

Unheard Voices: The Time-Travelling Woman as Writer of History

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THE intersection of science fiction and the political commonly occurs in the form of the alternate history or the far future dystopia: the Gileads, the Panems, the Burdekinian Reichs, the east-European inspired cities out of Miéville. But this is the science fiction politics of the outward, of the warning, of Kurt Vonnegut's "coal-mine canaries" (266). This paper argues for a different sort of politics to be seen in science fiction: that of the inward, metatextual politicking of the historian. Three postulates recur within this piece: the act of writing is a political act, history is a political construct, and being a woman is also a political act. Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* (1992) and its time travelling history PhD student Kivrin Engle provide a clear argument about the gender politics of writing history, and the potential avenues that science fiction provides to undermine the traditionally male focus of history.

Broadly speaking, women writing history is a very new phenomenon. Women being a central concern for historians—male or female—is also relatively recent, with the obvious exception of figures like Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria. However, for decades the historiography in both cases presented these as important rulers in *spite* of their gender. Though this is improving, the gender politics of history writing continues to be a problem. As Joan Wallach Scott argues, "the subject of women has either been grafted on to other traditions or studies in isolation from them" (6): women historians were granted a room of their own, but then told to stay put. To write on women—or even just *as* a woman—is to invite criticism, particularly if this is to write in a field that is more typically about men: if there was ever proof that history has not managed to overcome the gender barrier, it is the reactions to Hallie Rubenhold's book *The Five* (2019)—a title with the temerity to focus on the victims of Jack the Ripper rather than the murderer.

The issue goes beyond—but also is intrinsically linked to—this issue of historical authorship. The very writing of history itself is only as good as its sources. Here I need to gloss a considerable amount of historical theory, but in brief: the decision of what to keep in an archive and what to lose, and what gets kept at all (due to archivist

care or the ravages of time and bookworms) tends towards the male and powerful. We have relatively little in terms of women and the lower class for the majority of human history, whereas we have relatively large numbers of sources from powerful institutions like monarchies and churches in more document-poor periods—and this is all before we even get to the narrative construction issues noted in Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973). Obviously women, the poor, and people of colour were alive during this time and important historical actors, but most of what they left were entries in baptismal records, a couple of pots, and, if they were lucky, some gravestones. It is not an exaggeration to say that, at least in the pre-modern era, we have more ‘gaps’ in the archives than we do archive itself. It is in this gap that historical fiction can work as historiography—and in this gap in particular that women can make an intervention in the historical narrative through the use of fiction.

Diana Wallace argues in her book *Female Gothic Histories* (2013) that women have used historical fiction as a type of “historiography which can simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion” (1). Indeed, the popularity of the historical mode for the woman novelist and short story writer seems a direct attempt to redress the (white, upper-class, straight) male focus of much history—and this is true from canon-approved authors like Elizabeth Gaskell to populist favourites like Diana Gabaldon to Regency romance writers like Tessa Dare and the mostly self-published Courtney Milan. Such writers are fiction’s antidote to the (thankfully no longer popular) “Great Man” theory of history, and instead provide myriad “what ifs” to the wealth of historical stories we may never know. It does not appear as a political act on the surface—the ripped bodices in Milan, Dare, and Gabaldon do not seem to obviously undermine any historical narratives—but the palimpsest of personal narratives (they are commonly first person testimonies) adds to a historical record *in potentia*. Meanwhile, time-travelling women like Willis’s Kivrin Engle—and Diana Gabaldon’s Claire Fraser, Kage Baker’s Mendoza, and Deborah Harkness’s Diana Bishop—become unmoored in time, simultaneously participant and observer but fully neither. Like their Gothic forebears (Punter and Byron 278-282), they sit between worlds. In time travel fiction, this takes on a further dimension: these women sit between *times*.

Bizarrely, there is relatively little work on the topic in existence: most analyses of women’s historical fiction outside of that by Wallace looks at it in terms of its cross-modal connections—such as studies of the romance, the time travel narrative,

or the woman's novel more broadly, as in the case of Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1991) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985). David Wittenberg's otherwise perceptive book on time travel also deals very briefly with this issue—but argues that “historicity per se” does not “tend to be immediately at stake” in these texts (26). And yet, surely the very fact a woman is reinscribing another woman into history is itself “historicity per se”—both in terms of subject and authorship. This is particularly the case when we consider questions of narrative voice in terms of gender: to give a woman a voice is to provide her with “power” (Lanser 3). Indeed, such a tactic is inherently postmodern:

Women's marginal and excluded position has meant that they often understood that recorded 'history' is not straightforwardly 'what happened in the past' but has always been the result of selection, presentation, and even downright falsification based on particular ideologies and viewpoints (Wallace *Historical Novel* 2-3).

This is in effect Foucault and Lyotard in fancy dress: the breakdown of the historical record as the sole method of understanding the past. This approach means that historical novels written by women and based around the experience of female characters are *ipso facto* alternate histories of some sort—and this is where the writing of history and the science fiction text touch in a clear way. For the historical novel, Wallace calls this “the radical potential of the reconceptualization of history as plural and subjective” (*Historical Novel* 3); for science fiction, this is a “question[ing] of the nature of history and of causality” (Hellekson 4). What we see in women-authored and women-centred time travel fiction is a politicization of not only the historical novel, but of the writing of history itself.

Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* provides a fascinating example of this, particularly given her main character's status as woman historian. Her main character, Kivrin Engle, travels back in time to pre-plague-era Oxford to aid the completion of her doctoral thesis with some in-situ observations. The relatively routine journey to the past goes revealingly awry. Engle finds herself not in pre-plague-era Oxford, but instead that she and the plague arrive in Oxford simultaneously. Her carefully constructed clothes are entirely wrong and the version of English she was taught does not help her understand the “contemps,” rendering their speech a conlang until her interpreter adapts:

The interpreter is working now, more or less, and the contemps seem to understand what I'm saying. I can understand them, though their Middle English bears no resemblance to what Mr Latimer taught me. It's full of inflections and has a much softer French sound. Mr Latimer wouldn't even recognise his "*When that Aprille with his shoures sote.*" [...]

The language isn't the only thing off. My dress is all wrong, of too far a weave, and the blue is too bright dyed with woad or not. I haven't seen any bright colours at all. I'm too tall, my teeth are too good and my hands are wrong, in spite of my muddy labours at the dig. They should not only have been dirtier, but I should have chilblains. Everyone's hands, even the children's, are chapped and bleeding. It is, after all, December (162-163, sic).

Indeed, almost nothing resembles what she was led to expect: "Only the church looked the way it was supposed to" (172). This throw-away comment reveals the novel's approach to the writing of history: the church, as the centre of information and education and an area with a considerable amount of surviving information for historians, carries with it a high level of accuracy. The quotidian, however, was often lost to disease and the ravages of time and illiteracy—but it is this area where Engle can work as a woman historian and not merely correct the historical record but add to it. This is underlined at the very end of the novel when Engle is rescued by male historians. Her male rescuers are incapable of seeing the subtle differences between the historical record and lived experience: "They said in the book it was like this [...] Actually, I was afraid it might be a good deal worse. I mean, it doesn't smell or anything" (562). For these men, their lived experience does not rewrite the historical record, while Engle's clearly does.

This ability directly links not only to Engle's gender but also the concept of "slippage" that is so important in the novel. For the novel, slippage is "time's way of protecting itself from continuum paradoxes," and it "prevent[s] collisions or meetings or actions that would affect history" (29). In Engle's case, however, slippage lands her directly in the path of the Black Death. Some of this is put down to incomplete record keeping in the period, making dates less concrete (6-7), but I would argue that what happens to Engle suggests that slippage in this case pointed her to a place and time that allows her to act as a voice for the voiceless in this village, completely decimated by the plague. Slippage does not therefore avoid a paradox so much as

allow the completion of the historical record.

Yet, for Engle, her time in the past is characterised by endless grief and a total lack of agency. Instead of the slippage fail-safe providing her with greater agency, she is actually constrained by her lack of knowledge of what she can and cannot do to impact the historical record. Robbed of agency through her lack of knowledge, Engle is meant to only be an observer and to tread as lightly as possible on the past. The climax of the novel leaves her entirely frozen due to her grief, her alienation, and her knowledge that even if she could use her agency, it would not matter at all in the end: everyone in this village will die of the Plague (314). Engle's gender allows her to work in the unwritten parts of history—as her supervisors say, if she dies in the past, she will unlikely even be mentioned by name in the historical record (32)—and she is historically inert. As a time traveller, a historian, and a woman, Engle's complete lack of agency is underlined three times, haunting the novel's climax as she watches parish priest Father Roche dig his final grave, then lacing his bubo in a pointless attempt to save his life (550).

Engle's ability to impact history is not limited to saving lives, however. Engle goes back in time with a recorder to take notes with, and it is here where she really does create a 'record of life' (18)—and death—in this village. She begins to fill in the gaps in the historical record, for example, cataloguing the residents in Oxford who have fallen victim to the plague:

All the steward's family have it. The youngest boy, Lefric, was the only one with a bubo, and I've brought him in here and lanced it. There's nothing I can do for the others. [...]

(break)

The steward's baby is dead.

(break) [...]

Ulf, the reeve, is dead.

Also Sibbe, daughter of the steward.

Joan, daughter of the steward.

The cook (I don't know her name).

Waltheof, oldest son of the steward.

(break)

Over 50 per cent of the village has it. (472-3)

This is a record of names, of positions, of people who would otherwise be lost to history, and there are several other similar lists in Engle's record. She may be unable to help Father Roche or any of the other "contemps," but she can ensure evidence of their existence remains. The final chunk of entries in her record emphasises not only the need for lived experience, but what her presence has provided here:

Tell Mr Latimer adjectival inflection was still prominent in 1348. And tell Mr Gilchrist he was wrong. The statistics weren't exaggerated.

(break)

[...] I wanted to come, and if I hadn't, they would have been all alone, and nobody would have ever known how frightened and brave and irreplaceable they were (551).

Engle's record is a true "Domesday Book"—originally meant as a complete record of medieval life, which inevitably left quite a lot of information out if it did not directly relate to William the Conqueror's taxation system (18). Engle does not provide a total corrective to this imperfect survey, but she goes some way towards making corrections, both in terms of the technical aspects of history and the everyday lives of people in the past.

Where Engle's corrective—and Willis's novel—differs from the multitude of historical fiction that provides nuance to the historical record in thinly documented areas, however, is precisely in her status as time traveller in a piece of science fiction. She does not merely observe: she records, and she brings back. This recentring of historical attention onto the quotidian and everyday is itself a political act, one that science fiction and time travel narratives are themselves particularly well suited to. Indeed, history itself is *still* particularly behind the times in terms of how it "accept[s] these feminist challenges" (Bucur 12), and it is no mistake that social history—history that covers those who traditional diplomatic and political historians tend to ignore—and women's history "developed in tandem" (Scott 21). Science fiction texts like Willis's make an intervention in these inherently politicised approaches to history by foregrounding the authorial voice of the woman historian *and* these lost or silenced histories simultaneously. Indeed, there seems to be a suggestion that only women can provide access to these histories because as women they work

in the unseen parts of history to start with. The time travelling woman therefore has an extraordinary amount of agency in her ability to not necessarily impact the historical record, but to record it in the first place. As per Diana Wallace, historical fiction provides women with both “escape and political intervention” (*Historical Novel 2*)—but also a historiographical intervention when dealing with time travel. As a historian, Engle works within the historical “wobble room” provided by the lack of existing documentation and provides not just new interpretations but new information, therefore allowing her to potentially change “the past” without actually impacting the future.

Given that women so commonly are greeted with karmic punishment when attempting to change the past in women-authored time travel narratives (Claire Fraser’s miscarriage in *Dragonfly in Amber*; the repeated deaths of Mendoza’s lover in *The Company* series; amongst others), such agency should not be ignored in the context of time travel narratives centred on and authored by women. The very telling of these narratives, fictional or not, is itself a political act. Women had an impact on the past, whether or not it is mentioned in the historical record: “those absent from official accounts partook nonetheless in the making of history; those who are silent speak eloquently about the meanings of power and the uses of political activity” (Scott 24). Though Scott here is speaking particularly about women in the past, Willis’s novel seems to argue much the same is true for women historians—silencing women at either end of the historical record does not mean they did not exist nor that they had no impact on the past, either in its making or its telling. It is only through the very hypothetical structure of science fiction that Willis’s novel can make this argument, though: it simultaneously provides that potential hidden history as well as a method for its discovery.

This suggests a number of broader considerations, particularly around the issue of the politics of women writing not just historical novels but time travel in particular. Despite it seeming as if women are suited for time travel for a number of ideological reasons, time travelling women *authored by women* are rare, even when the multitude of *Outlander* look-alikes are taken into account. The most famous are all centred around men: “By His Bootstraps,” “All You Zombies,” “The Sound of Thunder,” *Back to the Future II* (the female character is unconscious!), *The Time Machine*, and so on. Women-focused time travel narratives are therefore not just in dialogue with history, but with the science fiction megatext in multiple ways, though not all of these

can be satisfactorily engaged with here and I have chosen to focus on questions of authority and agency. These texts provide one possible method of understanding the third wave feminist concept of the personal being political; these fictional women's experiences are inherently political. They change the historical narrative without changing history itself (whatever that can come to mean): they rewrite the past to be more inclusive and complete. Time travel fiction does something uniquely political in this sense, in that such texts provide a voice where there may well be none, and they help refigure the writing of history as something that may not merely focus on women, but also be written *by* women.

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