

# Crossing the Border: History, Fiction and Postcolonial Identity

Stephen Harris

## Abstract

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*The literary depiction of history can, in a variety of forms and ways, act as an imaginative “re-possession” of history, a means of re-viewing the past not only in terms of what has happened and how, but also, by extension, in the sense of challenging accepted concepts of history. As argued, the politics of post-colonialism hinge on just such concern, and it is through many examples of contemporary fiction that we are compelled to read history in a different way, and see that it bears alternative and politically liberating meanings.*

**Key words:** History, fiction, post-colonialism.

## Resumo

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*A descrição literária da história pode, numa variedade de formas e maneiras, agir como uma “re-apropriação” imaginária da história, um modo de re-ver o passado não apenas em termos do que aconteceu e como, mas também, por extensão, no sentido de desafiar os conceitos estabelecidos da história. A política do pós-colonialismo está centrada nesses temas, e é através de muitos exemplos da ficção contemporânea que nós somos compelidos a ler a história de uma forma diferente, e apreender os significados alternativos e politicamente libertadores que ela comporta.*

**Palavras-chave:** História, ficção, pós-colonialismo.

And when he gazed out over this sea crossed by ships, adventurers, and immigrants, he was able, now and again,

to bring the past back to life (Nelida Piñon, *The Republic of Dreams*, 1989)

Since the 1980s there has been something of a revival of the once-disparaged historical novel. I say “something”, since the manner in which history is treated in much contemporary fiction distinguishes this fiction from earlier models in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. And yet, in admittedly more complex ways, what such fiction dramatises is the fact that while we like

to think we are living in the Present, we always live very much in the Past. For Madruga, octogenarian patriarch and stern husband to Eulalia, the conjurer of dreams, the Atlantic ocean is a “sea of memories”, the repository of his past from which he is able to retrieve stories of his own experiences as an immigrant and, in turn, tales and legends of a deeper familial past in Spain that reaches back four generations. Madruga and Eulalia are central characters in Nelida Piñon’s novel, *The Republic of Dreams*, the

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Stephen Harris completed his tertiary education in Australia, and currently lectures in American Literature and creative non-fiction at Victoria University (NZ); he has also written and lectured extensively on Australian literature. Most recently, his research has focused on individualism in American culture and on the literary treatment of history in contemporary American and Australian fiction.

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flamboyant saga of a Brazilian family, and she is here working with the metaphorical associations of the sea-as-symbol – the ocean as the gulf of time, as a vast well of mystery and “tall tales”, as a seductive lure to and catalyst for the human imagination and curiosity, and of course, as the watery “land” across which successions of historic travellers have trekked. As with many contemporary novelists, Piñon is not only writing fiction that is historical in scope and subject, but she is also, if only implicitly, re-working the very idea of history through the medium of fiction. This is to say, in this portrait of a family whose history is spread between Brasil and Spain, Piñon is in effect providing us with another way of imagining or conceiving history, albeit a distinctly personalised view. As the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago has said in relation to his own fictional re-writings of the past, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, “the truth is that history could have been written in many different ways and this idea of infinitude and variation are the essence of my writing. The possibility of the impossible, dreams and illusions, are the subject of my novels” (1996, London: The Harvill Press, (Trans. Giovanni Pontiero), pp.xviii). The fictional narrative, then, stands as what we might call a poetic perspective on accepted views of chronology, origins and time, and so an alternative version of history if only in the sense that we view these factors through the experience of particular individuals. And it is through the lens of individual experience that we gain a distinct view of the relationship between past and present. While Magruda’s personal past is “stored” in the ocean’s immemorial waters – a sea of stories in which he might both immerse himself in order to escape the present yet also “fish” from so as to repeatedly renew his sense of identity through recovering the stories of his origins – the ocean is also mapped with a larger drama of human endeavour – chronicles of adventure and movement, of conquest and colonisation. As an immigrant entranced by the dream of the New World, Magruda may have left his past in pursuit of his future in Brasil, yet what he comes to realise is that not only is the past important, but that he is himself very much a result of the much larger narrative of history.

That our lives, and any sense of personal and cultural identity, are framed within and formatively conditioned by the larger story that is history is self-evident. And yet, at this time, when the highly complex and often contentious issues of identity are of prime concern for a great many people around the globe, the ways in which we read, and who it is that writes history, are of unprecedented critical importance. In very general terms, the politics of postcolonialism emerges out of this concern with identity and the conditioning forces of history – or more precisely, not only out of the actual events that constitute what we understand as history but also, in what is in many ways inseparable, the way in which particular narratives of European colonialist history erase or deny diverse identities by speaking of and so “for” large groups of subject peoples and cultures. Whether literary fiction can in any real way assist us in conceiving of viable versions or alternatives to these imposed narratives is another part of the question I am concerned with here.

In this era, I think we can envisage history as contested “territory” – the “grounds” over which disputes occur as a result of the fundamental need to secure a self-defining place *through* the right to both have a voice in the making of history and, therefore, have a place *in* history. To adjust the metaphor, history is the “space” that is left following the territorial expansions of European powers over the last 400 years. In employing this metaphor, I am not saying that there is no material basis to any given notion of history. And in describing such fictional “re-versions” of the past, I am not suggesting that there have never been serious questions asked about the ways in which events and people have been (mis)represented in accounts of history. Rather, it is to propose that the current competing claims over and for identity are more so than ever about the politics of historiography as much as they are about the politics in history. In fact, confronted as we are with the prospect of a potentially monolithic global community, we are reminded that conventional notions of territory have been, and are being, profoundly altered. Current and frequently urgent concerns with locating and negotiating borders – ontological, epistemological, cultural, political –



and theoretical efforts to describe conceptual “landscapes” of self-identifying experience can be seen (in part) as responses to on-going fears of forces that threaten to obliterate difference *and* the sense of space in which this difference might exist.

Any claim to identity is always to some extent or another contentious; however, one way in which such claims are important is primarily in terms of agency. That is, the urge to reclaim or redefine identity is directly political in that it is typically about the right to speak and to claim the freedom to exercise some measure of self-determination. In fact, the demand to be given a “voice” is itself a central part of the political act. Yet, these questions themselves raise other questions. The matter of just who determines the discursive framework for any discussion of identity is an ever-present concern – which is to say, can the voiceless and under-privileged ever speak in and on their own terms? Also, we cannot ignore the fact that the very idea of identity is itself a politically suspect Western ideal, one which is, wittingly or otherwise, often imposed paternalistically upon others. We might also question the placing of a political premium on the notion of identity: to what extent does this contribute to an atomistic individualism and so undermine a strong sense of community, such an important factor for so many dispossessed peoples? In her comparative study of Latin American and North American historical fiction, Lois P. Zamora offers the telling observation that the fixation with individual identity in much of the literature of the United States is not only symptomatic of an underdeveloped or even absent historical consciousness, but it also, crucially, signals a withdrawal from communal life and so from the world of potentially meaningful action. Latin American historical fiction by contrast, in employing apocalyptic forms and themes, strives «to make connections between the past, present, and future, between the individual and the community, between the real and ideal ... [it] is a means of expressing the *communal* realities of historical identity» (Zamora, 1989. 176/9).

Before returning to Zamora’s useful point, I think it is worth noting that, in speaking of literary fiction in this way, we arrive at a

certain paradox. That is, to what extent can we say the highly individualistic act of writing fiction offer us a potentially fuller sense of communal involvement and so political engagement? Such a claim rests on another paradox: to describe an historical novel such as Nelida Piñon’s, replete as it is with strong romantic and epic qualities, as an alternative version of history is to make a strong political claim for both the role of literary fiction and therefore the writer’s imaginative capacities. In fact, to argue for the political relevance of literary fiction of this sort and in this televisually mediated world becomes something of a romantic claim itself: in the writer’s capacity to create new worlds, and so offer new ways of viewing our selves and our realities, there is an implicit celebration of the potentially liberating act of imagination. In using the term romantic, my intention is not to disparage the act of writing fiction or the liberating effects it may be said to have so much as to be clear about what it is that is being implied in such claims. This paradox points to another set of paradoxes intrinsic to postcolonialism. The first is the essentialism – the notion of a singular identity, individual or collective – that underlies postcolonial arguments for pluralism and difference – the very basis of postcolonialism’s emancipatory politics; and the second is the fundamentally materialist conception of history that underlies claims that our social, cultural and historical realities are primarily discursive “constructs”. These problems have been addressed by a number of critics, and it should be said that they do not necessarily undermine the postcolonialist approach; yet I think any serious approach to the matters at hand benefits from a balanced consideration of the assumptions and claims being made.

Whatever theoretical problems exist within postcolonialism, I think Zamora’s point is an interesting one, firstly in terms of the use of the comparative approach to the literature of North and South America; and secondly, in terms of highlighting the role fiction can play in reinforcing the link between a sense of history and identity. In fact, as I want to argue, fiction’s potential to encourage, and even re-affirm and re-new, some sense of both indivi-



dual and communal identity through its capacity to “re-imagine” history is fundamentally political in character. If such a claim can be described as “romantic”, it is no less worthwhile for it.

As embodied in fictional narrative, the emancipatory act of imagination becomes political in its capacity to “re-write” or “re-view” history. Of course, all fiction is at some point historical for it is about the passing of time; as well, we should not overlook the fact that depictions of that “other country” – the past – can all too easily become means of escapism – a self-deceiving nostalgia for the golden ages of yesteryear. And of course, we should not forget that there are always a number of ways to read or view the past: history can be consulted as a “teacher” or guide, even if all it offer is the knowledge that history trundles on in monotonous futile and brutal repetition. More optimistically and humanistically, history might also instruct by example, although such readings appear anachronistic and idealistic when we remember that the meaning of history is a matter of interpretation, itself a reflection of the fact that what is presented as history is always to a certain extent a matter of subjective perspective. Yet the point is that in certain important respects, this imaginative re-viewing of history offers a means of challenging, if not undermining, politically dominating representations of the past. In this respect, the fictional “re-writing” of history becomes a definitive characteristic of the postcolonial critique of imperialism and colonialism. As I have suggested, the past, then, becomes “another country” in very particular and political sense – a colonized “territory” that is imaginatively re-possessed in the interests of re-claiming, asserting or re-defining a self-determined, and thus liberating, sense of identity. The recent resurgence of the historical novel in its various guises and modes attests to the fact that there is an important conceptual shift occurring as regards our notions of history: literary writers are not simply making epistemological claims on history, but very much staking claims “in” a much disputed discursive territory. The blurring of the generic boundaries that occurs in the very form of the historical novel becomes in itself an aspect of the challenge to the “master” narrative of history – an

incursion into the authoritative grounds of historiography and so a violation of the territorial rules of genre that in effect challenges the fundamental distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. It is true that in fiction’s ability to freely transgress the boundaries between reality and fantasy, history becomes the material for the imagination and so may be transformed or in some less appealing way, distorted in the process. And yet, as the German writer Gunter Grass has said, “writers experience another view of history, what’s going on, another understanding of ‘progress’ ... Literature must refresh memory” (Grass in Tharoor 1989: ix). Fiction, then, can not only gesture towards poetic or symbolic truths, and evoke “unrecorded” historical facts and personal experiences, but it can also go some way to reminding us that our relationship with the past, and accordingly our understanding of the present, can be modified in the most positive sense.

To conclude, then, in many instances post-colonial fiction can be read as a form of “revisionist” history, in which the past is “poetically” re-viewed, parodically re-presented, or “mythically” reinvented, thereby offering a qualitatively different history-as-story that challenges the “hegemonic” history of the colonial powers and the credibility of the methodologically conventional methods of historical narrative. In such fictionalised versions of history, we can see a subversive re-viewing and imaginative re-presentation of the past in the interests of re-conceiving a post-colonial identity and reclaiming post-colonial cultural and geographical territory – a direct challenge to the official or “received” history, in both form (and therefore) content.

I would like to finish where I started – with an example of a fictional reviewing of the past from work of the Australian writer David Malouf. For Malouf, the post-colonial repossession of history starts with the establishment of “place”; with the identification between the individual and national “self” and a geographical and cultural locale. In and through his fiction – most notably *The Great World* – Malouf fictionally “mythologizes” history, and in doing so foregrounds the act of storytelling as the



meaningful narrativization of the post-colonial self. In endeavouring to uncover what he calls the “other histories” – the many stories often elided by the official account of events – Malouf not only lifts the stones of “fact” and “event” in the field of the past and poetically “finds” the secret, untold stories living underneath, but he also re-enacts through his fictional narratives the articulation of place and self. The speaking of “place” and “self”, then, involves the imaginative “re-possession” of history through the imaginative fictional act, and so we are compelled to read history in a different way, and see that it bears alternative and, ideally, liberating meanings.

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# Comunidad y solución en la narración de origen indio en los Estados Unidos

Márgara Averbach

## Resumen

*Este artículo intenta explorar el papel de la comunidad en la literatura y el cine de los indios de los EEUU. En el centro de las visiones del mundo de las tribus de los creadores, la comunidad organiza, define estructuras, es refugio y futuro en estas obras. Su falta significa locura, el reencuentro con ella es siempre una especie de resurrección. El futuro (y la esperanza) se relacionan directamente con ella y está representada por fotos, comidas en grupo, ceremonias curativas y música según la historia de que se trate.*

**Palabras claves:** Indios de los EEUU, comunidad, literatura/ cine

## Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the role of Native American communities in literature and movies. In the center of the world views of the tribes of creators, the community organizes, defines structures, is refuge and future in these works. Its lack means madness, the encounter with the community is always a kind of resurrection. Future (and hope) relate directly with the community and it is represented by pictures, the eating together, healing ceremonies and music according to history one refers to.*

**Key words:** US Indians, community, literature/cinema.

Hay muchas maneras de narrar en nuestro tiempo. Desde el cine a las distintas formas de literatura, "contar" es siempre una forma de transmitir maneras de ver el mundo. Las historias cinematográficas y literarias de los autores indios estadounidenses y canadienses tienen ciertas características en común por encima de las amplias diferencias tribales y personales entre los creadores y los grupos de los que provienen. Algunas de estas características construyen puentes entre estos libros y películas, y los que producen otras minorías étnicas, raciales y de género en los Estados Unidos. Tal vez

la más evidente y frecuente es una tendencia a terminar la historia en tono positivo, con algo que podríamos llamar "final feliz". El "final feliz" no es universal - hay libros muy famosos que no terminan "bien", por ejemplo, *Winter in the Blood* de James Welch (1974), pero en su gran mayoría, la tendencia es la contraria.

Eso es interesante en sí mismo. Y tiene una gran importancia desde lo político. Por ejemplo, en otras oportunidades, he comparado películas de grandes estudios de Hollywood, tradicionales y sin demasiada intencionalidad artística con películas en las que las minorías tie-

Márgara Averbach - doctora en letras (Universidad de Buenos Aires) y traductora de inglés (IES en lenguas vivas, J. R. Fernández). Profesora de literatura de los EEUU y traducción literaria a nivel universitario y terciario, e crítica literaria del diario Clarín, traductora literaria e escritora.

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