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Paloma Fresno-Calleja and Hsu-Ming Teo (eds). *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History*. Routledge, 2024. Pp. 230. US $49.59 (paperback). ISBN: 9781032797724.

Paloma Fresno-Calleja and Hsu-Ming Teo (eds). *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories*. Routledge, 2025. Pp. 219. US $49.59 (paperback). ISBN: 9781032801797.

Review by Amy Duong

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In the evolving landscape of literary studies, particularly within the domains of popular romance and historical fiction, two recent edited collections stand out as significant contributions: *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History* (2024) and *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?* (2025), both edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Paloma Fresno-Calleja and published by Routledge as part of their Research in Women's Literature series. These companion volumes focus on the politics, aesthetics, and marketing of women's popular fiction, with an emphasis on history, exoticism, and romance. Together, they interrogate how "postmillennial Anglophone women writers use romantic narrativizations of history to explore, revise, repurpose and challenge the past in their novels" (*Conflict and Colonialism* 3).

The first volume, *Conflict and Colonialism,* examines how romantic historical fiction engages with themes of conflict, imperialism, and social injustice, imagining alternative histories that expose the damages of patriarchal and colonial societies while highlighting women's agency and achievements. Reparation occurs through a reimagining and/or an alternative perspective on historical events, using history not only as a backdrop of the romantic plot but a crucial element to the overall plotline. The second, *Travel and Colonialism*, shifts the lens to narratives of travel, tourism, and migration, questioning whether such stories empower women or inadvertently replicate colonial discourses

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through exoticization and voyeurism. Both books bridge popular fiction with critical theory, drawing on postcolonial, feminist, and reparative reading frameworks.

In the introductory chapter of *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History*, Teo and Fresno-Calleja present the volume's central thesis, asserting that 21st century Anglophone women writers use romantic historical fiction to provide reparative readings of the past, but that such efforts are fraught with limitations and entrenched problems. The editors define "romantic historical fiction" broadly to encompass both popular romance novels that conclude with a happy ending (HEA) and more complex love stories that may not end conventionally. Through this inclusive definition, the editors emphasize the serious engagement these novels have with historical interpretations, treating the past not as mere backdrop but as a site for critical revision and reparation. They trace the genre's evolution beginning with precursors like Georgette Heyer and Kathleen Woodiwiss, noting how contemporary works build on this tradition to address modern concerns such as intersectional feminism and decolonization. The introduction surveys existing scholarship, critiquing earlier dismissals of romance as escapist and positioning the genre as a site for exploring injustice and women's autonomy. While Teo and Fresno-Calleja's expansive definition enables broad engagement, it also complicates genre specific analysis by diverging from the long agreed upon criteria that historically categorize texts as romances.

The chapters that follow span diverse historical contexts, united by their focus on conflict and colonialism. Hsu-Ming Teo's chapter on Australian convict prostitute romances narrates social and sexual justice for "damned whores," repurposing convict histories to challenge stigmatization and imagine redemptive love amid imperial brutality. Ramón E. Soto-Crespo examines 21st century Caribbean authors, analyzing how romantic historical fiction confronts the legacy of British imperialism, repurposing a "trashed world" into spaces of resistance and healing. Jayashree Kamblé's analysis of K.J. Charles' *Sins of the Cities* explores immigrant histories and intersecting diversities in Victorian London, using romance to intersect race, class, and sexuality in reparative ways.

Carmen Pérez Ríu's contribution on Lorraine Heath's popular romance series *Scandalous Gentlemen of St. James* delves into language, sexuality and "necessary anachronism" in neo-Victorian romance, arguing that deliberate historical inaccuracies serve feminist reparations by empowering female characters. Mariana Ripoll-Fonollar discusses suffragette historical romances in a postfeminist context, repurposing women's suffrage narratives to critique contemporary gender politics. Carolina Fernández Rodríguez focuses on U.S. Civil War-era Quaker romances, hailing white heroines as nation-builders and healers, while interrogating the racial implications of such portrayals. Silvia Martínez-Falquina analyzes Evangeline Parsons Yazzie's *Her Land, Her Love*, emphasizing historical reparation and emotional justice in the context of the Navajo Long Walk. While many romances perpetuate the white-savior narrative, these scholars highlight romances that resist such narratives, identifying romances that use historical backdrops as resistance and reparation.

Thus far in this collection, we've been shown how romantic historical fiction can be reparative through the use of history and redefining what that history looks like fictionally. However, Teo makes the argument, along with other scholars, that the Holocaust was uniquely traumatic and devastating, in a way that cannot be compared or matched by any other event in history. For that reason, there are certain limitations and expectations that

must be considered when writing Holocaust fiction and, of course, Holocaust romantic fiction. She eventually concludes by stating: “Repurposing the Holocaust for the romance genre may restore individual Jewish women to the narrative centre of genocide and celebrate women's agency as survivors, resisters and even saviours, but at what cost? “ (204) The use of Holocaust history as romance may do irreparable damage. Her explication of the limits of repurposing foregrounds the central thesis of the second volume, which asks when acts of repurposing, reparation, and resistance cross into exploitation and commodification of trauma.

The second collection, *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?*, questions the reparative potential of travel plots in romantic historical fiction, asking whether discourses of tourism empower women or position readers as neocolonial voyeurs. The introduction by Teo and Fresno-Calleja frames romantic fiction as often involving “exotic” encounters, where the past is othered for romantic amplification. They discuss a corpus of Anglophone works depicting women’s journeys, critiquing how armchair travel may replicate colonial gazes while narrating healing. The editors invoke postcolonial theory to examine exoticization’s dual role as empowering female protagonists while simultaneously commodifying histories of trauma.

The chapters explore varied geographies and eras. Sarah H. Ficke's analysis of Caribbean historical romances focuses on piracy, race, and freedom, showing how love stories outside the law challenge colonial legal frameworks. Irene Pérez-Fernández critiques Sarah Lark and Michelle Paver's neo-historical novels on Caribbean plantation life, arguing they view exploitation through "rose-tinted glasses," romanticizing slavery's aftermath. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez examines Jennifer McVeigh's works on colonial Kenya and South Africa, highlighting the fetishization of the "Dark Continent" in narratives that (mis)guide readers through imperial landscapes.

Pilar Villar-Argáiz narrates tragedy through love in Irish diaspora romances set during the Great Famine, using migration plots for emotional reparation. Miquel Pomar-Amer analyzes Jo Eames' *The Faithless Wife*, set in Menorca during the Spanish Civil War, critiquing "sun, sex, secrets" as masking the Pact of Forgetting. Fresno-Calleja's chapter on Pacific War fiction exoticizes "the most romantic place on earth" through militourism and romance. The final chapter by Teo and Astrid Schwegler-Castañer explores post/colonial nostalgia in Dinah Jefferies' novels set in Ceylon and India, analyzing melancholia in tea plantation stories. This collection centers on exoticism's entanglement with colonialism, the ethics of historical tourism in fiction, and whether reparative histories can avoid neo-Orientalism, ultimately serving as an extension of the previous collection.

These volumes function as interlocking pieces, with *Conflict and Colonialism* focusing on static sites of strife and *Travel and Colonialism* on mobile narratives of displacement. Both employ reparative frameworks—drawing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading—to argue that romance can heal historical wounds by imagining empowered women, yet they caution against oversimplification. For instance, Teo's Holocaust chapter in the first echoes the second's critiques of exoticized trauma, revealing genre pitfalls like trivialization or commodification. The shared postcolonial lens, evident in chapters on Caribbean and African settings, highlights how romance repurposes imperialism for feminist ends, but often at the cost of racial othering.

Strengths include the interdisciplinary approach, blending literary analysis with historical and cultural studies, and the global range from Australia to the Pacific. However,

the collections' prioritization of Anglophone texts potentially marginalizes non-Western voices. While they critique anachronism, some analyses risk over-romanticizing reparation without empirical reader studies. One potential limitation of these two collections is the overemphasis of Anglophone texts and writers engaging with colonial violence, often from perspectives shaped by Western imperial histories. While this scope provides valuable insights into how popular romance repurposes colonial narratives for reparative ends, it largely centers the viewpoint of the frequently white or Western-based writer and reader. The volumes do include some intersectional analysis, such as chapters on Caribbean, Navajo and immigrant stories, but they could more explicitly interrogate the positionally of the viewer and/or writer themselves. How does the act of writing or consuming these romances might inadvertently reinforce a neocolonial gaze? How do these analyses exert the same violence they intend to critique? How do these romances position the writer and reader as accomplices in the long history of violence against colonial subjects? While *Conflict and Colonialism* leans toward internal societal repairs, *Travel and Colonialism* externalizes them through journeys. Together, the two volumes illustrate romance's dual capacity for empowerment and perpetuation of colonial tropes. Perhaps a third volume in the series could expand beyond Anglophone dominance by centering romances written by and about people of color (POC) in deeper ways.

Teo and Fresno-Calleja's volumes are indispensable for scholars of romance, historical fiction, and postcolonial studies, offering a reparative yet critical lens on women's narratives. By repurposing history through love stories, they demonstrate the genre's potential to repair past injustices while exposing its constraints, encouraging readers to question exotic journeys and conflicted legacies. Though historical romance faces publishing declines in recent years, adaptations like *Bridgerton* and *Outlander* highlight its ongoing cultural resonance. These volumes show how the genre transcends escapism to become a battleground for gender and colonial reckonings.