Faithless Wife* (2010), set on the island of Menorca. Using a double timeline, Eames resorts to the recurrent trope of the contemporary female traveller who discovers love in the present time while investigating the atrocities of the past. Questioning its own status as an escapist “beach read” set on an exotic Mediterranean paradise, Eames’ novel urges its readers to engage not only with the protagonist’s personal predicaments but with the traumatic histories of the local population by exploring the effects of the war and of Franco’s dictatorship in their lives. In its engagement with the “pact of forgetting”, instituted in Spain after the Amnesty Law passed in 1977, the novel suspends illusions of escapism and exoticism and forces the characters to engage with the problematic past.

The volume closes with a chapter co-authored by Hsu-Ming Teo and Astrid Schwegler-Castañer on two romantic novels set in colonial Asia, Dinah Jefferies’ *The Tea Planter’s Wife* (2015) and *Before the Rains* (2017), respectively set in Ceylon and India in the first half of the twentieth century. Jefferies’ novels are analysed as contemporary manifestations of colonial nostalgia that recreate the British empire as exotic luxury goods and narratives to indulge a melancholic but pleasurable longing for an elegant and idyllic imperial past. This chapter considers the tensions that arise between the author’s attempt to pander the needs of her readers for exoticism and colonial glamour and her acknowledgement of the damaging and traumatic legacies of the British Empire. The authors argue that Jefferies negotiates these contradictory impulses by interrogating the racial and gender politics of Raj romances and by playing with their plots and motifs through the use of the post/colonial Gothic mode. As the authors conclude, however, these reparative moves are insufficient and ineffective because Jefferies’ novels are still subservient to the depiction of a romantic and exotic South Asia.

The taste for armchair travelling continues to mobilise women authors of romantic historical fiction and these narratives, now set in virtually every corner of the globe and written in English, but also coming from many other literary traditions, have continued to proliferate in recent years. With this selection of chapters, our intention has been to engage with a sample of those narratives which centre women’s experiences of love and romance in various exoticised locations and to explore the frictions which derive from, on the one hand, the novels’ recreational and glamorised approach to the past and, on the other, their serious historiographical commitment with painful legacies of violence, conflict and colonialism. We are aware that there are evident gaps in the volume’s scope and contents, but we hope that both this book, together with its companion volume, serve as initial explorations of romantic historical fiction and its commitment to engage in revisionist and reparative visions of the past, however limited or imperfect that reparation might be.

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