Postcolonialism and the Historical Novel: Epistemologies of Contemporary Realism

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The historical novel is one of the most popular and critically significant genres of postcolonial writing, but, to date, almost no systematic scholarship is dedicated to it. This essay proposes theoretical and critical parameters for exploring this genre. It begins with the observation that plausibility is a key principle articulated by many postcolonial writers and explores how framing novels in these terms, as a kind of realism, requires readers to negotiate heterogeneous structures of reference—and, in particular, to read imaginary characters as abstractions of historical phenomena. The second half of the paper explores the theoretical implications of this ontological heterogeneity, suggesting how the genre's conventions are inflected by normative patterns of gender, race, and temporality. Overall, I propose that it is possible to read the postcolonial historical novel as a kind of allegory, and I offer the term allegorical realism to describe this paradoxical mixing of conceptual and affective knowledge.

Keywords: Historical novel, postcolonial literature, literary realism, allegory, characterization in fiction

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The cliché says that the past is a foreign country, and postcolonial studies has always questioned the intentions of those who try to map distant climes.[1] This suspicion can be seen in the field's relationship with the historical novel, a genre at once central to the literatures of formerly colonized societies, and yet which lies beyond the bounds of most current postcolonial scholarship. To date, no systematic study of the historical novel from a postcolonial perspective has been published, and analyses of individual historical novels have tended not to engage with issues of genre nor to theorize the significance of generic conventions for texts that blend fiction and history. That neglect motivates this essay. I offer the following as a preliminary attempt to trace the contours of this hitherto unexplored region of postcolonial literature. I draw

[1]   The cliché originates from L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953): 9.

upon an emergent body of scholarship that has sought to reexamine the significance of realism and argue that the field has been overcommitted to antirealist principles and poststructuralist reading practices. I suggest that by resisting this tendency, we can recognize that plausibility is a core value of much postcolonial literary production and that this principle has wide-reaching implications for how historical novels are written and read in postcolonial contexts. The historical novel can be seen, I suggest, as a "new topography" for postcolonial studies—a region that has always been there, populated by those happily uninterested in our existence, but which we may now venture to explore.

This paper is divided into three sections. First, I examine the centrality of plausibility and verisimilitude to the genre and argue that postcolonial historical novels ask to be read as serious interpretations of the actual past. Second, I trace how this plausibility operates through aesthetics of "representativeness," a principle that positions the postcolonial historical novel as a realist genre, but with specific inflections generated by its postcoloniality. Finally, I suggest how this realism can be understood as a kind of allegory and propose a number of interpretive implications that arise when we read postcolonial historical novels in these terms. Above all, I argue that the postcolonial historical novel is a formally and thematically diverse genre centred on a defining epistemological premise: that "fiction is a way of knowing" the past.[2] Tracing the implications of this premise, I show, opens new vistas for postcolonial scholarship to explore.

Historical Interpretation and Postcolonial Criticism: Accounting for Plausibility

To date, the postcolonial scholarship that has engaged with literary realism has largely done so suspiciously. Novelists' attempts to portray the past "as it actually was" have been dismissed as theoretically naïve at best and as an expression of imperialistic attitudes at worst. As a result, postcolonial criticism has tended to downplay the realism of historical novels and to foreground instead their debts to postmodern tropes or other markers of a supposedly antimimetic ethos. Such attitudes can be seen in the questions that usually shape analyses of, for example, colonial settlement narratives: criticism focuses on whether such works "grant legitimacy to their post-colonial settler audience" or undermine claims to colonized space.[3] In this way, issues of discursive conflict and ownership of the means of interpretation are foregrounded as the primary subject for critical reflection—a focus reflected by the exemplary title of a monograph on the subject: *Claiming History*.[4] Critics have not attempted to theorize how questions of interpretive plausibility, or the "truth" of historical novels, might affect how they are written and read. As a result, the epistemological premises of much of this literature are unexplored.

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[2] Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971): x.

[3] Lisa Fletcher and Elizabeth Mead, "Inheriting the Past: Peter Corris's *The Journal of Fletcher Christian* and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45.2 (2010): 190. See also, for example, Carolyn Masel, "Late Landings: Reflections on Belatedness in Australian and Canadian Literatures," in *Recasting the World: Writing after Colonialism*, ed. Jonathan White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Philip Steer, "History (Never) Repeats: Pakeha Identity, Novels and the New Zealand Wars," *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 25 (2007).

[4] Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

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I suggest that this neglect is a legacy of the poststructuralist reading practices that framed postcolonialism's formation as a discipline. In his influential 1984 essay "Representation and the Postcolonial Text," Homi Bhabha criticized interpretive models that treat literature as a window to "the essentially unmediated nature of reality."[5] Bhabha declared "historicism and realism" to be "necessary fictions that tragically believed too much in their necessity and too little in their own fictionality," and he castigated as imperialistic discourses that—like realism, supposedly—"deny their own material and historical construction."[6] Bhabha's argument became the basis for a critical preference for self-conscious, parodic, and antimimetic writing, which was presumed to be intrinsically radical insofar as it foreswore attempts to depict the "actual" past. Such attitudes can be seen in work on Australian historical fiction, for example, which reads directly from aesthetics to politics, asserting that "representations of history which operate in terms of fixity and closure *are bound* to perpetuate familiar colonial stereotypes," while an "open and fluid portrayal of history [...] permits fictional accounts to subvert and break up such petrified notions."[7] In this passage we can see the slippage in which postmodern form is treated as coextensive with postcolonial literature. As Neil Lazarus points out, the result is to create a canon in which aesthetically experimental writers—above all Salman Rushdie—receive more substantive analysis and less critical suspicion than realists.[8] Indeed, the assumption that realism and postcolonialism are antithetical is reflected in some introductory textbooks to the field, in which realism is either absent or appears only as a negative term, a foil against which other modes can be defined.[9] Such criticism privileges the capacity of antimimetic form to split the "consensual continuity" of signs, making the question of interpretive plausibility moot.[10]

The problem with such readings is that they ignore the ethical commitments to historical plausibility routinely expressed by many postcolonial novelists. For example, even Rushdie himself asserts his desire that his novels be read as thoughtful, informed analyses of the actual past and not simply as acts of discursive contestation or linguistic experimentation. In his recent memoir, he suggests that *The Satanic Verses*, notwithstanding its magical realist dimensions, ought to be read in dialogue with archival evidence of the events it depicts. He challenges those who rejected his argument that the birth of Islam was a historical process shaped by political expediency and compromise, asking if they knew

> [T]hat after the Prophet died there was, for some considerable time, *no canonical text?*
> The Umayyad inscriptions from the Dome of the Rock were at odds with what was now

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[5] Homi K. Bhabha, "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism," in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1984): 94.
[6] Ibid., 96–97.
[7] Segrun Meinig, *Witnessing the Past: History and Post-Colonialism in Australian Historical Novels* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004): 11. Emphasis added. For an analogous argument, see Jonathan Lamb, "The Problems of Originality; or, Beware of Pakeha Baring Guilts," *Landfall* 4 (1986): 394–395.
[8] Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 22–23.
[9] See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[10] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 226.

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insisted upon as holy writ [...] The very walls of one of Islam's most sacred shrines
proclaimed that human fallibility had been present at the birth of the Book.[11]

Such an appeal to archival evidence is commonplace for postcolonial historical novelists,
whether they work in experimental modes or not. In Australia, for example, Kate
Grenville—author of *The Secret River* (2005), a novel about colonial genocide—has
repeatedly affirmed her desire to produce "a tale that drew its power from
the fact that it was real."[12] Like Rushdie, Grenville's attitude combines ethical and
epistemological registers, as she avows that "I didn't want people unsympathetic to
the idea of frontier violence to be able to say: it's just a novel, she made it up, none of
this really happened."[13] Similar assertions appear frequently in the authors' prefaces
or "notes on the text" customarily appended to historical novels. They establish para-
textual frames that make plausibility and potential verifiability key criteria against which
the representation asks to be read.[14] Chinua Achebe is thus not the only postcolonial
novelist for whom fiction is an "applied art," intended to educate readers about the truth
of their national histories.[15]

Given this disjunction between scholarship and texts, I argue that postcolonial
criticism needs to become more attuned to the epistemological parameters shaping the
contemporary writing it describes. In this I align myself with an emerging trend in
which critics have argued that the field's suspicion toward literary realism ought to be
reconsidered. Most significantly, Lazarus's *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011)
highlights how scholars have constructed a *selective tradition* of antimimetic texts,
which has been mistaken "for the only game in town."[16] I agree with Lazarus when he
argues that "we lose something indispensable when we suspend inquiry" into texts'
plausibility and "bracket as undecidable the question of [...] *epistemological*
adequacy."[17] Recently, Eli Park Sorensen has proposed how such questions could be
approached. His work draws on Georg Lukács, proposing that we conceptualize
realism as an ethos underpinning a variety of literary forms—both conventional and
experimental—and which makes narrative "a finite or strict compositional structure
[...] which *in advance* has implied or pre-interpreted a particular causal-determining
relationship between events."[18] Sorensen's approach suggests how aesthetics might be
influenced by epistemology, allowing us to explore how formal structures shape the
interpretation of historical processes and how archival evidence enters into an
intertextual dialogue with fictional events. Other critics have advanced similar claims,

[11] Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (New York: Random House, 2012): 213.
[12] Kate Grenville, *Searching for the Secret River* (Melbourne: Text, 2006): 146.
[13] Quoted by Louise Maral, "Warts and All: On Writing *the Secret River*" (2006), http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=1240.
[14] See, for example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006); Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace:* On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *The American Historical Review* 103.5 (1998): 1503–1516; Witi Ihimaera, *The Trowenna Sea* (Auckland: Penguin, 2009); *The Parihaka Woman* (Auckland: Vintage, 2011).
[15] Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," in *Morning yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975): 145.
[16] Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 32, 34. Original emphasis.
[17] Ibid., 125.
[18] Eli Park Sorensen, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 64. Original emphasis.

with Susan Andrade, Deborah Shapple Spillman, and Ulka Anjaria all publishing analyses of colonial and postcolonial realism that are substantially more complex than we have been led to expect.[19] The point I take from this trend is that there are already critical resources available for examining realism not simply as a set of representational tropes or a naïve presumption of the transparency of language. Building on this shift, I suggest that we view realism as an ethos shaping much postcolonial literary production—particularly the historical novel, and especially though not exclusively texts in which plausibility is presented (through paratextual framing, say) as a criterion of evaluation.

How, then, can we begin to map the realism of the postcolonial historical novel and unpack the significance of the genre's commitment to interpreting the past seriously? Such analysis needs to begin with the epistemological paradox that prompts many readers to dismiss the historical novel as incoherent—that is, the fact that its represented worlds juxtapose supposedly *real* events, places, and people to avowedly *imaginary* characters, settings, and episodes. For many historians in particular, this combination invalidates the genre's claim to seriousness. I already mentioned Grenville's commitment to writing novels that her readers could not dismiss as mere stories. Nevertheless, when she published *The Secret River*, her work was attacked by historians, who suggested that such a hybrid text could never be an actual interpretation of the past. Her critics declared history and fiction to be incompatible, for in the words of one historian they are directed toward different aims and represent different objects: "Historians are concerned with what men and women have *actually* done," while "[n]ovelists enjoy their space for invention because their only binding contract is with their readers, and that ultimately is not to instruct or to reform, but to delight."[20] This argument presumes that historical discourse can produce genuine knowledge only if it rigorously excludes anything unsupported by the archive. In narratological terms, it is an example of what Lubomir Dolezel calls the "principle of ontological homogeneity," according to which "all fictional entities are of the same ontological nature," and "Dickens's London no more actual than Carroll's Wonderland."[21] The customary claim of the postcolonial historical novelist to produce meaningful knowledge of an actual past therefore compels us to theorize how the genre blends apparently incommensurable ontologies.

A substantial body of literary theory contests this strict demarcation of fictionality and actuality, suggesting that readers encountering such hybridity are capable of negotiating the resultantly complex patterns of reference. Catherine Gallagher, for example, argues that fictionality operates unevenly depending on the structure and generic framing of the work in question. Comparing three texts in which the character "Napoleon" appears—a document, a historical novel, and a counterfactual

[19] Susan Z. Andrade, "The Problem of Realism and African Fiction," *Novel* 42.2 (2009): 183-89; "Staging Realism and the Ambivalence of Nationalism in the Colonial Novel," *Novel* 44.2 (2011): 186-207; Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Deborah Shapple Spillman, *British Colonial Realism in Africa: Inalienable Objects, Contested Domains* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[20] Inga Clendinnen, "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?," *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006): 31. Emphasis added.
[21] Lubomir Dolezel, "Possible Worlds of Fiction and History," *New Literary History* 29.4 (1998): 788.

historical novel—she traces how the versions can be understood as varying interpretations of the same (historically existent) individual, meaning they share a "commonality of referent."[22] Readers' capacity to identify this referent shows that they "engage in a dialectically differential reading within a work," changing "semantic expectations" as they encounter different elements and connecting their reading to intertextual fields of reference.[23] As she suggests, this reveals how historical novels work by invoking history as their "horizon of possibility, the ground against which we judge them probable or improbable."[24] The result is to view fictional worlds as sites for the construction of *provisional knowledge*—what Gallagher calls discourse in the "subjunctive voice," or Doreen Maitre characterizes as "hypotheses" about real events.[25]

This description of historical novels as hybrid texts with internally differential relations of fictionality and actuality is certainly supported by postcolonial writers' descriptions of their own work. Because the events they narrate are often concerned with past violence, or are the subject of ongoing political debate in their societies, novelists routinely emphasize their obligation of the archive, which becomes precisely the "horizon of possibility" for interpretation that Gallagher describes. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example, has stressed her commitment to the historical events she narrates in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)—the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–70. In an interview appended to the novel, she describes how she considered "playing with the minor things" permissible, "inventing a train station in a town that has none, placing towns closer to each other than they are, changing the chronology of conquered towns." The "central events" of the period, however, were beyond invention: "I could not let a character be changed by anything that had not actually happened."[26] In this way Adichie, "equally committed to the fiction and the history," asks her readers to differentiate the invented and documented elements of her novel and assess both in relation to available records.[27] Similarly, Margaret Atwood describes her historical novel of 1840s Canada, *Alias Grace* (1996), as a kind of patchwork woven from recorded sources—"solid fact[s] I could not alter"—and imagination, which occupies "the gaps left unfilled" but which is constrained by the overall need for plausibility.[28] This commitment to balancing the freedom of invention against the limitations of verisimilitude can be seen especially in the practice many postcolonial historical novelists have adopted of affixing historiographic notes to their texts. The two most recent historical novels by New Zealand writer Witi Ihimaera, for example, include what amount to short essays on the events they describe, outlining the sources upon which they are based and explaining how and where invention has taken place.

22 Catherine Gallagher, "What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters," *New Literary History* 42.2 (2011): 316.
23 Ibid., 318.
24 Ibid., 320.
25 Ibid., 321; Doreen Maitre, *Literature and Possible Worlds* (London: Middlesex Polytechnic Press, 1983): 24–25. See also Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).
26 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "In the Shadow of Biafra," in *Half of a Yellow Sun (Postscript)* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007): 11.
27 Ibid., 11.
28 Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*", 1515.

The Parihaka Woman (2011), in fact, includes actual footnotes in the text.[29] In this case ontological heterogeneity manifests itself as a generic hybrid of novelistic and historiographic discourse.

I suggest that this ontological heterogeneity has three significant consequences for the genre. First, the commitment to plausibility means such narratives demand to be read as serious interpretations of the *actual* past and evaluated against norms similar—though not identical—to those of professional history. For this reason, to treat them as ungrounded flights of invention (or simply as an ironic commentary on historical narration, in the style of Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction") is to miss something crucial to the genre.[30] Ann Rigney describes how particular reading practices emerge from this "co-occurrence in texts of fact and invention," arguing that historical novels invoke two structures of reference that readers negotiate: "As novels, they are written under the aegis of the fictionality convention whereby the individual writer enjoys the freedom to invent and the reader enjoys the freedom to make-believe in the existence of a world 'uncommitted to reality.'"[31] As "*historical* novels, [...] they also link up with the ongoing collective attempts to represent the past and invite comparison with what is already known about the historical world from other sources."[32] This intertextual dialogue means that historical novels are "theoretically open to scrutiny, supplementation, and correction" in the light of rival accounts or archival evidence.[33] They function as the *beginning* of a conversation about the past, rather than the final word on it.

Second, texts demand this dialogue by complicating the binary between factual truth and invention, and asking their readers to assess not whether a statement is true or false, but whether it "is a possible way into understanding that which is absent."[34] This attitude allows historical novels to present fictional elements as what Rigney calls "invented exemplars"—tailor-made evidence that represents historical phenomena by substituting created objects for putatively verifiable facts, events, or individuals. The referential status of this evidence is "weakened" in comparison to archival sources, but not "abolished."[35] This, Rigney suggests and I agree, is how fictionality can remain theoretically open to evaluation. The genre's formal heterogeneity means that it possesses an ontological connection to actuality that is the condition of possibility of realist claims, and which demands that its readers treat its fictional elements as *abstractions* of actually existing historical phenomena. Adichie herself attests how her novel depends on this principle. She describes how her writing involves creating characters, situations, and events that never existed, but that are "true to the spirit of the time"—a spirit her readers are expected to evaluate.[36]

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[29] Witi Ihimaera, *The Trowenna Sea* (Auckland: Penguin, 2009); Witi Ihimaera, *The Parihaka Woman* (Auckland: Vintage, 2011).
[30] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
[31] Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001): 17, 19.
[32] Ibid., 19. Original emphasis.
[33] Ibid., 39.
[34] Ibid., 25.
[35] Ibid., 25–26.
[36] Adichie, "In the Shadow of Biafra," 11.

The third consequence of the postcolonial historical novel's ontological hybridity therefore concerns how we read its characters. When we encounter an imaginary individual, we are asked to assess his or her plausibility as an exemplification of the historical milieu. Yet Gallagher highlights a paradoxical consequence of this. The "real nonexistence" of the fictional character—his or her status as a product of the author's imagination—generates a "peculiar affective force"; the absence of a literal referent produces an illusion of psychological depth in which the character becomes "deeply and impossibly familiar."[37] In other words, the abstraction that defines the fictional dimension of the historical novel enables identification from its readers—an act to which they attest when they discuss characters as though they were real people. The process that Rigney identifies as representation via imaginary exemplification therefore generates a surplus of affect, over and above the cognitive demands of historical interpretation. This "sentimental appropriation" then becomes a further source of anxiety for critics of the genre, who argue that readers' identification with invented people can produce an illusion of proximity that obscures the past's cultural difference.[38]

The genre's convention of representing history through exemplars therefore has implications that go beyond the question of whether or not fiction can advance epistemologically responsible interpretations of real events. Ontological heterogeneity generates theoretical questions about the processes of abstraction that underpin the historical novel's representational procedures and that invite reflection from a post-colonial perspective. For that reason, I turn now to questions of narrative abstraction and propose that we venture deeper into uncharted territory by exploring how postcoloniality might inflect the generic conventions of the historical novel.

Abstracting Postcolonial Histories: Gender, Race, and Empire in Realist Characterization

As I hinted previously, in relation Eli Park Sorensen's work, some recent analyses of realism have drawn on the theories of Georg Lukács, whose *The Historical Novel* can, I suggest, be read as a starting point for exploring the ideological implications of exemplary characterization. Lukács's theories are, among other things, a systematic attempt to explain the practices Rigney and Gallagher describe and are predicated on the genre's commitment to producing socially relevant knowledge about the past. I will therefore use his work as a model of how epistemological seriousness can operate through narrative abstraction and explore how these conventions might be affected when transplanted to a postcolonial setting.

Drawing on nineteenth-century "classical" examples, Lukács distinguishes two different kinds of character in the historical novel. On the one hand are individuals who are "historical-social types," exemplary figures who "represent social trends and

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[37] Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 356.
[38] Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 175. For examples of criticism that worries about the epistemological consequences of this effect, see John Hirst, "Forget Modern Views When Bringing up the Past," *The Australian* 20 March 2006; Mark McKenna, "Comfort History," *The Australian*, 18 March 2006, 107–108.

historical forces."[39] Examples include Fergus MacIvor and Colonel Talbot in Walter Scott's *Waverley*, who embody the putatively typical qualities of Highland Scottish and English societies.[40] For Lukács, these figures represent "at a certain level of abstraction" social forces in conflict: the clan-based order of the Highlands and expanding mercantile capitalism of the cities.[41] As he describes, this mode of characterization enables the depiction of large-scale processes of change via narratives of fictional individuals who are, in Rigney's terms, invented exemplars. On the other hand, a different kind of character mediates this dramatization. The "middle-of-the-road" hero does not exemplify a social order per se but is defined by the relative absence of positive qualities. This character's neutrality provides a mobile point of focalization that can move between competing "historical-social types," producing a narrative that posits society as a totality of contradictory forces.[42] Waverley himself, whose indecisiveness sees him vacillate between MacIvor and Talbot (and thereby the Highland Scottish and English perspectives that make up Scott's Britain), is the archetype of this figure. Lukács suggests that the middling hero's role is to indicate the direction in which civilization is developing by siding with history's winners, while preserving worthy elements of the defeated society. As James Calahan observes, this middling protagonist "corresponds, philosophically, abstractly, to Hegel's synthesis: he represents progress."[43]

We can therefore see that Lukács's analysis demonstrates how the logic of sociological abstraction is permeated by the Enlightenment and Romantic concepts of temporality, cultural difference, and gender that formed the milieu of the classical historical novel. First, temporal presumptions are reflected by Lukács's suggestion that this character structure depicts "the way society moves."[44] The apparent neutrality of the focalizing protagonist, who drifts, almost involuntarily, to the winning side, presents socio-cultural change as inevitable, an unfolding of history's immanent logic rather than a product of conscious agency. The passivity of the middling protagonist thus tends to legitimate the violence inherent to conflict between modes of social organization, framing it as an inevitable side effect of progress and thus inscribing an implicitly teleological temporality into the genre.

Second, Katie Trumpener points out that the "notion of historical representative character" that Lukács explores "is adapted" from the national tale genre, and, as such, operates according to an immanently nationalist logic.[45] As Trumpener describes, the national tale, popular in the first decade of the nineteenth century, focuses on sets of characters whose personalities are abstract representations of national communities, and who, in their totality, produce an account of human nature as a shared set of norms inflected by cultural difference.[46] James Chandler argues that this literary-historical

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[39] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1962): 34–35.
[40] Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
[41] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 39.
[42] Ibid., 36.
[43] James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983): 9–10.
[44] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 144.
[45] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): 130.
[46] See also Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 107–108; Clara Tuite, "Maria Edgeworth's Déjà-Voodoo: Interior

background makes the historical novel a permutation of the national tale, applying the latter's *territorial* concept of culture to the representation of the past. As a result, the production of a "cultural-historical period" is a temporal analogue of the national community, meaning the representative figures of the classical historical novel draw their "individual human character [...] from the peculiarities of different epochs," just as the national tale typifies English or Irish civilizations.[47] This overlap demonstrates the extent to which exemplification assumes a Romantic understanding of culture as a set of qualities shared by members of a group. Thus representation via imaginary exemplars presumes a sociological order that infuses realist form with a normative, totalizing conception of community.

When we consider this combination of teleological and nationalist presumptions we find significant ideological consequences. Lukács's analysis highlights the extent to which processes of realist abstraction are distributed unevenly across sociopolitical space. His key metaphor distinguishes the "middling" protagonist—who occupies "neutral ground"—from the "historical-social types" who represent "*extreme*, opposing social forces."[48] This imagery reveals how a spatial dimension underpins the characterological division. The supposed neutrality of the middle-of-the-road protagonist derives from his conceptual proximity to the metropolis—his imperial, as well as poetic *middleness*—while sharply differentiated exemplary characters multiply toward the periphery. This happens because the historical novel's debt to the national tale (as well as to Scottish Enlightenment theories of stadial development) leads it to map temporal difference onto geography, so that moving away from the center leads backward in time, and cultural difference is represented as a deviation from the present.[49] This is the pattern that Johannes Fabian describes as the "denial of coevalness" characteristic of the anthropological imaginary, in which a temporal separation between subject and object enables knowledge of the other to be produced.[50] The historical time generated by this pattern—the teleology that Lukács calls "evolution"—is therefore predicated on the separation of center and periphery into successive temporal levels, which are homogenized as the latter is incorporated into an imperial order that accelerates its development and brings it up to speed with civilization. As Moretti notes, "Historical novels are not just stories 'of' the border, but of its erasure"—through typically imperialist means.[51]

Third, and further complicating this entwining of time and space, we can observe that the classical historical novel's practices of abstraction are implicitly gendered. Scott noted of his art that it is "those minute circumstances belonging to private life and domestic character" that give "verisimilitude to a narrative, and individuality to the persons introduced."[52] In other words, the paradoxical "realness" of the abstract

Decoration, Retroactivity, and Colonial Allegory in *the Absentee*," *Eighteenth-Century Literature* 20.3 (2008).

[47]   James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 173–174.

[48]   Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 35–36. Emphasis added.

[49]   Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998): 37–38.

[50]   Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): 47.

[51]   Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*, 40.

[52]   Sir Walter Scott, "Dedicatory Epistle," in *Ivanhoe*, ed. Ian Duncan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 15.

individual is conceptually shaped around a split between public and private, with the latter providing the locus of fictional individuals' distinctive qualities. This means that it is women, metonymically linked to domesticity, who function as representative characters *par excellence*. Indeed, in Scott's *Waverley* the social-historical types of Fergus MacIvor and Talbot are complemented by Flora MacIvor and Rose Bradwardine, who likewise signify rival social orders but whose difference is transposed into the domestic sphere as competing types of femininity. Moreover, as Diana Wallace observes, the middling hero is implicitly masculine because the "'typical' woman is one who [...] rarely, if ever, comes into contact with world-historical figures," and so cannot readily supply the narrative's mediating function.[53] The Lukácsian character structure is thus divided between a mobile, masculine focalizing agent and the fixed, feminine exemplars of cultural difference between which he moves. This gendered structure adds yet further ideological force to the imperialist normalisation described previously. In Scott's novels, the narrative combines the defeat of the resistant social order with the protagonist's choice of wife, affirming metropolitan hegemony through a combination of teleological temporality, the privileging of imperial space, and the supposed naturalness of heteronormative sexuality.

The significance of such a reading is reflected in the obvious tension between these Lukácsian norms and the political imperatives of much postcolonial writing. I suggest that this tension could be treated as a problematic for critical analysis, which could focus on how gender and race structure the postcolonial historical novel at an aesthetic, as well as overtly thematic level. We might hypothesize that as novels adopt different characterological structures—focalization through a female character, for example—this deviation from the generic norm would produce simultaneously formal and ideological consequences, which would resonate differently depending on the text's historical entanglements. One of the anonymous reviewers of this essay suggested Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a perfect test case for such analysis. As the reviewer points out, unlike Lukács's "classical" models Marquez's focalization is split between masculine and feminine protagonists, with a resulting divide in the novel's historical vision that problematizes its temporal structure and precludes the normalization of imperialist progress. Alternatively, we would use this perspective as a basis for comparative analysis, asking similar questions of novels that frame cognate historical events within contrasting gender or racial character structures. We could explore how those variations manifested at the textual level and link those differences to the political and material contexts in which the novels were produced and read. This approach would illuminate how the specifics of postcoloniality inflect the genre's conventions, allowing us to conjoin various layers of textual, ideological, and historical interpretation.

There is insufficient space here to present such an analysis in full, but as a brief example I would point to the works of New Zealander Fiona Kidman and Australian Kate Grenville as presenting an ideal contrast. Both authors explore nineteenth-century colonial settlement in Australasia and narrate how initially peaceful relations between settlers and indigenous people broke down—but they draw very differently

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[53] Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 12.

on the Lukácsian model to do so. Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) is focalized by a male, working-class protagonist who mediates the contrasting sociopolitical structures of colonial New South Wales by trying to make a living on the frontier, observing the differences between settler and Aboriginal societies. Like the classical wavering hero, he vacillates between those who argue for the violent imposition of imperial authority and those who favor peaceful relations with Aborigines. This latter group's perspective is not explicitly presented but functions as what Grenville calls "a hollow in the book," a silence readers are expected to interpret.[54] When fear prompts Grenville's protagonist to participate in a massacre, his passivity—coupled with the narrative's lack of a perspective beyond colonialism—codes extermination as the immanent logic of empire, an act of violence imposed by history rather than chosen by individuals. In contrast, Kidman's *The Captive Wife* (2005) is centred on a female middling protagonist. Lacking the freedom to move that is available to men, her mediating role is achieved through a captivity narrative in which she becomes the object of competing male attempts to control her sexuality. The violence imposed on her by her exconvict settler husband, and the Maori chief who takes her from him, renders the gendered nature of the historical novel's conventions explicit, bringing them to the center of the narrative and highlighting the agency of those who impose their power on others. The effect is to denaturalize frontier violence by presenting it less as an inevitable effect of colonial relations than the product of masculine rivalries played out on feminized bodies. Kidman's novel thereby undercuts the teleological bias that aligned heteronormative romance and imperial domination in the texts discussed and that allows Grenville's novel to lament colonial genocide while offering no alternative to it.

This analysis is obviously preliminary, but I offer it as indicative of the perspectives opened when we start to map the postcolonial historical novel and interrogate the overlapping aesthetic and ideological implications of its realist commitments. This reading allows us to explore the significance of the genre's desire for epistemological seriousness and understand how the resulting ontological heterogeneity shapes specific responses to postcolonial histories. What is striking, however, is how Kidman's emphasis on her protagonist's *body* as the site where the frontier is inscribed returns us to Gallagher's paradox discussed earlier—the way in which an abstract interpretation of colonial history coexists with, and in fact actively generates, an evocation of the corporeal individual. The genre's heterogeneity thus circulates around contrasting epistemological paradigms, invoking apparently contradictory forms of knowledge. In the final section of this essay, I want to pursue this problem further and explore how we might map the postcolonial historical novel's processes of realist abstraction in terms of a dialectic between *concept* and *affect*, or the contrasting interpretive demands of *typification* and *singularity*. As such, this final section outlines how we can read the postcolonial realism of the historical novel as a kind of allegory.

Allegorical Realism: Interpretation between the Typical and the Singular

As I have suggested, the expectation that we read characters in the historical novel as representative presumes a mode of thought that conceptualizes the social world as a set of abstract categories that individuals embody. This principle is foundational to the

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54   Grenville, *Searching*, 198–199.

realist novel as such, as is suggested by its classic formulation posed in the eighteenth century by Henry Fielding—whose narratives depicted "not an individual, but a species," such that "every thing is copied from the Book of Nature, and scarce a Character or Action [is] produced which I have not taken from my own Observations and Experience."[55] In his 2005 book *Specters of the Atlantic,* Ian Baucom explores the implications of this mode of thought, explaining the practices of representation outlined, in relation to Lukács's work, as an epiphenomenon of eighteenth-century finance capitalism. The expansion of the triangular slave trade necessitated the creation of credit systems that could treat imaginary entities—the profits of future transactions, say—as theoretically "real." Baucom suggests that participants in this new mode of production had to find ways to "credit the existence of [...] abstract, imaginary, speculative values."[56] The resulting "actuarial" logic was concerned primarily with statistical probability and general outcomes, so that an object was evaluated not in terms of "the individuality of the thing" but rather its "typical or average character," which was identified as "that thing's immaterial value."[57] The result, Baucom suggests, is that the eighteenth century marked the ascendency of abstract exchange-value as the rationale of production, resulting in a corresponding shift in thought in which the logic of *types* emerged as the principle way of knowing the social world.

This account provides a material context for the development of realism. Baucom presents the realist novel as the aesthetic correlate of this epistemology, for its characters are "the type of someone or something that does not exist as *this* or *that*, but only as *such*, only in the aggregate or abstract."[58] The exchangeability of typical characters for collective entities like classes (their status as imaginary exemplars, in other words) enabled eighteenth-century readers to consider fiction a legitimate mode of knowledge.[59] Baucom's argument explains how the realist novel can depend simultaneously on its readers' capacity to recognize the individuality of protagonists—for critics like Ian Watt the defining feature of the genre—while still presuming their social "averageness."[60] Described by Baucom as "typification," this mode of representation determines characters' significance by reference to the sociological categories of which they are both parts and signifiers. It presumes a strong commitment to verisimilitude and is comprehensible only on the assumption that the existence of those sociological entities can be confirmed through other sources. In other words, it relies upon an intertextual relation with an archive. Typification thus names the cognitive procedure or epistemological premise underlying the Lukácsian conventions described, and Baucom indeed cites Lukács's work as an early analysis of the practices he describes.[61]

[55] Henry Fielding, "Preface to *Joseph Andrews*," in *Narrative/Theory*, ed. David H. Richter (White Plains, N. Y.: Longman, 1996): 21.
[56] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 67.
[57] Ibid., 104.
[58] Ibid., 216. Original emphasis.
[59] Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): esp. chap. 11.
[60] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).
[61] Baucom, *Specters,* 105–106.

In identifying the origins of this mode of thought in the eighteenth-century slave trade, Baucom suggests that it is underpinned by forms of epistemic violence. Just as the slave's human uniqueness is destroyed by his or her conversion into currency, so typification effaces the sign's material particularity in favor of its abstract, transferable qualities. As a result, Baucom argues that in the late eighteenth century a counter-movement emerged in which an alternative mode of representation developed from typification to oppose its epistemic violence—one predicated on the *singularity* of the represented object.[62] Dipesh Chakrabarty defines singularity as "that which defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination," a limit-concept that marks the point at which representation becomes "opaque to the generalities inherent in language."[63] Singular entities, in other words, are irreducible to categorization. For Baucom, this mode of thought is enabled by typification, insofar as the universal exchangeability of the abstract individual provides a condition of possibility for Enlightenment discourses of universal sympathy, which identify with the suffering of others—such as slaves—and, through that identification, resist the transformation of the singular object into an abstraction. Sympathy, in other words, conceives of a *type* of object while simultaneously asserting the radical *singularity* of that object as an entity that exceeds typifying logic.[64] Baucom argues that this mode of representation became dominant from the late eighteenth century onward, resulting in a sympathetic discourse predicated on "witnessing," which "assumes an affective property in the image of the thing" and refuses to accept that thing's "speculative destruction."[65] This kind of realism focuses on objects that exceed abstraction and exist outside categories such as class, gender, and nation—the conceptual frameworks that underpin Lukács's social-historical types.

How might this theory inform our reading of the postcolonial historical novel? First, I suggest that we accept Baucom's conceptual division of realism into two branches while questioning his literary-historical narrative in which singularity sup-plants typification as the logic of realism. Rather than treating the singular as emerging *after* typification to resist its violence, I argue that it is more effective to treat it as a dialectical result *of* typification, one that emerges *through* abstraction to trouble its borders. Conceptualizing realism as a dialectic of typification and singularity sheds light on the effect I noted earlier, when I mentioned Gallagher's observation that the nonactuality of the fictional individual produces a "peculiar affective force" that makes characters seem "deeply and impossibly familiar."[66] Gallagher may here be invoking the doubled logic of the fictional character, which is simultaneously a "typical, average abstraction" *and* an "absolute, singular, individual, isolated" life, outside "all possibility of substitution, surrender, or exchange."[67] This perspective sees the negative moment of singularity shadowing realist representation, producing a counterdiscourse that disrupts the process of subsuming fictional entities into the sociological categories they

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[62]   Ibid., 133.
[63]   Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000): 83.
[64]   Baucom, *Specters*, 129–133.
[65]   Ibid., 207, 105.
[66]   Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," 356.
[67]   Baucom, *Specters*, 105, 216, 225.

exemplify. In other words, I argue that realism is a dialectical mode of representation that oscillates between typification and singularity. The abstract sociological mode of conceptualizing history projected by realism is constantly troubled by affective engagements with objects that refuse to be types.

Second, I propose that we use this account of realism to frame an understanding of the historical novel as immanently *allegorical*. Gordon Teskey's *Allegory and Violence* offers a framework for what I am suggesting. He argues that allegorical representation—like Baucom's dialectical realism—has two dimensions. It first acts "as a wedge to split a unity into two things," and then works "to yoke together heterogeneous things by force of meaning."[68] In his words, "*allegory* evokes a schism in consciousness—between a life and a mystery, between the real and the ideal, between a literal tale and its moral—which is repaired, or at least concealed, by imagining a hierarchy on which we ascend toward truth."[69] Allegory therefore produces a "rift," or conceptual divide, that the reader crosses when he or she grasps the connection between sign and referent, but which is not closed or eliminated by this process.[70] Thus in Lukács's aesthetics, for example, abstraction relies upon the conceptual rift between the fictional character and the underlying (supposed) truth he or she illustrates. That deeper knowledge (for Lukács, "the way society moves") is privileged as the ultimate meaning of the narrative, knowledge that we reach by moving through and beyond the invented exemplar.

Teskey, however, argues that this movement relies upon (and exists to obscure) a logical problem. Allegory privileges the idea over the exemplification, but an exemplification is comprehensible only by reference to the idea it signifies. For example, we reach an understanding of social transformation through a narrative of typical characters, but those characters are comprehensible *as types* only insofar as they presume the social categories they represent. Allegory's logic is circular. Thus for the allegorical idea to retain its consistency it must subject "what it does not understand, the realm of *physis* or growth, to a knowledge it imagines it already has."[71] The result, Teskey suggests, is "dissonance" or "resonant noise" between the literal narrative and its "imposed structure of meaning."[72] To illustrate, he cites the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, in which a gap opens between the pilgrim-Dante's sympathy for Francesca and the divine meaning her punishment is supposed to represent. Instead of a transparent signifier of ideal qualities (Adultery and Justice), she appears as a sympathetic being irreducible to moral categories: in Teskey's words, "a woman whose punishment is simply unjust."[73] This is the moment in which, as Baucom argues, the individual's singularity generates an affective response that troubles his or her reduction to a conceptual structure. Allegory's hierarchy of value is disrupted as, in Auerbach's phrase, "[t]he image of man eclipses the image of God."[74]

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[68] Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996): 2.
[69] Ibid., 2. Original emphasis.
[70] Ibid., 12.
[71] Ibid., 17.
[72] Ibid., 23.
[73] Ibid., 28.
[74] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953): 202.

Teskey's argument reinforces my claim that the resistance of the singular is not, as Baucom claims, subsequent to abstraction, but is itself dependent upon the rift between the literal and ideal levels of representation. Thus instead of a conceptual *alternative* to typification that produces a different, nonallegorical mode of representation, the singular is a position *within* allegory, naming the moment when, in Teskey's words, the reader discovers "something out there beyond the grasp of the [...] interpreting mind, a negative other that announces itself in real events, real bodies, and real pain."[75] I argue that we can understand this kind of allegory not as a unidirectional process of interpretation in which the reader ascends from the literal object to its ideal referent, but rather as a back-and-forth movement across the conceptual divide. Typification names the process of interpreting fictional characters as exemplars of abstract entities, whereas singularity is what happens when the process is checked. Empathetic engagement with the singular other—the paradoxical realness of an abstraction that I identified as a product of ontological heterogeneity—thus emerges as a counterabstraction implicit in the logic of the social-representative type. I propose the name *allegorical realism* to describe the unity of this dialectic, a term that signals the mutual codetermination of representational levels across the rift that is the condition of possibility of their meaningfulness.

This, therefore, is the theoretical basis I propose for mapping the postcolonial historical novel. Conceptualizing the realism of the genre as allegorical allows us to understand how historical novels weave together conceptual and affective modes of knowing the past and begins to explain how the genre's epistemological commitments shape its narrative structures and ideological significations. My use of the term *allegorical* to describe of course recalls Fredric Jameson's well-known claims about "third-world literature." My account indeed shares Jameson's view that realism is split along a line dividing its engagements with social life and corporeal existence and that the relationship between these "levels" of representation should be an object of critical analysis. I also agree with him that a text's postcoloniality—its situatedness within material circumstances and sociopolitical structures that, in the final analysis, can be understood only in relation to the histories of empire and capital—shape the relationship between its representational levels and, thus, its significations.[76] My account differs from Jameson's, however, in that where he (like Lukács) identifies the social dimension as the text's true or proper reference, I argue that it is precisely in the oscillation between typification and singularity that the specific resonances of allegorical realism emerge. My account thus does not privilege one side of realism or the other, and does not depend on Jameson's distinction between "first-world" (libidinal) and "third-world" (political) narratives. Rather, I seek to analyze each text in its material and political contexts, and explore how epistemological entanglements generate unique responses to postcolonial circumstances.

I am therefore proposing a model for understanding the postcolonial historical novel as a genre shaped by an ethical commitment to historical plausibility, shared by readers and writers alike, and which has significant epistemological, aesthetic, and

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[75]   Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 25.
[76]   Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

ideological consequences. I suggest that a postcolonial studies approach to such texts can treat their movements across representational levels—the oscillations of allegorical realism—as a problematic for analysis, interrogating the links among form, generic convention, text, and context, and asking questions such as those sketched in the previous section. Such an analysis would allow us to see how these novels affirm their commitment to putative verifiability, while resisting our desire to reduce fiction to a *mere* abstraction of social reality. I believe that it is in this tension that the potential for critical insight lies.

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This essay therefore proposes a number of ways that we might direct our attention to the postcolonial historical novel, a genre the significance of which has been belied by the relative paucity of criticism about it. If we are going to explore historical novels on their own terms, we need to begin by addressing the ethical commitment to plausibility that drives those who write them and affects how they are read. This desire shapes the genre around a foundational ontological heterogeneity, one that opens its narratives to an intertextual dialogue with other accounts of the past and that, I have shown, has significant aesthetic consequences. Needless to say, the brief sketch I have offered here is only provisional, and the value of my concept of "allegorical realism" can be demonstrated only through more extended illustrations of what it reveals about texts we had not previously read in these terms. Whatever the result, I propose that we look to the historical novel as a new topography for the field, one that will force us to reconsider our assumptions and test our critical methods. In this, the genre—along with postcolonial realism more generally—constitutes a particularly rich new world, one that awaits the scholars who will dare to explore it.