



## Fabulating history in contemporary bio/fiction

1 /2027

*Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Philologia*

[philologia.studia@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:philologia.studia@ubbcluj.ro)

### Guest editors

**Ágnes Zsófia Kovács**, University of Szeged, Hungary

[agnes.zsofia.kovacs@gmail.com](mailto:agnes.zsofia.kovacs@gmail.com)

**Anna Kérchy**, University of Szeged, Hungary

[annakerchy@gmail.com](mailto:annakerchy@gmail.com)

Historical fiction has experienced a boom in the last twenty-five years, engaging with the past in innovative ways. The most celebrated five genres of contemporary historical fiction are identified by Alexander Manshel (2023) as contemporary narratives of slavery, the World War II novel, the multigenerational family saga, immigrant fiction, and the novel of recent history. Manshel argues that the canonization of minoritized writers has revolved around historical fiction: along with the growing critical and popular interest in work by minority authors, the critical acclaim they garner is mostly for their work within historical fiction.

The relationship to facts in these historical fictions is “creative” or imaginary, similar to Saidiya Hartman’s idea of “critical fabulations.” Hartman explained the notion in connection with African American historical novels: an archival engagement employed “not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified . . . and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance” (Hartman 2008b, 12). Similarly, Madhu Dubey (2010) detected a clear drive towards speculative forms of rendering African American history in fiction. Although Menshel showcases several areas in which critical fabulations take effect, he provides not so much a study of cultural revisions of the official archive through everyday acts of resistance (Hartman 2008a) but rather a McGurl-style sociological (Bagherli 2023) study of the historical turn in contemporary minority fiction. Menshel’s analysis is tied to the work of literary institutions like publishing contracts and prizes in the literary field (2023). He also detects a growing fatigue with institutional expectation among minority authors who have become mainstream (2024) and that is why he devotes a full chapter to Colson Whitehead’ works: to illustrate the change in his attitude to critical expectations of writing history.

The contemporary boom of historical fiction has nurtured more variation than Mensor's big five would indicate. As a case in point, biofiction has emerged as a popular new term for biographical fiction that relates to the past in a critically fabulative way. Michael Lackey (2021) defines biofiction as "literature that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure" (25). Yet, apart from naming, biofiction makes no claim for documentary value or authenticity but has a vision of its characters' interior world that highlights "how he or she evades determinism by creating new ways of thinking and being" (27). In his book *Biofiction* (2022) Lackey distinguishes biofiction from the historical novel. He states that historical fiction as Lukács defined it aims to represent a typical hero in the network of their social-contextual determinants, while biofiction highlights the agency and personal efficacy of the protagonist in a way that it has not been acknowledged before, endowing them with an ethical or political dimension. Bethany Layne (2020) explores self-reflective iterations of biofiction that often target authors who become characters, and she refers to this group as "postmodern bifiction." Biofiction can also be concerned with a specific historical target area, as demonstrated in Marie Louise Kohlke's and Christian Gutleben's (2020) work on various forms of neo-Victorian biofiction. In general, biofiction crumbles the division between fact and fiction whilst it is situated closer to the historical side of the spectrum between the two, providing a reinterpretation of the past from a yet unacknowledged perspective, challenging dominant viewpoints and potentially even surpassing conventional anthropocentric frameworks.

This special issue proposes to study in what ways history is made or fabulated in contemporary bio/fiction. The volume aims to explore 1) the forms and variations of biofiction as it meets other genres, together with its travel across media. Also, possible 2) theoretical frameworks and 3) institutional backgrounds for assessing these types are sought. Therefore, the questions the issue addresses are linked to but not limited to the following:

1) Forms: What forms, themes and temporalities are pursued in contemporary versions of biofiction? In what ways do characters whose lives are fabulated in biofiction perform their agency differently than earlier supposed? In what contexts does it make sense to distinguish postmodern and modernist aesthetics of biofiction, or realist and speculative biofiction? What forms of biofiction appear in the popular register today? How does biofiction travel across media? What earlier themes and genres intersect in the genre of biofiction?

2) Theories: How does the production of historical knowledge in biofiction appropriate the postcolonial agenda of "writing back"? What sort of nationalist agendas may be at play in biofiction? How can one address the diverse ways in which history is made in biofiction theoretically, beside the postcolonial framework? Do contemporary biofiction novels perform more self-reflection than earlier versions? How does biofiction address its audience and in what ways does it require readers to think about the past? What role do affects and empathy play in biofiction? How does biofiction problematize traditional humanist perspectives on

the past and future, including linear notions of progress, historical agency, or human centrality? In what ways can biofiction foster ecological, non-anthropocentric, or multispecies readings of history?

3) Practices: How do institutional practices of the literary field relate to writing history in biofiction? Can biofiction be an emerging subgroup similar to Manshel's big five?

The articles of 5-7,000 thousand words are to be accompanied by short, max. 250-word abstracts and five keywords, together with short author bios. All formal details are addressed in the style sheet of the journal, available at:

<https://studia.reviste.ubbcluj.ro/index.php/subbphilologia/about/submissions>

The journal *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Philologia* is listed in several international databases, including ERIHPLUS, EBSCO Host, CEEOL, PROQUEST and Web of Science ESCI: [http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/philologia\\_indexari\\_en.html](http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/philologia_indexari_en.html).

## Timeline

- May 15, 2026 – deadline for paper proposals (abstract of 200 words, 7 keywords, minimum 5 theoretical references, author's bio note of 150 words);
- June 30, 2026 – notification of acceptance;
- October 1, 2026 – submission of articles (the required format for referencing can be found at: [http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/pdf/Instructions\\_En.pdf](http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/pdf/Instructions_En.pdf));
- March 31, 2027 – publication of the special issue.

Proposals and completed articles should be sent to the following addresses:

- [philologia.studia@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:philologia.studia@ubbcluj.ro)
- [agnes.zsofia.kovacs@gmail.com](mailto:agnes.zsofia.kovacs@gmail.com)
- [annakerchy@gmail.com](mailto:annakerchy@gmail.com)

## Works Cited

- Bagherli, Omid. 2023. "Reading Literary Success: On Dan Sinykin's *Big Fiction* and Alexander Manshel's *Writing Backwards*." *ASAP Review* Nov 30, 2023. <https://asapjournal.com/review/reading-literary-success-on-dan-sinykins-big-fiction-and-alexander-manshels-writing-backwards-omid-bagherli/>
- Dubey, Mahdu. 2010. "Speculative Fictions of Slavery." *American Literature* 82 (4): 779-805.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. *Lose Your Mother*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* [no. 26] Vol. 12 (2): 1-14.

- Kohlke, Marie Louise és Christian Gutleben. "Taking Biofictional Liberties: Tactical Games and Gambits with Nineteenth-Century Lives." In *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*, edited by Kohlke, Marie Louise és Christian Gutleben, 1-53. Leiden: Brill Rodopi.
- Kucukalik, Lejla. 2021. *Biofictions. Literary and Visual Imagination in the Age of Biotechnology*. New York: Routledge.
- Lackey, Michael. 2022. *Biofiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Lackey, Michael. 2021. "The Bio-national Symbolism of Founding Biofictions: Barbara Chase Riboud's *Sally Hemings* and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 36:1, 25-48.
- Layne, Bethany, ed. 2020. *Biofiction and Writers' Afterlives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Manshel, Alexander. 2023. *Writing Backwards: Historical fiction and the Reshaping of the American Literary Canon*. New York: Columbia.
- Manshel, Alexander. 2025. "Reprinted Excerpt from *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (2023), by Alexander Manshel, and an Interview with the Author." *New American Studies Journal* 76: 1-28.