



Digging Up the Un/Romantic Past: The Revision of Popular Romance Codes in Rose Tremain's *The Colour* and Maxine Alterio's *Ribbons of Grace*¹

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Abstract. This article offers a comparative reading of two neo-historical novels: Rose Tremain's *The Colour* and Maxine Alterio's *Ribbons of Grace*, both set in 19th century New Zealand and portraying interracial love stories between British and Chinese characters in the context of the gold rush. I read these neo-historical novels in relation to the romantic conventions they simultaneously employ and subvert. My contention is that their manipulation of certain romantic narrative and thematic conventions demonstrates the porosity between the literary and the popular ends of the historical spectrum. My analysis concentrates on how each author employs the romantic material to articulate their respective political agendas. Whereas Tremain's novel prioritises a feminist perspective and emphasises the individual dimension of the love story, Alterio's work is more concerned with the postcolonial revision of New Zealand's past and highlights the social consequences of the interracial liaison.

Keywords: Rose Tremain, Maxine Alterio, Neo-historical novel, Popular Romance, New Zealand history.

[es] Desenterrando el lado (menos) romántico del pasado: La Revisión de los códigos del romance popular en *The Colour* de Rose Tremain y *Ribbons of Grace* de Maxine Alterio

Resumen. Este artículo realiza un análisis comparativo de dos novelas neo-históricas *The Colour*, de Rose Tremain y *Ribbons of Grace*, de Maxine Alterio. Ambas novelas se sitúan en la Nueva Zelanda del siglo XIX y narran relaciones interraciales de amor entre personajes británicos y chinos con el trasfondo de la fiebre del oro. Mi lectura se centra en demostrar cómo estas novelas neo-históricas emplean y subvierten simultáneamente convenciones de la novela romántica. Mi argumento principal es que la manipulación de estas convenciones genéricas demuestra la porosidad que existe entre las variedades literarias y populares de la novela histórica y que cada autora utiliza el material romántico para articular su respectiva agenda política. Mientras la novela de Tremain prioriza una perspectiva feminista y coloca el énfasis en los aspectos individuales de la historia de amor, la novela de Alterio se ocupa de la revisión de la historia neozelandesa desde una perspectiva postcolonial resaltando las consecuencias sociales de la relación interracial.

Palabras clave: Rose Tremain, Maxine Alterio, novela neo-histórica, romance popular, historia de Nueva Zelanda.

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1. Introduction

The proliferation and success of women’s historical novels in the last decades, as part of what has come to be defined as the “historical turn” in contemporary fiction (Keen 2006), has invigorated the academic revision of the genre in its multiple forms. Despite the fact that they focus on different historical and geographical contexts and display an array of aesthetic and ideological agendas, many of these novels share similar gender concerns, equally placing the emphasis on the recovery of women’s history (Wallace 2005: 180), the centralization of the female experience and agency (King 2005: 3), and the reassessment of “marginalized or misunderstood female figures” (Cooper and Short 2012: 12). In addition, studies of the historical genre generally tend to agree that, although set in the past, these novels engage in critical debates with sociocultural and political issues which are of relevance to the various present-day contexts from which they originate (Cooper and Short 2012: 9; Wallace 2005: 23).

Part of the discussion around historical fiction has focused on revising the taxonomy of the genre, as academic and commercial labels become simultaneously questioned, blurred and reformulated. Jerome de Groot employs the traditional distinction between popular and literary historical novels, but remarks on the genre’s “intergeneric hybridity and flexibility [evidenced by] the complexity of the bookshop’s Historical Fiction section [with its] physical intermingling of genres, types of writer, and publishers” (2010: 2). Suzanne Keen similarly establishes a division between traditional historical novels, often associated with male writers, popular historical romances, generally produced and consumed by women, and what she calls “new historical fiction” (2006: 171), written in agreement with postmodern and often postcolonial concerns. Borrowing Raymond Williams’ concepts, Keen defines each of these types respectively as residual, dominant and emergent forms of historical fiction (2006: 173). Yet, she advocates for reconsidering the supposedly different spaces these various forms occupy and locates them as part of “a conversation about past and present in emergent, dominant, and residual forms, with a variety of attitudes toward truth, accuracy, evidence, events, causation, human beings, and fictional characters” (2006:182). In her monograph on the “woman’s historical novel”, Wallace similarly reinforces the connections between “the ‘popular’ and the ‘serious’ or ‘literary’ ends of the spectrum”, arguing that all these varieties should be read “together and against each other” (2005: 5) since “[t]hese two uses of history –escape and political intervention– are more connected than they might at first seem” (2005: 2).

Considering the continuities and connections between these different varieties, I focus on two recent novels which can be categorized as “new historical” or “neo-historical” fiction, as other critics prefer to define it (Rousselot 2014): Rose Tremain’s

The Colour (2003) and Maxine Alterio's *Ribbons of Grace* (2007). Both novels are set in New Zealand in the 1860s and describe the hardships of colonial life in the context of the gold rush. Albeit in different form, they similarly explore the presence of Chinese people in New Zealand and the climate of racial tension that characterised this period through the portrayal of interracial love stories. Chinese sojourners arrived in New Zealand from the 1860s to work as gold miners; they were mostly men who came from China's southern provinces, escaping poverty and hunger (Ip 1990: 18), and aimed to stay in New Zealand long enough to make a small fortune and return to their families in China, although many of them actually made of New Zealand their home. The cultural and racial tensions originating from the presence of these sojourners are explored by Tremain and Alterio in their articulation of the central love stories in the context of the profound gender imbalance which characterised colonial New Zealand, and particularly the Chinese gold mining communities portrayed in the novels (Ip 2002: 149; Ng 1995: 263). From a fictional perspective, this gender imbalance allows great possibilities when it comes to the inscription of the female experience so central to the agenda of female historical fiction.

The novels, therefore, engage with "public" concerns, traditionally associated with historical narratives, but do so through the depiction of interracial love stories, resorting to motifs commonly found in popular historical romance produced by women. Katherine Cooper and Emma Short discuss contemporary historical fiction by women remarking on how many novelists "play on the associations of both female protagonists and female authors with the romance genre [and] playfully exploit this association" (2012: 8) through their narrative, thematic or structural choices. Tremain and Alterio employ popular romance codes in their neo-historical novels and in particular resort to some of the conventions of the popular romances set in colonial and exotic locations, produced by female writers from the end of the 19th century and often depicting interracial liaisons. These colonial romances or "imperial romantic fiction" (2016: 89),³ as Hsu-Ming Teo prefers to categorise the genre, combine the features of "the masculine imperial adventure romance and the more feminine form of the domestic romantic novel" (2016: 88) and were intended to inscribe the female role in Empire building, offering extensive critical commentary on the politics of the day and reflecting anxieties about miscegenation and interracial relations, often articulated through tragic and unhappy love stories (2016: 90).

My aim is then to consider how these stories of interracial love can be read in relation to the romantic codes they simultaneously employ and subvert. My contention is that their manipulation of certain narrative and thematic conventions demonstrates the porosity between the literary and the popular ends of the historical spectrum, a porosity which allows each author to articulate their respective political agendas. In this sense, I borrow the two questions posed by Teo in her analysis of imperial romantic novels: "what does the genre of romantic fiction allow women writers to *do*? How does it enable them to intervene in public debates [and] amplify their political voice, whether for progressive or conservative positions?" (2016: 102). I also follow Emily Davis' work on the use of romance in a range of contemporary novels and her exploration of the apparent incompatibility between the escap-

³ Teo (2016) uses the term "imperial romantic novel" to highlight the fact that many of these works were also written after the end of colonial rule, displayed an interest in the aftermath of colonisation, reflected on the ongoing links between the former colonies and the metropolis and were in fact written for a metropolitan audience.

ist and the political. Her contention that romance is “an especially malleable tool for representing fluid political, sexual, and racial identities and coalitions” (2013: 2) and “a logical place for feminist critics to seek critique of social inequality and representations of alternative social formations” (2013: 8) proves pertinent to my discussion of these novels and the doomed love stories they depict. By establishing an implicit dialogue not only with traditional historical fiction written by male authors, but also with popular historical romances produced by women, these neo-historical novels profit from the malleability and hybridity of the historical genre (De Groot 2010: 2) in its confluence with romance, while addressing a range of social debates in agreement with postcolonial and/or feminist preoccupations.

2. “The (White) Woman Always Wins”: Feminism and Orientalism in Rose Tremain’s *The Colour*

British novelist Rose Tremain, one of the most successful exponents of the contemporary historical novel, has set her novels in an impressive range of times and locations. *The Colour* (2003) takes place in New Zealand in the 1860s and tells the story of Harriet and Joseph Blackstone, a newly married couple who migrate, together with Joseph’s mother, from Norfolk to New Zealand in 1864. The novel depicts the collapse of their marriage before Harriet becomes involved in a passionate love affair with a Chinese migrant, Pao Yi. Tremain’s settler narrative reproduces the plot of some colonial romances which “emphasised freedom and possibility in the New World” (Gelder and Weaver 2010: 3), yet this story of female emancipation (Walezak 2017: 13) works precisely by denying the “happy ever after”, or rather, by offering happiness to the heroine outside the institution of marriage. As opposed to many romance novels which open with an arranged union which then evolves to overcome the multiple “barriers to become a true marriage” (Regis 2003: 30), the plot works in reverse, showing the collapse of Harriet and Joseph’s relationship.

Despite its apparent unromantic ending, the novel playfully invokes common motifs and romantic plot lines. Harriet abandons her position as governess to marry Joseph, who promises a new life in “the paradise he would create on the other side of the world” (14). Early in the novel, we are misleadingly taken down the romantic path when Joseph reflects on his feelings and promising prospects:

[Joseph] felt his heart suddenly fill to its very core with gratitude and affection. [He] wanted to cross the room and put his arms round Harriet and gather her hair into a knot in his hand. He wanted to lay his head on her shoulder and tell her the one thing that he would never be able to admit to her –that she had saved his life. (4)

The hardships of colonial life become overwhelming once the couple settles in New Zealand, although Joseph seems keen on overcoming these difficulties by taming and shaping the inhospitable bush in proper settler fashion. For instance, after inspecting his newly acquired plot of land, he decides to call the nearby river “‘Harriet’s Creek’ because he knew how much this would please his new wife. He imagined her [...] writing to her father [...] telling him how fast the water rushed over the stones, ‘and don’t you think this is very romantic of Joseph?’” (12).

Harriet's perceptions, however, appear to contradict Joseph's thoughts, and the narrative establishes very early the failure of her romantic expectations. Firstly, Harriet feels excluded from the project Joseph has undertaken: "she had been left behind. It would be Joseph who would make their house rise out of nothing on the empty plains, Joseph who would build a fire under the stars and hear the cry of the distant bush" (6); and to this frustration she adds the realisation that she hardly knows Joseph and cannot fall in love with him: "She'd told herself that, here in New Zealand, love would come in like a quiet change in the seasons, that she wouldn't have to strive for it; it would become as easy to her as breathing. But she saw now that it wasn't easy, that it hadn't thrived as she'd expected" (49). Harriet's goals thus soon deviate from domesticity and romantic daydreaming in favour of her need to secure real independence and self-fulfilment.

Her rejection is intensified after Joseph finds gold in the creek which he now feels "was *his*" (75), and becomes obsessed with "the colour". His settler dreams of creating a farm are transformed into blind ambition as he realises that "he'd *never* loved [Harriet] as much as he'd hoped to [and] now, his mind had gone towards gold" (121). After excavating his land in a way that Harriet sees as "obscene" (95), Joseph decides to try his luck in the West Coast fields, escaping both a failed marriage and an obscure past in England as responsible for his former girlfriend's death. Rather than appearing as the conventional alpha male of popular romance who is redeemed by the heroine, Joseph is presented as irredeemably lost. Both characters, thus, experience their own process of recognition, one that does not result in the removal of the existing barriers and the confirmation of their love (Regis 2003: 36) but in their mutual dislike for each other: Harriet's indifference towards Joseph evolves into "hatred of the blackest kind" (95) and Joseph similarly realises that "he hated her" (252).

Harriet's transformation also allows her to displace her interest from Joseph to her new environment, thus illustrating Teo's point that imperial romantic heroines often "fall in love with the land" (2016: 101). While Joseph struggles with the hostile environment, "she loved the wilderness he had brought her to, but not him" (95). She agrees that Joseph leaves the farm to go to the West Coast fields to find the colour, but as a condition she asks for a horse to move about freely; all she wants is "[t]o be alone here, alone with a strong horse in all this magnificent vastness! Alone and alone and alone, with no one guiding or leading. Alone in a desert of hills that lay between the mountains and the sea" (52). After Joseph's mother dies and the house is destroyed by heavy rains, Harriet decides to leave the farm to find him, but mostly she desires to quench her thirst for freedom, which she defines as a "yearning beyond any telling" (201). Harriet thus embodies what Sceats identifies as one of the key preoccupations in Tremain's oeuvre, the search for a "fulfilling self-identity" (2005: 168), while her behaviour questions her willingness to submit to "the domestic test" which vertebrates popular romantic fiction and which demands women to "conform to the three traditional and interrelated roles of female socialization: wife, mother and homemaker" (Mussell 1984: 89). Harriet comes across Joseph in a most unromantic and anticlimactic reunion and, once Joseph tells her to get her own tent, she begins her independent life liberated from any emotional or moral responsibility towards him. At this point Harriet realises that she has everything she needs to "go where she liked" (258) and decides to try her own luck at gold-digging.

In the final part of the novel Harriet moves up-river and sets her camp opposite Pao Yi's plot of land. Pao Yi starts his days in New Zealand mining for gold and feels

that he cannot return to China until he has become rich; yet, in a reversal of what happens to Joseph, who abandons the farm for the colour, Pao Yi forsakes gold mining for his vegetable garden, a place where he hopes to replicate “the colours of his past” (214). Despite the fact that his thoughts constantly go back to his wife and son in China, he feels that what he really wants is to construct “his own world” (248), while making his living by selling vegetables to the diggers. When he finds gold in his garden, he stores it and continues working, showing no interest in returning: “just as he wasn’t yet prepared to abandon his market garden for the sake of gold, so he wasn’t yet prepared to abandon his solitude for the sake of Paak Mei and Paak Shui” (248-49). This establishes an ideal context for the love story to emerge, positioning both Pao Yi and Harriet as characters struggling to survive in an alien and hostile environment and, at least momentarily, free from previous sentimental or familial attachments.

After an unremarkable first meeting, in which Pao Yi and Harriet exchange a few polite words, Pao Yi comes to Harriet’s rescue in typical romance style when she is about to drown in the overflowed river. Pao Yi then takes Harriet to his hut to recover and it is in this secluded space that their relationship develops. Harriet’s rescue can be read as an ironic reversal of rape or captivity narratives (Marchetti 1993: 8) employed in colonial times as cautionary tales about the dangers of interracial liaisons. In this case, their relationship turns into an intimate and intense one based on mutual consent as Tremain allows both Harriet and Pao Yi to reflect on their feelings for each other by offering both the male and female perspective on the same events. Pao Yi, for instance, defines their physical proximity as “intimate and troubling” (310), while Harriet observes Pao Yi’s delicate movements as she begins to experience an intense attraction: “she felt his hand on her brow and the touch of this was as beautiful a thing that Harriet had ever experienced and she wanted it to remain there and never move” (313). Harriet’s incipient desire grows fast and unexpectedly, like the rapidly rising river, and evolves into an overwhelming passion of a kind she has never experienced:

she now saw that the curve of his mouth was sensual and beautiful beyond any other that she’d seen, and she was unable to stop herself from reaching out, hesitantly, like a blind person trying to find her way, and touching his lips with her fingers. [...] And it seemed to her that for all the time she’d been alive, desire had lain asleep in her and never stirred, so that she’d believed she would never feel it and would go through into middle age and old age never understanding what it could be. But now it had been woken by this one man. She whispered his name: ‘Pao Yi’. (322-23)

In the presentation of their mutual and genuine passion, Tremain explicitly subverts polarised views of Chinese men as either sexual predators (Ooi 2011: 217) or asexualised “celestials” prevalent at the time. Far from being associated with evil or aggressive male behaviour, features which Tremain ascribes to Joseph, Pao Yi comes across as a passionate but sensitive lover, a fully-fleshed character, realistically constructed and psychologically well-developed, and with the erotic appeal of romance heroes.

The intensity of their relationship derives to a large extent from the specific physical conditions that determine it. Pao Yi and Harriet’s stay in his hut during the win-

ter, in “the room which contained their existence in a way that was absolute, in a way which refused both past and future” (344). Once the snow disappears, they move to a nearby cave where they are protected from the outside world. To achieve that seclusion Pao Yi “banished time” (343), by removing all traces of his past life, including the photographs of his family. By placing the characters in isolation, away from the mining community, from colonial rules and taboos, and from their past lives, their love affair is not affected by any social or moral judgment, nor by any external pressures. Harriet and Pao Yi never leave the hut or the cave as a couple, their affair remains constricted to this secluded location, and the novel capitalises on this atmosphere of secrecy and protection to enhance the intensity of their sexual encounters and Harriet’s evolution after the experience.

Nevertheless, in its presentation of the interracial union, the novel reinscribes some of the ideological patterns it otherwise appears to reject. In imperial romantic novels interracial relationships were normally inconceivable or, when allowed, limited to very specific combinations (Teo 2016: 97-99). The sexual union between a British woman and a Chinese man presented in the novel offers a liberal message of racial equality and female freedom. Yet, by conditioning Harriet’s and Pao Yi’s relationship to the temporal and spatial confinement of the cave, the novel paradoxically contributes to the portrayal of their affair as taboo, a choice which might be realistic in the context depicted, but which in my view jeopardises the revisionist potential of the romantic plot as a tool to discuss the evident public dimension of the interracial romance and the contemporary resonances of the novel’s discussion of gender and identity.

The liberating potential of the love story is also thwarted by the conspicuous deployment of well-known orientalist tropes. Although Pao Yi is depicted sympathetically, clearly showing Tremain’s attraction for marginal and outsider figures with which she allows readers to empathize (Sceats 2005: 166-167), some of the elements employed to describe his past life in China lie perilously close to the orientalist discourse of colonial romances. In her discussion about the settings of neo-Victorian novels, Kolkhe argues that “the nineteenth century [has replaced] the Orient as an imaginary free-zone of libidinal fantasy and ‘sexation’” (2008: 53). Like many contemporary novels set in Victorian times, *The Colour* reflects a similar fascination with Victorian sexuality in its more appealing or repulsive varieties (Kohlke 2008: 56; Saxey 2009: 80). These polarised views are evident, on the one hand, in the narration of Harriet’s sexual awakening and, on the other, in the subplot concerning Joseph’s abusive behaviour towards both his former girlfriend and a young man, William, with whom he maintains a homosexual relation. But, contrary to Kohlke’s argument that actual Oriental settings are hardly given prominence (2008: 68) *The Colour* actually articulates this “sexation” both temporally and geographically by resorting to a range of iconic oriental elements to construct Harriet and Pao Yi’s romance. In this sense, Tremain’s novel employs many of the recurrent “exoticising strategies” that Rousselot ascribes to neo-historical novels in their attempt to recreate the past through the aesthetisation of the historical Other (2014: 8) in a way that “comes perilously close to reproducing the same problematic cultural readings as those found in traditional travel narratives” (2014: 7) as well as in colonial romances.

This is evident in some of the flashbacks that transport us to China, described in highly idealised vignettes (248-249), as well as in the passages where we learn about

Pao Yi's past life. We are told that in China Pao Yi had become "an artist of love" (341) after spending his whole life devising ways to please his non-existent lovers: "His imaginary concubines has had fantastic names, Indigo Bird, Scarlet Tigress, Emerald Flower, and he had always been certain that these beautiful beings would be capable of feeling sexual pleasure as intense as his own" (342). His self-acquired artistry is finally put to use when he marries his wife and makes her feel "The Empress of Heron Lake" (343). Harriet benefits from this sexual expertise, after he decides to banish all memories from his past and his family and devote himself exclusively to please her:

Pao Yi's only thought was to become the perfect lover of the woman he called Hal Yet. [...] All Pao Yi knew and all he wanted to know was that he had found this perfect woman and now he would love her. For her, he would be a real 'connoisseur'. He would find the bud of her pleasure and make it flower. He would discover every inch of her and caress her with his hand and his lips and his sex and his mind. (343-344)

Pao Yi's sexual skills are thus presented as one of the many transportable commodities intertwined in the narrative. In a proleptic reference to the central love story, at the beginning of the novel Harriet chooses for her scrapbook the label of a tea box which shows two herons, "with their necks entwined amidst some Chinese writing" (10), in clear allusion to Heron Lake, the place where Pao Yi comes from (Walezak 2017: 156). Likewise, Harriet reflects on the diverse oriental commodities exchanged across the ocean: "the empty [tea] box, which must have crossed the Pacific on some interminable sea-voyage from Canton. Tea and silk. Opium and ebony. Chinese settlers hoping for money and gold... All these, like her with her dreams of land and children" (60). Opium, in fact, becomes a central prop to their love story. Pao Yi, like many Chinese migrants, consumes opium regularly. When Harriet and Pao Yi move inside the cave, opium becomes the only way to endure the cold and thus Harriet starts smoking it: "He lit a pipe and they lay down together and the pipe passed from the one to the other and Harriet felt for the first time that stretching away of her being into fragments of extraordinary lightness which could rearrange themselves into any shape or form she might desire" (347). Opium smoking intensifies Harriet's physical pleasure, allowing her to become someone else. The reference to opium as a vehicle for mental liberation contributes to the orientalisation of the erotic scene by detaching the lover's use of opium from the multiplicity of factors determining its consumption.⁴ This scene can thus be read as engaging with imperial tales of oriental seduction (Marchetti 1993: 8) which appear to be invoked when Pao Yi provides the opium responsible for Harriet's delirium. But, at the same time, the episode ironically reverses the seduction narrative by presenting Harriet as a temptress responsible for corrupting Pao Yi:

⁴ The massive migration of Chinese people to New Zealand and other parts of the world occurred mostly as a result of the effects of the Opium wars; the effects of opium consumption were devastating not only in China, but also among migrants, who often smoked it to combat pain, loneliness and sadness. Common accusations against the Chinese as immoral and depraved beings pointed specifically at habits such as gambling and opium smoking (Murphy 2009: 74), and the opium dens often figured in popular imagination as places of corruption and perversion.

And Pao Yi, who had been afraid to abandon himself to her, who, until now had held on to his separate and private self, now called her to kill him, to let him pass to oblivion through desire, and she acquiesced, and he felt come into him an animal rage to mate without ceasing [...] and in a torrent of language he cursed her as a demon, as a reptile who had tempted him away from all that had been precious to him [...]. (347)

This extremely intense experience recedes as Harriet and Pao Yi realise that their affair, like winter, must soon come to an end. The impossibility that their relationship materialises after this brief impasse is paradoxically compensated by the discovery that the whole cave is made of gold. The cave thus becomes the ultimate metaphor for the Orient; on the one hand, it is the stage (Said 2003: 63) on which Pao Yi's China is played out and, on the other, it appears as a place of excess and opulence which westerners exploit and eventually leave behind. After extracting and sharing the gold, Harriet returns to the "real" world and Pao Yi to the "real" China, not before experiencing a moment of recognition when he reconsiders his relationship with Harriet as a betrayal of his wife. Tremain then rewrites the happy ending when Harriet imagines Pao Yi's arrival in Heron Lake to his wife—a woman "he had loved and [...] he loved [...] still" (356)—and reverses the usual framework of imperial romances by having the Chinese man leaving the white woman behind. Although historically accurate, the ending nevertheless contributes to resituate Pao Yi in "a regressive past in which individual desires and feelings are painfully oppressed, and defined roles are marked by an extreme enforcement of gender inequality" (Young 2016: 206).

Keeping the news of her pregnancy from Pao Yi, Harriet accepts his decision to go and, despite moments of "agony" (356), she actually experiences her own happy ending. While Joseph goes back to England troubled by the secrets of his former life, frustrated by the failure of his mining venture, and convinced that Harriet is dead, she uses her newly acquired fortune to rebuild the farm and start a new life with her son, thus fulfilling her own "dreams of land and children" (60). In its happy but unconventional ending, *The Colour* then moves away from its generic referents. Harriet and Pao Yi's love story unfolds without tragic consequences, while miscegenation anxieties informing colonial romances are not addressed, since their story never becomes public. The feminist message of emancipation is obvious, but Harriet's future predicaments as a single mother of a mixed-race child are left out of the narrative, a decision which in my view prevents Tremain from fully engaging with the social implications of Harriet's decision.

Walezak defines *The Colour* as "a proleptic narrative paralleling post-colonialism and feminism through the fight for independence of Harriet Blackstone and Chinese migrant Pao Yi" (2017: 3). Contrary to this view, I argue that the postcolonial message is clearly overshadowed by the focus on Harriet's feminist struggle. Although Tremain portrays the hardships of colonial settlement and interrogates "colonial trespassing" (Walezak 2017: 161) by making Joseph fail and return to England, the novel concludes with Harriet's triumph, thus sanctioning her settlement process as legitimate. The happy ending does not depend on the materialisation of the protagonists' love story, but paradoxically on its coming to an end. Harriet's independence is achieved thanks to Pao Yi's unsuccessful attempts to gain such freedom, as he must return to China to meet his familial duties. The well-known assumption that in

romance novels “the woman always wins” (Krentz 1992: 2) proves true in a novel which paradoxically questions many of the tenets of the romantic formula. Harriet’s ability to “ride alone” and start afresh can be ascribed to her stamina and courage, but also, irremediably, to the material resources provided by the land. In this sense, Harriet’s triumph as a white woman can be read as metonymic of the hegemonic imposition of British settlers both over indigenous Maori people and non-Anglo-Saxon migrants, clearly marginalised in the process of colonial and national construction.⁵ This in my view shows that both the specific historical context and the choice of an interracial love story are secondary to the novel’s feminist message. In this respect, I fully concur with Sceats’s comment that Tremain’s novels display a “peculiar brand of feminism” (2005: 175), one which, she argues, is “psychological rather than political” (2005: 167).

A New Zealand reviewer of the novel remarked that it was “odd to read a book set in New Zealand yet aimed primarily at a non-New Zealand audience” (Thomson 2003). This is not to suggest that Tremain’s novel is not carefully documented, it is rather a poignant way of condensing the novelist’s personal take on her historical material and her prioritisation of the feminist message irrespective of the context in which the novel is set. The observation that this is a New Zealand story intended for a non-New Zealand audience, evident if we consider the international circulation of the novel,⁶ does not minimise the accuracy of the historical narrative. But it does position Tremain’s account in the context of the large scale project collectively created by female historical novelists to revise and subvert gender roles and empower female characters, while displaying a taste for remote and exotic settings in a way that may result problematic. While *The Colour* breaks free from a number of the ideological constraints employed in colonial romances and reverses some of its motifs, the postcolonial potential of the love story is, in my view, clearly minimised by its orientalist slant and the prioritisation of the white feminist message.

3. Romance and the Postcolonial Agenda: Maxine Alterio’s *Ribbons Of Grace*

Maxine Alterio’s *Ribbons of Grace* (2007) is similar to *The Colour* in context and setting, but it offers significant differences both in how the romantic elements are used and how the interracial love story is presented. The novel is set in the goldfields of Arrowtown in the 1870s and narrates the tragic liaison between Ming Yuet, who manages to escape China and migrate to New Zealand dressed as a man, and Conran, an Orcadian stonemason who has also settled in the area. Although Alterio’s novel was a best-seller in New Zealand (Stachurski 2013: 206), it has definitely not enjoyed the global reach of Tremain’s novel. Its appearance needs to be framed both within the worldwide boom of historical fiction (in its popular and literary varieties) and within the expansion that the genre has experimented in New Zealand in the past

⁵ This approach is evident not only in relation to Pao Yi, but also to the Indigenous Maori culture, as evidenced by the subplot involving a Maori woman named Pare. A discussion of this aspect of the novel, however, exceeds the purpose of my paper.

⁶ The novel has been translated into several languages and is currently being turned into a film, directed by Peter Webber and co-produced by the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

two decades, especially in the hands of female writers.⁷ As several critics have noted, this success may be due to the fact that these novels adapt and blur recognizable and popular genres, occupying a “middle ground” (McAllister 2004) between literary historical novels and popular romances and successfully combining “aspects of the romance genre with finely detailed evocations of place, time and wider social issues” (Stachurski 2013: 205).

My reading of *Ribbons of Grace* starts from the acknowledgement of this generic blending and, while it focuses on the novel’s reworking of popular romance codes, it considers the ways in which Alterio’s novel differs from Tremain’s in its more nuanced articulation of the interracial love story. Alterio’s specific take, I argue, is conditioned by her status as a New Zealand writer so that the treatment of the historical material is more clearly related to a postcolonial agenda, particularly to the key postcolonial concern of revising official versions of history. More specifically, the novel explores the silenced Chinese New Zealand voice by focusing on the development and tragic outcome of Conran and Ming Yuet’s relationship, which is fully conditioned by the colonial climate of violence and racism dominating New Zealand in the 19th century and directly targeting Chinese migrants. The prologue, narrated by Ming Yuet while visiting the tomb of Conran and their daughter, anticipates both the happy and the unhappy elements of the story while pointing at the public dimension of their relationship:

Con-Lan and I loved among these poppies. We filled the space between the river and mountains and sky, flattened the tussock grass and warmed the schist. And, in a hut, high on the side of a mountain, we burrowed deep into each other’s hearts. Happiness lived within us until our secret flew out of the door, tumbled down the gorge and rushed into town on the wind. Dark Times followed. (10)

Differently from Tremain’s novel, romance is a more prominent ingredient in *Ribbons of Grace* and Alterio offers multiple hints that feed the readers’ romantic expectations from the beginning (Stachurski 2013: 213). In the first part of the novel China is presented as violent and brutal towards women, a “flawed” society (Regis 2003: 31) which prevents the heroine from the pursuit of her romantic goal. Witnessing the fate of other women in her village, who are taken by “river men” (33) or of her oldest sister sold by her father to pirates to pay for his opium addiction, Ming Yuet tells her mother: “I want love, not a husband” (24). She eventually manages to escape China disguised as her dead brother to travel to the New Zealand gold mines to narrate her story of “love fever” (65).

Although the romantic motivations of the protagonist are somehow anachronistic, given the context Alterio describes, and the narrative is not free from the orientalist slant which I discussed in relation to Tremain’s novel, Alterio manages to work the romantic plot around the historical conditions that truly determined the migration of Chinese women to New Zealand. Since Chinese women were expected to remain in China taking care of relatives (Ip 1990: 19), Ming Yuet can only hope to escape by

⁷ The gold rush period, in particular, has been fictionalised in works of diverse kind (see Ooi 2011), often employing the interracial romance motif. Recent New Zealand historical novels featuring Chinese characters include Jenny Patrick’s *Landings* (2012), Deborah Challinor’s *The Cloud Leopard’s Daughter* (2010), Kaye Kelly’s *Cross the River to Home* (2004) or Kelly Ana Morey’s *Bloom* (2003).

adopting the identity of her brother. Impediments to the journey also included the high costs involved but, most notably in the case of women, the physical limitations deriving from their bound feet (Ip 1990: 19). Ming Yuet's Grandmother and her Great-auntie, in fact, both have bound feet and recall their painful and unromantic stories: "All my life I have this misery for a husband who thrashed me" (23). Although Ming Yuet's mother refuses to have her feet bound, she is equally burdened by a marriage to a man she does not love. In a letter she writes to Ming Yuet when she is already in New Zealand, she confesses her attraction for a poet who visited her village when she was already married to her father, and asks Ming Yuet "not [to] fear love [...]. Embrace that which comes to you. Better to feel heat once than live in the shadows forever" (78). Ming Yuet's friend, Soo Tie, who has also been forced to marry in China before migrating, explains that he actually loves another Chinese man and that they intend to remain in New Zealand together. Soo Tie thrives in this homosexual relationship and promises Ming Yuet similar pleasures once she finds her perfect match: "Wait until you love a man [...] Then you will sing more sweetly than a bellbird" (83).

These romantic expectations are fully realised when Conran appears, although the narrative frame questions the chronological progression towards the happy ending in favour of a fragmented narrative whose sad outcome has already being announced. Ming Yuet's account, as she already warns us in the prologue, "will not travel in straight lines" (10) and resists closure. Her narrative focuses on her youth in China, her trip to New Zealand and the hardships of her life as a miner, trying to pass off as a man. But when it comes to her relationship with Conran, Ming Yuet only offers some brushstrokes, announcing its tragic ending before we actually witness how the courtship and love story develop; for instance, at the beginning of the novel she momentarily recalls their passion: "Skin remembers. [Conran] moved in me like wind through a cane field, sometimes gentle- a feather touch; other times twisting and turning until he exploded like a fire cracker. I still hunger for him" (74). In the chapter entitled "Man Who Makes Music in the Mountains" she remembers his appearance and the impact that his music had on her: "I heard Con-Lan before I saw him. He came to me on the wind, playing joyful music that swept away my darkness" (81). Ming Yuet's account is soon interrupted and her role as narrator taken over by Conran in the second and longest section of the novel, in an interesting twist from the female-led romantic narration.

In the second part of the novel, Conran's unique narrative voice and his peculiar idiom provide a new angle to the romantic narrative. Proving the ambivalent use to which the author subject the generic conventions, Alterio reinforces heteronormative patterns while revising gender roles. Although his condition as a Scottish stonemason clearly positions him as akin to the prototypical "rough-hewn working class pioneers" of imperial romantic novels (Teo 2016: 100), and his personality aligns him with the "strength and stability" (Mussell 1984: 119) found in many popular romances, Conran also deviates from the model in interesting ways. This is most evident in the candid and straightforward expression of his romantic feelings, which questions the traditional "emotional reticence" (Mussell 1984: 126) that characterises romantic heroes. Alterio also transfers to Conran some of the common attributes of romantic heroines. For instance, he confesses his inexperience in sentimental matters - "I knew nothing [about love] myself" (128); he expresses his longing for a life companion openly: "Thoughts of Annie and John, and Ida and Alfred, and the love

that passed between each couple, kept me awake. Would I ever care for a lass in the same way?" (127-128); and after falling in love with Ming Yuet, he fantasizes about a wedding in "the Orkney tradition" (179). The ambivalent treatment of Conran as a romance hero is also evident in his peculiar ability to combine explicit and often comic references to male sexuality and desire as well as clichéd views of romantic love:

Me love for Ming Yuet was getting harder to conceal. [...] It wasna just an unruly pilly that longed to be with her. Don't get that idea. I wanted to look into her eyes and wrap me arms around her as we talked. I would have given anything just to hear her breathe. Love's more than putting your pilly in and going for it. It means caring for your lass as much as yourself.

Ordinary things took on new meaning. Colours appeared brighter. Cats fighting at night sounded joyful, whereas previously their screeching had affronted all me musical sensibilities. Aye, love had me by the throat. I wanted to marry her, but I worried what the settlers would say if she accepted, and whether the sojourners could forgive her masquerade. (164)

Despite the emphasis on Conran's feelings and sensitivity, the novel does not fully relinquish traditional gender roles. On the contrary, the love story develops in a fairly predictable fashion: Conran comes to Ming Yuet's rescue when the river overflows and stays in her hut until she recovers. During this time we witness his growing affection towards the "fine looking lad" (133), as they get to know each other by exchanging stories and learning about their respective cultures. In this respect, Stachurski considers that the novel displays an "underlying heterosexual framework" clearly reflected in its constant references to Ming Yuet's "essential femininity" (2013: 213) despite her male disguise. This underlying framework minimises the effectiveness of the cross-dressing device, commonly employed both in popular romance and historical novels written by women to explore "the transgressive possibility of gender identity acted out through clothes" (Wallace 2005: 21), and thus the potential of the novel to upturn gender hierarchies and push the heterosexual tenets of popular romance. Ming Yuet's inescapable femininity in fact serves to sanction Conran's incipient feelings for her as "natural" within a heteronormative framework so that he does not cross any undesired lines. Thus, his anxieties in relation to a possible homosexual attraction are merely hinted at and Conran only expresses his romantic feelings openly once it becomes clear to him that Ming Yuet is actually a woman:

Me head whirled with strange thoughts. Why had his voice changed during the evening? At times he'd almost sounded like an excited lassie. And something about his chest was odd. [...] why did two mounds sit like gimmer shells? [...] The longer I thought about them, the more I wanted to race back into the hut, open his shirt and take one in me mouth. [...] Why hadna I realised? What nyaff doesna recognise a lassie's ways? [...] A surge of longing came over me. I wanted to hold her. Take those small hands in mine and kiss each inch of calloused flesh. (134)

Ironically, it is the fact that he appears to love a Chinese man rather than a woman that prevents the development of their love (Stachurski 2013: 214) and ultimately what causes his death. Conran's frequent visits to the "Chinaman" soon inspire ru-

mours and suspicion, and his brutal killing is the result of anxieties about their homosexuality. The moral crusade against the Chinese carried out in this period and accusations of their immorality are to be read in a context which New Zealand historian James Belich characterises as one of moral and racial “tightening” (2001: 121). Conran is evidently aware of those social and moral imperatives and they become a constant source of anxiety: “I wanted to marry her, but I worried what the settlers would say” (164). Indeed, his doubts drive the plot towards the tragic ending, as he endlessly postpones “a public declaration” (168) of his love. Although he mentions “two English lasses who’d had children with Chinamen” (120), Ming Yuet and Conran decide to keep their relationship and the fact that they are expecting a child secret. Interestingly, Conran considers both the social pressures and the economic barriers: “Arrowrites wouldna fancy a Chinawoman winning the heart of a single man with a stone cottage and money in the bank” (135) and concludes that “livings have to be made and appearances kept up” (156). Similarly, Ming Yuet is reluctant to abandon her disguise because she can only continue to repay her debt and send money home by working in the goldfields. The happy ending is thus doubly frustrated: Ming Yuet prioritises her familial obligations over her love story (Stachurski 2013: 213) and, unlike popular romance heroes, Conran is prevented from acting publicly as Ming Yuet’s partner and provider.

In this respect, Alterio skilfully interweaves the social, moral and economic determinants of a love story which may have thrived in the privacy of Ming Yuet’s hut, but is obviously thwarted by the increasing climate of racism and violence described throughout the novel. Ming Yuet recalls the opposition to Chinese miners by the Arrowtown Miner’s Association and their petitions to reject them (85). When Ida’s husband refuses to sign one of these petitions, their stable is burned. Later on, Conran overhears a conversation about mobilizations for a petition to prevent more Chinese migrants from arriving in Arrowtown on the accusation that their work on farms is affecting workers’ wages (168); a group of young boys destroy the Chinese gold miners’ camp (159); and Conran and his friend William are involved in a fight after responding to some racist comments about Chinese migrants. Incidentally, prejudice also comes from the Chinese community, whose members are equally opposed to interracial relations and mixed marriage (Ng 1995: 256). Conrad recalls the reactions of the Chinese shopkeeper when he visits his shop: “When I placed two shillings on the counter, saying, ‘Each earned honestly,’ he said, ‘Honour not in words but actions’” (177), a suggestion that their relationship is not as secret as they believe and that prejudice circulates in both directions. In fact, Conran’s death is the evidence that violence addressed against the Chinese actually permeates the whole social fabric of the colony affecting all its members.

In this sense, Alterio’s agenda is revealed as being more concerned with the social dimensions of the interracial liaison than with its effects on the characters’ maturation, as is the case with Tremain’s novel. Alterio thus highlights the social rather than the personal dimension of their romance, that is the public effects of the characters’ private choices. In this sense, the novel resists the common outcome of historical romances “in which women’s concerns triumph over social constraints on love” (Mussell 1984: 29) to offer a more problematic ending. By turning Conran into the victim and allowing Ming Yuet to survive the novel problematizes the “[s]acrifice narratives [which] justify white domination by depicting the Asian lover as willing to [...] die, to maintain white [...] domination” (Marchetti 1993: 8). Ming Yuet,

however, cannot escape sacrifice. As she had already announced at the beginning, she is forced to return to China. The complex ties to the homeland in the form of filial piety and familial obligations are reinforced by her inability to find answers, justice or personal happiness in New Zealand. Her decision to return after twenty four years is thus problematic, if credible according to historical circumstances, because it refreshes the sacrifice trope by placing Ming Yuet as a victim both of racism in New Zealand and of the abusive demands of her own culture. This unromantic ending then underscores the separation between the two worlds that otherwise converge in the novel and the racial and cultural differences that Conran and Ming Yuet try in vain to bridge. Alterio, however, redirects our attention towards non-romantic forms of affection, as evident in the friendship between Ming Yuet and Ida, a nurse and a close friend of Conran's who narrates the third part of the novel after his death. Ida takes care of Conran's dead body and helps Ming Yuet when she arrives in her house looking for him; she also learns about Ming Yuet's secret identity when she goes into labour and helps her give birth to a daughter who dies immediately afterwards. Ida befriends Ming Yuet and acts as her confidant, helping her investigate Conran's murder, while she mourns for the disappearance of her adopted son Jack, who seems to have been involved in Conran's death. Ida and Conran then prove that, in a town dominated by racism, affective relationships and interethnic solidarity among Chinese migrants, settlers and indigenous people were also possible.

The novel contributes to document and reimagine these forms of affection not only in relation to the historical period it recreates but also, and perhaps most importantly, in the context of renewed forms of racism and exclusion which defined the period in which it was written. In its portrayal of a community confronting racial tensions and trying to accommodate diversity, *Ribbons of Grace* parallels the post-1990s scenario marked by changes in New Zealand's migration policy which resulted in an increase of Asian migrants which in turn prompted a great deal of public discussion and social unrest. Old perceptions of Chinese migrants as a "yellow peril" were refreshed from the 1990s, as sinophobic attitudes spread in popular and media accounts presented these new migrants as a risk to New Zealand's cultural values (Ip and Murphy 2005: 30). In turn, these negative reactions also resulted in the articulation of diverse critical and literary responses by New Zealand authors.⁸ Alterio's novel can be read as part of that collective response and, although it is written from a Pakeha⁹ perspective, it illuminates evident connections between racial prejudice against Chinese people in its past and present forms. The interracial romance thus serves as a valid point of departure and a very useful framework to reflect on the history of racial prejudice in New Zealand, but Alterio's exploration of life in the goldfields ultimately moves beyond the framework of the historical romance to venture into an implicit exploration of New Zealand's post-settler and multicultural society which transcends the eminent temporal dimension of the novel and is fully attuned to a postcolonial agenda.

⁸ Most notably these came from New Zealand writers of Chinese descent whose voices had remained virtually absent until the 1990s. Authors like Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Renee Liang, Alison Wong or Chris Tse, to name a few, have variously reflected on the silenced history of Chinese people in New Zealand. Alison Wong's novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver* (2009), the first by a New Zealand author of Chinese descent, also employs interracial love between a Chinese man and a white woman as the central motif of her narrative. For an analysis of this novel, see Fresno-Calleja (2017).

⁹ New Zealander of European descent.

4. Conclusions

As many instances of neo-historical fiction, *The Colour* and *Ribbons of Grace* consciously employ well-known romantic tropes and conventions, appropriating the escapist plots of historical or colonial romances set in remote and exotic times and locations while subverting some of those components. My aim in this article has been to highlight the ways in which those romantic elements are put to use in each novel as well as the varied nature of the questions posed by each author in their articulation of their respective love stories. Whereas Tremain's novel prioritises a feminist perspective and emphasises the individual dimension of the love story, Alterio's work is more concerned with the postcolonial revision of New Zealand's past and highlights the social consequences of the interracial liaison. Despite their differences, their depiction of interracial violence, harsh colonial life and oppressive patriarchal structures operating both in China and New Zealand aligns these works with other instances of neo-historical fiction which attempt to reconstruct the past while trying to establish a dialogue with contemporary readers. As De Groot argues:

Whereas in standard romance the aspirations of the romantic heroine work to sustain dominant cultural modes such as family, heteronormative relationships, economic, social and class structures, the manifestations of the romance in historical fiction might ask more questions than it answers, and cause the reader to question these discourses. (2010: 57)

The novels thus experiment with the versatility of romantic codes to address feminist and postcolonial concerns and reflect the fluidity and porosity that exists between the literary and the popular ends of the historical spectrum. Transcending strict definitions and taxonomies, both Tremain's and Alterio's novels demonstrate a conscious and playful manipulation of the popular for the sake of the political and illustrate the various transmutations of well-known romantic formulae in the neo-historical fiction produced by contemporary female writers.

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