

Gabriela Wiener Does Not Care if You Don't See Her Writing as Literature

The Peruvian author wants to “decolonize” everything — starting with her body and her family. Her latest book, “Undiscovered,” investigates the 19th-century European explorer that shares her last name.

By María Sánchez Díez

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When the Peruvian writer Gabriela Wiener was a child, she dreaded school trips to museums in Lima, the capital.

As her class approached the display cases containing the pre-Columbian ceramic statues known as huacos retratos, she would start shaking. The figurines' faces, which are believed to represent notable members of the Mochica culture, had an undeniable resemblance to hers.

Mockery and insults would inevitably follow: “There’s Gabriela,” she remembered her classmates would shout. “Indian face, huaco face.” To look Indigenous, to be brown and not white in Peru in the 1980s, meant to be ugly, undesirable — or at least that is what she felt for a long time.

“Colonialism is not something that just happened in the past, it continues to pulse in our lives, our beds, our families, our society,” said Wiener in Spanish, standing in front of one of these statues at the Metropolitan Museum, in a recent visit to New York.



Portrait vessels known as huacos retratos anchor the central metaphor in “Undiscovered.” Metropolitan Museum of Art

Several decades and several books later, the huacos retratos are no longer vessels of painful childhood memories for Wiener, perhaps the most irreverent and daring voice of the new literary generation of Latin American women. The sculptures have become an instrument to “decolonize” herself and reclaim her identity, she said; the metaphor is the backbone of her novel “Undiscovered” — “Huaco Retrato,” in Spanish — out by HarperVia, in a translation by Julia Sanches.

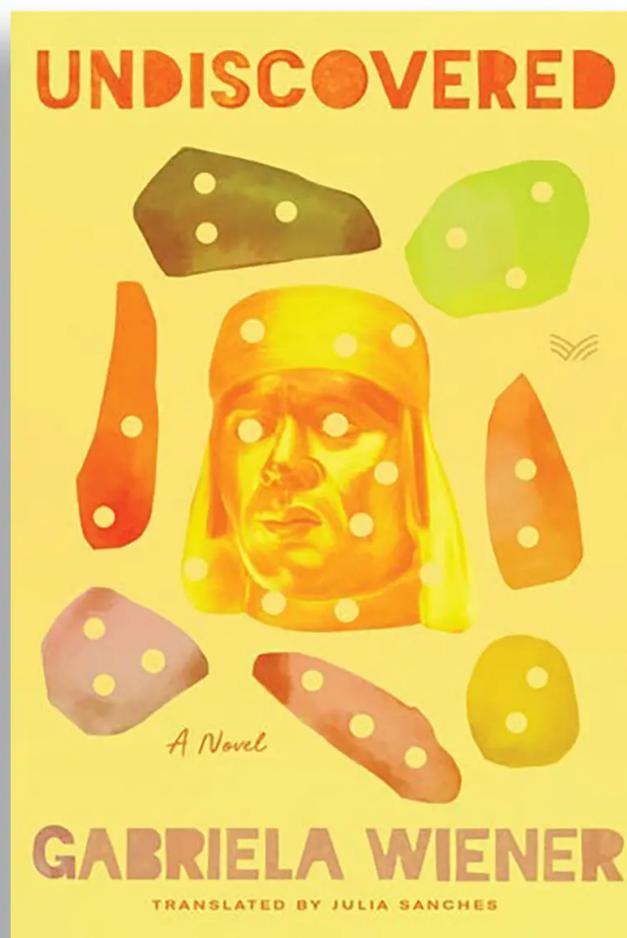
“Undiscovered” explores a conflict central to Wiener’s identity. She is brown, a proud “chola,” to use the derogatory Peruvian term for people of Indigenous ancestry. But she also is likely a descendant of Charles Wiener, an Austrian-turned-French explorer who traveled to Peru in the 19th century and became known for *almost* finding Machu Picchu: He came as close as Ollantaytambo, where the locals told him about the abandoned Incan city. Wiener mentions it by name in his notes, but he never reached the ruins.

Charles Wiener left behind a trace of colonial violence and pillage that the novel examines, mixing fact with fiction. What is known about the historical Charles Wiener is that, when he left Peru for France, he took thousands of pre-Columbian artifacts, including huacos retratos, that helped build the Ethnographic Museum collection in the French capital. In a book he wrote about his expeditions to Peru, Charles Wiener also describes buying a child named Juan and taking him to Europe.

In exchange, he left behind a son he had with an Indigenous woman — the beginning of the mixed race lineage that would, according to the story passed down by the family, lead to Gabriela Wiener. Reconstructing the steps of the patriarch and intertwining personal and official history, Gabriela Wiener unmask her ancestor as the force that shaped many of her wounds.

“The book talks about all imperialisms from a place of everyday, intimate life, from experience,” Wiener said.

The conclusion? She wants to decolonize it all: the status of whiteness as a proxy for beauty, the mythology around Charles Wiener in a clan that is still proud of its European-sounding last name, the family secrets.



“Undiscovered” is not the first book in which Wiener unflinchingly grapples with uncomfortable truths. In fact, to readers familiar with her previous books, and with interviews she’s given over the years, it may seem that she’s explored virtually every thorny problem society is grappling with today.

“Intimacy, vulnerability, shame, the dark, what we keep silent, are my creation and art

materials,” said Wiener. “That also makes my work a denunciation.”

In addition to race, sex has also been at the center of Wiener’s work. In 2008, working as a journalist, Wiener wrote “Sexographies,” a collection of first-person gonzo stories that explored, no holds barred, various aspects of sexuality. She wrote openly about her taste in pornography and her experiences donating eggs, about female ejaculation, a sexual encounter with a porn star and visits to swingers’ clubs.

Before polyamory went mainstream, before the term “ethical non-monogamy” caught on in dating apps, Wiener was already speaking openly about the complex polyamorous relationship she had with her longtime husband, the poet Jaime Rodríguez Zavaleta, and a Spanish woman.

In 2018 and 2019, she wrote and acted in a short play called “Qué Locura Enamorarme Yo de Ti” (“How Crazy for Me to Fall in Love With You”), after the 1980s Eddie Santiago salsa song. The performance laid bare the emotional conundrums that tormented an otherwise happy polyamorous arrangement, which included co-parenting two children.

The tension and contradictions of the polyamorous relationship, which ended recently, is under scrutiny in her most recent novel: Why does the author keep cheating if she is already in an open relationship? Is there room for jealousy in non-monogamous love? Is the Spanish woman really attracted to her or does she have a white savior complex?

“All my stories are about these people that I am close to, but speak about issues that concern us all,” said Wiener.



Wiener is always pushing boundaries, examining topics that others consider taboos, said Daniel Alarcón, a novelist and host of Radio Ambulante. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Writing openly about the people in her life has gotten her in trouble, Wiener said, but she gives them a lot of credit for playing along. “They are co-writers with me,” she said. “It bores me a lot, this whole idea of the individuality of the artist.”

Wiener, who has lived in Spain since 2003, has also written about the immigrant experience in “Llamada Perdida” (“Missed Call,” unavailable in English) and alternative approaches to pregnancy and maternity in “Nueve Lunas” (“Nine Moons,” published in English by Restless Books).

“Gabriela is always pushing the boundaries and trying to ensure that these topics and issues are not taboo,” the Peruvian novelist and journalist Daniel Alarcón said. “She is always opening doors for us.”

Alarcón, host of the Spanish-language “Radio Ambulante” podcast, featured Wiener in an episode about ugliness where the writer unpacked what it meant for her to feel unpretty. In, it she cataloged all her perceived imperfections.

“My crooked teeth. My black knees. My fat arms. My sagging breasts. My small eyes circled by two black bags. My shiny and grainy nose. My black, witchy hair.”

The inventory went on and on.

What happened afterward is exactly what Wiener had hoped for: “A lot of women came to tell me that it had liberated them from their own physical complexes,” she said. “That’s what happens. You create something and it can become something that mobilizes things.”

This unconventional and kamikaze approach to writing has prompted critics at times to label her work not as literature, but as “testimony,” she said. But she couldn’t care less what literary critics think, she said. “I feel less and less ‘a real writer’ every day. And proudly so.”

Today, Wiener thinks of herself as a “book worker,” she said, closer to artists who have made art out of their pain — such as Nan Goldin, who shot self-portraits after being battered by her boyfriend. In a tribute to Goldin, Wiener interviewed a former lover who had punched her in the face for “Dicen de Mí,” (“They Say About Me,” not available in English), a collection of conversations about herself with family and friends.

For Wiener, the political is woven into her writing, but also goes beyond, into activism.

She is an outspoken antiracist feminist and, in her opinion columns in Spanish newspapers (and occasionally in *The Times*), has furiously denounced, among other things, Spain’s colonialism. She pointed out, for example, that Oct. 12 — the day that commemorates the arrival of Columbus on the American continent — is the main national holiday in Spain.



“As a Peruvian and a Latin American, I am in search of restitution, of putting the issue of colonial historical memory back into debate,” said Wiener. María Sánchez Díez/The New York Times

In 2020, she participated in a protest in which activists spilled red paint, to symbolize the “bloody genocide” of Indigenous people in the Americas, over the statue of Christopher Columbus that looms over a namesake square in Madrid. When, during this interview, Wiener learned that Manhattan has its own statue of Columbus — a 76-foot monument in the middle of Columbus Circle — she insisted on stopping by.

“There he is, offending and hurting people, so plump, in the middle of everything, in an absolutely central, untouched place,” she said, looking up.

Then, she tried to climb the pedestal, as a group of office workers and tourists stood by, eating their lunch in the sun.