



New Directions in Contemporary Women's Historical Fiction

Catherine Barbour and Karunika Kardak

*There is so much pressure to bury the history of rebellious, revolutionary,
and visionary women
—(bell hooks, 1996)*

In 2017 the late Hilary Mantel, twice winner of the Booker prize, made the controversial remark that historical novels should stop falsely empowering women (Macallister 2017) and instead represent the historical

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realities of their subjugation. The dilution or erasure of women's oppression and suffering in literature remains commonplace, all the more so at its intersection with aspects such as race, class, age, sexuality or disability. Yet some critics have dismissed Mantel's assertion as an oversimplification. Countless women have lived feminist lives throughout history, but their stories have not been told, for as Sara Ahmed insists, the historical patriarchal silencing of women means that diverse subjectivities are not represented in culture: 'when doors are closed to some people, they are also closed to our stories, which include our stories about closed doors' (2019, 220). At the time of writing, as the war in the Middle East continues to escalate, Catherine E. Walsh's words at the beginning of *Rising Up, Living On* are especially pertinent:

How many stories have we been told? How many stories have been shrouded, silenced, and untold? And what about all those distorted stories that form part of the master narrative, the myth of nation-state, universalism's political discourse, and coloniality's global project all wrapped up as one? Those stories constitutive of the enduring colonial legacy and devastation, and most especially the enduring legacy and devastation that is the colonization of the mind? (2023, 1)

Recent press articles attest to the fact that the historical novel is booming in terms of readership, scholarship and profile, with broad appeal in the global literary market as writers and readers look to the past to make sense of the turbulence and uncertainty of the contemporary moment, in the wake of a global pandemic, the climate emergency, military conflict and polarised politics (King 2017; O'Grady 2019; Wood 2020). This is a multifaceted genre, an inherently political form of counter-storytelling¹ that in its potential for engagement with and interrogation of the past speaks to the fractured condition of the present. Indeed, its women writers have much to tell us. While historical fiction by women has been openly derided as 'romantic escapism' (Cooper and Short 2012, 2), 'light', or 'popular', and often overlooked and even chastised for being of low

¹ Counter-storytelling is a methodology used in educational settings based on the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which examines how 'Communities of Color experience and respond to racism as it intersects with other forms of subordination in the United States educational system' (Yosso 2006, 8). In their aim to recognise and document experiences of racialised minorities (see Yosso 2006, 10–12), we find that counter-storytelling methodologies resonate with the radical potential of women's historical fiction.

quality (Wallace 2005, 2; 227), historical fiction written by men has been viewed as literature's contribution to nation-building, as has been seen in Europe (György Lukács, Walter Scott) and Latin America (see Noé Jitrik 2005). Similarly, canonical works published in the twentieth century by authors like Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez reinstated the notion that 'serious' historical fiction continued to be a male-dominated space, demonstrating how 'a world has too often been described from the point of view of those who are accommodated' (Ahmed 2019, 219–220). Contemporary historical fiction by women has as a result been a consistently under-researched area (Zimmerman 2014, 9), though it is certainly not a new phenomenon (Spongberg, Curthoys and Caine 2005, xv).

The present volume takes a step towards correcting the linguistically homogeneous and 'Global North' focus of historical fiction studies, repositioning the field as the first book of its kind to draw on intersectional, transnational, multilingual and decolonial feminist approaches to the analysis of contemporary women-authored historical novels from and about distinct geographical locations. The chapters included here examine a modest sample of contemporary texts originating in a range of languages and literary traditions that engage with diverse time periods and cultural settings, intervening in wider debates regarding memory, women's writing and history.² Maintaining an awareness that temporal definitions vary considerably across societal and cultural contexts (Wisker and Bibby 2023), we frame the 'contemporary historical novel' broadly in the context of works published after 1968, a pivotal year for activist movements across the globe (The Guardian 2008; Becker 2018) which speaks to the ethos of our project. For David Damrosch, the field of so-called world literature is a 'mode of circulation and of reading' (2003, 5), encompassing works which actively circulate in literary systems beyond their original culture, as is the case of a number of the texts analysed here. Though world literature continues to be considered a productive framework for thinking through theoretical and materialist approaches to literary texts across the globe, theorisations of the same have also been decidedly Eurocentric and androcentric (Truth Goodman 2023). Our volume intervenes by expanding understandings of the limits and possibilities of world literature as a field of scholarship at the intersection with women's historical fiction. We take inspiration from Robin Truth Goodman's assertion that 'feminism

² As it happens, the majority of the sources constituting the bibliography to this introduction were published in the twenty-first century.

destabilizes World Literature from the perspective of its inherent democratic, ethical impulse' (2023, 17), so that a transnational feminist approach to global historical fictions becomes especially productive. Despite the aims of feminism 'to dethrone the perspective of the universal' (Berman 2023, 131), much feminist scholarship has been criticised for privileging white, middle class, 'Western' women. Through the diverse texts examined here, we wish to highlight 'those processes of (world) literary production that take place away from the beaten path of the market or that involve a smaller circulation of certain texts' (Müller 2022, 7). By focusing on what Anu Aneja terms 'crossings' between cultures, identities, ideologies and ways of being—'intersectionalities, intertwining, frictions, encounters, dissonances, hybridizations, cross-hatchings, conversations, translocations, impasses, solidarities and coalitions' (2019, 2)—the essays included here trace connections between diverse voices, texts and literatures, highlighting activist, revisionist trends in feminist case studies of the historical novel genre from across the globe and showcasing the breadth of scholarship in a burgeoning field.

Based on the international conference on 'Women's Historical Fiction Across the Globe' (Habib 2022) hosted in collaboration with the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, where both the co-editors were appointed as visiting fellows, the volume aims to showcase the work of early-career, precariously employed and established scholars from diverse disciplines based in different corners of the globe, bringing into dialogue studies of women's historical fiction from literary communities of both the 'Global North' and 'Global South'.³ The multicultural, comparative scope of our project builds on contributor Tegan Zimmerman's foundational argument that 'focusing on contemporary women's historical fiction constitutes a transnational feminist writing/reading project' (2014, 9). The single and multi-text contributions included here speak to the breadth of voices writing diverse forms of women's historical fiction across the globe in countless languages and cultural contexts, as well as showcasing the rich scholarship on the genre across cultural, linguistic and disciplinary lines. Our compilation takes a strictly multilingual and non-canonical approach, with analysis of texts originating from several global languages, including minority languages, as well as transcultural, postcolonial, queer and

³ See Prys-Hansen (2023) on debates surrounding this problematic but widely employed terminology.

migrant narratives. Contributions span contexts including Galicia, Guadeloupe, India, Korea, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Puerto Rico, Scotland and the United States, often focusing on border thinking (see chapter by Sharma and Kumar) or the transnational (Barbour; Thomas and Kearney; Zimmerman), or bringing insights from conflicts (Sampson Vera Tudela; Sharma and Kumar; Lee), colonial spaces (Elías; Sharma and Kumar; Thomas and Kearney; Villegas Triay; Zimmerman) and non-state nations (Barbour; Villegas Triay). As many of the essays included here demonstrate, contemporary historical novels respond to and 'represent moments of human wreckage generated by state and imperial exceptionalism: the invocation of an idealised national community that excludes its Others and legitimates violence against them' (Strehle 2020, 2).

Historical fiction offers women writers a means to conceptualise overlooked lives and experiences to make sense of contemporary issues and 'has often been used by women writers (as by male writers) as a way of writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo, or of offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past' (Wallace 2005, 2). Each essay included here brings an illuminating range of approaches to discourses of gender, heteropatriarchal systems and body politics as they are encoded within the genre of historical fiction. As Ana Nunes explains in her work on African American women's historical fiction, 'this body of literature privileges the lives of the socially marginalized, those who remained outside the pages of history' (2011, 4) and our focus on the gender paradigm is perceived in relation to intersections manipulated to facilitate oppression, such as race (Elías, Kearney and Thomas, Sampson Vera Tudela, Zimmerman), class (Barbour, Elías, Sampson Vera Tudela, Villegas Triay), sexuality (Garber) and disability (Sharma and Kumar). Audre Lorde reminds us that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1984, 110–13); in turn, we argue that the contemporary historical novel offers a framework to reclaim tools denied or appropriated from women and minoritised groups.

A crucial aim is to explore how authors revisit and reassess historical documents, testimonies, photographs and other archival works to create a politically charged feminist version of 'her-story'. Key scholar of women's historical fiction Diana Wallace credits the genre with permitting women 'to transcend the constraints of gender' more than any other (2005, 227). Considering the archive as a site of power (see Schwartz and Cook 2002; Lipscomb 2021, 180), the assembled chapters explore how historical fiction unearths women's historical experiences, retrieves them from the

same archive and *fills gaps* in historical narratives in order to counter and challenge heteropatriarchal and cisnormative official histories (see Kardak 2023). In other words, it explores how fiction can become a way for women writers to reclaim ancestral pasts and write back into history overlooked and oppressed subjectivities, especially racialised, ageing, disabled, LGBTQIA+ and other minorities. Such incursions are all the more relevant and timely in the context of transnational feminist, LGBTQIA+ and anti-racist movements which have made a mark in recent years, and this collection highlights how traces running through works of historical fiction at a global level draw upon and function hand in hand with contemporary activist movements. Indeed, as Amia Srinivasan notes, '[a] feminism that addresses only sexual oppression will pursue strategies that are of little use to women whose sex is just one cause of their political predicament' (2021, 162).

It must be acknowledged that gender is historical as well as socially constructed, for 'if structures of gender emerge out of particular histories and social contexts, we must pay attention to the continuous ways in which gender is made and remade' (Oyěwùmí 2005, 2). Through this volume, we seek to not only highlight how gender has been historically conditioned but also how historical fiction can question, challenge and remake (as well as perpetuate) these politically charged constructs. At the same time, we acknowledge our limitations given the modest scope of the project; the gaps and fissures speak to the silencing of women's historical fiction, women's writing and women's histories more generally. Indeed, in spite of considerable advances, the study of literature written by women, as well as the history of the feminist movement, continue to be starkly under-represented in numerous school and university syllabi (Riley and Pearce 2018, 2). Of course, the selection of essays included here represent only a very tiny proportion of the historical novels composed by women across the world; countless writers, texts, cultures, communities and languages are not included here. A glaring gap, due to changes in original contributors to the volume (exacerbated, it must be said, by issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, workloads in the neoliberal academy and job precarity), is the lack of representation of literature from, and about, (as well as by scholars from or based in) the African continent, though African heritage is central to the chapters by Zimmerman and Kearney and Thomas. Meanwhile, at a time when trans rights are under threat in many contexts, including some factions of feminism, historical fictions about transwomen and other queer subjectivities urgently require further representation and

research. Fundamentally, this collection identifies and interrogates trends in contemporary historical fiction through gender-informed approaches to a heterogeneous range of texts, topics and cultures, taking a step towards developing more inclusive, transnational, comparative and comprehensive theoretical interventions on a genre to which women's contributions globally have as yet not been sufficiently acknowledged in scholarship.

In her discussion of marginality, bell hooks emphasises 'the necessity of a resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues giving us ways to speak that decolonize our minds, our very beings' (1990, 150). Women's historical fiction brings intersectional concerns to the fore, in keeping with Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 coinage of intersectionality for the interlocking of systems of oppression relating to race, class and gender, as it allows authors to recreate 'the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinate people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves and colonised peoples, and to shape narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history' (Wallace 2005, 2). Nunes emphasises that fiction serves as a platform to (re)historicise and (re)document lost voices and subjectivities, as well as records 'that were destroyed or never existed' (2011, 4). The result is two-fold: the writing of historical fiction empowers women authors, functioning as a space for them to resist the patriarchal archive and utilise these her-stories to confront feminist concerns in the present. Similarly, it provokes readers to rethink official histories by acknowledging women who have been, in the words of Jane Ohlmeyer, 'hiding in plain sight' (see Carroll 2024).

Corresponding to the 'decolonial turn' in the historical novel genre, as identified in this volume by Zimmerman, our aim to contribute towards decolonising the genre of historical fiction goes hand in hand with our feminisms. Decolonial feminisms, such as those explored here by Catherine Barbour, Guadalupe Elías, Mariana Villegas Triay and Zimmerman, remind us to try to 'critically reflect upon traditions of feminist thought and practice so that we do not reproduce the epistemological coordinates, political subjectivities, and social relations of the system we are attempting to transform' (Motta 2021, 139). Seeking to 'learn and unlearn' (Harcourt et al. 2022, 294) from a broad range of feminist scholarship from beyond anglophone or Eurocentric parameters, whilst bearing in mind the problems and limitations of drawing on the labour of theorists in the 'Global South' to understand distinct cultural contexts (Espinosa Miñoso 2014), we are concerned with interrogating discourses of power to uncover

means of resistance with an approach that is ‘not centered on the interrelation of the struggles but rather on the comprehension of the inseparability of the regimes of domination, of the impossibility to deal with oppression separately’ (Espinosa Miñoso 2021, 114). To a certain extent this might be identified in current debates on posthuman feminism which works to ‘nurture and implement the ongoing process of unfolding alternative and transformative paths of becoming’ (Braidotti 2022, 8), calling into question anthropocentric bias through a gender-conscious lens. In essence, we position this edited volume as a vehicle to interrogate systems of power whilst addressing women’s multiple subjectivities.

Although we take a capacious understanding of literary ‘historical fiction’, our point of departure is admittedly Linda Hutcheon’s productive and well-known concept of historiographical metafiction, a genre which ‘plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record’ and whose protagonists ‘are ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history’ (1988, 114). Moreover, in Hutcheon’s version of the historical novel, even well-known historical figures ‘take on [a] different, particularized, and ultimately ex-centric status’ (1988, 114), challenging the nineteenth-century didactic relation between nation and historical fiction as is the aim of this volume. More recently, Katharine Harris’s definition of neo-historical texts in an anglophone context takes a broader approach; these are ‘new histories that are “authentic” in that they recognise their own narratives as problematically constructed but continue to function as (fictionalised) narratives that have something to say about the past as well as the present’ (2017, 194), though this varies across literary, cultural and linguistic contexts. We acknowledge that the anglophone terminology and conceptualisation of historical fiction is a Western frame of reference that does not easily transpose onto many cultures. Just as women’s historical experiences across the globe are varied and diverse, so are approaches to their depiction in diverse literary traditions. While recognising the importance and influence of many scholarly interventions on historical fiction to date, we are nonetheless proposing a more porous and inclusive understanding of the genre that is not limited by certain dominant cultural traditions.

Indeed, there exist many culturally specific alternatives, such as the Latin American *testimonio*, explored in Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela’s chapter on the Peruvian conflict. Narrativising women’s testimonies not only denounces crimes but also ‘construct[s] cultural symbols that may ultimately reinforce the pursuit of justice’ and ‘consolidate a political vision of

the future through a poetics of memory' (Forcinito 2018, 88). What becomes of the stories of women whose voices have been and continue to be silenced? In these cases, writing historical fiction does not just record women's stories for posterity but is motivated by the urgency to pursue justice for them in the present. Seoung Yun Lee's analysis of novels which draw on testimonies of women survivors of the 'comfort women' system in Korea exemplifies this. In other contexts, historical fictions privilege oral traditions or cultural artefacts as opposed to the written word, as is explored in Zimmerman's work on Puerto-Rican neo-slave narratives. Linda Garber's approach highlights how lesbian historical fiction in the anglo-phone world has been written in different styles and genres (e.g. romance, ghost stories, westerns, etc.), while Beth Kearney and Bonnie Thomas's chapter argues that placing photographs alongside text can reframe how contemporary literature represents racialised women. Sampson Vera Tudela's analysis underscores how polyphony and fragmentation portrays the universality of sexual violence against women, a feminist technique also explored by Zimmerman. Zimmerman and Villegas Triay further explore how combining supernatural elements with the historical results in an experimental genre that highlights the stories of enslaved or persecuted women. Lee and Barbour, on the other hand, examine how their selected authors emphasise their works' proximity to the historical archive by including additional details in footnotes and reproducing archival documents. Through analysis of such a diverse collection of texts, it is our intention to expand understanding of the historical novel genre and rethink the history of the form, while pointing to the variety of ways of representing, challenging and rewriting history, memory and commemoration in literature.

By opening up the typically heteropatriarchal archive through fictionalised accounts of queer women's histories, memories and stories, authors blur the gendered, heterosexist binary between the public and the private, 'History' and memory, fact and fiction. They draw attention to the forgotten, the overlooked, the non-normative, what Ahmed has theorised as the 'useless'. In the context of a history 'littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants' (Love 2007, 1), Ahmed emphasises that 'in queering the archive, we have affection for what has been discarded; we find uses for what has been declared useless' (2019, 219). Although Justin Bengry rightly asks 'is history – with all its ambiguity, misleading familiarity and unknowable possibility already queer?' (2021, 63), we argue that historical fiction has the potential to further queer the narrative. We see this, for example, through lesbian historical fiction, which writes lesbian stories

into history, (re)imagining queer forebears and challenging heteropatriarchal representations (O'Callaghan 2012, 148), for as Garber emphasises, 'we want our lesbian celebrities (Tracy, Melissa), our dyke forbearers (Gertrude and Alice, the Ladies of Llangollen), our lavender histories' (Garber, 2021, 2), a clarion call that echoes through her chapter included here.

A further consideration is how cultural or collective memory, that is, narratives and ideas about the past, and figures of memory, like commemorations for instance, define and maintain what, and who, is remembered (Assmann 1995). The very act of remembering has been appropriated by systems of power, for as decolonial theorist María Lugones emphasises, 'the civilizing transformation justified the colonization of memory, and thus of people's senses of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their conception of reality, identity, and social, ecological, and cosmological organization' (2010, 745). We find that the historical novel in particular functions 'both as a figure of memory and as a means to contest formative cultural processes' (Kardak 2023, 6), while Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith suggest in their work on feminist approaches to cultural memory, women's individual stories represent 'a challenge and a countermemory to official hegemonic history' (2002, 7). As the historical novel evolves, viewed as a transnational genre, and functioning beyond the task of informing national identity, we task ourselves here with demonstrating how women's historical fiction is becoming 'increasingly memory without borders rather than national history within borders' (Huyssen 2003, 4). In other words, as these writers bring hitherto marginalised women into the centre of their historical fictions, the genre decentres the nation through intercultural memory, dialogue and exchange. The texts under study show an awareness of not only how racist heteropatriarchal power structures have historically constructed memory narratives, but also how 'every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting and absence' (Huyssen 2003, 4). Many of them then function as 'acts of performance, representation, and interpretation' (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 5) and push back on what Lugones terms the colonisation of memory, to a greater or lesser degree availing of the fictionalisation of history to reinscribe values of environment, community and identity.

What is more, particularly in contexts of minoritisation, the significance of translation in circulating women's historical novels cannot be overstated. Reflecting the enduring linguistic imperialism of English, the

role of translation is apparent in the international success of texts such as *Arráncame la vida* (1985), translated to English by Ann Wright as *Mexican Bolero* and analysed here by Elías, and Claudia Salazar's *La Sangre de la aurora* (2013) translated by Elizabeth Bryer as *Blood of the Dawn*, the subject of Sampson Vera Tudela's chapter (both examples translated from the hegemonic world language of Spanish), as well as both Galician-language novels considered by Barbour. Important to consider are those voices which are not translated and therefore do not circulate—as in the example of Korean historical fiction writer Yun Chŏng-mo's novel *Emi Irŭmŭn Chosenppiyŏtta* (1988, 1997), discussed in the chapter by Lee, which visibilises the experiences of women subjected to sexual slavery as 'comfort women' for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. This is the first volume to bring together a range of historical novels irrespective of whether or not they have been translated into English. Although this book has been composed in an imperialist language, 'the hegemonic epistemic language of our times' (Reimóndez 2017, 46) responsible for the systematic overshadowing and indeed erasure of other languages, admittedly 'publishing feminist work in English can bring ideas from everywhere into the "conversation"' (von Flotow 2017, 184). Moreover, we agree with Luise von Flotow in that 'through the translation and the comparative juxtaposition of texts and lives that we gain access to diversity in universality, and expand understanding' (2017, 190). Through this volume, it is our aim to democratise how knowledge about different historical and literary contexts is disseminated and give space to those voices which do not easily circulate in global literary markets.

The volume is divided into three parts entitled 'Retelling', 'Resisting' and 'Decolonising' which signpost key priorities of women's historical fiction that recur across the contributions. Although all of the chapters discuss how their selected texts retrace women's pasts, resist hegemonic historical narratives and interrogate how the past is remembered, by dividing the book into three sections, we wish to showcase distinct approaches to specific contexts and historical fictions.

PART I: RETELLING

Following this introduction, chapter two by Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela opens 'Part I: Retelling' and focuses on Peruvian writer Claudia Salazar Jiménez's Spanish-language novel *La Sangre de la aurora* [*Blood of the*

Dawn] (2013) which presents a feminist and Indigenous perspective on the sexual and gender-based violence that characterised Peru's armed internal conflict between 1980 and 2000. Through the fragmented perspectives of three women representing different actors in the conflict, namely a journalist, a militant and a local peasant woman, Sampson Vera Tudela argues that the novel attempts to construct an alternative archive of women's stories. She underscores that although the polyphonic formal structure, in particular choral narration, highlights the universality of violence, it becomes apparent that such stories relating to trauma cannot be fully voiced.

To follow this, the third chapter by Seoung Yun Lee examines Korean-language novels of Yun Chŏng-mo and Kim Sum which depict the lives of 'comfort women', a term used to describe victim-survivors of the systematic mass kidnapping and rape of Korean women by the Japanese military in the 1930s and 40s. In the present-day, when both national governments have deemed the issue to be resolved, Lee highlights how historical fiction functions as a counter-narrative, becoming a means to contest this officialised practice of collective erasure. The chapter explores how women writers in their role as activists and cultural producers engage with testimonies of gender-based violence whilst advocating for the women they are writing about.

While the fourth chapter by Linda Garber on English-language lesbian historical fiction acknowledges that the term 'lesbian' is troubled in reference to the past, she argues that contemporary lesbian identity requires an imagined past in order for lesbians to imagine a future. Garber accordingly focuses on a subgenre of historical pirate novels set in the Atlantic World between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and explores how these texts make seafaring life a subversive backdrop for lesbian historical fiction. As the chapter shows, the historical existence of women pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read opens the door for numerous fictional lesbian pirates who make inspirational role models for rebellious heroism. Together these chapters highlight how 'retelling' women's histories through fiction functions as a process of creating alternative memory archives.

PART II: RESISTING

Opening 'Part II: Resisting' with the volume's fifth chapter, Catherine Barbour explores how women's historical fiction in the non-state Iberian nation of Galicia takes an intersectional approach to gender and social class. Drawing inspiration from feminisms and working-class women's literary studies, this chapter considers how two popular Galician-language historical novels, *Herba moura* [*Black Nightshade*] (2005) by Teresa Moure and Eva Moreda's *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto* [*Home Is Like A Different Time*] (2011), reinscribe Galician working-class women's subjectivities back into transnational historical narrative. The analysis contrasts Moure's depiction of Hélène Jans, a seventeenth-century Dutch maid and botanist based on the real-life mistress of philosopher René Descartes, with Moreda's fictionalisation of Elisa, a Galician emigrant to London in the 'swinging sixties' who becomes an activist in the Women's Liberation Movement.

In the sixth chapter, Bonnie Thomas and Beth Kearney focus on Guadeloupean author Gisèle Pineau's French-language text, *Ady, soleil noir* [*Ady, Black Sun*] (2021) which depicts Adrienne Fidelin, a Guadeloupean dancer and muse of American photographer Man Ray from 1936 to the outbreak of World War II. Thomas and Kearney explore how Pineau's text re-centres Ady's personal narrative and highlights her often overlooked contributions to the surrealist movement. While the text underscores what has been obscured or lost in the historical archive, it reproduces fourteen photographs of Ady taken by acclaimed male artists, and offers an imagined perspective on her life which Thomas and Kearney argue presents a more complete vision of the racialised woman's interventions in art history.

For their part, in chapter seven Radhika Sharma and Nagendra Kumar explore the representation of the India-Pakistan partition in the 1940s in *Cracking India* (1991) by Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa. Sharma and Kumar highlight how the text provides a space for individualised personal stories of the partition, in particular through the perspective of a young girl with a disability. Engaging with issues relating to disability, religion and caste, their analysis elucidates how exploring the fictional experiences of marginalised figures can reveal multiple layers in the history of partition. The chapters in this section 'Resisting' fundamentally highlight how women's historical fiction can resist (colonial) patriarchal historical records

and re-centre the narrative by bringing minoritised voices and experiences to the forefront.

PART III: DECOLONISING

In the final section, 'Part III: Decolonising,' chapter eight by Tegan Zimmerman focuses on Puerto Rican author Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) and analyses mother-daughter history through the postcolonial feminist theory of voice(lessness). As the novel traces five generations of Puerto Rican women beginning with the enslaved African-mother-ancestor Fela and concluding with Carisa, an aspiring Afro-Latinx writer based in New York, Zimmerman argues that the text contributes to a decolonial turn in the historical fiction genre. She explores how the novel emphasises the need to challenge colonialism in Puerto Rico through women's attempts to vocalise experiences of slavery via alternative, inherited, textual materialities, like the magical stone.

Mariana Villegas Triay's chapter nine takes a decolonial feminist approach to the representation of witchcraft in Scottish writer Jenni Fagan's 2022 novel *Hex*, based on the life of Geillis Duncan, a young maidservant in late sixteenth-century Edinburgh who was wrongfully accused of witchcraft and executed in 1591. Through a transhistorical exploration of Geillis's story involving Iris, a woman in present-day Edinburgh, the narrative exposes what witch hunts in early modern Scotland reveal about women's universal experiences of oppression, violence and resistance. The analysis considers how the text rewrites decolonial feminist and non-modern ways of knowing into history, through a focus on elements such as healing practices, understandings of time and space, and relationships to nature and the land.

To close the volume with chapter ten, Guadalupe Elías examines Mexican writer Ángeles Mastretta's debut novel, titled *Arráncame la vida* (1985) and translated to English as *Mexican Bolero*. Written at a time when women were largely absent from Mexican official histories and women writers themselves were not considered sufficiently literary, Mastretta's novel signalled the beginning of the country's *boom femenino* [women's writing boom]. Through the lens of decolonial feminist theory, Elías considers the role that an Indigenous woman plays in the process of the novel's protagonist achieving liberation as a white-mestizo woman. The chapter highlights how the novel took a much needed—at the time of its publication and today—step towards reimagining history from the

point of view of individuals often excluded from official discourses. All three chapters in Part III engage with decolonial feminist theory to elucidate representations of women's experiences of colonialism, capitalism and gender-based violence.

Women's historical fiction being published and circulating across the globe aims to retell, resist and decolonise in a myriad of innovative ways that demand urgent consideration. The popularity of the genre shows no signs of slowing as readers on an international scale turn to the fictional past to understand the fractures, disparities and violence of the contemporary sociopolitical moment.

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