

## Romancing the Past: History, Love, and Genre in Vincent Ward's *River Queen*

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Published online: December 2011

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**Abstract:** Theorists tend to conceive the role of narrative in historiography as emplotment (Hayden White), giving “direction” to readers’ thoughts by its generic choices. This paper argues that in such contexts genre is often hybrid, coupled with other genres or even divided internally. A case in point is the New Zealand film *River Queen* (Vincent Ward, 2005), where romance complicates and extends an historical narrative of violent, colonial hostilities. Romance glamorizes history; it is also a complex form in itself: love romance, quest, captivity narrative. History becomes affective and intimate. At some level, here, love offers history the fantasy of a “new community” (Regis); or, perhaps just a measure of “restitution” (Sebald).

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**Keywords:** captivity narrative, Caroline Perrett, colonialism, historiography, love, Maori, *River Queen*, Roger Nicholson, romance, Titokowaru, Vincent Ward

There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.

(W. G. Sebald. ‘An Attempt at Restitution’)

I fell in love with Ngoungou, for he was a very fine looking Maori indeed, and he took me to be his wife according to Maori custom. There was feasting to celebrate our union.

(Caroline Perrett, ‘My Life Among the Maoris’)

Hayden White argues that history supplies its truths in forms of narrative, “mapping the limits of the imaginary and the real which begins with the invention of fiction itself” (*Content of the Form* 45). This paper tests those limits by focusing on two specific couplings of historiography and “fiction itself”: history and film, history and romance. My concern is with the impact of such blending, when romance seems to disturb the settled terrain of the historical record, as it often does in film, refiguring an established historical sequence of events and altering the cast of known actors. Romance, film scholars tend to say, figures in such a case because of its capacity to coerce the attention of the viewing audience, at some cost to that audience’s comprehension of events or relations between them (Toplin *History by Hollywood* 19). For Hayden White, however, the blending of “history” and “fiction” is structural, involving narrative modes derived from a common, cultural repertoire. Emplotment, in this account, orders understanding: “[narrativization] does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” (*Tropics of Discourse* 85). White’s argument implies that fiction’s shaping work plays out in the context of a single fictional genre, a single “direction.” I argue, however, that tensions between and within genres bear significantly on the viewer’s sense of the historical past. Romance, for example, may be inherently hybrid: an impure genre (or tissue of genres) that may in fact lend itself, in a filmmaker’s hands, to the critical and revisionist project of historiographic metafiction.<sup>[1]</sup>

My primary case for this discussion is *River Queen*, a recent film (2005) by the New Zealand director Vincent Ward, where a remarkable love story is built into an equally sensational history of colonial warfare, as if the one both demanded and explained the other. Ward’s film begins, in effect, with competing texts: a diary and a map. The former is insistently personal, since the author—Sarah O’Brien, who is not known to history, but has historical foremothers—speaks of this record of her days as confessional and therapeutic; furthermore, since this introduction anticipates the final frames of the film, the diary has the force of testimony, as if this private, intimate history were the history that counts, a tale of exceptional suffering and heroic devotion, but also of romantic passion. The map works differently. As an aerial shot of the territory across which Sarah’s questing romance will range, it signals more immediately the public, geo-political dimensions of the colonial history into which her life is bound. A screen note briefly details this larger historical situation—the defining mid-nineteenth century period of the New Zealand Wars, when imperial and colonial government forces engaged in a string of battles with Maori tribes over issues of land and sovereignty. The very final action of the film is to acknowledge “with respect,” in the credits, the historical figures whose lives provided models for the film’s main protagonists, the questing Sarah, but also the insurgent Maori chief, Te Kai Po. The map and these framing screen notes, then, appear to define the film’s work as quasi-documentary, re-presenting an historical moment, even as the narrative that plays out between them focuses as much on a love story as it does on a political conflict.

We might conclude, then, that Ward’s film illustrates Pierre Sorlin’s familiar, broad conclusion—“Historical films are all fictional” (38)—in redrafting the historical record as an invented text of personal experience. “It is very seldom,” Sorlin writes, “that a film does not pass from the general to the particular, and arouse interest by concentrating on personal cases; this is one of the most direct forms of the appeal to identification” (38). More is

involved, however. No matter whether a film aims to present a strictly historical narrative or just to tell a tale that has historical valency, presentation of historical action at a personal level inevitably produces a “distorted image of society” (41), at least insofar as large, social conflicts are played out as if they depend on the will and virtue of the individual, historical actor. Furthermore, the story of the individual actor—hero or heroine—means that the historical narrative is “arbitrarily shaped by the conventions of the genre”; genre places limits on “the course of events,” since it “requires a fixed organization of the story material” (41-42). In the filmic text, then, genre is the sign of fiction’s interference with the historical record.

This generic organization is not hard to see in *River Queen*. The film’s representation of the New Zealand Wars may centre loosely around one exemplary, historical engagement, but as the film progresses, continued military action devolves into a set of skirmishes, minimally explained, lacking the definition of a campaign. Ward makes narrative, intelligible sense of this otherwise shapeless history by threading it on the remorseless linearity of romance, since the film begins with the heroine, Sarah O’Brien, and lasts long enough for her to discover love, suffer in its cause, and finally settle into a happy future, the demands of passion finding a complex but conventional resolution. The film thus seems clearly to illustrate Hayden White’s argument that historical emplotment is a kind of “performance,” with “the choice of the story type and its imposition on events” serving to “endow them with meaning” (*Content of the Form* 44).<sup>[2]</sup>

Yet in *River Queen* the coupling of history and romance is demonstrably no easy relation, largely because romance is, itself, impossible to reduce to a single “story type.”<sup>[3]</sup> Before it proves to be the generic vehicle for a familiar passion, the film’s romance-as-love-story catches into itself other, equally enduring versions of romance as a genre, and in the process, other, more dangerous histories. *River Queen* employs the venerable traditions of the quest romance, and specifically a quest romance that revolves around the recovery of a lost child: a motif that goes back through Shakespeare to ancient Greek Romances and which is also a politically-charged antipodean tale, in fantasy and in fact (Pierce). And even the love history itself—the romance within the romance—must negotiate the erotic and cultural ambiguities of the captivity narrative, a romance subgenre that flourished in colonial societies, itself a striking instance of the interweaving of history and fiction. To say that history is “arbitrarily shaped by the conventions of the genre” (Sorlin 41) cannot do justice to the kind of internal variety and sophistication we see in *River Queen*, where there is no one “fixed organization of the story material” (42). Rather, history here is shaped by the tensions that form *between* the film’s distinct narrative genres and subgenres, and those tensions—as well as those genres—give the film’s version of history its affective turn.

## Recovering the historical moment.

The historian Robert Brent Toplin, surveying the popular historical film, sees Hollywood’s deployment of “elements of romance” in such films as a way to “enhance audience interest”—and, by extension, to increase profits (19). Such an approach, however, ends up treating a film’s un-historical elements simply as instances of conventional storytelling, the stuff of emotional or ideological manipulation. It cannot account for the

internal dynamics of a film's constituent genres, nor for the artistic and intellectual subtlety achieved through the interplay between various genres and subgenres in an impure, generically blended text like *River Queen*. Indeed, the generic complexity of *River Queen* properly suggests not a commodified history-making, but a sustained effort to call a privileged historical account into question—the grand narrative of colonialism and its well-disciplined practices—in line with the textual activity that Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. A film's play between narrative orders may not be standard academic historical practice, that is to say, but it can call familiar interpretations of the past into question and draw attention to other, unobserved centres of sympathy, triggering perceptions that do not accord with standard understandings of the historical moment. Showing love in history, for example, when historiography is seldom interested in the question of love, may give to private and emotional life—and, although these are by no means identical, can give to a woman—what public national 'history' so seldom gives to any of these, the larger part.

In his own comments on *River Queen*, Ward has claimed that a primary objective was to produce a "woman's film," in the sense that the woman was to be the leading figure, not limited by or to the actions and activities conventionally assigned to women. [4] In truth, part of the ethos of nineteenth-century colonial romance fiction (including adventure stories, colonial love stories, and tales of settlement) was the independence, the enlarged range that it awarded to its young women, a reflection of the real world demands made of their mothers, whose workaday responsibilities seldom stopped at the front door, but took in much that related to the larger economy of the rural homestead. *River Queen* reflects this earlier, colonial model of the resourceful wife and mother, although the scene within which the enterprising woman acts is radically altered, turning from the orderliness of the homestead, where conflict is essentially personal, to the site of armed hostilities—not the normal territory for a Victorian woman, even in the colonies. Ward's sensitivity to colonial gender relations, nevertheless, shows in the skills he allows to his heroine, as healer and nurse, but not surgeon; nursing did give women a role close to battle. [5]

Like other popular histories, *River Queen* tends to compose a narrative out of the competing desires of its leading characters to bring history into line with their wills: oppositions that are more immediately personal than political. Nevertheless, at the very outset, Sarah is placed by her relation to the land and to the colonial contest for land; in a sense, the action of the film is to give her the right to settle. The film initiates this action by opening up into a significant space, with an aerial view of a great river, Te Awa Nui, winding through the land, but laid out before us, as if a territory or domain is being mapped, as I have already noted. This camera's gaze descends to the level of the river itself; space contracts into gorges and the winding river is suddenly peopled. The gorges wall the river, as if they mark the main path through this wilderness, but also construct an extraordinary set of fortifications. [6] The visual sensibility that Ward displays here seems completely in line with his painterly reputation; the combination of the establishing shot and the abrupt introduction of his leading characters also suggest the narrative economy of romance. And more is involved, it must be said, for a local audience, for whom the beauty of these scenes is creased with anxiety: the film was actually shot on the most symbolically fraught of New Zealand rivers, the Whanganui, a site of deep loyalties and intense hostilities, guilt and *tapu*. [7]

Much of the violent contest that makes up the spectacular action of the film, played out between the opposing hosts of British invader and Maori indigene, is organised in terms of upriver and downriver. It is also played out over the body of the young woman, Sarah (Samantha Morton), daughter of an army doctor, stationed in a frontier garrison some distance upriver. According to Sarah herself (in the voice-over that registers her role as diarist, war historian, and first-person narrator), the garrison is the most remote in the British Empire, fixing the border between the territories of Maori and Pakeha (the English settler).<sup>[8]</sup> As war breaks out, Sarah, having fallen in love with a local Maori youth (who has died from the “choking sickness”) and having given birth to their child, now hunts for her lover’s father, since, seven years on, he has captured her son, to be brought up in his own family. The war, historians tell us, was about land and sovereignty, but here the war is also about who gets to keep the child—and since no limits are set on Sarah’s search for her son, it is also about which community finally gets to hold the body of the woman: white settler society or Maori tribe.

The film thus plays on the familiar trope by which the woman’s body represents the colonial domain, and from the anxious, settler point of view, Sarah’s quest puts her at risk of being slaughtered or sexually violated. More, though, is at stake than the threat *to* Sarah. Rather, Ward emphasizes, there is also threat *from* Sarah’s actions, which embody the coloniser’s horror of going native. Major Baine (Anton Lesser), the commander of the British colonial forces, describes women who take Maori husbands as committing a crime, in a time of war, tantamount to treason. Sarah’s engagement with the enemy manifestly calls into question the legitimacy of British rule and colonial government, and it exposes the racist antipathies that undergird imperialism. “White woman join the rebels? Can’t allow that,” Baine says. Indeed, in order to take her search for her son into regions that would normally be barred against her, crossing the line between Pakeha and Maori, Sarah responds to a summons made by Wiremu Katene (Cliff Curtis), her son’s uncle, to employ her notable skills to treat the ailing Maori chief and war-leader Te Kai Po (Temuera Morrison), an act which might well be considered treasonous. As Sarah travels upriver on this double mission, she is blindfolded, and the camera stays very close to her, emphasizing at once her powerlessness and her indomitable will.

Men’s bodies, too, are at issue in the film. Cinematic passages show off Maori bodies, in battle and in battle challenge—the *haka*—and the camera never awards the opposed forces of the colonial government anything like the same desirous gaze. This gaze has its historical antecedents: like the Zulus, the Maori resisted the mid-nineteenth century expansion of British imperial dominion with a prowess and tactical intelligence that gave them a reputation as a warrior people, not easily subdued (Belich); in the case of the Zulu, this inspired a period fetishism of black bodies.<sup>[9]</sup> Historical references to *haka* as war-dance likewise warrant its presence in the film, although it surely functions here primarily as a global sign of Maori-dom, displaying a theatrical aesthetics, compounded of ceremony, muscularity and monstrous wit. Like other popular media of historical reenactment, then—from sophisticated, quasi-theatrical performances to popular reality television programs like *Colonial House*, *Frontier House*, *1900 House*, etc.; in Australia and New Zealand, *The Colony*, *Outback House*, *Pioneer House* (West)—Ward’s film mixes spectacle with experience, offering viewers an affective, embodied engagement with the past. As Ricoeur says of the affective historical text, in this film the audience can “imaginatively ‘enter’ a reconstructed past world as an attempt to grasp the feelings and decisions that instigate

historical events” (Ricoeur 54),[\[10\]](#) here including “feelings” that are distinctly erotic, inspired by the camera’s attention to male Maori bodies. We are invited, that is to say, into an edgy confederacy with the vital forces of Maori insurgency, a confederacy that mixes moral judgement on colonial aggression with both fear and desire.

The complexity of our response to the Maori insurgents plays out most vividly in the film’s portrayal of two men: Wiremu Katene, Ward’s romantic protagonist, but also a leading Maori insurgent in the film (as in fact), and Te Kai Po, who, in the real world of the historical past, was Titokowaru, a brilliant general and a significant political strategist. For the film, as for the citizens of colonial Wanganui, terror finds a sensational source in the latter, who taunts his opponents—in history and in the film—with the most fantastically dreadful of endings:

“I have begun to eat human flesh and my throat is constantly open for the flesh of man. I shall not die; I shall not die. When death itself is dead I shall be alive.” (Belich 57)

Titokowaru despatched this warning on June 25, 1868. When it is restated in Ward’s film, it charges the fictive colonial moment with the full force of its original mix of violence and apprehension. Ward has spoken of his interest in investigating such sites of resistance to imperial power in territories that Europeans sought to dominate in the late nineteenth century, from Japan to Africa, from North America to New Zealand. This was, he says, “a volatile time, full of unique contrasts” (“Inspiration”). Titokowaru’s war was indeed extraordinarily “volatile,” not least in the shifting alliances that saw certain Maori tribes support Titokowaru, while others, known as *kupapa*,[\[11\]](#) opposed his ambitions, supporting instead the colonial effort to destroy his armed resistance to European expansionism. Caught between cultures, Wiremu Katene—the only one of the film’s central characters to retain his historical name—participates in the partisan flux performed in and between the battles staged in the film, just as he did in fact. As a Maori warrior, he embodies the constant threat felt by settler society, but as the film’s darkly impossible lover for Sarah, he embodies the eroticism of the Other, and thus the tensions, divisions, and barriers that conventionally spark passion in the love-story romance. Fashioning and refashioning his problematic identity, he is, like Sarah, a figure of unsettling possibility.

Through the film’s quest romance and love story plots, then, Ward presses romance (in multiple senses of the word) into a compact with history, retrieving and restaging moments of possibility from the tangled, even contradictory historical record. For example, if Titokowaru’s war backs the film’s narrative—offering both an historical analogue for the film’s action and the useful coherence of a known campaign—the film invites us to recall that Titokowaru’s relationship with settler society began in peace, before he became a warrior, and it ended when, undefeated, if not victorious, he progressed from battles into renewed commerce with the settlers. [\[12\]](#) His extraordinary life furthermore included, in legend at least, a curious incident following his Taranaki campaign. He fell ill and called on the services of an English woman, Ann Evans, who had been a nurse before migrating to New Zealand, where she married and eventually settled as homesteader and “healer” in Waihi—in the middle of the territory across which Titokowaru had waged his war (Belich 281). Ann, like Sarah, was brought blindfolded to Titokowaru’s sickbed. Ward couples this event to a second, largely unconnected narrative, concerning the abduction of a young

Pakeha girl, Caroline Perrett, and relocates these stories to the very centre of the action, braiding them together with the historical campaign report to produce the charged, personal narrative of Sarah O'Brien's quest.<sup>[13]</sup> Heroism ends up located in the play of feeling between boundary-crossing lovers or between mother and child, and not in the brutal, male clamour of conquest and resistance that makes up both public history and another genre that bears on the film, the epic.

## **Romance in captivity: the problem of culture.**

Ward's own comments on the fictions he most values—the *Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*—suggest the filmmaker's interest in epic, and *River Queen* has been read by other scholars in this context.<sup>[14]</sup> Certainly there is an epic scope and agency to the film's unusually active heroine, crafted out of local memories of the extraordinary lives of two women. My sense, however, is that epic ultimately defers to romance in *River Queen*, just as official history gives way to local legend. These shifts in emphasis connect the film less to the cinematic genre of the "woman's film" than to a much older literary antecedent, the captivity narrative. This frontier genre gained tremendous currency in the New World, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, especially in America, but it was also widespread elsewhere: the early, historical publication of Caroline Perrett's life among the Maori is one of many instances in Australasia.<sup>[15]</sup> From its earliest instances, this genre mixed fact and fantasy, public and private history, spiritual and ideological virtues and traditions, as a rule in service of demonstrating, at least on the surface, the virtues of white settler society.<sup>[16]</sup> Aesthetically, the captivity narrative combined "the large-scale, panoramic and global, with the small-scale, the individual, and the particular" (17): a strategy that Ward echoes in the interlocking campaign and quest histories of *River Queen*.

In Ward's adaptation of the captivity narrative, captivity itself remains occluded, in that Ward refigures this history as the quest of a mother for her lost child. Yet as I have noted, Sarah's quest begins with her being ferried upriver, blind-folded, which robs her of freedom and places her in the power of a boatload of (in the genre's terms) "savage" warriors.<sup>[17]</sup> Captivity narratives, including Caroline Perrett's, commonly provided quasi-ethnographical observations; here Sarah's dealings with Te Kai Po, Wiremu Katene, and her son mean that we learn a great deal about Maori tribal society, especially at war. Sexual threat, a recurrent feature of the genre, is present too, but represented obliquely; it is in her time in Te Kai Po's *pa* (a fortified village), that Sarah's interest in Wiremu Katene is aroused and, indeed, gets noted—even by her son—in a context where sexuality is by no means over-ruled by seamliness. Where male captives might develop sexual and familial alliances with women among their captors, the women who do so in the genre are few, exceptional, and largely condemned: Sarah belongs in this company. To borrow a phrase from Kate McCafferty, a scholar of modern American captivity narratives, the whole production proves to be a "palimpsest of desire" (43-56). Beneath the public, military history, with its conflicting political desires, lies a layer of romance, marked by eroticism and private longing, but beneath the integument of romance lies the tangle of desires characteristic of captivity narrative, xenophobic and xenophilic, reactionary and progressive, political and private.

The genre of the captivity narrative is far too large and far too American to be discussed here in detail. It is worth remembering, however, the scale of captivity and narrativisation at stake in the genre's development worldwide: captivities in their thousands, producing narratives in their hundreds. [18] Numbers like these support the foundational, prototypical importance of the genre, especially in the American tradition, even as they suggest the impossibility of settling on a single definition of it or of the cultural work it performed. Certainly the captivity narrative changed over time, as white settlement spread from Puritan New England to the West, across the American plains, with the captivity narrative called on to answer to new cultural needs and fashions (Kolodny 187). Yet even if, as Kay Schaffer and D'Arcy Randall argue, these narratives are properly viewed as "cultural artefacts that helped to produce rather than reflect asymmetrical hierarchies of gender, race and class," they also encode counter-narratives, alternative histories or resistant facts (109). [19] In particular, despite the fact that women are so often the victims, or get called on to collude in the male's passion for domination, the captivity narratives constantly, collectively, turn their gaze upon women who, one way or another, are busy changing the scene. As June Namias puts it:

In this literature, white women participate fully in the so-called rise of civilization. In fact, what is significant about the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century representations of this material is that women are not only there, but they are frequently at the center of stories, histories and illustrations (23). [20]

Long before the "woman's film," the captivity narrative offered a genre in which to tell a heroic woman's story in a surprising place, where women were subdued, suffered from a fundamental loss of community and close family and maybe survived, or even flourished, by virtue of accepting enforced marriage or sexual alliance: all elements central to *River Queen*.

Since American captivity narratives are so numerous, it's tempting to conclude that its prominence is a sign of American exceptionalism: a reflex encouraged, perhaps, by the conventions of American captivity narrative itself. But comparable narratives were composed and published elsewhere, where other settlers were locked in conflict with other indigenes. [21] The Australian 'Eliza Fraser' narrative, for example, is quite as complicated, in content and publication history (including film), as any of the major American stories. [22] More to my immediate purpose, some one hundred and forty cases of captivity were recorded in New Zealand, several of which were turned into narrative (Bentley 11). Vincent Ward may well have been influenced by examples of filmed captivity narrative, like Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*; [23] it is quite as likely, however, that, in discovering Caroline Perrett, he also came across other New Zealand examples, a few of which include enforced marriage of some kind. [24] He could indeed have found fictional examples in nineteenth-century novels like H. A. Forde's *Across Two Seas*, where, for instance, the four year old daughter of a settler family is abducted by a Maori band. [25]

*River Queen* both echoes and revises the conventions of captivity narrative—or, to be more precise, it draws on multiple narrative and political possibilities already existing within the genre. As her seven year quest develops, for example, Sarah is by turns both captive and rescuer. When she rescues her son, she finds that he has identified fully with



his Maori family and is obdurate in his resistance to being returned to Pakeha society, and she decides to stay with him and join the Maori community, in order to maintain her family. As a result, Sarah is again made captive, and needs to be rescued—but the “captors” this time are those who would “rescue” and return her to Pakeha settlement, so that she must now be freed not *by* but *from* the colonial forces. If this twist foregrounds Sarah’s refusal to accept white society’s expectations of white women, in particular with regard to love, sex and marriage, subtexts within the captivity narrative back up this move. Overtly, these texts tend to condemn the woman who takes a man across racial lines; but they also repeatedly accommodate such transgression, affirming the priority of a woman’s choice of life in a different, opposed society. The last of the New Zealand captivity stories, Caroline Perrett’s, seems particularly relevant in this context (Bentley 212-35).

Lost in the bush as an eight year old child in 1879, Caroline was in fact abducted by a Maori tribe, apparently in revenge for her father’s desecration of Maori burial sites (as in *River Queen*). She was not rescued until 1926, when family recognised her for who she was by birth. In effect, she had lived her entire life as Maori, possessed indeed a Maori sense of difference from Pakeha; she loved and married Maori husbands, twice, with whom she had several children; in the event, she was by no means willing to give up her Maori life and family.

### **Love’s triumphs: new worlds.**

The history of women captured, but choosing to live with their captors, taking lovers and husbands from among them—a history that already, itself, partakes of romance—helps Ward negotiate the sometimes conflicting demands of historiography and love story in *River Queen*. Clearly it supports the final turn in this story, when Sarah takes her Maori lover, Wiremu Katene, and chooses for herself a Maori family. Hers remains, however, an exceptionally difficult romance: unlikely on the face of it, threading its way through other, more pressing affairs, including both the military business that surrounds and interrupts her love story and her persistent, equally complicating effort to regain her son. Again Caroline Perrett comes to mind, for whom the declaration “I love you” seems to have been momentous, even if she can barely speak the words, since there is so much else to do, as wife and mother in her tribal community. Sarah, too, finds a great deal to be done, and although the demands on her are not so flatly domestic as they seem to have been for Perrett, they do tend to crowd her sexual passions from the screen, and even to undercut the popular romance genre’s conventional emphasis on a betrothal or marriage. Sarah does momentarily play at being a bride, but she perversely acts out this game with a mortally wounded Irish soldier, her father’s erstwhile companion Private Doyle, not with Wiremu Katene; for Sarah to say “I love you,” however, demands that she abandon Doyle, if only for a time, in order to meet Wiremu Katene, still in her theatrical gown, and to join him in a rough coupling that certainly shows their attraction, their sexual chemistry, but hardly serves as a climactic betrothal or marriage.

Indeed, the portrayal of romantic love between Sarah and Wiremu Katene in *River Queen* is mostly covert, a matter of glancing agreement, not fully acknowledged until very late in its history and, even then, not declared, as both society and the romance genre

expect, in an explicit pledge of love. [26] What are we to make of this decision, on Ward's part, to play down (at least in its tone) the love relationship that is otherwise so crucial to the film's narrative structure?

One answer may lie in Ward's negotiation between the different ways that the emotion of love is coded in different narrative genres, and the risks that are run when those genres are combined. In academic history, love is virtually invisible, requiring representation in legitimating social relations (e.g., marriages), if it is marked at all. In popular romance, by contrast, the need for affirmation of mutual feeling is paramount, but love is coded first in conventional forms of action that give it duration and a certain dynamic: quest, misunderstanding, exile, discovery, declaration, reconciliation, etc. The emotion of romance, that is to say, is inseparable from the actions of romance, the passion from the narrative. And if, as John Cawelti observes, "the moral fantasy of romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (41-2), a more dramatic staging of "love triumphant" at the end of the film might have the effect of reducing everything before it—the immediate dangers of battle, Sarah's conflicting sympathies, Maori suspicion, and her violent pursuit by colonial troops—to nothing more than a set of "obstacles" she has had to overcome, the disasters that romance, as a genre, requires in order to defer love's consummation. Love's triumph would subsume the film's military and political narratives into the "moral fantasy" of romance; it would, that is to say, romanticize not just history, but war itself, drawing our attention away from the savagery of military action—and the military action in *River Queen* is, by contrast, resolutely and unromantically portrayed as frightening.

Ward also may be drawing on another dynamic within romance itself: one identified not by Cawelti, but by another American scholar, Pamela Regis. In her *Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis identifies a characteristic movement in the genre from "a state of bondage or constraint to a state of freedom" (15) in which the novel's protagonists, united at last, represent in microcosm a "new community" (38). This final happiness is frequently preceded by what Regis, following Northrop Frye, calls a "point of ritual death": a moment in which a tragic conclusion is threatened but ultimately deflected by the romance's larger comedic action, so that the freedom and new community with which the novel ends represent, in effect, a victory of life over death. Unlike Cawelti, however, Regis does not see this victory as necessarily complete. "Romance novels are a subgenre of comedy," she explains, but although "the freedom won for the comic hero is total," the freedom achieved by the romance novel's heroine remains "provisional" and "constrained" (16). Indeed, she writes that "the heroine's freedom in the form of her life, her liberty, or her property may be in doubt not only in the original society [ . . . ] but also in the new society at the end of the work" (16), so that the "new society" may seem an improvement over the old, but hardly a perfect wish-fulfilment or utopian ideal.

Regis's nuanced description of the "new society" promised in the romance novel may help us understand the muted close of *River Queen*. On the one hand, Sarah O'Brien's romance plot sees her suffer a "ritual death." In the film's final action, she is shot by colonial troops and tumbles into the great river, which then washes her away—but because this is a romance and not a tragedy, to fall into the great river is not to die, but to be carried into a second life downriver, in Castlecliff, at the river's mouth. Our last sight of Sarah is in a three-cornered embrace with her grownup son and the man whom she loves and with whom she lives in this second life, Wiremu Katene. Their embrace does possess something

of the force of a wedding, and it marks the visible emergence of a “new community,” Sarah’s own family, which is separated from a demanding, larger society.

But Ward ensures that we see both the freedom and the lingering constraints upon this community, the complexity of its liminal position vis-à-vis both Maori and Pakeha societies. On the one hand, Sarah bears the *moko* (the chin tattoo) that marks her as both renegade and Maori by adoption. Taking charge of her own body, after the fashion of modern popular romance heroines, she has removed herself decisively from European society, settling with her family in a Maori community on the margins of the larger Pakeha world.<sup>[27]</sup> But neither Wiremu, her lover, nor Boy, her son, displays the tattoos that signal Maori identity, and we learn that Boy makes his way both confidently and profitably in a Pakeha world—as, in fact, an entrepreneurial tattooist. The defining signs of ethnic identity, then, are employed in the film’s final moments to separate this small community from the race and culture groups to which, at the beginning of their history, they were tied by birth and/or breeding, but also to hint at potential new configurations of connection, signified not just by Sarah’s heroic, maternal quest across racial and cultural lines, but also by Boy and his tattoo business.<sup>[28]</sup>

Although it is true that romance thrives on transgression, the family tableau of Sarah, Wiremu, and Boy hardly seems reducible to an odd-looking instance of boundary-crossing romantic love. It has the air of ideological allegory, as though miscegenation—New Zealand’s favourite, fraught, national myth—ruled here as the seed of future social and cultural harmony, the symbolic marker of a national cultural identity that refuses to give credit to race differences. (This is not simply a New Zealand phenomenon. As McCafferty points out, in the fictional captivity narratives of modern popular romance, a cross-racial sexual alliance is clearly the norm.) Perhaps, in fact, the point of the embrace lies in the way it signals the hybridity of historical romance itself, a once-colonial narrative mode now affording nostalgic pleasure as it imagines a moment in the national past when, however awkwardly, social and cultural difference could be resolved at the personal level. Historical romance, in this instance, offers a backwards-looking but future-oriented gaze; its future anterior tense, so to speak, at once resets the national clock, recuperates the past, and prefigures the arrival of Aotearoa—a new New Zealand, where whiteness is no longer a guaranteed virtue. It offers, in short, a quasi-magical solution, won by art, for the release of social tensions: a cultural fantasy that speaks poignantly, if indirectly, of the deadening, oppressive reality for which it serves as a form of compensation.

## Film, Historiography, and Feeling

The Australian historian Mark McKenna notes the “sheer force of frontier history” that leads writers to feel “they cannot understand the country in which they live without first confronting the history of dispossession.” He argues that “there is never one moment when the past dissolves completely, leaving a new landscape in its wake” (106) It is difficult to resist the feeling that Ward was vulnerable to that kind of pressure and this impossible ambition, to compose just such a “new landscape.” Yet, whatever else he sought to do in this film, he certainly presents with impressive sharpness the material reality of some of the historical events it describes—and judges history by reference to values that

orthodox, academic histories would barely recognise. The generic fracturing that makes it possible to locate in his film not only military history and love romance, but also quest, memoir, documentary record, captivity narrative and symbolic vision, suggests that he employs this range of narrative modes in the interest of prosthetic, communal memory (Burgoyne). As “cinematic history,” the film does indeed function as historiographic metafiction, critiquing existing accounts of the past and opening up new versions and visions.

The economy of film as a medium seems to demand compromises with a verifiable, historical truth. At the same time, however, such fictionalised history may generate a sense of the significance of past events, honouring them by giving them the kind of presence where the past is known on the senses, as if it were indeed a collective memory. Hayden White claims that the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (‘Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’ 24). His point about the coherence, but also the fullness sought in historical narrative is fundamental to discussion of relations between history and romance, and peculiarly important in the case of film. Furthermore, in line with the affective turn in historiography, when historical narrative takes the form of romance, for all its limiting concentration on a singular set of characters, it constitutes an argument for a specific, but also intensely engaged apprehension of the past. Film in particular, it is widely acknowledged, offers an historiography that has a power and efficiency that academic history cannot match. It does large-scale action well—battle—it also puts place on show—battle-fields, but also perilous river gorges.[\[29\]](#) It also can deliver intimacy, which, outside such frames, seldom finds expression, or, indeed, even a moment in modern history. Whatever one thinks of its conclusions, *The River Queen* offers these access routes to the past, perhaps composing what Pierre Nora calls “living history”—which correlates with memory—a more or less public, but personally felt history (7-24). For Raphael Samuel, likewise, this kind of history, which he identifies as “unofficial knowledge,” is the antithesis of hierarchical, esoteric, academic history, that which is written. For him, the critical act in this theatre of memory is testimony, and testimony is capable of working in many forms, from diaries to family photographs. In effect, with all its resources for the making of image and narrative, film may renew testimony and revive memory, with a force and an economy that the printed historical text cannot manage.

In this regard, an emphasis placed upon the value of historical narrative that gives us access to the “structure of feeling” of some moment in the past is particularly useful for an appreciation of the work done by the affective, historical romance, even when the history is told at a remove (Williams 132). Fictional construction of the past, in conveying to us that most radical dimension—feeling—may deliver to us the kind of knowledge that one might argue history cannot do without. Perhaps there is more. W. G. Sebald claims, in taking account of writing about the past, that “only in literature [ . . . ] can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of fact and over and above scholarship” (McKenna 99).[\[30\]](#) My own claim, here, is a good deal smaller: we do not understand this recovery of the past, nor the need for it, if we fail to recognise how the complexity of the literary or filmed history is the consequence of its resources as textual representation. In particular, love’s history, love *in* history, is bound to be mediated by the

complicated operations of embedded or framing genres—including the impure, but powerfully affecting narrative moves of romance.

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[1] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, passim. See also Amy Elias's revisiting of Hutcheon in *Sublime Desire: History and Post 1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), where metafiction expands—and splinters—into varieties of “metahistorical romance.”

[2] See also, Paul Ricoeur, ‘The Interweaving of History and Fiction,’ *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181]

[3] For pointed commentary on romance, see the introduction by Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia to *Doubled Plots: Romance and History* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003): “History and romance trope each other” (xxv). For film, see White: “if it turns out to resemble a ‘historical romance,’ it is not because it is a narrative film, but rather because the romance genre was used to plot the story that the film wanted to tell.” (‘Historiography and Historiophoty,’ in *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), 1195)

[4] See Ward's description of his ‘Inspiration’ in his comments on his website for the film: <http://vincentwardfilms.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/River-InspirationandDirectors-Notes-ex-Press-Bk.pdf>. Also his interview with Clint Morris: <http://www.webwombat.com.au/entertainment/movies/vincent-ward-int.htm>

[5] It is also worth noting, perhaps, that Nightingale nurses arrived in the New World, Sydney, in 1868, toward the end of the New Zealand Wars; for some discussion, see Sioban Nelson, *Say Little, Do Much: Nurses, Nuns, and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). One of the models for Sarah O'Brien, Ann Evans, was a nurse; see below.

[6] In his ‘Director's Notes,’ Ward writes about working in dense bush, where he had to turn difficult circumstances to his advantage: “The hills around us would become our major sets. Why create period townships when we have seen so many clichéd in every western and period film and when the land herself has so much more power conveying a people who lived hard and survived subsumed by it.” (<http://vincentwardfilms.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/River-InspirationandDirectors-Notes-ex-Press-Bk.pdf>)

[7] *Tapu* indicates sanctity and, in consequence, restrictions on use.

[8] The term is more broadly used now, for white New Zealanders of European descent. It is worth noting that there were in fact no riverbank garrisons of the kind Sarah describes; see maps in James Belich, *I Shall Not Die: Titokowaru's War, New Zealand 1868-1869* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1989), especially pp.12-13.

[9] See Gail Ching-Liang Low, ‘His Stories?: Narratives and Images of Imperialism,’ *New Formations* 12 (1990), 97-123; also *White Skins/Black Masks: Colonialism and Representation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), especially chapters 2 and 3. For white interest in black bodies in Australia, see Margaret Maynard, ‘Staging Masculinity: Late Nineteenth-century Photographs of Indigenous Men,’ in *Journal of Australian Studies* 66 (2000), 129–37.

[10] Compare Ricoeur's vision of what a historical text might do with Vanessa Agnew's account of historical reenactment culture as “a body-based discourse in which the past is

reanimated through physical and psychological experience." Vanessa Agnew, 'Introduction: What Is Reenactment,' *Criticism* 46.3 (2004), 330.

[11] Maori allies of the colonial forces, often greater in number than the government troops, in this campaign; see Belich, *I Shall Not Die*, passim. See also Ward's notes, briefly arguing that the Wars saw, in the mass, Maori fighting Maori, rather than Maori tribe battling colonial government.

[12] For discussion of the uncertain reasons for the Titokowaru's abandonment of his *pa* at Tauranga Ika, in particular the sudden breakup of his alliances because of loss of *mana*, prompted by his sexual predatoriness, see Belich, *I Shall Not Die*, 242-46. In the film, Sarah, reflects in her diary on Te Kai Po's abandonment of hostilities at precisely the point when victory seemed most in prospect; his perverse behaviour stems not from some fault of character, but rather from his conviction that this loss would design for his people a future other than the disaster he foresaw for them, a river of blood.

[13] Ward appends a note to the film, paying tribute to Titokowaru, but also to Ann Evans and Caroline Perrett.

[14] For a brief, but valuable reading of the film in the context of other New Zealand films on the Maori Wars, as epic, see Bruce Babington, 'Epos Indigenized: the New Zealand Wars Films from Rudall Hayward to Vincent Ward,' in *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (New York: Routledge, 2011), 235-60.

[15] See Trevor Bentley, *Captured by Maori: White Female Captives, Sex and Racism on the Nineteenth-century New Zealand Frontier* (Auckland: Penguin, 2004); for Perrett's story, in particular, see pp. 212-235. Ward notes Caroline Perrett's nick-name, 'Queenie'; he also has Te Kai Po, inside the film, invest Sarah with Caroline's nick-name, after she has cured him. In doing so, Ward connects Sarah to the riverboat that travels up and downriver, the 'River Queen', modelled on the PS Waimarere.

[16] See Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (Westminster, MD: Knopf, 2004), on the varieties of routes these narratives might take to publication, including spoken texts, presented in court, or testimonies offered in support of pleas for charity; "But the most complex and comprehensive testimonies of overseas capture . . . were . . . substantial accounts usually written in the first person and completely or in part by a one-time captive, but sometimes dictated to others" (13).

[17] Blindfolding is relatively uncommon in the American tradition, although frequent in modern captivity narratives. It is mentioned nowhere, to the best of my knowledge, in Australasian instances, although ritual humiliation, a likely purpose, is common in New Zealand captivity narrative.

[18] For the wider history of this genre, see Linda Colley, *Captives*.

[19] Also see Rebecca Blevins Faery, *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, & Sex in the Shaping of American Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 8-9, where she speaks of "cultural work" done by "representations" of "white women's Indian captivity and of Pocahontas figures."

[20] For New Zealand, see Trevor Bentley, *Captured by Maori*, 15, for very similar recognition that "female captives were not just central to the printed material, they were at the centre of events."

[21] Gordon Sayre calls for this kind of comparison, even as he describes the genre as "unique to the English literature of America." See *American Captivity Narratives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 4. Annette Kolodny usefully notes that the captivity narrative is

“the single narrative form indigenous to the New World,” but we may need to expand that Eurocentric term to include not just the Americas, but also Australasia. See Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 6. Linda Colley, in *Captives*, would not accept even these expanded limits.

[22] See Robert Dixon, *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo-Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), for this and other tales, including Rolf Boldrewood’s fictional captivity narrative, *War to the Knife* (1899), set in New Zealand, during the New Zealand Wars (53-8); Boldrewood was influenced by Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*.

[23] See Patrick Brantlinger, ‘Forgetting Genocide: or the Last of *The Last of the Mohicans*,’ in *Cultural Studies* 12.1 (1998), on Cooper’s echoing “countless captivity narratives,” to create a novel where the erotic is “both interracial and racist”, only to have this large cultural offence compounded by Mann in the film, where sentimental racism disappears in a blitz of whiteness.

[24] He may have found Perrett’s story in the useful anthology by Bentley, although the history of the film’s production makes this unlikely; the story, however, was first published in a local newsletter, *Historical Review*, in 1966.

[25] When she is returned to her family, she has been stripped of her Pakeha clothes, wearing instead a Maori mat; later a local chief proposes marriage between young Daisy and his nephew. For discussion, see Claudia Marquis, ‘Romancing the Home: Gender, Empire and the South Pacific,’ in *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture*, ed. Beverly Clark and Margaret Higonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999), 61-2. More typically, of course, in New Zealand as in America, children were abducted with their mothers, a circumstance that emphasised the precious circle of domestic virtue, even as it defined the fragility of European culture in frontier society.

[26] See, in particular, Lisa Fletcher’s *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (Ashgate, 2008), which shifts discussion of modern romance by its insistence on the central place of this performative utterance. See also Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 22.

[27] For Ward’s aliveness to tattoo, see *The Past Awaits: People, Images, Film* (Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2010), especially pp. 124-30. Comparison with *The Last of the Mohicans* is instructive, firstly because of the racial prohibitions signalled by skin and mixed ancestry, as James Fennimore Cooper played them out, but also for the way that Michael Mann ironed out Cooper’s difficulties, draining away Cora’s mulatto heritage, leaving her dark, but very European and, in the person of Madeleine Stowe, fit for love. For Cora’s skin, see Janet Dean’s brilliant essay, ‘Romance and Race in *The Last of the Mohicans*,’ in *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, ed. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 45-66. also Patrick Brantlinger’s provocative review article, ‘Forgetting genocide.’

[28] Although the traditional, maternal quest romance is very different, I think here of Geraldine Heng’s *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): “[A] nationalist imaginary at key junctures requires figures of maternity and family to instantiate concretions of feeling and thought” (207-8).

[29] Robert Rosenstone: "Film lets us see landscape, hear sounds, witness emotions as they are expressed with body and face, or view physical conflict between individuals and groups ... altering our very sense of the past" ('History in Images/History in Words,' *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1179).

[30] For an online text of Sebald's speech, see

[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/12/20/041220fa\\_fact3?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/12/20/041220fa_fact3?currentPage=all).



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