

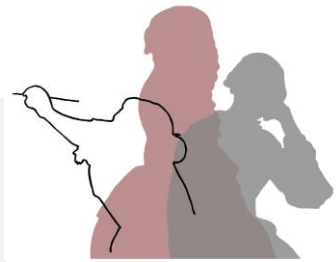
# Herstory Re-Imagined: Women's Lives in Biographical Fiction and Film

16-17 December 2019

Centre for Life-Writing Research, King's College London, UK

Convenors: Julia Lajta-Novak (Vienna) and Caitríona Ní Dhúill (Durham)

[www.herstory-reimagined.net](http://www.herstory-reimagined.net)



## Call for Papers

How do the lives of historical women become the raw material of novelists and filmmakers? This conference addresses the current boom in biographical novels and biopics about women's lives, encompassing a broad conception of 'woman' that includes queer and trans life narratives. Figures as diverse as Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, poet Sylvia Plath, surgeon James Miranda Barry, painter Artemisia Gentileschi, and actress Jiang Qing are the subjects of fictions in various formats and degrees of literary ambition, while pilot Amelia Earhart, stateswoman Margaret Thatcher, blues singer Bessie Smith, and first lady Jackie Kennedy – to name just a very few – have been prominently re-imagined on the silver screen. The conference examines the contemporary repackaging of historical women's lives in narrative genres, exploring possible connections and tensions between these stories and earlier feminist perspectives on 'herstory' and women's (in)visibility.

Scholars of biofiction and film have drawn attention to the ways in which biographical novels and biopics are implicated in the construction of female subjectivity, while the field of life-writing research has seen a rise of interest in questions of gender identity. This conference aims to bring studies of biofiction and biopics into close dialogue with gender-sensitive approaches to biography, so as to shed light on the interactions between life writing, fiction, and dynamics of gender. We are particularly interested in papers that rigorously consider the theoretical questions at the heart of this conference: How do fictions and films about historical women relate to, or challenge, existing theories of women's biography or gender-sensitive approaches to life writing? What common parameters are available to narrate women's lives, and how can these be historicised? What does the fictional element contribute to (or subtract from) the image generated of the subject in relation to previous representations? What is the ideological thrust and broader cultural function of these narratives? And how do these re-imagined herstories trouble or confirm the sex-gender systems within and against which they operate?

Topics may include, but are by no means limited to, ...

- **Notable women in cultural memory:** exemplarity and ideological functionalisation of the protagonist/s; if representations of past lives tell us more about views of femininity at the time of their production than in the biographee's life-time, what need does a novel or film fulfil in its respective present? What narrative/filmic strategies render visible the location of the fiction within a specific culture of gender?
- **Genre and gender:** What generic features distinguish biographical or fictional/filmic representations of historical women (plot model, typical features/ motifs/ representational modes)? To what extent do these corroborate or unsettle gendered subject positions? What understandings of life writing, and particularly women's lives, are encoded in the genres? (e.g. experimental, clichéd, genre fiction, self-reflexive approaches, spot-light approach, collective biography etc.)

- **Postcolonial theory and intersectional approaches:** how is the depiction of female subjectivity in biopics/ biographical novels inflected by other categories such as ethnicity, class, or age?
- **Female biopics/ biofiction in the marketplace:** the mass-market demand for “real lives”; biofiction/biopics and literary/film awards; biographical fiction and film as media of gendered celebrity culture, commodifying women’s lives for public consumption
- **Reception:** What processes of identification are at work in the reception of biofiction/ biopics? How can theories of affect and empathy help to illuminate these? What can reviews of biopics/ biofiction tell us about the discursive construction of gender identity via different modes of reading/ watching biographical fiction and film?
- ...

Keynote speakers:

Prof. **Diana Wallace**, University of South Wales  
 Dr. **Belén Vidal**, King’s College London  
 & reading by acclaimed novelist **Patricia Duncker**

Conference language:

English.

Deadline:

Please email your proposal (250w) and a brief bio note (80w) to [Julia.Novak@univie.ac.at](mailto:Julia.Novak@univie.ac.at)\* by **21 June 2019**.

Notifications:

23 August 2019.

Selected contributions will be considered for inclusion in a peer-reviewed collection or special journal issue.

\* With the submission of your proposal you consent that any data you submit will be saved by the organisers until the end of 2019. Your email will be used for the limited purpose of informing you about updates and news relating to the conference and will not be passed on to any third parties.