Magical Realism: An Honors Colloquium

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Abstract

Over the course of one semester I researched primary and secondary texts pertaining to the literary genre known as Magical Realism. From the works I read I made selections and developed a syllabus to teach a two-hour discussion-based honors colloquium course. I organized lesson plans that centered around specific questions as well as broader themes of the genre. During the spring semester of 2009 I taught the class to eleven honors students. We met twice a week for one hour to discuss novels, short stories, scholarly articles, films, and art that all were Magical Realist or discussed Magical Realism. The students were required to keep a weekly reading journal and complete a midterm and final project.
Artist's Statement and Introduction to the Project

I began this project hoping to further my own knowledge and appreciation of a genre that I have enjoyed reading for pleasure. Magical Realism has always been a fascinating subject and technique, and is one that I believe is breaking new ground in the realm of modern literature. Through my reading and gathering of information on the history, theory, definitions, and debate surrounding Magical Realism, I have succeeded in deepening my knowledge and appreciation of the genre as well as the authors and cultural contexts from which these works come.

I began with the intention of creating a syllabus for a two hour colloquium course that I would teach in the Honors College during the spring semester of my senior year. During the fall I worked closely with Dr. Deborah Mix of the English department to map out a course for completing my work on time, as well as learning the process that professors go through in planning a new course. I spent many more hours than my undergraduate fellowship required each week reading, highlighting, and taking notes not only in the novels and short stories that would make up the bulk of my class' texts, but also delving into many scholarly articles that concerned the debate over the definition of Magical Realism and where it fits into the literary canon.

I began reading some texts that I thought would be potential final selections during the summer before school began, and continued to read new works before making my decisions for the textbook order. In the end, I selected five novels, five short stories, and a chapter excerpted from a novel. I wanted to represent a broad cultural spectrum, planning originally to assign a novel from each continent. This proved impossible, but I felt satisfied that my selections were representational not only of the large Latin-American influence, but of other lesser known traditions as well.

After making the final selections, I began a much closer reading of each of the texts, focusing on specific passages and drawing together broader themes from across cultures and time periods. In order to keep my thoughts organized I created a standard chart which I kept by my side as I read. On this chart I recorded my thoughts on various themes such as religion, politics, specific instances of magic, gender issues, racial or ethnic issues, the author's possible intentions, as well as anything else striking about the work.

At the same time I was also reading scholarly articles written by people who have studied Magical Realism and have attempted to define it or provide some sort of unifying theory about it as a genre. Out of these articles, I concentrated on extracting a working definition of Magical Realism: the term itself, the history of the use of the term, and of course what it is not. I used color coded highlighting to draw out quotations on the following five areas: definition of the term, political connotations, gender and identity issues, prominent names and translation issues, and the influence of religion. This color coding scheme and my discussion of each one can be found under the "Big Questions" section after the article synopses.

After I had done this extensive reading, I began to be able to wrap my own head around a working definition of the term and the history of the genre. Magical Realism
is, in shortest terms, "an amalgamation of the real and the magical." The term amalgamation is appropriate here because it doesn't just mean a union, but a specific and total blending. The magical and realist elements of any piece of Magical Realms coexist in the same physical and cultural space, mutually oppositional, but without one ever becoming dominant over the other. Fantastic events are described in an almost deadpan, conversational manner so as not to draw undue attention to the fact that they are not physically possible. This allows the author more freedom to describe his or her own emotional connection to the subject and forces the reader to look at any situation through new eyes. Magical Realism permits a retelling of history that is not bound by dry facts, nor is it dismissed as purely fictional.

Once I had reread all of my selected texts and felt comfortable with my subject matter, I began lesson planning. I laid out a large calendar and moved the texts around until I was satisfied with the order and length of time to be spent on each one. For each novel I divided it up into assigned sections and gathered some discussion questions from each one. I also did a brief search for biographical information and any other relevant political, historical, or cultural information to accompany each text. I brainstormed ideas for homework assignments and began drafting my syllabus.

Taking my experience from other colloquiums I have taken, I decided to model my general class and assignment structure after them. Each student is required to submit a one-page reading journal on Wednesday reflecting on the assignment and drawing connections between previous texts. They are required to provide direct quotes from the texts. I believe that this keeps students up to date on the reading and, while they are not required to write many lengthy papers, the journals keep them in the habit of organizing their thoughts and working through confusing passages on their own.

For the midterm I decided that allowing them to choose their own text would allow them to delve into an author that we will not cover in class, and give them the opportunity to teach their fellow classmates something that they have learned on their own. More details follow about the midterm and how it was graded in my syllabus.

Unfortunately, I discovered toward the end of my planning process that one of my favorite novels, Whale Rider, is out of print. Since it was planned for after spring break, I decided to leave those three days blank on the syllabus and let my students decide what they would like to do. I had as a back up The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka, and was also open to the idea of putting together a slideshow on Magical Realist art. My students voted and decided that they would like to read Whale Rider and have a slideshow on art. They agreed to find copies of the novel independently of the bookstore, and I agreed to do some more research into what modern artists are doing with the genre.

Nearing the end of the fall semester I felt confident that I was organized and had done my research thoroughly in order to conduct a fun, exciting, and informative class. I have experience with public speaking and so was not overly concerned with leading a group of students for an hour twice a week. I got a little more nervous as the first day of class drew closer, but Dr. Mix was there to support me and offer feedback for the first several weeks. After I felt like I had my feet under me, she asked if I would like to take
over classes completely on my own. After getting to know my students and building a rapport with them, I felt very confident in my abilities to lead discussions, allow my students to talk about issues in a conversational setting, but also take back control of the classroom and have the authority and respect of an actual professor.

So far it has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have had at Ball State. I have heard very positive comments from several of my students, and am pleased with the quality of work that they have turned in. As we near the end of the semester I am happy to look back on the entire process and have a chance to reflect on all the different steps and processes that have brought me to graduation with an entirely separate set of skills apart from those of being a student. Reading any text in the mind frame of being called upon to answer a question is one aspect and technique of engaging with an assignment. Reading that same text in the mind frame of being the one asking the question is like looking through the other side of a mirror, and I feel incredibly privileged to have experienced and enjoyed both.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Mix for agreeing to work with me in the first place. This has been a huge, time consuming, and complicated project, and I have enjoyed every minute of it. I feel very fortunate to have had the chance to work with Dr. Mix since I was never able to take a regular course from her. I appreciated her guiding hand throughout all of my organization and decision making processes. She not only was able to guide me in the right directions that would allow me to have a great final product, but she did it in a way that permitted me to really make the decisions for myself. In short, she taught me how to teach myself while sharing her wisdom and experience. Always willing to give me constructive feedback but also to step back and let me take hold of the reins, I would not have wanted to work with anyone else on this project.

I would also like to thank Dr. Stedman. The idea for this project was born in her office and she encouraged me to go ahead with it and not try to come up with an easier way to get the necessary credit to graduate with honors. She has always asked me, “In a perfect world, what do you want to do?” Once I had put all my inhibitions and practical nay-saying aside, she would tell me that I simply had to find a way to do it.

Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Joanne Edmonds for having enough confidence in me to approve my proposal. I knew from the beginning that students were not usually allowed and rarely encouraged to take on such a big project, but I appreciate her recognizing in me that I was passionate enough and both capable and determined to see it through to fruition.
Synopses of Scholarly Articles
Assigned Articles:

“Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas” from Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas
By Shannin Schroeder

This article traces a detailed history of the term through Latin America, but makes the point that Latin-America does not have a monopoly on the genre. It discusses the difference between magical realism and marvelous realism as described by Alejo Carpentier, and points to some reasons for the great debate over the term. It also walks through many different ways of defining the term, but also suggests that part of the appeal of the genre is that it is indefinable.

I assigned this article because I found it very accessible to a beginner to the subject and gave a thorough and relatively concise overview of all the different aspects of the term and how it has evolved into what it is today.

“Cross-Cultural Variants of Magical Realism” from Magic(al) Realism
By Maggie Ann Bowers

This chapter focuses on several specific authors, several of whom we have studied in this course. It contains quotes from Morrison, García Márquez, and Rushdie, and concentrates specifically on Woman Warrior, Beloved, and One Hundred Years of Solitude. It provides a dialogue about the term coming from the authors themselves which is at times surprising. It discusses the individual and global cultural contexts of Magical Realism and emphasizes once again that the term is still extremely hard to define. It is associated with post colonialism and minority peoples, which helps it to be accessible across cultures and time periods.
Background Reading:

“Magical Realism Revisited”
By Michael Bell
This article provides a fairly concise history of where the term originated from in regards to literature. He talks about the Latin-American influence, but is sure to emphasize that Magical Realism is not the exclusive property of Latin-America. He argues that it is a cross-cultural genre because it deals with issues that affect peoples from all over the world. He also raises the question of whether or not the Bible is a Magical Realist text, which I found very interesting in planning some discussions on religion in general.

“Notes on Spanish-American Magical Realism”
By Tommaso Scarano
This article focuses more on the Latin-American experience and development of Magical Realism. Through anecdotes focusing on three writers from South America, Scarano shows how Magical Realism can be cross-continental, but also emphasized very heavily its political focus. Because of the examples he uses, he also mentions surrealism as a movement and how it differs from Magical Realism. He touches on the influence that myth and oral tradition has had on the genre, as well as an experience common in many Magical Realism writers: their membership to a culture that has been colonized.

“Introduction” to Coterminous Worlds
By
This article takes Scarano’s claims about colonization further. This is where I took the bulk of my information about the “de-centered other.” People who have lived as a minority or on the fringes of society have used the mode of expression that has come to be known as Magical Realism in an attempt to fully convey their cultural experience. It also points out some seemingly mutually exclusive dichotomies, including among them “real/marvelous.”

“Magical Strategies: The Supplement of Realism”
By Scott Simpkins
This article attempts to define Magical Realism by showing us how it differs from simple realism such as history or narration. He also points out the limitations of language in an author’s attempt to convey their meaning.
"Big Mama in Postmodern Society: Tracing Magical Realism in Popular Culture"
By Gloria Jeanne Bodtolf Clark

This article is concerned almost exclusively with the Magical Realism of Gabriel García Márquez. It uses his Magically Realist short stories and his acclaimed novel One Hundred Years of Solitude to point out some elements of Magical Realism that have cropped up in all of the other texts I have read. Among these is the theme of time being non-linear, childhood being seen as a fantastical experience, and the politically charged characters that often appear as the most magical.

"Suspended Between the Nastiness of Life and the Meanness of the Dead': Beloved as the Physical Embodiment of Magical Realism"
By Shannin Shroeder

This article takes an in depth look at Beloved and the characteristics of the novel that exemplify Magical Realism. Some of these themes included the flexibility of time, the collective memory of a cultural group, and the significance of the characters' names.

"Unsavory Representations in Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate"
By Helene Price

This article provided some good groundwork to further expound a discussion about gender roles and tradition in Like Water for Chocolate. It draws parallels between Esquivel's novel and Morrison's to show some similarities in the magical experiences of two women whose lives were dictated by their surroundings.

"Phenomenal Women: The Shape-Shifter Archetype in Postcolonial Magical Realist Fiction"
By Megan Musgrave

This article brings together several of the novels I assigned for discussion, all by female authors. It also raises the issue that language is often inadequate to describe our own experiences, especially if we come from a minority group or a culture that has been colonized.

"Why are Europeans and North Americans Obsessed with Magical Realism?"
By Gustavo Pellón

This article was written by a Latin-American author who is frustrated with the "fad" of Magical Realism. He experienced rejection of his work because it did not contain enough magic to be a marketable book. He suggests that it is time to move on from Magical Realism and leave it in the past.
“Realismo Mágico – True Realism with a Pinch of Magic”
By Lee A. Daniel
This short article offers a very concise definition with limited exposition. It has a brief history of some of the critics that have debated the genre, and brings them together under one definition.

“Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition”
By Kenneth Reeds
This article is also a history and definition of the genre, but expanded much further and is much more detailed. It also suggests that Magical Realism is a genre of the third world, and provides an extremely helpful bibliography for other sources.
Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas

Magical realism, for many, connotes Latin American literature, but the *denotation* of the term—and its potential for application far beyond one continent’s literary endeavors—has been greatly neglected. In fact, many scholars would be hard-pressed to define the phrase. Are the terms “magical realism” and the “marvelous real” interchangeable? Is magical realism a genre? An attitude? A literary style? An aesthetic? A movement? Does the magically real work subvert reality? Rely on fantasy or magic tricks? Rework Surrealism? Hinge on political agendas? And does (can) magical realism belong to one nation or continent? In the past, critics and theorists have argued that magical realism conforms to any one or more of these possibilities, in addition to countless other spins put on the phrase. The terms “magical realism” and “marvelous realism” and their “positions with respect to either realism or other concepts in the realm of fantasy (such as myth, faerie, the marvelous, or the fantastic) have seldom been clearly elucidated. As a consequence, magical and marvelous realism have remained rather fuzzy notions, the definition of which is usually taken for granted, or alluded to by an implicative nod to works of ...” (Scheel 3). Additionally, “[c]ommentators have used that term ‘magic realism’ to refer to so many different works of art—mostly written in Latin America—that the term has largely lost its value for making distinctions between genres” (Durix 116). While more recent scholarship seems no less confusing or cacophonous, several critics have attempted to arrive at mutually acceptable answers to the above questions. Predictably, these answers not only put to test many works we have unquestioningly accepted as magical realist texts but also allow the inclusion of new authors from around the globe. Magical realism, as defined by scholars like Amaryll Chanady, proves to be universal, a code that defies limitations of geography, generation, and language.
Since Franz Roh first coined the term "magic realism" in his 1925 article on post-expressionist art, the term "has become a catch-phrase which obscures the many varieties of fiction that have appeared in the last decades" (Franco 308). Massimo Bontempelli was actually the first to apply the term to both art and literature (Menton, "Magic Realism" 130); in 1927, he "made the term known simultaneously in French and Italian in his bilingual journal 900" (Delbaere 75). Although, in 1948, Venezuelan writer Arturo Uslar Pietri "was the first to refer to Magic Realism in the context of Latin American literature" (Menton, "Magic Realism" 140), it was Alejo Carpentier who first claimed "lo real maravilloso americano" solely for Latin America in the preface to his 1949 novel, El reino de este mundo [The Kingdom of this World]; as noted below, his term—though frequently used as such—is not a synonym for magical realism. Angel Flores defined the Latin American phenomenon as "magical realism" at a 1954 MLA meeting, and cited Old World origins and practitioners alongside Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina. But Flores's "definition is very wide in its application and suggests a reference to phenomena more currently described as the 'fantastic'" (Durix 104). Luis Leal, in 1967, would refute Flores's claims in another attempt to petition for magical realism as a solely Latin American event. Moreover, in the 1970s Miguel Angel Asturias would prove the first to define his own Latin American writing as magical realism (Boccia 22). Still, over sixty years after Borges and his apparent "fathering" of Latin American magical realism, only a few texts provided the bulk of the scholarship on the issue. Indeed, until the Latin America "Boom" in the 1960s, the term had been subjected only to limited scrutiny and had few applications.

The "Boom" expanded scholars' and other readers' opinions of both Latin American literature and magical realism. Authors like Colombian Gabriel García Márquez made "magic realism" simultaneously a Latin American and a literary happening. Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal stresses that the Boom "should not be construed merely as a list of names, dates, and titles, for it was very much a cultural and personal phenomenon as well." Rather, it must also "be viewed as a privileging of the mainstream, the masculine, the universal, and the commercial: this [idea] is not to detract at all from the quality of the writers, but to recognize that all literary history is a hierarchical prioritization" (118–19). The new fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, symbolized by such authors as Borges and Carpentier, had already begun to project Latin American literature onto the "global stage" (Saldívar, "Dialectics" 80), but the acquisition of the new catch phrase "magical realism" placed Latin American literature more firmly on the map. One way to reclaim magic realism for Latin Americans came, for some, through the differences it embraced. Unfortunately,

in the 1960s this term became fashionable in literary criticism to designate different types of fiction which actually had little in common: "magic realism," or "marvelous realism," a variation of the former, was applied indifferently to the writings of J. L. Borges and García Márquez. To make matters even more confusing, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier introduced the term lo real maravilloso to refer to his literary experience of Latin America as opposed to the European tradition. (Durix 102)

Mireya Camurati notes that

[i]n their eagerness to interpret this conglomeration of lands and peoples some writers, such as Alejo Carpentier, speak of the real-maravilloso americano,... a juxtaposition of circumstances—impossible in other places on the planet—that occur in Latin American time and space, or to an acceptance, based on faith, of that which is magical or miraculous for others. (89)

By claiming sole rights to magical realism, Latin American authors helped to prove that they could, in fact, create a new literature worthy of world attention; after all, who better to master magical realist texts than writers living on the one continent that could produce it? Still, these writers were beginning to find themselves members of "a creative community whose identity went beyond national or regional boundaries" (Schulman 29).

If Latin American writers wanted (or perhaps still want) magical realism for themselves, they nonetheless manage to maintain a startlingly broad definition of what being "Latin American" means. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes identified "that quality so characteristic of cultured Latin Americans" as "the passion to know everything, to read everything... And, above all, to demonstrate to the European that there is no excuse not to know other cultures" (qtd. in Zamora, "The Usable Past" 33–34). Latin American identity is not singular but rather plural; through their works, "Latin American writers are affirming a plurality of cultures within a larger sense of being 'Latin American.'... For despite similarities in historical background what defines the Latin American identity is not one but many ways of being rooted in Latin American reality" (Meyer 8–9). In fact, César Fernández Moreno believes even the term Latin American to be too narrow, since it neglects such populations as indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Anglo-Saxons who are equally present. Moreno adds,

Some say of a child that he is identical to his father, others say he is just like his mother; they are all right. The same may be said of Latin America: that it is identical to its mother (Spain, Portugal, Africa, and other "fathers" which reached it from outside). But at the same time, and just like that child, America is different from its progenitors and has its own personality. (10)

These "children" who create Latin American fiction are being read "as writers of a same literature" (Retamar 245)—a New World literature described by Octavio Paz as "a literature of foundations"—whether they be Colombians, Mexicans, or Argentineans.

More recent scholarship has shown that, rather than magical realism being the attitude or the fact-is-stranger-than-fiction reality of any one area, it has been appropriated by a variety of authors, many of whom have no connection to Latin
American literature whatsoever. "Citizens of the world, [these new] Magical Realists write a world literature, appealing to readers in many nations with many viewpoints" (Boccia 23). Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris reveal Latin America's own interest in the area as the catalyst for the "popular perception of magical realism as a largely Latin American event" (1). But, they stress, "Readers know that magical realism is not a Latin American monopoly... It is true that Latin Americanists have been primary movers in developing the critical concept of magical realism and are still primary voices in its discussion, but [works like Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community consider] magical realism an international commodity" (2) and "an important presence in contemporary world literature" (4). It is "an international literature that oversteps national boundaries and languages, with roots deep in many literary traditions" (Boccia 21). Some, like Canadian Geoff Hancock, consider themselves cohorts in a New World literary tradition based on similar pasts, legacies replete with indigenous peoples, beliefs, and cohabitation. Others, like German Franz Kafka, were practicing what may very well have been magical realism before the advent of the Boom or even before it. He offered the terminology that could be applied to such endeavors. The fact that magical realism existed before it existed, that is, before we knew what to call it, suggests that its definition will not be limited to any particular region or set of experiences.

Latin American literature itself is not immune to debate over whether it can be appropriated by writers outside of South and Central America. "Jean-Paul Borel's appropriately titled "Una historia más" questions not only geographic boundaries in advocating the inclusion of American Hispanic writers (in the Latin American literary history) but also linguistic boundaries as he points to the Francophones of Canada, the speakers of Dutch in Suriname, and of speakers of the "Amerindian" or African languages that are excluded when only Portuguese and Spanish texts are entered into the Latin American canon. Furthermore, some of Latin America's most famous practitioners are no longer in Latin America. For example, Chilean author Isabel Allende now lives in San Francisco; however, in spite of her increasingly North American settings and interests, her fiction is still synonymous with Latin America (and specifically Chile). Though the questions raised by and about Latin American literature will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the fact that they have arisen at all seems to call into question our understanding of literature as we know it in a Western sense.

As international writers continue to borrow from (and elaborate on) the Latin American magical realist tradition and to make it their own, critics are forced to revise their perception of magical realism as the sole property of Latin America. Charles Werner Scheel provides an apt analogy for the exportation of magical realism from Latin American literature, in whatever shape it is ultimately defined, into other cultures. Scheel notes that "good sparkling white wine deserves to be labeled champagne" even if it is not French wine. "It is the method rather than the mere ingredients, or their origin, which defines that product, and if local soils and climatic conditions add a particular color, texture, and bouquet, so let there be French champagne, Russian champagne, or other champagnes" (1). He goes on to apply his comparison directly to magical realism: "Since the cultural conditions affecting a literature are likely to be more specific—by virtue of their complexity—than the factors contributing to the production of grapes and wine, it should go without saying that narratives written in the same magico-realist (or marvelous realist) mode, but in different countries or even continents, are apt to display strongly distinctive flavors" (1). Balancing not only French texts but also Kafka against the magical realist mode, Scheel asserts, "[O]bviously there is no lack of contradicting world views and beliefs within Western culture. That the realities of experience can be seen and expressed in various fictional modes is amply exemplified in the Old World too, and magical realism is only one of [those modes]" (102).

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF MAGICAL REALISM

Describing Magical Realism

Many critics, in an attempt to offer sage advice regarding magical realism, dip into their own realms of contradiction (or into magical realist scholarship, as it were). Words like "juxtaposition" and "antinomy" fight for space beside several variations on the phrase itself: "lo real maravilloso," "realismo mágico," "magic" or "magical realism," "marvelous realism," or "marvelous real," not to mention the variations in languages other than English and Spanish. Lee A. Daniel believes that "the ensuing critical studies treating magical realism have complicated even more an understanding and a definitive definition for the apparently catch-all phrase" (129). At one extreme is an overly simplified version of the debate, an inevitable conclusion if Brian Conniff is right in proclaiming that "the term has always lent itself to certain simplifications" (168). Daniel, for example, argues, "Realismo mágico is actually nothing more or less than its name implies" (129). Edwin Williamson claims a similarly "easy" definability for magical realism:

At the level of simple definition there can be little disagreement: magical realism is a narrative style which consistently blurs the traditional realist distinction between fantasy and reality. Beyond this, critical opinion is divided as to whether magical realism is entirely self-referencing or whether it establishes a new kind of relationship between fiction and reality. (45)

Beverley Ormerod argues, "Magical realism is a literary technique that introduces unrealistic elements or incredible events, in a matter-of-fact way, into an apparently realistic narrative" (216). Moreover, Jean-Pierre Durix says, "According to our most restrictive definition of the term, the magic realist aims at a basis of mimetic illusion while destroying it regularly with a strange treatment of time, space, characters, or what many people (in the Western world, at least) take as the basic rules of the physical world" (146).

While some "simple" definitions of magical realism border on the "simplistic," most (such as Durix's and Williamson's contributions) undercut their explana-
tions by introducing new terms ("consistently," "blurs," "mimetic illusion," "destroying," "strange") that themselves demand to be defined before scholars can proceed. For example, Keith Spears questions whether the line between reality and the fictitious is blurred ("intertwoven") or juxtaposed (6), which is perhaps a critical distinction in determining the purpose and/or intentions of magical realism. Melissa Stewart claims that critics must work through such debates, since, "[i]n order to define magical realism, it seems necessary to identify the nature of the relationship between the magical and the rational, and indeed, several descriptions of this relationship have been offered. Some of these ... evoke an 'antagonistic struggle': the magical 'collides' with the rational, as David Young and Keith Hollaman state, or 'another world [intrudes] into this one,' according to Brian McHale" (477).

One such semantic debate is over whether magical realism pits reality against fantasy, and whether the term "fantastic" is interchangeable with the supernatural, the irrational, the mythic, or the surreal; others fastidiously avoid the debate altogether or adopt an "already-been-done" attitude, as when José David Saldivar cites Fernando Alegria's, Robert González Echevarría's, and Amaryll Chanady's debates on magical realism as the reason he will not trace the theoretic and historical problems of postmodern magical realism as a concept ("Postmodern Realism" 523). Yet, Saldivar willingly points out that "[a]lthough Gabriel García Márquez's use of magic realism includes Carpentier's familiar tropes of the supernatural—one of the foundation concepts of magic realism—his version differs from Carpentier's and inaugures the rise of (postmodern) magic realism globally" (526); in doing so, Saldivar narrows in on the fundamental challenges of magical realist scholarship: distinguishing it from that of Carpentier's lo real maravilloso.

Alejo Carpentier coined his expression lo real maravilloso in the preface to El carnaval en el siglo xvi in 1949. In it, he not only privileged lo real maravilloso as a Latin American (and, more specifically, Caribbean or perhaps even Cuban) event; he argued that the very concept itself sprang from the marvelous quality of the Latin American soil. Carpentier's "own conception is rooted in America, latent in the native landscape, and therefore symbolized for him the great revolutionary movement which a small country like Cuba can export to the rest of the world" (Durix 87). His geographic association denied European artists access to lo realismo maravilloso, though in fact his own arguments rested heavily on European sources (such as French anthropology) and ignored his own partially European heritage. Carpentier's "vision is," as Durix puts it, "a strange combination of revolutionary ideals and European ethnocentrism" (107). For critics who read lo realismo maravilloso as synonymous with magical realism, Carpentier gives "magical realism an ideological value, associating it with certain unique features of West Indian culture such as the religions of voudou and santería" (Ormerod 216). But even Carpentier stresses that his real maravilloso is different from 'magic realism' because the latter is identified with the artificial quality of the surrealistic search" (Durix 107). Stephen Hart does an exemplary job of differentiating between lo realismo maravilloso and magical realism. First, he says,

it is clear that the experience Carpentier is referring to, since it is couched in the language of divine revelation (Carpentier refers to "miracle," "spiritual exaltation," and "faith"), has much in common with the religious experience. This emphasis is totally absent from magical realism. Yet perhaps the single greatest difference between "lo real maravilloso" and magical realism concerns the role that the supernatural plays in each. According to Carpentier's definition of "lo real maravilloso," the experience of the marvelous is unexpected and unusual. . . . Nothing could in fact be further from magical realism. (43)

Carpentier, like Ormerod, Williamson, and other critics, assumes a role for the reader that is primarily outside the text; at the same time he provides a mythological or religious explanation for the "marvelous" qualities of lo real maravilloso.

As comparisons with Carpentier's term suggest, a popular method for defining magical realism is by contrasting it with other traditions, that is, by arguing what it is not. Its closest European relatives, for example, are perhaps surrealism and the fantastic. S. P. Ganguly claims that "hispano-American" magical realism borrowed directly from European surrealism, but that "the surrealist technique of psychic automatism and transcription of dreams was supposed to reveal deeper realities and inner marvels" that magical realism was not interested in (172). "[Andre] Breton and the surrealists (if, for the sake of clarity, one may consider the 'movement' as unified, which it was not) were exploring new territories opened by the discoveries of Freud concerning the unconscious" (Durix 109). Though "[b]oth Asturias and Carpentier were, at various moments, in contact with the surrealists," at the same time they "were rebelling against a vision of Latin America entirely conditioned by the European point of view" (109). Leal argued that surrealism intended to damage reality, but Hart believes that Leal was a bit too strict in his separation of surrealism and magical realism; both are traditions, Hart argues, that "join hands in their appreciation of the value of fantasy, and its paradoxical ability to unlock the secrets of the real world" (38). Hart says that though "the interests and subject-matter of these two literary movements were often similar, the presentation of that subject-matter was rarely so. The surrealist formula, as it stood, was unable to adapt itself to expression in the form of a realist novel" (39). Indeed, magical realism does not turn its back on reality as Breton and his followers were compelled to do. The difference between magical realism and surrealism is, thus, not to be understood in terms of the cultural gap separating Spanish America from Europe [but rather as a different] degree of familiarity with the realist mode—which is non-existent in surrealism but very alive in magical realism. (39)

Durix suggests that this cultural gap is not so large as some would have us believe, since magical realism might owe as much to surrealism and the European-based traditions as to traditional cultures; he believes that magical realism in fact "may pander to the tastes of Westerners eager to read about quaint exotic worlds. But it also . . . constitutes a counter-discourse which uses fantasy in a manner reminis-
cent of indigenous literature while subverting its premises [of an unproblematic, 
organic, and positivist magic world]" (187).

The other close cousin to magical realism, the fantastic, has perhaps a similar re-
relationship to reality as did surrealism, in the extent to which it, too, managed to
avoid or distance reality altogether. "Historically speaking, the fantastic emerges
roughly at the same time as romanticism" but "serves to question the tyranny of the
logos" in European narratives (Durix 82, 81). Roger Caillois says, "The fantastic
comes after the fairy tale and practically replaced it. . . . The fairy tale is set in a
world where enchantment is taken for granted. . . . The fantastic presupposes the
solidity of the world but only to ruin it more radically" (qtd. in Durix 82). Karla J.
Sanders explains that, whereas the "fantastique is a universal way to present un-
reality without cultural ties, . . . Magic Realism is a distinctly twentieth century genre
that developed as a response to cultural diversity, vast immigration, and coloniza-
tion" (23). For Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic requires "the reader's hesitation [a
hesitation that a particular character may also experience] . . . between a natural
and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (Durix 79).

Defining the supernatural and fantastic traditions against magical realism has
necessitated a revision of the perception of Latin American writers of the Boom.
"Largely because of his close ties with the fantastic, the designation of Borges as a
magical realist has created critical dissension, although he is credited by some crit-
ics as one of the major early influences on the contemporary magic realism move-
ment which has flourished internationally since the early part of this century" (Simpkins 145). For example, when Jeanne Delbaere stretches the definition of
magical realism even further to describe "two branches" of the mode, she argues
that those branches are composed of

an intellectual one derived from Borges and the surrealists and a popular one derived from
Márquez [sic]. In the former the magic generally arises from the confusion of the tangible
world with purely verbal constructs similar to it but without their counterparts in ex-
tertextual reality: playful, metafictional and experimental it has much in common with the spirit
of fabulation. The other brand, closer to the spirit of the marvelous, accommodates the
supernatural, relies heavily on superstition and primitive faith and has its source in popular
myths, legends and folklore as well as in the oral tradition; despite the challenge it offers to
traditional realism it continues to adhere in its form to the realistic conventions of fiction.

For Delbaere, the former (and, therefore, Borges) has an affinity with Old World
magic realism, while the other is influenced "by the 'real maravilloso' of the Latin
American writers" (99). Though Delbaere attempts to reconcile many of the con-
tentions among critics by making magical realism an Old World and a New World
mode, her arguments do not convincingly distinguish Borges's work from surreal-
ism, fabulism, or the fantastic. At the same time, her emphasis on "superstition and
primitive faith," "popular myths, legends and folklore" privilege Old World myths
as "reality" and indigenous ones as "supernatural" in both of her branches; in fact,
the magical realists surveyed in this volume invert not only traditional Western

mythology but Delbaere's "primitive" myths as well. Later attempts by Delbaere
(who had since become Delbaere-Garant) coined "additional concepts—psychic,
mythic, and grotesque realism" in an attempt to make her discussion of magical
realism widely inclusive (250). Delbaere is not alone in her attempt to claim Borges
as a magical realist, but the assertion has, surprisingly, engendered only limited
counter-criticism.

In his essay "The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism," Rawdon
Wilson not only provides concrete evidence against the classification of Borges as
magical realist but also walks his reader through a comparative example of the fan-
tastic. According to Wilson, "What occurs in fantasy is memorably exemplified in
Borges's narrative 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.' Tlön is a fictional world created
within the literature of the people of Uqbar (itself quite fictional), a world that
obeys, as its chief and consistent axiom, the epistemological principle of Berkeley that
nothing can exist (that is, have a place in space) unless it has been perceived. For the
inhabitants of Tlön the problem of what happens to certain copper coins when they are not
being observed is considered a paradox equivalent, the narrator observes, to those created
by the Elastic philosophers. (219)

Similarly, Wilson adds, "The Garden of Forking Paths" posits that "time bifur-
cates, that time is labyrinthine, not directly linear, and that fictional space mirrors
what is true of time" (219). For Borges, then, space is plastic, unpredictable, de-
formed, and he uses the fantastic to expand on this notion and "to comment upon the
nature of narrative" (219).

The traditions against which magical realism is tried by critics of the mode begin
to form, if not an explicit example of what magical realism is, then at least a clear illus-
tration of what it is not. Stephen Leemon's comment that "[n]one of its applica-
tions to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated
between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque,
the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous" (407) is obviously hyperbolic. Thus,
Leal can summarize that, "[u]nlike superrealism, magical realism does not use
dream motifs; neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of
fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does it emphasize psychological analysis
of characters, since it doesn't try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to
express themselves" (121).

Much has also been made of magical realism's close association or even syno-
yny with "post" traditions. Durix implies that only postcolonial writers use magi-
crealism, and that they use it for specific political commentary on their (and
their nations') postcolonial status. Postmodernism is alternately a sister tradition
and synonymous with the magical realist mode. Paris argues that "the category of
magical realism can be profitably extended to characterize a significant body of
contemporary narrative in the West, to constitute . . . a strong current in the
stream of postmodernism" (" Scheherazade's Children" 165), and that such fea-
tures as metafictional dimensions, linguistic or verbal magic, primitivism, repeti-
tion, and metamorphoses all situate magical realism in the postmodern (175–77). Theo D’haen says “the cutting edge of postmodernism is magic realism” (201); “to talk of magic realism in relation to postmodernism is to contribute to decentering that privileged discourse of Anglo-American modernism” (203). Delbaere contends that magical realism “has not superseded the more experimental strain of postmodernism but has merely developed alongside it” (77); similarly, Sanders argues that magical realism is not synonymous with the postmodern, which “focuses on technology, media proliferation, and logos, since] Magic Realism emphasizes a return to cultural knowledge and authority and values paths” (277). In fact, the North American magical realist mode, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, does focus on both the media and technology. In addition, One Hundred Years of Solitude, observed in Chapter 2 through an alchemical lens, in many ways serves as a reaction to technology. Given the similarities between and breadth of scholarship dedicated versal quality is to deny the reader any sense of connection with the characters, a

While comparing science fiction and magical realism, Kenneth Wishnia suggests that they are “typically classified as ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture, respectively” (29) and sees them as “two openings to the same space” (30). But the difference between the two, Wishnia argues, is one of framing; “[i]n magic realism, we have the weird things without the explanatory framing. In [science fiction] and horror, even the unexplained is explained by the framing effect of the genre classification: Weird things happen because it’s [science fiction]” (30). Other narrative styles that have previously been described as magical realism are similarly framed. As Ormerod claims, magical realism “relies on the reader’s acceptance of the idea that there is an illogical, irrational dimension to the everyday world,” an idea she says is also “common to folktales, fairy stories and other forms of narrative throughout the world” (216). Yet in these latter examples, the magical is explained away to the reader who “enters the text through the doorway of ‘once upon a time.’” Like horror and science fiction, fairy tales are “explained by the framing effect of their genre classifications,” while with folktales, cultural mythologies provide the frames. The efforts, not just on the part of critics, but on the part of magical realist writers, to distinguish the magical realist mode from other traditions may in some respects be a by-product of its affiliation with the “New” World literature that itself must work to set itself apart from other, largely European traditions. In addition, such “apparently paradoxical rejection of those whose influence is obvious can be considered a symbolic partide due to the inevitable anxiety of influence of formerly colonized societies” (Chanady, “Territorialization” 138).

As noted above, magical realist texts do not analyze their characters, but this is not to imply that the mode lacks any correlation with psychology. One frequent assumption about magical realism is that it is a Jungian (as opposed to Freudian) mode. Steven F. Walker advises using a Jungian psychoanalytic approach to magical realist texts in order to disengage the symbolic meaning that “is the bridging concept that links the study of psychology and literature” (348).

Zamora argues that the psychology of magical realist characters often incorporates a shifting of the relation of the individual to the archetypal (Usable Past 81). “[T]he magic may be attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams or visions” (Paris, “Scheherazade’s Children” 183). Ganguly says, “The tendency to adopt the epic element [and to rise from the particular to the universal] by these novelists is an expression of a desire to communicate to the world what he sees and understands, that is to say, his vision” (170–71). Indeed, “the effectiveness of magical realist political dissent depends upon its prior (unstated, understood) archetypalizing of the subject and its consequent allegorizing of the human condition” (Zamora, Usable Past 83), while its “characteristic instability of strata—individual, community, cosmos—inevitably impels magical realism toward allegory” (87). One aspect of this universal quality is to deny the reader any sense of connection with the characters, a denial sometimes heightened by other literary techniques. For example, as Clive Griffin notes, García Márquez’s use of humor in One Hundred Years of Solitude denies his readers “any serious involvement with characters or situations which the novel might otherwise have possessed” (92–93).

Its political nature also seems to be a popular definitive aspect of magical realism. It “has typically been seen as the redemption of fiction in the face of a reality that is still becoming progressively more disorderly. Durix’s claim that “[m]agical realists usually have a definite idea of their social role and pose political problems, which beset the (post-colonial) country described” (146), presupposes that Europeans either write about postcolonial nations in their works or that they do not create magical realism—erroneous claims no matter which presupposition he intends. Magical realists’ social and political “concerns center around legitimizing the Latin American experience to an international intellectual community.” Toward this end, magical realists adopt such strategies as retrospective arrangement, inter-authorial solidarity, and a circular model of time—strategies which lend credibility to otherwise incredible narratives (Spears 8). Some claim that, as “an ideological stratagem,” magical realism collapses “many different kinds of writing, and many different political perspectives, into one single, usually escapist, concept” (Martin, “On ‘Magical’ and Social Realism” 102), but it is nearly impossible to reconcile such a viewpoint with the magical realism of García Márquez, Toni Morrison, and others; their texts refuse to forget the specific histories of the regions in which they are spawned and, instead, prove to be a refutation of the ironically escapist historical accounts that have survived.

Thus, some certainties do seem to exist, in that they recur within common descriptions of magical realism—for example, the juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic—although even here there are decisions to be made over what to call the “unreal” in magical realism: the fantastic? the supernatural? the praeternatural? The method and extent of such juxtaposition, as well as the balance struck between them, however, have rarely been discussed or determined. In addition to challenging our ideas about the supernatural, “[m]agical realist texts (also) question the nature of reality and the nature of its representation” (Zamora, Usable Past 81).
Past 79), since, "[f]or the Magic Realists, the Magic is real, but the Real is also magic" (Shannon 25). As opposed to the horror and Gothic novels where "the supernatural tends to burst into a world which is otherwise subject to empirical and logical laws" (Hart 40), "[i]n the universe of magical realism, the supernatural plane does not irrupt at certain crucial junctures into the empirical world. Rather, the supernatural is never absent from the magical-realist universe, and, indeed, it is always visible to all. In this particular world, nothing is supernatural or paranormal without being at the same time real, and vice-versa" (41). Moreover, the magical realists "are clearly sophisticated in the use they make of metafiction, intertextual references, an interweaving of the 'realistic' and 'fantastic' modes but also of an implicit questioning of the polarity on which such terms are based" (Durix 146).

If the critics have difficulties determining what magical realism is and how to apply the term, it is perhaps not surprising that writers have similar difficulties. Perhaps the most famous example is García Márquez's claim that he is not a magical realist; but as Delbaere notes, "Writers do not as a rule think of themselves as magic-realists or write exclusively magic realist works; if the label fits some of their novels or stories it is usually because what they had to say in them required that particular form of expression. Neither are these works particularly experimental even though they challenge traditional realism" (98). Canadian author Keith Maillard describes the impetus for the writer of magical realism: "Something tremendously important must be said, something that doesn't fit easily into traditional structures, so how can I find a way to say it?" (qtd. in Delbaere 98-99).

Hancock, like Maillard and other critics, seems to be searching for a description of what Delbaere calls the "spirit" of magical realism (99). He argues,

A few features of magical realism] can be identified: exaggerated comic effects; hyperbole treated as fact; a labyrinthine awareness of other books; the use of fantasy to cast doubt on the nature of reality; an absurd recreation of "history"; a meta-fictional awareness of the process of fiction making: a reminder of the mysteriousness of the literary imagination at work; a collective sense of folkloric past. (36)

Elsewhere he states that magic realism "contains some elements of a mythical quest" (40). Hancock's use of the terms "features" and "elements" implies the same variation among texts that Schele described as "flavor." Hancock's definition, like those of many other critics, seems an amalgamation of characteristics drawn from several texts, the term "feature" implying that the above may be included in a magical-realist text, but doing very little to prescribe the qualifying (as opposed to the comparative) formula for magical realism. Still, Hancock's list serves to symbolize the general vagaries that plague magical-realist theory. It is little wonder that magical realism has become a catch phrase. As Durix notes, "Faced with such diversity of implicit definitions, it appears essential to explore and delimit the field" of magical realist criticism (102).

Prescribing Magical Realism

In her work Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy, Amaryll Chanady attempts to rescue magical realism from its beleaguered state. Chanady believes that, "[w]hile some scholars, such as Angel Flores, simply equate magic realism with the fantastic, others see it as a particular attitude towards reality... Because the concepts of the fantastic and magical realism are similar in certain respects, they have frequently been used interchangeably" (viii). The primary difference between the two, according to Chanady, is that the supernatural does not disconcert the reader of the magical-realist work as it is intended to in the fantastic work. "Whereas the simultaneous presence of the natural and the supernatural in the fantastic creates an ambiguous and disturbing fictitious world, it is the essential characteristic of a harmonious and coherent world in magical realism... The supernatural appears as normal as the daily events of ordinary life" (23, 101). Chanady's consideration of the differences between the fantastic and the magically real must also consider the reader, for although "the real reader's response varies according to his cultural background, that of the implied reader is based on the text... The real reader cannot be radically different from the construct of the implied reader if he is to understand the text" (33).

One of Chanady's initial tasks is to refute the idea that magical realism is a genre; instead, she claims it is a literary mode that can be found in many types of prose fiction. Were it a genre, she argues, it would be characterized by limitations both historical and geographic (16-17). In his book The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque, David Danow defines his topic as "narrative, a mode of human communication and an artistic form for reflecting one world (actual) in another (which is fictional)" (5). Zamora and Faris contend that magical realism is "a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic" and compare it to other modes of fiction, where such spaces or worlds would be irreconcilable (5-6). John Burt Foster, Jr. concludes,

Because magical realism refers to an international cultural tendency, it is broader than any single group of writers and/or painters, such as English Vorticism, Russian Acmeism, or Dutch De Stijl. At the same time, it lacks the all-encompassing cultural scope of categories like modernism, the avant-garde, or postmodernism. Magical realism seems ultimately to belong with such intermediate terms as surrealism, expressionism, and futurism, all of which designate movements with a significant presence in several national cultures but with no pretension to characterize an entire epoch. (267)

Like allegory, or any other narrative mode, magical realism has certainly shown that it will not adhere to boundaries—not even those set by the "masters" of its craft.

Because Chanady's goal is to clear up the confusion between the terms "magical realism" and "fantastic," she creates several straightforward guidelines that ultimately define magical realism extremely well. Phil McCluskey, who also relies on
Chanady’s work for his definition of magical realism, says, “The obvious advantage in a purely structural definition of the mode’s operation is the ability to identify its presence in various texts. This disturbs the prominent tendency to refer to all Latin American texts of the 60s as ’magic realism,’ and similarly calls into question claims for the appearance of the mode outside of Latin America” (89). Over the countless versions of the “definitive” definition of magical realism, Chanady’s proves to be not only the most persuasive but also the most easily applicable. Because she has read and commented on critics whose own ideas overlap or frequently, conflict with her opinions, her discussion serves to eliminate certain extremes while still allowing flexibility. Indeed, several of the critics she cites would be able to justify their own beliefs by using Chanady’s guidelines.

Chanady offers the three following criteria for magical realism. First, it is characterized “by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an ’enlightened’ and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday life” (Magical Realism and the Fantastic 21). Next is the “resolution of logical antimony in the description of events and situations” (26). “In magical realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic; it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (23). Finally, that resolution is achieved through “authorial reticence, or absence of judgments about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed in the text.” If the narrator stressed the exclusive validity of his rational world view, he would relegate the supernatural to a secondary mode of being (the unreliable imagination of a character), and thus the juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive logical codes, which is essential to magical realism, would become a hierarchy” (29–30). Chanady provides an excellent application of these criteria when she discusses Julio Cortázar’s “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris”: “The protagonist, who is left in charge of a friend’s apartment in Buenos Aires, vomits innumerable rabbits that proceed to destroy the carefully kept home of his absent friend.” Cortázar “rejects a rational explanation of the events as the product of the protagonist’s imagination in what would then be a patently oneric or hallucinatory account, as well as the treatment of the supernatural in the canonical fantastic, in which the apparently inexplicable events produce disbelief and fear in the observer/narrator” (“Territorialization” 139).

According to Chanady, it is through authorial reticence that authors like Cortázar establish their relationship both with the magical realist text and with their readers. Ultimately, authorial reticence “eliminates the antinomy between the real and the supernatural on the level of the text, and therefore also resolves it on the level of the implied reader” (Magical Realism and the Fantastic 36). Authorial reticence relies on narrative innovation:

One way in which such authorial reticence is communicated to the reader is through technique: magical realists are preoccupied with formal presentation of fiction as a work of art. Magic realist fictions always incorporate technical innovations. Levels of language, layers of formal and informal diction, doubles, transformations, stories-within-stories, a

blurring of that border between fiction and reality, are all contained within a formally presented and shaped book. The author gets away with such labyrinthine constructions by unifying the narrative with a voice that never questions what it tells. Everything is permitted to the writer as long as he is capable of making it believable, says Gabriel García Márquez. (Hancock 41–42)

These writers also draw upon popular events like weddings, festivals, fairs, and carnivals to insert literary imagination into a community (Hancock 41). What Hancock considers to be a hybrid space, a co-existence of opposite and conflicting properties (70), Joseph Benevento suggests should be termed something else, because “while ’hybrid’ often suggests a compromise or mating of two distinct entities, magic realism often seems to be both fully magical and realistic at once” (125). Chanady would surely agree that, in magical realism, neither the natural nor the supernatural is compromised. If the supernatural is not to stand out from realism in a magical realist text, it must be portrayed as normal or ordinary. Zamora and Faris believe “the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing” (3).

MAGICAL REALISM AS A SCHOLARLY DEVICE

The following exploration of the diverse uses of magical realism as a narrative mode in the literature of the Americas relies on Chanady’s general criteria to evaluate a variety of works. Inter-American comparative studies illustrate the extent to which writers in this part of the world have in common an indebtedness to European literature, questions of national identity, and an indigenous heritage, among other issues (Pérez Firmat, Cheek to Cheek; Zamora, The Usable Past 11). Gustavo Pérez Firmat believes that “four approaches to the issue of hemispheric literary communality—generic, genetic, oppositional, and mediative—outline the methodological options available to inter-American comparison,” and argues that not enough has been done with such comparison (4). “The relative scarcity of comparative studies of literature in the Americas suggests the difficulty of establishing appropriate bases for comparison” (Zamora, Usable Past xii). Like Zamora’s The Usable Past, this “comparative project is to expand the territory of comparative literary inquiries from its original national parameters in Europe to hemispheric ones in the Americas” (4). Because of the increasing interest in both the literature of the Americas and magic realism, the study of magical realism proves extremely current in American literary studies and creates more opportunities for comparative efforts. The primary works (and the majority of the secondary works) included in this text are in translation for two reasons: first, because a study of magical realism without translation would require mastery of no less than four languages for the Americas alone; and second, because most students read magical-realistic texts—from One Hundred Years of Solitude to The Metamorphosis—in
translating, just as they (and most scholars these days) read any number of other "great" works of literature. González Echevarría more directly implicates the reader in the translation process; as a bilingual reader, he argues, his work is to transfer "a text from one code to another to sift out in that process what holds it together" (Voices of the Masters 6). Hancock suggests that magical realism may provide the "glue" in such translations, since it, perhaps more than other narrative modes, is well-suited to being translated: "The experience of magic realism is the vitality of language expressed in images. This quality also lends itself to translation with little loss of meaning" (41). Gregory Rabassa, a well-known translator of Latin-American texts, seems to elaborate on Hancock's judgment, particularly in the case of the best known of all Latin-American magical realists:

The author who knows his language inside out can be either the easiest or the hardest to translate. If he has what might be termed a classical style or use of language, that is, if his sense of words is so pure that as metaphors they approach the object portrayed most closely, the translator is on his mettle to find that same closely approaching word in his language. A writer like Gabriel García Márquez has this gift of language, and he is so exact in his choice of words, getting ever so close to what he wants to say, that indeed, it is difficult to make a botch of a translation of his work as he leads you along to a similar closeness in English of metaphor (word) and object. "(No Two Snowflakes) 8"

When Jorge Luis Borges "told his translator not to write what he said but what he wanted to say" (Rabassa, "No Two Snowflakes" 6), he intimated not only the necessary adjustments that must be made from language to language but, more importantly, his own belief that his words could communicate a particular meaning even after translation.

Magical realism, once clearly defined, provides readers entry into hundreds of "new" texts—and perhaps re-entry into texts they have read in the past. Because it delves into the historical, social, mythical, individual, and collective levels of human reality (Hancock 47), magical realism offers new ways of exploring literature. For anyone interested in comparative literature, magical realism supplies structure and variety to countless studies, particularly in the context of the literature of the Americas. Yet, as noted above, this literary mode cannot be confined to one continent, language, or canon. It forces new comparisons even as it challenges former stereotypes and categorizations. For students and scholars and bedtime readers, magical realism creates new worlds of reading, teaching, and analyzing texts.

NOTES

1. According to Seymour Menton, the preface to this Cuban novel actually first showed up as an essay in El Nacional a year earlier (141).

2. Both Bainard Cowan (7) and González Echevarría ("Latin America" 54) cite Paz’s phrase, though it is Cowan who describes the foundation specifically as “New World” literature.

3. For example, Canadian writer Steven Guppy, in a letter to Geoff Hancock, wrote:

One of the things we have in common with people in parts of Latin America is our culture, such as it is, is based on a collision between the European intellectual tradition and the “mythic" perspective of a relatively large native Indian population ... with a rich and quite sophisticated oral literature. This collision between cultures ... is mirrored in the structure of much magic realist fiction, in which the miraculous events and symbolic characters we associate with the myth or folklore are depicted in the realistic style of a 19th-century European novel. Thus the juxtaposition of realism and fantasy, or myths and logos, if you like, which characterizes magic realist fiction, mirrors the superimposition of European culture on the North and South American landscapes. (cited in Hancock 33)

Similar claims could (and probably) have been made by writers from the United States.

4. Amaryll Chanady’s analysis of Borel’s text appears in her introduction to Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference, xiv–v. Chanady proves an important source for the definition of magical realism put forth later in this chapter.

5. Some of the studies Daniel cites include the works of Flores, Leal, and Carpenter, as well as Juan Barroso’s Realismo mágico y lo real maravilloso in El reino de este mundo and El siglo de las luces. Menton, who claims that "[i]n order for Magic Realism to have validity as a critical term, it must be placed in its historical context" (126), sets about doing just that in "Magic Realism: An Annotated International Chronology of the Term." Menton also notes that in 1974, "Roberto González Echevarría reviewed critically all previous Latin American literature articles on Magic Realism as an introduction to his erudite analysis of the historical sources of Alejo Carpentier’s El reino de este mundo. González Echevarría favors the Americanist interpretation of Magic Realism over the international one" (150). González Echevarría, whose analysis is in Spanish, is also cited by Sloman for his critical use of the term "magical realism” in Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home. Sloman cites a range of texts that critique the term and also notes Fredric Jameson’s study "On Magic Realism in Film" (Critical Inquiry 12.2 (Winter 1986): 301–25.

6. In fact, however, such certainty about his “simple definition” seems a bit naive, given that semantic games alone have already challenged such terms as “narrative style,” “consistently,” and “fantasy.”

7. According to Williamson,

[In the former view, One Hundred Years of Solitude is analogous to the fiction of Borges; its fictional worlds are autarchic, creating through the act of narrative special conditions of development and meaning which enable the fictive imagination to achieve a free-floating state of pure self-reference akin to the exhilarated innocence of children at play. ... Such a view ... cannot explain the political and historical allusion in the novel. ... The other account would have magical realism expand the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomenon in nature or experience which European realism has tended to exclude. (45)

This second possibility "endows García Márquez’s particular brand of modernism with a unique Latin American character” and reflects García Márquez’s own views on magical realism. But "[b]oth accounts regard magical realism as an entirely positive, liberating feature" (Williamson 45–46). In a note, Williamson adds that García Márquez "agrees that the 'rationalism' of European readers tends to prevent them accepting that magical realism is inspired in the fact that 'everyday life in Latin America shows us that reality is full of extraordinary things’” (62–63 n.5).

8. "It sounds as if, through some magic union with the world he was born in, the Latin American writer were gifted with a particular feeling for the mysterious realities of his country" (Durix 110).
9. Similar attempts are made by a wide range of criticism, from the widely cited essay by Angel Flores to Joseph Benevento's pedagogical approach.

10. Duriz argues, "This restrictive definition excludes texts such as most of Borges'[s] and Cortázar's works which do not have this broad allegorical framework and [that] concern limited environments and a relatively small number of characters and are best fitted within the category of the fantastic" (146).

11. "Just as James Joyce celebrated Everyman in Bloom's daily peregrinations around Dublin, everyday life is expressed in Magical Realism as both heroic adventure and international multicultural reality" (Boccia 24).

12. These issues are considered in light of the magical realist mode in later chapters, particularly Chapter 4 and Chapter 6.

THE BOOMING VOICE OF MAGICAL REALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

The young (and those who are less young) are truly beginning to read Latin America, because Latin America is truly beginning.

—Robert Fernández Retamar

LIBERATING THE LATIN AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Perhaps like most things in the "New World," magical realism has been "discovered" multiple times by vastly different literary explorers. Its evolution as a critical term is disputed, but less controversial are its origins. As Phil McCluskey prefaces an article on magical realism in Australian literature,

Any discussion of magic realism outside of a Latin American context must inevitably begin by using the literature of the Latin American "boom" and its immediate precursors as a site of origin, drawing parallels between the two conditions in order to lend authority to the "translation" of the form. Yet even within Latin America, the term's confusing genesis has meant that critical work on the subject has often been contradictory, thus complicating issues of definition, representation, and culture. (88)

McCluskey's claims regarding problematic definition have already been discussed in detail in Chapter 1, but his comments raise additional concerns regarding magical realism's originary status as an authentic Latin American mode indebted to the splendid and splintered historical, literary, and geographical realities of Latin America. An additional complication for setting down its origins is that "there is implicit in modern Latin American literature an ideology through which both literature and criticism identify what Latin American literature is and how it ought to
TRANSCRESSIVE VARIANTS OF MAGICAL REALISM

writers ‘wage war on totality’ by using magical realist devices to disrupt fixed categories of truth, reality and history. Their multiple-perspectived texts and the disruption of categories create a space beyond authoritative discourse where the unrepresentable can be expressed.

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIANTS OF MAGICAL REALISM

The oxymoron that makes up the term magical realism provides a structure for this mode of writing that includes opposing or contradictory points of view. The vocabulary used to describe this polarity at the heart of magical realism often indicates opposing worlds or at the very least, world views. Geoff Hancock, for instance, describes magic realism as constituting the \textit{conjunction of two worlds} (1980: 7) - the magical and the realist. Likewise, Amaryll Chanady states that magical realism is an \textit{amalgamation of a rational and an irrational world view} (1985: 21). Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris observe that the conjunction or amalgamation of these two worlds creates a mixture of these opposing cultures, and a third space, which is constituted from neither one nor the other of the opposing world views, but from the creation of a third which gives equal credence to the influence of the other two: ‘The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds’ (1995: 6). It is not surprising then to find that many writers whose cultural perspectives include varied and sometimes contradictory cultural influences are drawn to magical realism as a form of expression.
Even as early as the beginnings of magical realist writing in Latin America by Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Asturias, the cross-cultural nature of Latin America and the suitability of magical realism to express this aspect was emphasized. Carpentier calls this the *mestizaje* (culturally and racially mixed) aspect of Latin American culture (1995b: 100). He refers in particular to the different cultural influences provided by the African American and the indigenous people of Latin America. Even today this mixture of cultural influences is seen to provide the distinct characteristics of Latin America for writers such as Isabel Allende. Following Carpentier's belief that magical realism is specifically Latin American, she explains that it 'relies on a South American reality: the confluence of races and cultures of the whole world superimposed on the indigenous culture, in a violent climate' (Foreman 1995: 286).

Magical realism is often criticized for relying on a European viewpoint that assumes that magic and the irrational belong to indigenous and non-European cultures, whereas rationality and a true sense of reality belong to a European perspective. Carpentier, Allende and Chanady all seem to suggest this in the previous quotations, which leads to the accusation that they are repeating the colonialist attitudes established by the European Enlightenment in which reason, rationality, and science were considered to be the means to reveal the truth: non-European people, it was assumed through racial prejudice, were incapable of such thought and therefore of knowing the 'truth'. This will be discussed in more detail in relation to the critic Liam Connell in the final chapter. In a sense, it is unfair to make these accusations against Allende, based on this one statement, with the same force as those made against Carpentier. Carpentier based his novels on these ideas whereas we have seen that Allende's writing refers to a more Christian and European form of the novel (the Western form) but also from their alternative cultural perspectives, each adopted the narrative device of magical realism. Although Morrison has acknowledged that she uses the technique, she, Hong Kingston and Silko have all since rejected the term due to misconceptions brought about by the overly frequent use of the term in the 1990s. However, they employed the narrative technique of magical realism in order to express their own personal interpretations of their cross-cultural contexts in the face of domination by European American culture.

As they each explain, their cultural contexts include influences from dominant American culture (including their adoption of the originally European form of the novel) but also from their alternative cultural communities – the African Americans, Chinese Americans and Native Americans – all of whom have been persecuted by European Americans. Their aim is to challenge the dominant culture's authority and thereby lessen its power in order to articulate their communal histories which provide the necessary knowledge for establishing and articulating their cultural identities. As a part of this persecution and domination by European Americans, the histories of their persecution remained untold or told with the bias of European Americans for many decades. The Native American writer Simon Ortiz explains the difference of approach to history of European 'Westernized' Americans and his own community: 'History is the experience we live. I suppose "history" in the Western definition means something that is really a kind of contrived information to support the present case, the present United States' existence and aims' (Bruchac 1987: 223). Toni Morrison notes that the history of the slavery of African Americans from their own perspective has remained untold due to the oversight of dominant American (and previously slave-owning) culture. She claims:

We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over...
Morrison claims that magical realism provides 'Another way of knowing things' (Evans 1985: 342). This other way, which in her words blends the two worlds of practicality and magic together, allows the expression of a story that goes against what 'authoritative' history from a European American perspective claims. It also allows for the expression of African American myths that do not originate from European American culture, and for the expression of such myths that makes them approachable and meaningful for African Americans in a modern context.

For this reason Morrison's novels such as Beloved and Song of Solomon are set in an African American community at a particular historical moment. The central characters, Sethe and Denver in Beloved and Milkman in Song of Solomon, are searching for a way to understand their family's and their community's past. Morrison acknowledges that her aim in constructing narratives of African American history is an attempt to create a cultural memory for African Americans so that they can have a sense of how they became who they are today and what their past achievements had been. A large part of this creation of a cultural memory is the expression of a specifically African American culture. Using aspects of African American oral culture and myths that evolved during the time of slavery and are traceable today, some of which refer back to a West African cultural heritage, Morrison weaves African American cultural traits into her novels, which are also influenced by European American writers such as William Faulkner, and so creates a new cross-cultural context. Morrison's most famous magical realist happenings in her novel are in Beloved, the appearance in full bodily form of a girl who is understood to be Sethe's dead baby Beloved, who was killed by Sethe in order to save her from slave catchers and, in Song of Solomon, the flight of Milkman as he dies after having traced his family to the patriarch of Solomon the flying African. The appearance of Beloved can be interpreted as both that of a revenant ghost, that is an apparition in full bodily form, or as an abiku child, which is a child from West African Yoruba mythology who returns from the dead to be born again to the same mother. The story of Milkman can be interpreted as the Icarus myth but it is more convincing as the retelling of African American folklore which claims that when slaves died they returned to Africa by flying across the sea. Both of these myths can be found in differing forms in Ben Okri's Nigerian magical realist novel The Famished Road in which Azaro is also an abiku child caught between the worlds of the dead and the living, and in Alejo Carpentier's The Kingdom of this World in which the rebel slave Mackandal flies away when he dies.

Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead ([1991] 1992) is a complex novel with over fifty characters and differing settings. However, the central thrust of the novel is a call for environmental change and a consideration of Native American cultural beliefs which prioritize the wellbeing of the earth. Although there are many characters from differing cultural backgrounds whose stories are told in the novel, the overarching perspective of the novel is Native American. It is an expression of a point of view of a cultural group who are still under the colonial power of European Americans, who, between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth century killed many Native Americans, claimed their lands from them and organized them to live on reservations. Silko's text, however, is also a novel which draws on the fiction of postmodernist Californian Thomas Pynchon, among other European Americans, for literary inspiration and is set amongst characters of all nationalities in urban centres such as San Diego. This creates a strongly oppositional cross-culturalism in which the differing cultural influences are directly contradictory. In order to express both elements without one cancelling the other, her text relies heavily on the use of a magical realist narrative mode in order for the Native American myths to be accepted on the same level as recognizable American reality. The main source of Silko's magical realist plots is Native Mexican cultural practices, including the belief in the macaw as a sacred bird and the use of prayer bundles for guidance. The character Tacho, who becomes a leader of an environmental movement against the destruction of the earth by present-day Americans, talks to the macaws and asks them for advice. However, it is more the manner in which the Native American beliefs of the living character of the earth and the relatedness of all living things are placed in the text as a matter of fact that provides the alternative perspective from that of everyday American reality as perceived by the dominant culture. For instance, the fragment of the ancient Mayan Almanacs that is referred to in the title is transcribed...
and interpreted to provide a prophecy of the salvation of the earth by Tacho and his twin which is being set in motion during the action of the novel. The prophecy claims that they will arrive from the direction indicated by the great snake in the hills. This prophecy is based on two existing Laguna Pueblo Native American myths. The first is the emergence myth of the Laguna Pueblo that claims that the earth began when a pair of twins led the people into the present world and the second myth is that of the carved stone snake at the mine of Paguate which was discovered in 1979 and is believed to have special powers (Silko 1997: 126). The radical cross-culturalism of this novel and its magical realism resides in the fact that these Native American beliefs are proposed to the reader during the reading of the novel but are also intended to be considered after reading, no matter what the cultural background of the reader.

Maxine Hong Kingston's novels The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976) 1981a), China Men ((1980) 1981b) and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1989) 1990), like Morrison's, are written in order to express the history of her community and, in Hong Kingston's case, to create a cultural memory for the Chinese American community. As a group they were subjected to prolonged racist immigration restrictions until 1948. Chinese women were prohibited from entering the United States in a bid to stop them settling as a group and having families in the country. This led to a culture of secrecy in order to guard against exposure to the authorities who might find evidence of illegal entry into the United States. False family histories were common, resulting in the confusion of later generations in relation to their ancestry. Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior is semi-autobiographical and includes her anger at her parents for her lack of understanding of her Chinese heritage. As well as being confused by the secrecy surrounding her family history, the young narrator finds her mother's magical realist stories of China confusing in the extreme. She accuses her mother of 'lying' with stories (1981a: 180). One of her mother's most magical realist tales tells of how she battled with a ghost in a dormitory at her medical school. The detailed description and categorization of what kind of ghost it was combined with the description of the medical school where the mother learnt scientifically based medicine and rejected folkloric cures creates a magical tale told in the context of rationalism. However, this magical realism is entirely set in China and it is notable that it is the narrator's American perspective which provides the cross-cultural aspect to the text whereas the magic remains in China and in a cultural context unfamiliar to the narrator. Ghosts proliferate in Hong Kingston's work, although in the United States the word 'ghost' is simply used by the Chinese characters to refer to anybody who is not Chinese. The young narrator, being in a state of confusion, does not understand this and so is perpetually terrified. This emphasizes the magical realist aspect for the narrator, although it is not due to a specific magical happening but arises, rather, from the narrator's confusion about what is real and what is not real, about what is a ghost and what is not a ghost. The effort in her novels to untangle what it means to her to be a Chinese American is part of a broader attempt to provide a cultural memory for Chinese Americans. The use of magical realism for such a novel not only portrays the confusion between the categories of the real and the fake, or the real and the magical, but also brings into question what constitutes a multiply influenced culture such as the Chinese American.

In the context of the discussion of the cultural positioning of magical realism, it is notable that many of the novelists mentioned in this book draw on non-European cultural influences from orally transmitted myths. These myths often include magical elements that do not follow realist or rational lines. The magical aspects of their work, therefore, appear to come from non-European influences set against the dominant culture's rational, realist context. However, to contend with the criticism set out at the beginning of this section, Zamora and Faris point out that:

"Texts labelled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less 'real' than those upon which traditional literary realism draws - often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, ritual - that is in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind communities together."

(1995: 3)

Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko incorporate aspects of oral storytelling traditions, which are usually performed in interactive groups.
The storyteller, who can alter the story each time it is told can be asked questions by the listener who thereby guides the storyteller. This interactive storytelling is thought to promote communities by binding people together in a creative act. Moreover, because each time the story is told it is altered, it is understood that there is no one correct version of the story and that in fact, there are many. As Maggie Sale notes, in reference to Toni Morrison’s adoption of African American ‘call and response’ storytelling techniques, ‘This approach encourages multiple ways of seeing and interpreting, and so gives readers access to difficult material that encourages responses that are . . . complex and contradictory’ (1992: 44). The adaptation of oral storytelling techniques in a magical realist narrative are complementary and mutually supportive. In a text where categories between the real and the magical have already been broken down, allowing for more than one version of truth to be proposed, the use of such storytelling techniques which assume that there are multiple versions of a story, emphasizes the possibility of expressing multiple perspectives in the text. As Zamora and Faris point out, this creates the radical position that magical realism ‘resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism’ (1995: 6).

ONTOLOGICAL MAGICAL REALISM

Since he first presented his ideas on Latin American marvellous realism in 1949, Alejo Carpentier reiterated them, even as late as 1975, stating that ‘our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace’ (1995b: 104). Carpentier claimed that his version of magical realism, ‘the marvellous real’, found a natural home in Latin America. This he argued was in opposition to European magic realism, which he criticized for developing magic(al) realist techniques simply for narrative effect and without any connection to the cultural context in which it was produced. Carpentier saw the multi-ethnic and multicultural mix of Latin America and the cultural practices such as voodoo that resulted from it, as providing the perfect raw materials for a sense of the magical real in everyday life. He even provided a historical context for the development of Latin American magical realism, referring back to Hernando Cortés’ impression that the experiences of Latin America from a European perspective were beyond words.

These ideas have instigated a debate amongst critics of magical realist fiction. Some, such as Amaryll Chanady, criticize Carpentier for attempting to appropriate a narrative mode (that she claims cannot be specific to any one culture) in order to boost the status of a geographical location’s literary tradition – that of Latin America (1985: 131). Other contemporary critics, such as Roberto González Echevarría, have attempted to expand on Carpentier’s suggestion that magical realist ideas can originate from a particular cultural context where they are compatible with the belief systems of that culture, although, like Chanady, they do not associate magical realism with just one culture such as that of Latin America. In a study of the work of Carpentier written in 1974, Echevarría distinguishes two forms of magical realism: the ontological and the epistemological. Ontological magical realism can be described as magical realism that has as its source material beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which the text is set. For instance, Carpentier’s The Kingdom of this World includes a character called Mackandal who has the ability to change shape at will and even to take animal form. Mackandal is in fact a historical figure who led the slave uprising on Haiti and upon whom the novel is based. As Carpentier states, ‘Yet in America . . . Mackandal lived and was endowed with the same powers by the faith of his contemporaries who with this magic fomented one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in history’ (1995a: 87). He was thought to have magical powers such as the example of shape-shifting that Carpentier adopts for his novel and is a reference to the Haitian belief in man’s ability to change shape at will and to take the form of an animal. This is a recognized aspect of Caribbean mythology which recurs in books such as Pauline Melville’s collection of short stories entitled Shape-Shifter (1990), and is a trace of West African culture retained by the slave population.

Epistemological magical realism, on the other hand, takes its inspiration for its magical realist elements from sources which do not necessarily coincide with the cultural context of the fiction, or for that matter, of the writer. Jeanne Delbaere identified a similar difference between what she called folkloric magic realism (similar to the ontological) and scholarly magic realism (similar to the epistemological) in which the magical realism originates either from a particular folk tradition, or is cultivated
from a variety of traditions in order to produce a particular narrative effect (1992: 76). The work of the Flemish writer Hubert Lampo is a good example of such epistemological magical realism, as he acknowledges that he was interested in using magical realist techniques in order to express the mood of Belgium but also to be a part of a larger international literary movement (1993: 33). He draws his magical realist aspects from many sources, but particularly from Greek and Roman mythology. While there is an argument that Greek and Roman mythology have influenced Western European culture, its influence is so historically and geographically removed that this argument does not convince sufficiently to support a claim that Lampo's magical realism originates predominantly in Flemish folklore with its Germanic roots.

There are problems with the assumptions that these terms carry which we must consider before continuing further. First, the division of magical realist writing into the categories of epistemological and ontological gives rise to the inappropriate suggestion that a writer can only create one or the other. In particular, this gives the misleading impression that a writer of ontological magical realism is debarred from using the narrative mode for reasons of literary experimentation or for intellectual reasons. It gives the impression, in other words, that ontological magical realist writers produce magical realist fiction because that is what they automatically write, and that they cannot take a distanced intellectual view of their writing. Gabriel García Márquez is a perfect example of why such an assumption is wrong. Whilst talking about his work he has taken the ontological position, emphasizing his belief in Latin American mythology; 'I am a realist writer ... because I believe that in Latin American everything is possible, everything is real' (García Márquez and Vargas Llosa 1967: 19), whilst also expressing the epistemological position that is led by his knowledge and understanding of literature; 'I believe that what we should do is to promote it as a term of reality which can give something new to universal literature' (Irish 1974: no ref.).

However, if we are to identify those writers whose magical realism originates predominantly from the beliefs of their own cultural context, we find that ontological magical realism, in fact, has become the most common and most recognized form of magical realism. Writers such as García Márquez, Rushdie, Morrison and Okri all derive the magical realist elements of their texts from the mythology, cultural beliefs and folklore of the cultural context in which their fiction is set – which is also their own. García Márquez has often noted that his magical realism comes from his grandmother's method of storytelling, and her stories that included folktales and superstitions from their rural region of Colombia (Williams 1985: 6). As an example, he cites the superstition that an incestuous relationship will result in the birth of children with pig's tails. He incorporates this superstition into his novel One Hundred Years of Solitude when Ursula is gripped with fear of the consequence of her incestuous relationship with her husband, and the superstition eventually comes true when the third child, Aureliano, is born with a tail. Rushdie calls García Márquez's source of magical realism a 'village world-view', meaning that it is the result of a belief system developed in a rural environment and Rushdie implies that this is one that is little affected by modern scientific explanation (1993: 181). However, writers such as Morrison base their magical realism in the belief systems of their own cultural group rather than that of a particular location such as Latin America. Her locations vary between city, suburb, town and countryside but her magical realism is inspired by the residual influence of the belief systems of the African American slaves of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These slaves, having been brought predominantly from West Africa, were forced to lose their language and beliefs and to adopt the English language and Christianity. Particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, critics such as Henry Louis Gates have retraced many cultural aspects common to African Americans to the cultures of West Africa. These include lines and stories from spirituals, folktales and the patterns of music, speech and storytelling. With this knowledge, Morrison's fiction attempts to recreate a communal history for African Americans which links them back to the painful past of slavery and what was done to them and she emphasizes the cultural traits that link them to that history. Her magical realism includes characters who can fly back to Africa when they die. This was a commonly known myth amongst African American slaves.
As it is a recovered myth, Morrison herself is unsure of her own absolute belief in the flying slaves but is convinced by the cultural importance of such a myth. She claims that her novel *The Song of Solomon* is about Black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem ... It is everywhere ... people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking ... But suppose it wasn't? (LeClair 1994: 122)

The importance for Morrison of referring to these African American myths is that they rekindle the connections to their own distinct culture; one that developed through adaptation to their circumstances in America but which retained certain similar cultural traits to West Africa and which was brutally suppressed by slave owners and by the continuation of racist segregation laws into the twentieth century.

The West African writer Ben Okri uses the Yoruba myths and belief systems from Nigeria to illustrate the effects of colonialism. His novel *The Famished Road*, in particular, is built around the Yoruba notion of the simultaneous coexistence and connections between the worlds of the living and the dead. According to Brenda Cooper the appearance of the dead in the realm of the living is a negative 'commentary on the health of the human condition' (1998: 50). In the setting of the novel, the poor state of the human condition reflects the disastrous consequences of colonization and of the corruption of post-independence politicians in Nigeria.

What is also remarkable about the use of magical realism by these writers is that they employ the mode not only because they wish to repeat folkloric mythologies from their cultural community, but because they wish to promote a greater depth of understanding of the present circumstances in which the texts were written. For instance, García Márquez has claimed that he wants to bring back the imaginary into Latin American culture but also to write fiction that counters its destructive present-day atmosphere of political corruption. As Rushdie comments:

> The damage to reality in South America is at least as much political as cultural. In García Márquez's experience, truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is. The only truth is that you are being lied to all the time. (1991: 301).

Morrison has said that she wishes to make her fiction useful for present day African Americans in order for them to be able to move on from the past of slavery. Rushdie's novels provide commentary on the dangers and pitfalls of contemporary cultural politics and attitudes in India and Britain.

One question in relation to the concept of ontological magical realism remains unanswered and that is whether magical realism can be ontological when its sources are drawn from the context in which the novel is set but where these do not coincide with the culture of the writer. For instance, Alejo Carpentier, although from the culturally mixed region of the Caribbean, was a Cuban of European origin who spent much time living in Europe, where in fact he was introduced to the idea of magic realism. To what extent can he be said to share the cultural context of Haitian slaves with West African cultural influences from previous centuries? This question will remain unanswered in this section but it is a line of enquiry which will be considered again in relation to the future of magical realism in the final chapter. It is this form of questioning concerning the cultural position of the magical realist writer and critic that is most commonly posed.

**POSTCOLONIAL MAGICAL REALISM**

The majority of magical realist writing can be described as postcolonial. That is to say much of it is set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude. As we can see from our discussions of transgressive, crosscultural and postmodern magical realism, these variants seek to disrupt official and defined authoritative assumptions about reality, truth and history. In particular the proliferation of magical realist writing in English in the closing decades of the twentieth century has coincided with the rise of the postcolonial novel to such an extent that postcolonial critics such as Elleke Boehmer in her guide to colonial and postcolonial literature see the two as 'almost inextricable' (1995: 235).
Postcolonialism, like postmodernism, is a complex term that is still being debated and transformed. Essentially it refers to the political and social attitude that opposes colonial power, recognizes the effects of colonialism on other nations, and refers specifically to nations which have gained independence from the rule of another imperial state. Postcolonial writing can be, as in the writing of Robert Kroetsch in 1970s' Canada, a way of reconsidering the identity of a nation after independence or it can be a means of expressing opposition to the ideas of colonialism, such as in the work of Chinua Achebe in 1950s' and 1960s' Nigeria. It is generally agreed in postcolonial theory and criticism that the effects of colonialism were not just the imposition of one nation's rule over another, but it included attempts to change the colonized people's ways of thinking and belief to accept the cultural attitudes and definitions of the colonial power. This often involved the attempt by colonial rulers to define the colonized people and their nation from the colonizers' perspective and to impose a homogeneous, authoritative historical and cultural identity on the colonized nation. These disruptive and displacing effects on the cultural life of the colonized nation have been the most difficult aspects of colonialism to change. In his guide to postcolonialism, John McLeod is keen to emphasize the double faceted nature of this socio-political approach:

'postcolonialism' recognises both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity to change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved.

(2000: 33)

The majority of postcolonial theory and criticism, particularly that relating to literature, recognizes colonialism and postcolonialism as also a form of discourse, that is a socially and politically determined form of language and expression. Thus, postcolonial novels that are written in postcolonial discourse adopt assumptions and attitudes which are associated with a political perspective that opposes or recognizes the effects of colonialism on the context of the novel. For this reason, while many writers may not directly address the issue of colonialism or postcolonialism, their writing and the assumptions behind what they express reveal a concern with such political issues.

Summarizing her view of the closeness of magical realism to postcolonialism, Elleke Boehmer claims that:

Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement . . . They combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath.

(1995: 235)

There has been much discussion about how and why magical realist narratives are so suited to expressing postcolonial issues such as cultural distortion and displacement. The most often cited discussion is the 1988 theory of postcolonial magical realism proposed by the Canadian postmodernist critic Stephen Slemon. Although Slemon uses the term 'magic realism', his discussion refers to texts and characteristics that are commonly and more accurately identified as 'magical realism'. Calling on a mixture of postmodernist assumptions and the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, he claims that magical realism is able to express three postcolonial elements. First, due to its dual narrative structure, magical realism is able to present the postcolonial context from both the colonized peoples' and the colonizers' perspectives through its narrative structure as well as its themes. Second, it is able to produce a text which reveals the tensions and gaps of representation in such a context. Third, it provides a means to fill in the gaps of cultural representation in a postcolonial context by recuperating the fragments and voices of forgotten or subsumed histories from the point of view of the colonized.

Slemon adapts and simplifies Bakhtin's model of dialogic discourse to explain how the system of narrative tension works in a magical realist text. He explains that there are two discourses in the narrative but each
with a different perspective, the magical and the real, and that neither is dominant but is in constant tension with and opposition to the other. As he explains, there are 'two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other' (1995: 410). As he sees it, this structure reflects the tension between the ever-present and ever-opposed colonized and colonialist discourses in a postcolonial context in which the narrative structure reflects the relationship between the two, so that the 'texts recapitulate a postcolonial account of the social and historical relations of the culture in which they are set' (1995: 409). In addition, the tension between the two systems means that there are 'gaps' in the narrative which can be read either as a negative gap that reflects the difficulty of cultural expression for the colonized in the oppositional face of the colonialist power, or it can provide a positive gap which can be filled with the expression of an alternative perspective from the colonized point of view. Slémon explains that this comes about because:

a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences and silences.

(1995: 409)

Slémon refers to the Canadian writers Jack Hodgins and Robert Kroetsch to illustrate his theory. Here he deals with writers from what is known as a 'settler' postcolonial nation. Canada was settled by immigrants who originated from Britain, the imperialist power, and from other European nations. The settlers became the predominant population, dominating the indigenous population. This is in contrast to other postcolonial nations where the indigenous population remained in the majority and altered little in its composition during colonialism. These two forms of colonialism have been recognized by postcolonial critics to have different relationships with colonial power. However, Slémon uses these Canadian 'settler' postcolonial writers to illustrate the postcolonial condition in general. His analysis, therefore, needs to be read with that in mind. He chose these writers not only because as a critic he is predominantly concerned with Canadian postcolonialism but also because both writers are concerned with the effects of colonialism on identity. Hodgins's novel *The Invention of the World* follows the story of a community built as a replica of colonialism on Vancouver Island. Kroetsch's novel *What the Crow Said* describes the life of a small rural community on the borders of Saskatchewan and Alberta building a sense of who they are through the stories. Both writers attempt in their writing to create other ways of considering Canada as a postcolonial nation without having to rely on the image of Canada as defined by British imperialism. In order to do this, both writers use fragments of forgotten stories and orally transmitted tales to build an alternative history with which to consider Canadianness. As Slémon notes, these novels assume that colonialism has distorted their sense of identity and their relationship to their history. This occurs due to the Empire's power to define the history of its colonies to suit its own purposes. Slémon explains that colonialism is 'a condition of being both tyrannized by history and yet paradoxically cut off from it' (1995: 418). To move on from the colonized position, many writers such as Kroetsch and Hodgins attempt to reconstruct history from the remains of what is known of the people's history from their own perspective. As Slémon states, 'This imaginative reconstruction has echoes in those forms of postcolonial thought which seek to recuperate the lost voices and discarded fragments, that imperialist cognitive structures push to the margins of critical consciousness' (1995: 415). This means that many postcolonial texts (such as those by Toni Morrison that attempt to provide an alternative history to that supported by the dominant power) use oral storytelling as a source of alternative perspectives on history, as the oral tale was often the only way in which alternative versions of events that did not agree with those written as authoritative history survived. As Slémon points out, the political objective of these texts is that 'the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized of our own dominating systems can again find voice' (1995: 422).

The South African writer André Brink provides an interesting example of a postcolonial settler writer whose work is predominantly concerned with the reconsideration and revision of history. Brink's magical realist novels including *The Devil's Valley* ([1999] 2000b) and
imaginations of Sand ([1996] 2000a) are written from the postcolonial, post-apartheid, dispossessed perspective of an Afrikaner male. Although having been subject to imposed British colonial rule since the middle of the nineteenth century, this minority community still maintained a dominant position over the indigenous population until the fall of apartheid. Having lost their dominance, Brink explores the desperation and loss of identity through the eyes of a disenchanted urban and educated Afrikaner. His novel The Devil’s Valley reveals a grotesque community in which any involvement with the indigenous population was punishable by death; any reference to the punishments was taboo, despite the fact that the narrator is able to trace communal myths and beliefs to the local Indigenous community. The magical aspects of the novel include the appearance of the dead founder of the community amongst the living, the ethereal nature of one of the girls who leaves no footprints, and the strange nocturnal activities of the girls of the community who seem to be a group of witches. Rather than providing light relief, these magical aspects are highly disturbing for the narrator protagonist, Flip Lochner, who attempts to record an authoritative history of the community. The South African critic Marita Wenzel in an essay on Brink’s magical realism notes that the novel reveals its attitudes to history, and concludes that reality, absolute truth and history are unknowable. Indeed, all of the attempts made by Flip Lochner to record an authoritative history are disrupted either by losing his camera and tape recorder, or by the conflicting stories that he is told by different members of the community. He eventually notes that he will not be able to create one version of the history of the community, not only because so many aspects are hidden from him, but also because ‘I suspect that even if I were to know all there would still not be a whole, just an endless gliding from one to another’ (Brink 2000b: 368). Lochner eventually settles on gaining an understanding of the community through its diversity and the multiple perspectives which constitute it, rather than attempting to recreate a homogeneous authoritative history. In other words, Brink’s protagonist settles for a postcolonial historical perspective from the point of view of all the people involved, rather than seeking to impose his authoritative view of how he interprets their history in the manner of a colonialist. This denouement to Brink’s novel is perfectly illustrative of the critic Marie Vautier’s summary of the power of magical realist postcolonial novels:

'Magic realist works, however, bear witness to their liberation from a teleological and homogeneous historical discourse and to an acceptance of postcolonial heterogeneity with regard to historiography and to myth' (1998: 205).

The critic Michael Dash carried out a study of marvellous realism in the Caribbean in 1974, in which he too noted the close relationship of history to postcolonialism for non-settler, post-slavery nations. In a comparison of writers of the ‘négritude’ movement of the 1930s which sought to connect the people of the Caribbean with their slave ancestors and African culture and history, Dash notes that what is referred to as magical realism provides a means to recover not only the past but also the creative and spiritual aspects of the colonized people. He notes that these writers ‘have turned to the myths, legends and superstitions of the folk in order to isolate traces of a complex culture of survival which was the response of the dominated to their oppressors’ (Dash 1974: 66). Focusing his analysis on the writing of British Guyanese Wilson Harris (1921– ), he notes that such writing, like that of Alejo Carpentier ten years before, draws on voodoo and Amerindian culture for inspiration to recreate a spiritual and mythical cultural resource for the people of this ex-British colony. Harris himself is very aware of the postcolonial need for such recuperation, and is quoted by Dash as saying ‘the imagination of the old involved a crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest’ (1974: 66). To summarize, Dash claims that such marvellous realist writing of the middle to late twentieth-century Caribbean is:

the taking into account of the inner resources that the ancestors of the Third World could have developed to combat their tragic environment, therefore engaging in a conception of the past which would shatter the myth of ‘historylessness’ or ‘non-achievement’.

(1974: 66)

This appears to be what García Márquez attempts to do with his stories of the fictional isolated and unsophisticated town of Macondo. The population of Macondo are only considered to be important for a short period of history by the banana plantation owners, but generally the township is outside of history, marginalized from modernity and power.
It is only through the visits of the gypsies that the people of Macondo become aware of scientific discoveries. However, the attraction of writing about such a place for García Márquez is to emphasize the richness of their cultural and mythic life, and the importance of a pluralist storytelling rather than authoritative historical narrative. The critic Kum Kum Sangari wrote an essay in 1987 in which she considered the postcolonial aspects of what she called the marvellous realism of both García Márquez and Rushdie. Although Latin American writers are often not discussed in postcolonial criticism, Sangari puts forward a convincing argument for considering García Márquez in these terms. She explains that, for her:

Marvellous realism answers an emergent society's need for renewed self-description, and radical assessment, displaces the established categories through which the West had construed other cultures either in its own image or as alterity, questions the western capitalist myth of modernization and progress, and asserts without nostalgia an indigenous preindustrial realm of possibility.

(Sangari 1987: 162)

This chapter has demonstrated that magical realism provides a means for writers to express a non-dominant or non-Western perspective, whether that be from a feminist, postcolonial or rural standpoint, in opposition to dominant cultural discourse. It can be, in its transgressive, subversive and revisionary aspects, a revolutionary form of writing. The final chapter will explore the way in which the association of magical realism with non-Western cultures can equally provide a politically ambiguous situation in which the very magical realism itself seems to emphasize a Western perspective despite its attempts to portray a non-Western one. As Brenda Cooper explains, 'magical realism and its associated styles and devices is alternatively characterized as a transgressive mechanism that parodies Authority, the Establishment and the Law, and also as the opposite of all of these, as a domain of play, desire and fantasy for the rich and powerful' (1998: 29).

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MAGIC(AL) REALISM AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Up to this point the focus of this book has been on magical realism in adult narrative fiction. However, this chapter, which considers magic(al) realist cultural production discusses magical realism and magic realism where they appear in other cultural forms such as television, film and painting. It opens with a discussion of the appearance of magical realism in children’s literature in English such as that by Edith Nesbit and Michael Bond, then children’s television and particularly narrative drama. The section also considers the role of magical realism in film as a narrative art form. In order to do this, films such as Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire are considered in the light of the way in which the narrative of the film is told, whether through dialogue or filming techniques. Film has been considered in magic realist terms by a few critics such as Fredric Jameson, but for the most part, many magical realist films have not been analysed from this point of view, unless adapted from a recognized magical realist novel, such as Como agua para chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate). Finally, this chapter will consider magic realism in painting. As the term 'magic realism' was coined in relation to a particular form of painting, there is much critical work exploring these paintings in such terms. The sections analysing painting will identify the main practitioners of
Michael Bell

Magical Realism Revisited

In the late twentieth century various forms of the marvellous became popular in fiction around the world, including Britain, and in explaining the genesis and meaning of this development the phrase 'magical realism' has played a large but possibly misleading part. The most popular version of the story is that in the 1960s a group of Latin American novelists devised a mixture of 'magic' and 'realism' which subsequently extended to almost all parts of the globe. 'Magical realism' draws on pre-scientific folk belief to subvert the 'Western' commitment to scientific reason, itself associated with both imperialism and a history of realist representation, so that the new genre is intrinsically oppositional and progressive. García Márquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), as the most popular, substantial and summativie work in this mode, was the principal source from which magical realism became a dominant form in late twentieth-century fiction world-wide. Yet while there is considerable truth in this story, and writers from around the world, such as Salman Rushdie, have acknowledged the importance of García Márquez' example, this broad-brush account obscures a number of important questions and occludes a significantly different history.

To understand the wider recovery of the marvellous in world fiction, it is first necessary to question the assumption of a mainly Latin American influence. The new sympathy for the marvellous has broader bases, and wider sources. As signs of a more general cultural change, for example, one might note over the same period a new interest in Shakespeare's late romances, or the widened appreciation of opera as a dramatic form. It may be, in other words, that García Márquez is less a cause than a harbinger of change. That would not, of course, reduce the interest of his case. To be the symptomatic index of a deep-lying cultural shift suggests a more profound order of significance than being the instigator of a literary fashion. Likewise, some of the conscious rationales of 'magical realism' may have an ex post facto aspect, and an ideological thrust, which miss some of its underlying cultural meaning.

We should also note the unstable equilibrium in the very concept of 'magical realism.' It is often said that the proprium of the genre, in contradistinction to the fantastic, is that elements of the marvellous are naturalised, treated as unre-markable, in the narration. But of course it is often hard in practice to determine when this occurs, or if indeed it can truly be said to occur at all in respect of the reader's response to even the most apparently naive narration. For even if neither characters nor narrator baulk at the marvels, the reader, by the very logic of the genre, must be aware of them. Not surprisingly, therefore, even Wendy Faris's classic study of the form serves partly to reveal its elusiveness. Meanwhile, the phrase itself is as elusive as the genre it seeks to define. In oxymoronic formulations of this kind, it is always a delicate matter to determine where the principal emphasis lies. To what extent is magical realism opposed to realism or a form of it? Much discussion of the genre emphasises, or assumes, the former while other commentators note the ultimate importance of the containing category of realism as it is expanded and enhanced, but not exploded, in this genre. Since the familiar story has been well told on many occasions, I don't rehearse it here but propose a different rationale for 'magical realism' by first revisiting what the 'marvellous' meant in an earlier Latin American writer, Alejo Carpentier.

Because the term 'magical realism,' after some nonce usage in European art history, came into general use as a literary generic term in the Latin American context, it was affected by the gravitational pull of a neighbouring phrase 'lo real maravilloso' (the marvellous real, or reality). This was notably expounded by Alejo Carpentier in the prologue to his 1949 novel The Kingdom of This World. Carpentier records how, on visiting Haiti after a decade in the Paris of the surrealists, he was overwhelmed by the 'surreal' quality of the Caribbean and Latin American landscape and history. Here the anti-rational devices of the surrealists were starkly revealed to him as formal games still essentially within the world of western rationality. In being merely oppositional they were still defined by it. By contrast, the story of the eighteenth-century slave uprisings inspired partly by African tribal beliefs, or that of Henri Christophe with his fantastic redoubt of Sans Souci, were marvels of history. The phrase lo real maravilloso, therefore, refers to a reality whereas 'magical realism' refers to a literary mode. And 'marvel' similarly refers to the natural, just as 'magic' implies some departure from it. These expressions are, therefore, quite distinct in their meanings and claims; but Carpentier's argument, which was squarely based on a regional specificity, has coloured the use of the English phrase so that an ethnographic exceptionalism became part of the meaning of the sub-genre.

1 Amaryll Chanady, Magical Realism and the Fantastic (New York: Garland, 1985).
'Magical realism,' that is to say, has acquired such a meaning de facto without any intrinsic connection with Latin America. At the same time, Carpentier's prologue, illuminating as it is for the creative impulse behind the book, is actually quite two-dimensional as compared to the work itself. The Kingdom of This World is a poetically concentrated meditation on history in which the experience of the marvellous is ethnographically relativised as part of Black African culture, and is ultimately assimilated into the narrative as a form of artistically sustained mythopoëia. However deadly and duplicitous the European category of the aesthetic is shown to be, it remains the basis of the book's own utopian affirmation. The book is consciously a work of literature, of literary art. Likewise, while the book owes much of its local power to the communal imagination of the black slaves, it is squarely in the tradition of European Enlightenment in seeing slavery itself as an intrinsic, that is to say a universal, not a merely local and relative, evil.

It is difficult, and ultimately unimportant, to determine how far Carpentier may have been conscious of a gap between the rousingly simple reality claim of his prologue and the literary complexity of his actual achievement. The gap itself matters, however, because it separates a direct claim about reality from the significance of an artistically created world. And that matters in turn because the claim of an ethnographically specific experience is a common rationale for valorising 'magical realism' as a challenge to 'Western' rationality. Such a claim, although offered as a compliment, actually makes such works vulnerable to the charge of unreflecting sentimntality. I say 'unreflecting' because the rationality sometimes labelled 'Western,' and thereby contaminated with imperialism and other evils, is also the very universalism on which the moral standpoint of the book is at the same time likely to depend. García Márquez, for example, has been a Marxist throughout his mature life and therefore a child of the Enlightenment. And I say 'sentimental' because such a viewpoint seeks to enjoy a moral high ground on a simplified basis. But that is what Carpentier, in this classic and founding instance, notably avoids. If his prologue comes close to making such an argument, the book itself does not.

When I have called Carpentier's novel 'poetic' this does not imply a tendency to purple writing but rather a way of focusing, with a near-anthropological detachment, on metonymic moments which become radiantly iconic concentrations of historical experience. And with this thought we may return to the instability of the phrase 'magical realism' as reflecting an instability in the underlying notion of realism which the phrase 'magical realism' both exacerbates and occludes. A common argument for magical realism is that it subverts or expands the protocols of a more traditional novelistic realism, itself associated in turn with philosophical assumptions underwriting the political posture—and the scientific understanding—of the world. There is an important measure of truth in this. Several Hispanic writers of the region turned to the example of Cervantes, who is commonly accredited with founding European novelistic realism on mocking the marvellous in the form of medieval romance but, as Borges and others have insisted, Cervantes rather found in Don Quixote a cunning means of indulging his affection for it. In this respect, he represents a route back to the pre-Cervantean marvellous, and Carpentier in his prologue comments on the cultural ambiguity of a Cervantean episode in precisely this spirit. But there repeatedly creeps into the rehearsals of this account an assumption that 'realism' is a naively mimetic form, seeking to encapsulate reality objectively in language. It is one thing for writers such as Borges, within his fictions, to promote such a reductive conception of realism; but others, whether scholars or general readers, should not be drawn into taking such ideas too literally. Of course, the reality effect is crucial to much nineteenth-century fiction, hence the weight of the term 'realism,' but it is necessary every so often to remind some readers, including academics, that realism itself is only a literary convention. The great works of nineteenth-century realist art doubtless inform us about human experience; but, despite their occasional rhetoric or rationalisations as in Balzac's 'All is true,' they do so, no less than Dante or Greek tragedy, through literary means. All literary art affects us, in Nietzsche's words, as 'a concentrated image of the world.' In this respect, the assumed internal polarity in the phrase 'magical realism' has to be significantly reconfigured. The 'magical' and the 'realism' are both equally literary. Hence, along with the notions of 'magical realism' as either critiquing or expanding realism, one can also see it more directly and pertinently as foregrounding the literariness of the narrative. 'Magical realism' has origins beyond the ethnographic, and it often flouts a specifically literary pedigree.

This may initially appear a banal and circular reduction in so far as literature is a minimal and general category as compared to magic and realism. But it is sometimes the obvious that is at once most important and most overlooked. In the late twentieth century, despite the de facto popularity of literature, and specifically of fiction, it became a deeply problematic category, and especially under the pressure of political thinking on a geo-political scale. In a pedagogical volume entitled Literature in the Modern World, designed to introduce students to advanced, globally-conscious thinking about literature at the end of the twentieth century, the editor includes an excerpt from Terry Eagleton arguing the ideolog-

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4 For a discussion of this, see Michael Bell, Literature, Modernism and Myth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 182-95.

5 The phrase occurs at the opening of Le Père Goriot (1835).

ically-oriented arbitrariness of literary judgements. Literature, Eagleton suggests, is merely what a given set of people at a particular time find valuable or judge to be fine writing, and the supposed specialness of literature is a mystification. His argument has a structural similarity to Margaret Thatcher's notorious assertion that there is no such thing as society. Many observers saw this as a wicked dishonesty because it used the literal truth that there is indeed no such thing as 'society' to obfuscate the fact that every one born on to the planet is governed by a network of socio-economic relations which are man-made and a matter of political responsibility. As a popularising Marxist, Eagleton reveals with unusual candour the damaging pressure to which the category of the literary has been widely subjected within the academy. Although literary fiction remains buoyant in so far as it continues to sell, and is popular across a wide spectrum of readers, there is a question as to how it is read or what it is read as.

The literary has been a threatened category, if not at the level of practice, then at the level of understanding, and the notion that nineteenth-century realist writers practised naïve literalism is itself a symptom of its general occlusion. Imaginative writers like Carpenter and García Márquez, who have strong political and historical views, are for that very reason impelled to create a literary density within their fiction, which is why it may be an important underlying impulse of 'magical realism' more generally to foreground and affirm the literary as such. To take the sub-genre in this way is to deflect its meaning from pre-modern ethnographic exceptionalism and to see it rather as the expression of a highly sophisticated universality. That also explains why 'magical realism' has characterised widely different writers around the world, irrespective of influence from a single regional centre.

In this respect, Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita provides an illuminating comparison. First published with the Khrushchev thaw in 1966 from a manuscript which had survived the author's death in Stalinist Russia in 1941, its publication was almost contemporary with One Hundred Years of Solitude, yet its particular brand of 'magical realism' emerged from a completely different history, both literary and political. Both works use the Bible as a significant structural model within which to mobilise magically realist effects. Indeed, on a world-historical scale, the Bible is the most influential work of 'magical realism' in a colonial context, although this fact is commonly overlooked for the very feature that makes it so interesting a case: its peculiar status of having survived into modernity with a large readership for whom the magical elements are a matter of literal faith. Bulgakov and García Márquez exploit this fact in different ways, but in both cases it ultimately serves to foreground the meaning of their own literariness.

Several chapters of Bulgakov's novel consist of the Master's novel, which he has actually burned, telling the story of Christ and the imperial official, Pontius Pilate. Where James Joyce's fictional opening of the twentieth century took a Jew as its everyman figure, Bulgakov, in the latter half of the century, made Pilate the modern archetype. Pilate, the hand-washer, if not the moral centre of the book, is the centre of its moral significance. Unlike many of the real functionaries or bystanders in twentieth-century history, this Pilate is eternally tortured by the thought of his missed opportunity. And Pilate's moral cowardice is central because it figures forth that of the Master, who has imagined him, and through that of the writer as such. But, although the Master has destroyed his own work, in the magical world of Bulgakov's fiction 'Manuscripts don't burn,' and the work survives the personal weakness of its creator. Moreover, this work is a specifically literary one in multiple contrast to the familiar Biblical story which claims on the one side both historical and super-historical. Not only is the Master's novel narrated from Pilate's rather than Christ's viewpoint, and the characters given unfamiliar names, but Christ, known as Yeshua ha-Nosri, is presented in entirely secular terms. Yeshua repeatedly warns his disciple, Matthew, that he misunderstands and misrepresents his master. The proverbial value of the phrase 'Gospel truth' is subverted by an alternative history envisaged through the literary imagination. Meanwhile, the entirely secular conception of Yeshua/Christ in the Master's novel is in ironic contrast to the story of modern atheistic Moscow in which it is embedded, for this relates the grotesque mayhem created by a group of supernatural demons. Here again, however, the devils are deflected from traditional Christian figures and have an essentially literary provenance. Indeed, the whole Moscow story is an homage to the moral imagination of the nineteenth-century Russian novel. It is not only strewn with allusions from Pushkin to Tolstoy, it uses the grotesquerie of Gogol and the psychological imagery of Dostoevsky to explode the spiritual vacuity of Soviet Russia. If Bulgakov's novel had drawn on a literal religious faith, the effect would be more narrowly reliant on it. As it is, the literary imagination is felt as an enduring spiritual power and an historical resource.

Although One Hundred Years of Solitude draws more evidently on the folk imagination for its mediation of Biblical motifs, this also occurs through overtly literary means: Cervantes's signature device of the foreign historian. A major episode in the story of Macondo is the memory sickness which may be thought of as the shift from myth to history, the moment in which the communal memory...
becomes dependent on writing. The townsfolk initially seek to stay the loss of memory by the mechanical means of putting name labels and instructions on everyday items, and then they start to produce an 'imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them, but more comforting.' After these rather desperate veerings between mechanical records and flights of imagination, José Arcadio starts to construct a memory machine: a wheel turning thousands of cards reminiscent of a nineteen-sixties computer. But just as José Arcadio has written some fourteen thousand cards it is rendered redundant by the arrival of a mysterious, decrepit old man who eventually proves to be Melquíades. The focus veers in mid-sentence, and the memory machine itself quickly fades from the memory of most readers as the narrative goes on to tell how Melquíades cures the memory sickness with his magic potion.

Only at the end of the novel does the conjunction of Melquíades and the memory machine become significant. For Melquíades's true remedy for the memory sickness is not the potion but the written narrative he produces in the timeless zone of the chamber to which he retires. The timeless room combines a Nietzschean superhistoricism, the capacity to escape 'presentist' illusions, with the traditional 'once upon a time' of fiction. So too, although within the world of the novel Melquíades's manuscript is a chronicle — the simplest and most factual form of history — within the novel which we read as a novel, it is the purest fiction. And as an internal image of the novel itself, it preserves the ambiguities signalled at the moment of its birth. What does it mean for a novel to be a memory machine? Is this a reductive image, exposing its mechanistic limitations, or a positive one suggesting how it transcends the mechanics of its medium? The embedded chronicle images the novel's own ambiguous status as history and fiction, in which its considerable power as such is inseparable from the other. Most notably, the memory of the banana-company massacre, echoing the original memory sickness, disappears from the official history, and even from collective memory, but is revived, in a more mythic than historically accurate form, by virtue of the fiction. Fiction may be a deviation from history, or a concentration of it as meaning. As the latter, however, it may not be transparent, and interpretation, or a lived experience of history, may be necessary before its meaning can be appreciated. Hence, the final deciphering only when the experience has been lived is a resonant symbol, in Michael Wood's words, of what literature knows. It knows in a mode of the open secret, both transparent and opaque. In this respect, the populist literary charm of the book is itself part of redutive illusion from which the Buendías need to awake in their sleep-walking through history. Literary formal self-consciousness is the figure, and the means, of historical awareness.

The archetypal Anglophone work of magical realism in the postcolonial vein is Salman Rushdie's *Midnights Children* (1982) which, like *The Master and Margarita*, has other sources antedating García Márquez. Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), for example, is a major structural and thematic influence; and, as a reversal of the German *Bildungsroman*, it is itself a book of dense literary-historical allusion. Rushdie's novel creates a formal self-consciousness designed, in his case, to negotiate the problematic nature of representation in both its mimetic and its political senses. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, is constantly cast, by himself, by others, and by circumstances, as a representative of the collective Indian experience after Independence. Yet his capacity to embody the national history is continually ridiculed, and his magical property of being able to enter telepathically the consciousness of individuals all over India gives him what is referred to as the 'illusion of the artist.' Indeed, all the magic children mentioned here are artists figuring the art of the book in which they appear. Insofar as Saleem is specifically the Balzacian artist whose dramatic narrative expresses the national experience, the comparison is as ambiguous as the memory machine. Does it mean that India cannot be represented as nineteenth-century France could? Or that, for a late-twentieth-century, postmodern and postcolonial consciousness, this was always an impossible ambition even in Balzac's time? No doubt both implications are in varying measure present, and are made equally irrelevant, because the narrative uses the incapacity of Saleem to achieve more implicitly the representativeness that is apparently denied. The overt literariness of the work pre-empts the literalistic objections to which it could be vulnerable at the level of history while constantly putting into imaginative orbit highly concentrated iconic foci of the national experience. Once again, it is specifically as literature that the text is able to embody a history, or to become what Fredric Jameson calls a 'national allegory.'

Rushdie holds the historical tragedy and the fictional fantasy in a testing tension, but magical realism is peculiarly susceptible to short-circuiting the relationship and slipping into coyness or sentimentality — a danger which García Márquez saw in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* after its extraordinary success. Once again, sentimentalism may arise not from the genre as such but precisely from

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2 This notion was developed in *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, the second of the *Untimely Meditations* (1874).
its too easy privileging of an exceptionalist viewpoint, an exceptionalism which may be ideological as well as ethnographic. For many readers, the privileging of female sensibility in Isabel Allende’s The House of the Spirits (1982) or Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate (1993) allows the magic to become rather soft focus. Nights at the Circus (1984), by Salman Rushdie’s friend Angela Carter, is open to the same objection even though it offers an internal critique of contemporary strains of feminism. The strength of Carter’s novel lies in its being so self-consciously literary in challenging the influentially masculinist conceptions of art associated with Goethe and Joyce. Like Midnight’s Children, it approaches that characteristic late twentieth-century sub-genre of the rewritten classic for which Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) remains the magnificent exemplary case. The note of indulgence in Carter’s novel arises not from its feminism per se but from its too easy collusion of magic and exceptionalism, while the power of Rhys’s short novel, like Carpentier’s, derives from its broader sense of historical tragedy enveloping Rochester as well as Antoinette, and from its narrative containment of the exotic and the oneiric as experienced by the characters within the sober historical realism of the novel itself.

In whatever mode, the discipline of the real is vital, and it continues at all times to find expression in the traditional form of realism. Over the period in which magical realism has flourished, there have been writers of equal if not greater power, such as Anita Desai on India and John McGahern and William Trevor from Ireland, whose works have achieved the enigmatic transparency of literary transformation the more effectively for observing the protocols of realism. In this respect, it is useful to compare the South African novelist, J. M. Coetzee.

Until Elizabeth Costello (2003) and Slow Man (2005), Coetzee’s fiction had stayed principally within the protocols of realism, yet it has always been pervaded by a metafictional concern for the modes of meaning and responsibility peculiar to imaginative literature. Coetzee is remarkable for the rigour with which he thinks of major historical questions strictly within, or through, the category of literature. He repeatedly refuses to translate the moral substance dramatised in his work into general discursive opinion. His Foe (1986) ranks with Wide Sargasso Sea as a rewritten classic, but along with The Master of Petersburg (1994) it reflects on the tortured truth conditions of imaginative writing. Coetzee’s case makes clear that, although I have deprecated the tendentious, the category of the literary is far from apolitical. Indeed, the contemporary forms of the marvellous seem often to insist on the literature’s own oblique mode of intervention. Hence, although we may properly think of them as inhabiting different fictional universes, Coetzee and García Márquez have a deeper commonality in making self-conscious the vital, yet untranslatable, mode of meaning known as literature.

While I have emphasised the literary as a positive mode of meaning, Coetzee’s case also suggests more negative and political reasons why a globally postcolonial fiction in the late twentieth century should wish to emphasise its own literariness. The early twentieth-century generation of European modernist writers, most of them in some sense post-Nietzschean, frequently turned to myth as a primordial category whose functional modern counterpart is imaginative literature. The aesthetic is modernity’s equivalent of the mythic world-making. Such a privileging of aesthetically constructed myth was largely progressive in spirit, as Joyce and Mann especially exposed the arbitrariness of all philosophical systems. But to a later generation around the world the universalistic claims of these writers seemed Eurocentric, and it became more urgent – while recognising the mythic nature of every worldview, both individual and cultural – to question the hegemonic power of myth. If human beings are indeed mythopoetic animals, they have to adopt a more relativistic, quizical and postmodern relation to myth. As the Francophone Caribbean novelist, Edouard Glissant, put it in 1973: “The main difficulty facing national literatures today ... is that they must combine mythification with demystification, this primal innocence with a learned craftiness.” The difference in spirit is evident between D. H. Lawrence’s The Rainbow (1915) and One Hundred Years of Solitude. Both invoke Genesis to tell a modern regional history through a generational family saga, but Lawrence’s high seriousness contrasts sharply with García Márquez’ playful populism. Where Lawrence draws on a deep structure in English sensibility, García Márquez plays with the folk imagination without sentimentally endorsing it.

In this respect the fictional marvellous in late twentieth-century fiction is politically distinct from modernist mythopoeia, and its analytic or generic difference can be focused through Nietzsche’s remarks on literary response in The Birth of Tragedy.

Whoever wishes to test rigorously to what extent he is related to the true aesthetic listener... needs only to examine sincerely the feeling with which he accepts miracles represented on stage: whether he feels his historical sense, which insists on strict psychological causality, insulted by them, whether he makes a benevolent concession and admires the miracle as a phenomenon intelligible to childhood but alien to him, or whether he experiences anything else. For in this way he will be able to determine to what extent he is capable of understanding myth as a concentrated image of the world that, as a condensation of experience, cannot dispense with miracles. (BT, 135)

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14 See Literature, Modernism and Myth.
Donald Anderson

Necessary Lies: The expedient blurring of fact/fiction in creative writing

"Writing is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once more in that mirror which waits always before or behind him." So says Catherine Drinker Bowen, and I believe her. Memory and imagination are our only resources. Our stories are remembered or imagined, or, more likely, remembered and imagined. "It's a poor sort of memory," Lewis Carroll's Queen says, "that only works backwards." 2

Mind and brain studies agree upon one thing: there is no agreed-upon model of how memory works. Daniel Schacter tells us we can trust, though, that a good model for how memory works must be consistent with the notion that memories are constructions made in accordance with present—yes, present—needs, desires, influences. As such, our memories are accompanied by feelings, convictions, emotions. Furthermore, the experts say, memory involves an awareness of memory. 3

Jean Piaget, the great child psychologist, claimed that his earliest memory was of nearly being kidnapped at the age of two. He remembered sitting in his baby carriage, from where he watched his nurse defend herself against the kidnapper. He recalled scratches on the nurse's face and a police officer with a short cloak chasing the kidnapper off. The policeman swung a white baton. The rub against this story is that the event had not occurred. Years after, Piaget's nurse confessed that she'd fabricated the story. Piaget later wrote that he must have heard, as a

In his opening paper at the first congress entirely dedicated to realismo mágico, Emir Rodríguez Monegal pointed out that (far from offering a fruitful basis for critical discussion) the label had turned out to have a paralyzing effect and might be compared to a cul-de-sac, or labyrinth with no centre; at best, tautological, at worst, pleonastic.

Rodríguez Monegal meant, of course, to be provocative (and in this he was successful). Yet his conclusions were not (and in my opinion, are still not) completely unfounded. Behind the apparent transparency and clarity of the formula, there is, in reality, an excessive vagueness, above all owing to the adjective ‘mágico.’ And this explains the multiplicity of definitions that have been given, which in some cases present striking contrasts. It also explains the continual adaptations and adjustments that the content of the formula has been forced to undergo, depending on the texts referred to.

In the course of the debate, various links, influences and divergences have been alleged or refuted in an equally peremptory manner. The influence of surrealism has been denied by some and acknowledged by others. Realismo mágico has been compared to, or else clearly differentiated from, the fantastic. The Latin American real maravilloso theorized by Alejo Carpentier

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1 XVI Congreso Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana (East Lansing, Michigan, 1973).
as been considered a variant of realismo mágico, or something quite different, or again substantially the same. Mythology and folklore containal-
+ have come into; and passed out of, the discussion. Lastly, the mágico-
ment for some scholars resides in the particular way in which the writer re
eives what is real, whereas for others it is a question of a way of writing, and for yet others an aspect typical of the American reality-referent.

The discussion has inevitably spawned new formulas such as real
rognario, realismo artístico, realismo integrador, realismo fantástico, realismo
rilógico and realismo maravilloso. Each of these in turn has been considered
the formula best able to summarize the main aspects of this narrative tech
que, but none has yet succeeded replacing the original formula, not even
the last-cited, realismo maravilloso, which is undoubtedly the most correct, in
that it unites two well-codified literary categories, the realist and the anti
alist par excellence.3

Yet, as is well known, formulas die hard, and as they have been con
cretized by tradition, in whatever way, they command a certain respect. It is
sufficiently understandable that the formula realismo mágico continues to be used. It
is sufficient to be aware, in using it, that it is no more than a simple formula
that is to say, a model that "in itself is poor in meaning."

I want to say something about certain aspects of realismo mágico, but, given
the complexity of this literary phenomenon, I will only be able to deal with
the topic in a fragmentary manner. The first fragment, which might be
titled "Three Americans in Paris," opens on the terrace of a Parisian café, where
three young Latin Americans used to meet in the late Twenties and
eary Thirties to hold interminable discussions about politics and literature.
Each of them had his own dictador to describe, Estrada Cabrera, Machado, or
Gómez; each had his own literary project to accomplish and had discovered
a fundamental aspect of American reality which had formerly been ignored,
his own hidden face of American culture. The three young men were Miguel
Angel Asturias, from Guatemala, Alejo Carpentier, from Cuba, and Arturo
Uslar Pietri, from Venezuela. Writing in the Eighties, Uslar Pietri sum
marizes the interests of this group of Americans in Paris as follows:

4 Arturo Uslar Pietri, "Realismo mágico," in Gatos, insurgentes y visionarios (Barcelona:
Seix Barral, 1986): 135: "En Asturias se manifestaba, de manera casi obsesiva, el mundo
disuelto de la cultura maya, en una mezcla fabulosa en la que aparecían, como extrañas
figuras de un drama de guión, los esbirros del Dictador, los contrastes inverosímiles de
situaciones y concepciones y una visión casi sobrenatural de una realidad casi irreal.
Carpentier sentía pasión por los elementos negros en la cultura cubana. Podría hablar
por horas de los santeros, de los ríñigos, de los ritos del vudú, de la mágica mentalidad
del cubano medio en presencia de muchos pasados y herencias. Yo, por mi parte, venía de
un país en el que no predominaban ni lo indígena, ni lo negro, sino la rica mezcla
inclasificable de un mestizaje cultural contradictorio."


Asturias gave expression, in an almost obsessive manner, to the vanished
world of the Maya culture, in a fabulous mixture in which there appeared, like
the extravagant characters in a grand guignol, the Dictator's police, the unlikely
contrasts of situations and convictions, and an almost supernatural vision of an
almost unreal reality. Carpentier was fascinated by the negro elements of
Cuban culture. He could speak for hours on end about santeros, ríñigos, voodoo rites, and the magic mentality of the average Cuban in the presence
of the various heritages of the past. As for myself, I came from a country
where the dominant element was neither the Indio or the negro, but the rich
undefinable mixture of a contradictory cultural crossbreed.4

In 1924, Asturias moved to Paris, where he came into contact with such
Surrealists as Aragon, Breton and Tzara, and where he met Picasso and
Braque. He thus came to know all the leading exponents of French avant
garde Surrealism. In 1927, he completed (with J.P.M. González de Mendoza)
a Spanish translation of the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quichúa
Indians, based on the French version of Georges Raynaud, who held courses
at the Sorbonne on the myths and pre-Columbian religions of Meso-America
and with whom Asturias worked closely. This was followed in 1928 by a
translation of the Anales de los Xahil. As he recalled in later years, under
the guidance of Raynaud and other French anthropologists and ethnologists,
Asturias became an enthusiastic and voracious student of these cultures,
with the aim of tracing the disjunta membra of the Mayan Empire.5 The year
1930 saw the publication of the Leyendas de Guatemala, the great work which
laid the foundations of Asturias' later production, made up of indio folklore,
stories heard from children, memories and fantasies. Paul Valéry, who read
the translation by Francis de Mionmadre, was enthusiastic about these "story
poems," with their "bizarre mixture of beliefs, tales and customs,
representing all the stages of development of all the ages of a composite
people," from "a land where nature, botany, indigenous magic and theology
...combine to compose the most delicious of dreams." In other words, here is a surrealistic "reality." Valéry’s expression requires us to say something about the surrealism of Asturias.

It is undeniable that Asturias’ experience of Surrealism in Paris was fundamental for the definition of his language and for the dreamy atmosphere that pervades his writings. However, his own surrealism is less intellectual, and more vital, existential, and magical, than French Surrealism. Asturias himself likens it to the primitive or infantile mental attitude of the indio, who mixes reality and imagination, reality and dream.

Life in Guatemala, which is what pervades my novels, mixes together the real and the fantastic in such a way that it is impossible to separate them. I believe that this might be explained by what may be defined as ‘American magical realism,’ in which the real is accompanied by a dream-world reality so full of details that it turns into something more than reality itself, as in the native texts (Popol Vuh, Anales de Xahil, El Guerrero de Rabinal). The reality in which my characters move is a mixture of the magical and the real. The magical is a kind of second, almost complementary language used to penetrate the universe that surrounds them. They live, we live (because the novelist lives with his characters) in a world in which there are no barriers between the real and the fantastic, in which any episode, when narrated, becomes a part of something unworldly, and where, in the opinion of the people, that which is born of the imagination takes on the substantial nature of the real, unworldly and where, in the opinion of the people, that which is born of the imagination takes on the substantial nature of the real.

Carpentier arrived in Paris a few years after Asturias, in the spring of 1928, after a short period in prison, where he started writing a novel entitled Ecué-Yamba-O, a Lucumi-Náñigo formula (“God be praised”) sung at initiation ceremonies. He had managed to escape from Cuba thanks to his friend, the French poet Robert Desnos, who had lent him his own passport. Desnos now introduced him to the group of Surrealists, with whom he remained in close contact until his return to Cuba in 1939.

In a sort of parallel between his own cultural experience in Paris and that of his friend from Guatemala, Carpentier, too, soon “ardently felt the desire to express the American world,” and eagerly set about trying to learn about his continent. “For eight years,” he wrote in 1964, “I believe I have done nothing other than read American texts. America appeared to me like a sort of enormous nebula that I endeavoured to understand, because I had the vague awareness that my work [...] would be deeply American.”

When the first edition of Ecué-Yamba-O was published in Madrid in 1933, the nature of Carpentier’s America was already clear. Ecué-Yamba-O is the first stage of a complex discourse about the black element and Afro-Cuban culture and religion. The novel describes the life of Cuban blacks in the sugar plantations, suggestively presenting their beliefs, religion and culture in an atmosphere full of magic, surprise and mystery. The language shows clearly the influence of Carpentier’s avant-garde experience, above all in its bold metaphors and Cubist description of the countryside.

However, the crisis was already brewing which was to detach Carpentier from the Surrealist group, and, again like Asturias, this Surrealist phase proved to be a stage in the growth of a deeper and more lasting commitment to American real maravilloso. His return to Cuba in 1939, when he discovered La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), and his visit to Haiti in 1943 were decisive in leading him to compare the authentically marvellous element in American reality with the avant-garde’s claim to arouse wonder, in Carpentier’s view an unjustified one.

In an article published in El Nacional in April 1948, later re-used as the prologue to El reino de este mundo, Carpentier fiercely attacked the conjuring tricks performed by former Surrealist thaumaturges who had now become pure bureaucrats, and whom poverty of imagination had reduced to learning by heart “codes of the fantastic, based on the principle of the donkey...
predominate in the story was the tendency to consider man as a mystery surrounded by realistic data. A poetic divination or a poetic negation of reality. Something that, for want of a more suitable term, might be called magical realism."

In Uslar Pietri’s view, realismo mágico was essentially the perception of the mystery, or magical element, in man and reality - a revaluation and use of myths and popular legends in the conviction that it is in the conscience of the people that “a broad channel of communication between the mythica and the real” is created.13

Las lanzas coloradas, a mythicized epic of the wars of Venezuelan independence, was published in Madrid in 1931 (though Uslar Pietri only left Paris in 1934). The choice of subject is not without significance. As with Asturias and Carpentier, it was in France that Uslar Pietri discovered the peculiar condition of the American world and its difference from European reality, hence also the special role and task of the Latin American writer: “to reveal, to discover, to express, in all its unusual fulness, the almost unknown, almost hallucinatory reality which was Latin America, in order to penetrate the great creative mystery of the cultural crossbreed.”14 For Uslar Pietri too, this is a kind of redescubrimiento of Spanish America, which leads him to recognize the most obvious and significant (but also the least known and valued) aspect of its identity: namely, a cultural peculiarity which was the result of a complex series of encounters between different cultures and epochs.

Thus the moment had come for Uslar, too, to take his leave of Surrealism, which had been an important creative game, but had finally revealed its true character, that of “the autumnal game of an apparently exhausted literature.”15 The game played by the new Latin American writers, on the other hand, was quite different: not a game of imagination, “but rather a realism


10 Carpentier, “Un camino de medio siglo,” in Razón de ser (Caracas, 1976). (This is the text of a lecture held at the Universidad Central de Venezuela in 1974). I quote from Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso en la obra de Alejo Carpentier (Mexico City: Siglo XX, 1982): 44: “Me hallo ahí ante los prodigios de un mundo mágico, de un mundo sincretico, de un mundo donde hallaba al estado vivo, al estado bruto, ya hecho, preparado, mostrado, todo aquello que los surrealistas, hay que decirlo, fabricaban demasiado a menudo a base de artificios.”


13 Uslar Pietri, “Tio tigre y Juan Bobo,” Letras y hombres de Venezuela, 250: “un ancho canal de comunicación entre lo mítico y lo real.”

14 Uslar Pietri, “Realismo mágico,” Godos, insurgentes y visionarios, 137: “revelar, descubrir, expresar, en toda su plenitud inusitada, esa realidad casi desconocida y casi alucinatoria que era América Latina para penetrar el gran misterio creador del mestizaje cultural.”

15 Uslar Pietri, “Realismo mágico,” 137: “el juego otoñal de una literatura aparentemente agotada.”
that faithfully reflected a reality till then unknown, contradictory and rich in peculiarities and alterations, which made it unusual and surprising, as compared with the categories of traditional literature.  

The three Americans in Paris, then, had similar cultural experiences, which led them from Surrealism to realismo mágico as the most authentic expression of their Latin American condition. I believe that this element in the lesson of Surrealism is to be underlined. Clearly, realismo mágico is not surrealism, but it undoubtedly incorporated several of its elements, especially some found in late Surrealism, following Breton's second manifesto of 1930, which developed the conception of the immanence of the super-real in the real, and the reconciliation of contradictory aspects of the world.

For example, it has been rightly noted that Carpentier's theory of the real maravilloso borrowed various ideas from Pierre Mabille, the author of the famous Surrealist anthology Le miroir du merveilleux (1940), which gathered texts concerning the perception of the marvellous from a range of different cultures. These ideas included those of the origins of the marvellous in folklore, in popular mythology, and in religious syncretism, as well as the hypothesis according to which fringe cultures are the privileged site of the marvellous.

If I had to indicate where and when the coagulation of the elements destined to become the generative nucleus of realismo mágico first took place, I would say in Paris, while Surrealism was in full flower; but I would have to add: through an interest in the New World, and in opposition to Surrealism.

I should like now to consider the critical debate over 'magical realism'—the notoriously partial, generic and erroneous interpretations of Ángel Flores and Luis Leal. I do so for three reasons. The first is to revive discussion of the relationship between realismo mágico and the fantastic, which in my opinion critics have not yet fully elucidated, preferring as they do the simplicity of separation to the more productive complexity of probable contaminations. Secondly, I wish to question the all too widely—accepted differentiation between realismo mágico and real maravilloso (the former creates a marvellous reality and represents it into objective reality, whereas the latter represents the nature of a certain reality). Lastly, I also wish to show (and this might offer a suitable title for this second part) that 'some critics' mistakes may be a blessing in disguise.'

I begin with the famous lecture given by Ángel Flores at the MLA in 1954. This was the first time that the expression realismo mágico was used in an academic context to define a trend in Spanish-American literature. Flores used the formula 'magical realism' to define a way of story-telling that had developed in the Forties and had rejected the stereotyped models of indigenous, regionalistic, creole realism, preferring a more complex image of reality, based, as Flores said, on "the amalgamation of realism and fantasy."

The works mainly referred to in his analysis were Kafka's Metamorphosis, De Chirico's metaphysical paintings, and Borges' Historia Universal de la infamia (Universal History of Infamy) and "El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths"). These last two were said to represent moments of change and renewal in Spanish-American literature.

This was sufficient for many critics to affirm that by 'magical realism' Flores in fact meant the fantastic; which appeared to put an end to the whole question. This must have seemed correct even to Flores himself, given that a few years later, in presenting an anthology of Spanish-American narrative that included many of the authors quoted in his 1954 lecture, he no longer spoke of 'magical realism,' but of the fantastic.

Yet, though inaccurate, Flores' interpretation nevertheless contains two remarks that could be applied—and this is what always made him a subject of interest for me—to writings of magical realism, as this was to be defined in works not yet published in 1954. The first highlights the fact that in these works "the unreal happens as part of reality," and the second, that they share "the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal." For the "amalgamation of realism and fantasy" takes place, for Flores, by means of two procedures: the realistic narration of the unreal; and the unrealistic narration of the real (or if you prefer, the naturalization of the unreal, and the supernaturalization of the real).

In my view, both procedures, whether combined or not, are fully relevant to a large number of 'magical-realist' texts, both when they narrate the marvellous as natural, or as an integral part of reality, or as the hidden face

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16 Udaro Pietri, "Realismo mágico," 138: "sino un realismo que reflejaba fielmente una realidad hasta entonces no vista, contradictoria y rica en peculiaridades y deformaciones, que la hacían inusitada y sorprendente para las categorías de la literatura tradicional."

17 Chiampi, El realismo maravilloso, 39.


convinced supporters of this diversity is undeniable, as in 'classic' forms of the fantastic, but is also accepted, together with all its mystery, as an integral part of reality. In these stories the fantastic aspect is provided by an altered perception of the natural, which transforms (or deforms) it into the alarmingly unreal. This suggests the undoubtedly stimulating hypothesis that certain points of reference to post-expressionism, and through the emphasis it placed on Carpentier's conception of American reality. This element still needs stressing, insofar as the marvellous component of realismo mágico has perhaps been over-emphasized vis-à-vis the realist.

The great novels of the tradition of realismo mágico are first and foremost stories about the cultural, social, historical and economic reality of Latin America. It is therefore correct to claim that, among the great texts of realismo mágico, it is the Spanish-American works that make the greatest effort to recover and recognize an American identity, which is the keenest problem that 'discovered' colonial peoples have to face. For example, Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo is the mythical space where the history of the colonization and under-development of the whole of Latin America is written. On the other hand, Abancay, in Los ríos profundos by José María Arguedas, is a micro-hell where the positive myths of the indigenous culture clash with the negativity of the imposed Hispanic culture. Or again, Comala, in Juan Rulfo's Pedro Páramo, though wholly immersed in a climate of unreality, is a place that reveals the roots of the Mexican revolution and its failure.

Yet Luis Leal's analysis also suffers from a serious weakness, that of choosing Carpentier's narrative as the sole model for realismo mágico. As a result of its specificity, Carpentier's concept of the real maravilloso hardly represents the manifold aspects of the writing in the great magical-realist texts. It is sufficient to consider how restrictive it proves to be if used to describe the complexity of works such as Pedro Páramo or Cien años de soledad.

I believe we have to give up the idea of recognizing model authors, much less model texts; we should, rather, carry out a more systematic and refined examination of the narrative procedures, technical choices, and expressive and linguistic peculiarities which are at the basis of magical-realist texts. This has not yet been done in a satisfactory manner (perhaps the only serious attempt has been that of Iriemar Chiampi). This sort of study would at least counter the presumed but misleading opposition between Carpentier's real maravilloso, seen as an ontological concept, and the realismo mágico of García Márquez, seen as an aesthetic concept.

I tend to think that among the elements that make up the real maravilloso as defined by Carpentier are also those we generally call by the name realismo mágico, which is a far richer, more complex mode of narration.

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23 As interpreted by Franz Roh in his Realismo mágico: Problemas de la pintura más reciente, an essay (published in Revista de Occidente, 1927), well-known in Hispanic circles.
24 Referring to the specificity of his real maravilloso, Carpentier himself says in the above-mentioned lecture held at the University of Caracas in 1974: "lo que yo llamo lo real-maravilloso [...] difiere del realismo mágico y del surrealismo en sí" ("what I call real maravilloso is different from both ‘magical realism’ and from surrealism"). See Alexis Márquez Rodríguez, Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso, 44.
25 One of the most firmly convinced supporters of this diversity is Márquez Rodríguez; see his Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso and "Alejo Carpentier: Teorías del barroco y del real-maravilloso," in Ocho veces Alejo Carpentier (Caracas: Grijalbo, 1992): 55-91.
To recount the marvellous or prodigious "typical" of reality, the narrative discourse has to overcome two difficulties. The first is to make the improbable object or event narrated seem real, the more so the more the discourse tends to represent and adhere to the real, the more it undermines its character as realist discourse.

The second difficulty is to find a language that succeeds in saying what cannot be said. García Márquez writes: "It is necessary to create a whole system of new words constructed for our reality."26 For many magical-realists, above all Carpentier, this meant a form of neo-baroque writing.

There is a frequently quoted passage in Los pasos perdidos which offers a magnificent example of the problem of describing and authenticating the unrealistic aspect of reality:

Beyond the gigantic trees rose masses of black rock, enormous, thick, plummet-sheer, which were the presence and the testimony of fabulous monuments. My memory had to recall the world of Bosch, the imaginary Babels of painters of the fantastic, the most hallucinated illustrators of the temptations of saints, to find anything like what I was seeing. And even when I had hit upon a similarity, I had to discount it immediately because of the proportions. What I was gazing upon was something like a Titans' city - a city of multiple and spaced constructions - with Cyclopean stairways, mausoleums touching the clouds, vast terraces guarded by strange fortresses of obsidian [...]. There, against a background of light clouds, towered the Capital of the Forms: an incredible mile-high Gothic cathedral, a mile high, with its two towers, nave, apse, and buttresses situated on a conical rock of rare composition touched with dark iridescences of coal [...] there was something about it so not of this world [...] that the bewildered mind sought no interpretation of that disconcerting telluric architecture, accepting without reasoning its vertical, inexorable vertical beauty.27

26 Gabriel García Márquez, "Fantasía y creación artística en América Latina y el Caribe," Texto crítico 14 (1979): 6; "sería necesario crear todo un sistema de palabras nuevas para el lenguaje de nuestra realidad."

27 Carpentier, The Lost Steps, tr. Harriet de Onís (1956; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966): 154-55 (my emphases); "Allá, detrás de los árboles gigantescos, se alzaban unas nubes de roca negra, enormes, macizas, de flancos verticales, como tiradas a plumada, que eran presencia y verdad de monumentos fabulosos. Tenía mi memoria que irse al mundo del Bosco, a las Babales imaginarias de los pintores de lo fantástico, de los más alucinados ilustradores de tentaciones de santos, para hallar algo semejante a lo que estaba contemplando. Y a un tiempo encontraba una analogía, tenía que renunciar a ella, al punto, por una cuestión de proporciones. Esto que miraba era algo como una titánica ciudad - ciudad de edificaciones múltiples y espaciales - , con escaleras ciclopés, mausoleos metidos en las nubes, explanadas inmensas dominadas por extrañas fortalezas de obsidiana. [...] Y allá, sobre aquello fondeo de cirios, se afirmaba la Capital de las Formas: una increíble catedral gótica, de una mila de alto, con sus dos torres, su nave, su abside y sus arbotantes, montada sobre un peñón cómico hecho de la materia extraña, con sobrias irrisiones de hulla [...] había algo tan fuera de lo real [...] que el ánimo, pasmado, no buscaba la menor interpretación de aquella desconcertante arquitectura telúrica, aceptando sin razonar su belleza vertical y inexorable" (Los pasos perdidos [1953; Madrid: Cátedra, 1985]: 222).

28 Uslar Pietri, "Realismo mágico," 139; "... hecho mismo de una situación cultural peculiar y única, creada por el vasto proceso del mestizaje de culturas y pasados, mentalidades y actitudes, que aparece[se] rico e inconfundiblemente en todas las manifestaciones de la vida colectiva y del carácter individual"
But the improbability of the historical reality described is only the most macroscopic, and, ultimately, superficial form of syncretism present. It is more interesting to observe the way the plural character of syncretic reality pervades the narrative discourse, producing not only the simple representation, albeit strange and mystifying, of the simultaneous presence of disparate elements, but also the blending of real and non-real, one of the central aspects of realismo mágico.

El reino de este mundo is based on the coexistence of two contradictory visions of the world: the educated, rational and empirical vision of the white colonizers - the French colonizers - as against the mythic, supernatural and magical vision of the black slaves. These two visions logically exclude one another, but coexist in the historical, cultural, and racial reality of Haiti.

At the level of the story, and the organization of its discourse, this syncretism is signified by and reflected in a complex strategy of focalization. The black men’s vision, permeated by magic and the supernatural, is confirmed by the black focalizer, Ti Noël, and refuted by the white focalizer, Renormand De Mezy. At the same time, but vice versa, the rational, empirical vision of the white men is confirmed by the white and refuted by the black focalizer. 29

So far, there is nothing new: the simultaneous presence of distinct focalizers makes the various interpretations of reality problematic. But the play of perspectives and different readings of reality becomes complicated and ambiguous when the educated and Europeanized narrator recounts these two antithetical realities, authenticating each and thus determining the fusion of real and non-real. A good example is offered by the following passage, which, in an openly contradictory fashion, narrates the death and the survival of the black houngan rebel Macandal at the stake:

Macandal was now lashed to the post. The executioner had picked up an ember with the tongs [...]. The fire began to rise toward the Mandingue, licking his legs. At that moment, Macandal moved the stump of his arm, which they had been unable to tie up, in a threatening gesture which was none the less terrible for being partial, howling unknown spells and violently thrusting his torso forward. The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square:

"Macandal saved!"

Pandemonium followed. The guards fell with rifle butts on the howling blacks, who now seemed to overflow the streets, climbing toward the windows. And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry. 30

The white colonizers are only able to read this second version of reality; for this reason, they lose the colony. The narrator, on the other hand, perceives both of them, thus succeeding at the end of the novel in reading reality as the black men read it, and in using the authority that his role of omniscient narrator confers on him to authenticate the reality of the non-real.

Ti Noël was astonished at how easy it is to turn into an animal when one has the necessary powers. In proof of this he climbed a tree, willed himself to become a bird, and instantly was a bird [...]. The next day he willed himself to be a stallion, and he was a stallion [...] He turned himself into a wasp, but he soon tired of the monotonous geometry of wax constructions. He made the mistake of becoming an ant, only to find himself carrying heavy loads... 31

This last passage leads us back to Flores’ suggestion that the naturalization of the unreal entails an amalgam between real and marvellous. Here,


30 Carpentier, The Kingdom of This World, tr. Harriet de Onis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957): 35-36, “Macandal estaba ya adosado al poste de torturas. El verdugo había agarrado un rescaldo con la tenazas [...] El fuego comenzó a subir hacia el manco, sallándole las piernas. En ese momento, Macandal agitó su muñón que no habían podido atar, en un gesto conminatorio que no por menguado era menos terrible, aullando conjuros desconocidos y echando violentamente el torso hacia adelante. Sus ataduras cayeron, y el cuerpo del negro se espió en el aire, volando sobre las cabezas, antes de hundirse en las ondas negras de la masa de esclavos. Un solo grito llenó la plaza. Mackandal salvó! Y fue la confusión y el estruendo. Los guardias se lanzaron, a culatazos, sobre la negra suástica, que ya no parecía caber entre las casas y trepaba hacia los balcones. Y a tanto llegó el estrépito y la grita y la turbamulta, que muy pocos vieron que Macandal, agarrado por diez soldados, era metido en el fuego, y que una llama crecida por el pelo encendido ahogaba su último grito” (El reino de este mundo [Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978]: 40-41).

31 Carpentier, tr. Harriet de Onis, 143-44; “Ti Noël se sorprendió de lo fácil que es transformarse en animal cuando se tienen poderes para ello. Como prueba se trepó a un árbol, quiso ser ave, y al punto fue ave [...] Al día siguiente quiso ser gáranon y fue garañón [...] hecho avispa se hastió pronto de la monótona geometría de las edificaciones de cera. Transformando el hormiga por mala idea suya, fue obligado a llevar cargas enormes... ” (139).
Carpentier does not narrate or ‘represent’ the marvellous as real, because that is how his characters see it. Rather, he accomplishes the more complex operatio of presenting the magical world of myths and popular legends by consigning it to an omniscient narrator, who communicates it to the reader as real, absorbing the reader into a fictive reality in which he cannot help perceiving the incredible as credible, and the unreal as real.

In the sixth chapter of Asturias’ Hombres de maiz, the narrator alludes ten times, in the space of a hundred or more pages, to the popular belief that when Nico Aquino, the courier, crosses the mountains, he turns into a coyote. Then he abandons the point of view of the characters who believe in the truth of the náhuatl, a belief he does not share:

He had been turning the color of a thorn. He cast off his human shell, a ragdoll with dripping eyes, his tragic human mourning inseparable from the memory of his woman [...]. He cast off his human shell and leaped up on to a sandbank warm but rough beneath his four extremities of howl with hairs [...] with teeth from a cob of white maize, his far-fetching body like a handsaw sawing; pitched forever forward, four paws of running rain, blazing eyes of liquid fire, his tongue, his panting - as he panted, he went suffa, suffa, suffa, suffa - his intelligence, his itching.

This is an example of how the magical-realist text narrates the supernatural event without any ambiguity, removing all mystery, and presenting it as an event that is not in conflict with reality. This aspect of the non-conflictual coexistence of contrary elements is undoubtedly one of the central traits of realismo mágico, the one that differentiates it most strikingly from classic fantastic narrative. Where the latter, through its characters and narrator, conveys doubt, anxiety and crisis, the magical-realist narrative insinuates the absence of doubt, and relates a perception of the non-natural as organic and consistent with reality; in so doing, it is quite similar to the kind of neo-fantastic mentioned above.

In Cien años de Soledad, there is only one supernatural event, if I am not mistaken, that is doubted by a character - the appearance of the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar. José Aureliano Buendía does not believe [...]. When she says she saw him on the patio, intent on treating his wounded throat, and answers her, “Los muertos no salen.” He then changes his mind. But this is less important than the fact that, from now on, the appearances of Prudencio are no longer narrated as seen by Ursula or by José Arcadio Buendía, but as seen by the narrator.

Almost reduced to dust by now, by the profound decrepitude of death, Prudencio Aguilar visited him twice a day. They talked about cockerels. They planned to set up a breeding farm of magnificent animals [...] It was Prudencio Aguilar that washed him, fed him, and brought him fascinating news about an unknown figure named Aureliano, who was a colonel in the war.

But the naturalization of the non-real in García Márquez is usually more subtle. When Father Nicanor realizes that he cannot convince the people of Macondo, whether by exhortation or in his sermons, to give him the money he needs to build the church, he exhibits himself in a demonstration of levitation, which, as if by magic, makes his mean parishioners generous:

The boy who had served mass brought him a cup of creamy, steaming chocolate, which he drank at one gulp. Then he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief that he took out of his sleeve, stretched out his arms, and closed his eyes. Then Father Nicanor rose twelve centimetres above the floor level. It was a convincing stratagem. He continued to go from house to house for several days, repeating the levitation experiment, while the altar-boy collected so much money in a sack, that the building of the temple started in less than a month.

In this case, the miraculous phenomenon is normalized not only by the realist narration of the event, and by the assertive form, but also by the detail of the cup of chocolate. A formula, prayer, or invocation would have made a

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32 Asturias, Men de Maiz, tr. Gerald Martin (New York: Delacorte/Seymour Lawrence, 1975): 296-97; “Se había ido poniendo color de espina. Dejó su caparazón de hombre, muñeco de trapo con ojos gozantes, su trágico dueño de hombre inseparable del recuerdo de su mujer [...] Dejó su caparazón de hombre y saltó a un arenal de arenitas tibias y de lo más arisco bajo sus cuatro extremidades de auñullado con pelos [...] con sus dientes de mazorca de maíz blanco, su alargado cuerpo de serruchó serruchando, echado siempre hacia adelante, sus cuatro patas de lluvia corredora, sus quemantes ojos de fuego líquido, su lengua, su acido (al acezar hacia suflulufulufu ...), su entendimiento, sus cosquillas” (Hombres de maiz, in Obras completas [1949; Madrid: Aguilar, 1968], vol. 1: 756).

33 García Márquez, Cien años de soledad (Madrid: Cátedra, 1991): 243-44; “Ya casi pulverizado por la profunda decrepitud de la muerte, Prudencio Aguilar iba dos veces al día a conversar con él. Hablaban de gallos. Se prometían establecer un cría­dor de animales magníficos [...] Era Prudencio Aguilar quien lo limpiaba, le daba de comer y le llevaba noticias espléndidas de un desconocido que se llamaba Aureliano y que era coronel en la guerra” (my translation here and elsewhere; Gregory Rabassa’s 1970 English version is too imprecise).

34 García Márquez, 178; “El muchacho que había ayudado a misa le llevó una taza de chocolate espeso y humeante que él tomó sin respirar. Luego se limpió las labios con un pañuelo que sacó de la manga, extendió los brazos y cerró los ojos. Entonces el padre Nicanor se elevó doce centímetros sobre el nivel del suelo. Fue un recurso convincente. Anduvo varios días por entre las casas, repitiendo la prueba de la levitación mediante el estímulo del chocolate, mientras el monaguillo recogía tanto dinero en un talleigo que, en menos de un mes emprendió la construcción del templo.”
break between normal and non-normal; whereas the cup of chocolate forms a link between realistic and unrealistic; it is the banal touch of realism that domesticates and lends reality to the supernormal event.

At other times, the non-natural event is so embedded in the narration of other events, or is so casually introduced, that it loses all importance.

[Úrsula] asked to be helped to carry José Arcadio Buendía into his bedroom. Not only was he as heavy as ever, but during his prolonged stay under the chestnut-tree, he had developed the capacity to increase his weight wherever and whenever he wanted, with the result that seven men were not able to lift him up, and they had to drag him to his bed.³⁵

Procedures of this kind are generally associated in the magical-realist text with their overturning: that is to say, with the narration of the ordinary real as portentous and supernatural (Flores’ second insight). It is sufficient to think of the inappropriate degree of amazement and disconcertedness shown by the characters of Cien años de soledad in the face of objects believed to be magical and marvellous (ice, false teeth, a pianola, etc), and above all of that is to say, he increases the quantity in order to obtain a change in quality, thus projecting the object or event into an unreal dimension. Given the extremely high frequency with which this procedure is used, it ends up by becoming all the place all day. The invitation was a disaster, because hardly had the noisy college girls finished their breakfast than it was already time for the lunch shifts, and then for dinner [...] On the evening of their arrival, the schoolgirls created such chaos, trying to go to the toilet before going to bed, that the last ones were still going in at one o’clock in the morning. Consequently, Fernanda bought seventy-two chamber-pots, but she only succeeded in transforming the nocturnal problem into a matinomial one, because there was a long queue of girls in front of the toilet from the earliest hours of daylight, each with her chamber-pot in her hand, waiting for her turn to wash it.³⁷

Using this same procedure, magical-realist texts overturn history by turning it into myth, either by using popular tradition, or else by means of a form of narrative that renders the real constituent elements extreme and hyperbolic.

I would like to conclude by underlining the fact that the particular character of magical-realist writing stems from all the above elements taken together, from the narration of the marvellous aspect of reality as true and incredible, and from the intertwining of a naturalized supernatural and a supernormalized natural. The deep meaning of this combination lies in the representation of a wholly fictive reality – as Vargas Llosa defines it³⁸ – in which the principle of non-contradiction is not valid, and the isotopes of the natural and the non-natural are not in conflict.

In the article quoted above, “Fantasía y creación artística en América Latina y el Caribe,” García Márquez says of Mexico:

³⁵ García Márquez, 243; “[Úrsula] pidió ayuda para llevar a José Arcadio Buendía a su dormitorio. No sólo era tan pesado como siempre, sino que en su prolongada estancia bajo el castaño había desarrollado la facultad de aumentar de peso voluntariamente, hasta el punto de que siete hombres no pudieron con él y tuvieron que llevarlo a rastras a la cama.”

³⁶ In this connection, see Mario Vargas Llosa, García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1971): 565.

³⁷ García Márquez, 379-80; “Fue preciso pedir camas y hamacas a los vecinos, establecer nueve turnos en la mesa, fijar horarios para el baño y conseguir cuarenta taburetes prestados para que las niñas de uniformes azules y botines de hombres no anudasen todo el día revoloteando de un lado a otro. La invitación fue un fracaso, porque las ruidosas colegialas apenas acababan de desayunar cuando ya tentan que empezar los turnos para el almuerzo, y luego por la cena [...] La noche de su llegada, las estudiantes se embrollaron de tal modo tratando de ir al excusado antes de acostarse, que a la una de la madrugada todavía estaban entrando las últimas. Fernanda compró entonces setenta y dos bacinillas, pero sólo consiguió convertir en un problema matinal el problema nocturno, porque desde el amanecer había frente al excusado una larga fila de muchachas, cada una con su bacinilla en la mano, esperando turno para lavarla.”

³⁸ Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, 565.
Many would need to be written in order to explain its incredible reality. After living here for almost twenty years, I can still spend whole hours, as I have often done, contemplating a pan of jumping beans. Benevolent rationalists have explained to me that their movement is due to the fact that there is a live larva inside them, but the explanation seems a poor one to me: the wonder is not that the beans move because they have a live larva inside them, but that they have a live larva inside them which makes them move"; García Márquez, “Fantasia y creación artística en América Latina y el Caribe.”

This is much more than an amusing story. The jumping bean encapsulates everything I have been trying to say. It is, in itself, both true and incredible, real and marvellous; it can be perceived and represented as either natural or non-natural. Above all, it exemplifies the attitude that the magical-realist narrator adopts before the real, when his reading of the world is not exclusively directed by the poor canons of rationality.

Toad, all the roads from a man to a woman,
a man to a man, woman to man, woman to woman
lead through the non-human. This
is the reason, toad, for musicians.

[...]
We speak to each other by means

[...] of the bones and the horns and the bodies

[...] and bowels of dead animals...

to give a sense to Being means to go from the Same to the Other,
from I to Autrui, it means to draw a sign, to free the structures of
language.

RAWDON WILSON illustrates the emergence of magical-realist fiction in South America with a parable by Jorge Luis Borges about two brothers. The first brother began questioning the linear conception of time and geometry. His new, anti-rational logic was based on the
FOR YEARS NOW, the literary phenomenon discussed here has fascinated, even mesmerized me; at the same time, I felt a certain distaste for a parallel phenomenon, the literary postmodern. I don't wish to go into detail about this here (complex matters of definition and personal idiosyncracy); suffice it to say that I have found the postmodern to be an ambiguous attraction at best. There is doubtless a ludic aspect to postmodernism - something appealing that seems to legitimate the project, insofar as it makes itself out to be disinterested, disenchanted and perhaps even liberating. Yet it is often also a purely intellectual, sometimes ambitious and complacent, nihilistic game, ultimately expressing despair, as distinct from the deep, diffused sense of melancholy that characterizes modernism.

Texts in English that can be placed under the umbrella of the term 'magical realism' reveal certain formal affinities with postmodernism, but seem tuned to a different wave-length, one sufficiently difficult and enticing to excite interest, if not fascination. What is this wave-length precisely, and why has it manifested itself in such a large variety of forms across so many anglophone cultures? How do these texts function? What elements do they actually have in common?

The variants are in fact numerous and quite distinct. There are destabilizing tendencies within the still dominant mode of narrative realism itself - in the unusual yokings of the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' in the language of Patrick White, for instance, where wholly separate worlds seem impelled to undergo forms of osmosis; or there is the occasional glimmer of the marvellous in David Malouf, who, in a measured, reflective tone, reveals 'undisclosed connections' and 'limitless possibilities," an "expanding beyond us," a refusal to accept inherited oppositions as irreconcilable. Or

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1 That is, in the present volume, which is a selection of papers from a conference on "Il realismo magico e le letterature di lingua inglese," held at Pisa, 21-22 November 1996.
As the critic Wendy Faris calls it, magical realism looks like a renewal of literature - what Wendy Faris calls "a new form of narrative."\(^3\) Realist-naturalist aesthetics give way to a new vision of 'reality' which does not embody merely a postmodernist dynamic of dispersal or a bricolage of Derridean traces, but is mutable and heterogeneous, a heartbeat requiring auscultation by means of some new form of stethoscope. Realism, naturalism, social realism, psychological realism and surrealism make way for 'magical realism,' which interrogates the very idea of a priori 'realism' as the conventionally accepted way of encoding 'reality.' Here the factual coexists and interacts with the imaginary and with the paradoxes of the world of man, in a form of symbiosis.

Neighbouring areas include not only the postmodern but also the post-colonial (both sub-groups of the general category of contemporary literature). The magical-realist impulse did not, of course, originate in Europe but it has found its way there in Günter Grass's Tin Drum and Patrick Haggard's Perfume, and in the occasional interesting hint in Golding, Murakami, and Spark). Most of the writers considered in the present selection are formed less by the literature of modernism than by the Great Tradition of the nineteenth century, and by intimate suspicion of the complacent illusion of postmodernism. They come from countries which have occupied 'marginal' position, not only in the geographical sense, but also in the sense of being kept on the periphery of the cultural system by its central heartbeat, requiring auscultation by means of some new form of stethoscope. Realism, naturalism, social realism, psychological realism and surrealism make way for 'magical realism,' which interrogates the very idea of a priori 'realism' as the conventionally accepted way of encoding 'reality.' Here the factual coexists and interacts with the imaginary and with the paradoxes of the world of man, in a form of symbiosis.

The books considered here are fully representative of the post-colonial we mean by this the literature of the British Commonwealth (a geographical distinction within what remains of a unitary idea of the English World), expressions of (erstwhile or lingering) subject-status and subjectivity within a wider range of cultures such as the Third World or ethnic minorities scattered throughout the First World, or literary manifestations of anti-colonial resistance in their broadest forms.

From the periphery, seen for a long time as the place of the Other, these texts often embody their very own encounter with otherness; where the Other is everything that is not at its ease within monolithic structures, everything outside the order, rules and logic of the West and therefore regarded not infrequently as lower on the scale of eurocentric values.

It should, of course, be remembered that the oxymoron 'magical realism,' as used to define the texts in English that we are dealing with here, was first employed long before to describe a movement in painting (during the Twenties: Franz Roh in Germany, Massimo Bontempelli in Italy) and, later, a literary movement in South America (in 1927 and again in 1945). In its applications, it is a term that is perhaps not wholly satisfactory. Nevertheless, the designation 'magical realism' retains its charm, while the variants that have been proposed - 'mythic realism' (Michael Ondaatje), 'grotesque' and 'psychic realism' (Jeanne Delbaere-Garant), or, within the group of those contributing to the present volume, 'miraculous realism' (Lucia Boldrini) and 'shamanic realism' (Renato Oliva), etc - seem less comprehensive.

The critical literature on magical realism, at least as far as texts in English are concerned,\(^5\) is unsatisfactory. At times it focuses on magical elements rather than literary aspects, or on explaining connections with local geographical, religious or anthropological questions (the 'geographical fallacy'), or on the emergence of a general need for the supernatural and the religious as a popular phenomenon, such as in current 'new age' thinking. Zamora and Faris's recent Magical Realism deals mainly with texts in English, and contains some essays that represent honest attempts to define the specific nature of this form of narrative writing, together with others that apply the

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cultural typologies entails attacking inherited dichotomies – as man/nature, centre/margin, myth/history, and real/marvellous (rather: real/imaginary) and “philosophical pairs,” such as realistic language = true/rhetorical language = false. Semiotically speaking, we now encounter inclusiveness, the non-disjunction of contradictory elements, and above all the encounter with Otherness (not so much as intended by Jacques Lacan as by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas).

Foundational concepts of twentieth-century science – the principles of indeterminacy and complementarity (identical phenomena are susceptible of alternative theoretical explanations and alternative theory-bound descriptions) and the theories of quanta and parallel universes – and such contemporary extrapolations as chaos mathematics, fluid dynamics and the ‘butterfly effect’ interact with general thought, encouraging alternative modes of thought and changing our attitudes about how the world is/was supposed to work.

The fact that the wondrous never resolves into the supernatural in these texts is an indication that the whole literary operation of magical realism is instrumental; it is a form that is considered suitable for the presentation of ways of reconciling other modes of opposition that are experienced as intolerable. “Relief from the implacable polarization within history” is what Wilson Harris advocates; the calling into question of reality by means of Otherness, or the “bursting of bonds”; the attempt to salvage an organic image of the world as a “seamless whole.”11

However, these are literary texts in which we are searching for constants. It is necessary to devise conceptual instruments that make it possible to

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6 Susan Musgrave, Songs of the Sea Witch (Vancouver: Sonor Nis, 1976).
10 That is to say, the Other not as revealed from the splitting through of the Ego but as a presence, an inflowing world, penetrating and fructifying the world of the I: “a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, from I to Thou.” Martin Buber, To Hallow This Life, ed. Jacob Trapp (New York: Harper, 1958): 122. For Levinas, see Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exterity, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Totalité et infini, 1961, Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne UP, 1969) and Time and the Other and Additional Essays, tr. Richard C. Cohen (Le temps et l'autre, Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne UP, 1987).
explore unfamiliar logic (capable, that is, of explaining the new textual reality before us, as always in the study of literary texts) and to investigate the organization of the significance assumed by the structures of meaning within texts (a task which comes before any search for links with external systems). In any case, we will have to deal with new cultural models on the one hand, and with manifestations that are variously idiolectal, national and personal, on the other.

As regards the exploration of unfamiliar logic, we find isotopies based on the non-disjunction of contradictory elements (myth/history, naturalia/credabilia) - not either/or, but both/and. Textual axiologies are often unanswerable because of a challenging of socio-cognitive codes. Another still more common feature is censure of the principle dictating the reality of the social order. Cultural typologies are renewed by memory and by an awareness of new against old cosmologies, thus entailing acknowledgment of the persistence of myth. Lastly, metaphors built on analogical links with quantum theory, the theory of chaos, and fluid dynamics replace the modernist metaphors of fragmentation and segmentation and the postmodern ones of dispersal and dissemination. All these elements display a tendency to connect rather than separate, to recover and salvage rather than scatter or deconstruct, in order to form osmotic, metamorphic models.

As regards structures of meaning, even if some of the formal techniques are common to postmodernism (problematic enunciation, explicit and implicit meta-diegesis, the loss in mimetic function of conventional dialogue, iteration of temporal order, the anti-conventional treatment of space in textual construction), it is also true that in these texts the data include aspects of the world that have generally been marginalized or excluded from literary treatment, but are here shifted to the centre. The emphasis is on the thereness of the non-human, the counterfactual, otherness. Spaces are hybrid: opposite properties coexist. The temporal regime is mainly one of regressiveness and simultaneity. Characters are not single and central, but come in groups of two or more, or form communities. The story-line is rendered problematic, freed from logical connections, and working only by means of internal causality. Dominant themes centre on process-formation and carnivalization: routes, journeys, growth, initiation, death and rebirth, mutation, metamorphosis. Lastly, the language is both lexically and syntactically inventive and frequently has recourse to the multiplication of signifiers (lists), plays on words, polysemy, paradoxes, and a constant literalization of 'figures' - metaphor, oxymoron, hyperbole, and antithesis - which seems to confirm the overturning of the dichotomy realistic

language=true/rhetorical language=false (endorsed by recent work in linguistics and neurobiology on mental representations and cognitive semantics). Yet perhaps this is not so great a novelty. I am prompted to recall a fragment, quoted twice by Plutarch, in which Gorgias of Lentini says of literature (a privileged place for the exercise of language: i.e., rhetoric) that it is a form of deceit in which the deceiver is dikaioteros - more direct, more honest, more accurate, more right - than the non-deceiver, and where the person deceived is sophoterous - more intelligent, more prudent, more astute - than the one who remains undeceived.

I should like, in closing, to thank Robert Bringhurst and Wilson Harris for the approval they showed towards our venture. Bringhurst gave his permission to publish excerpts from his books; Harris very kindly gave encouraging support to my reading of one of his most difficult - and beautiful - books. All of the Italian contributors on anglophone literatures in this collection have reason to be grateful to Claudio Gorleri for starting us all on our journey. And all of the contributors have reason to be grateful to Gordon Collier for the competence, patience, and good humour with which he helped 'iron out the bumps.'
Magical Strategies:
The Supplement of Realism

SCOTT SIMPKINS

Magic realism seems plagued by a distinct dilemma, a problem arising primarily from its use of supplementation to "improve" upon the realistic text. The source of this nagging difficulty can be attributed to the faulty linguistic medium that all texts employ, and even though the magic realist text appears to overcome the "limits" of realism, it can succeed only partially because of the frustrating inadequacies of language. The magical text appears to displace these shortcomings through a textual apparition, but this appearance itself illustrates the representational bind which hampers its desired success. And thus the magic realists, always trying to overcome textual limitations, continuously fall short of their numinous goal.

In Don Quixote, Cervantes offers an appropriate example of the textual strategies employed in magical texts, and their ultimate failure, as Sancho betrays the creaky machinations that fool the less wary reader (Don Quixote himself, in this instance). Sancho, after all, is not deceived by "magic"—although Don Quixote insists otherwise.

Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez contribute further to this supplemental discourse by examining the condition of textual magic itself in their own writings. Largely because of his close ties with the fantastic, the designation of Borges as a magic realist has created critical dissension, although he is credited by some critics as one of the major early influences on the contemporary magic realism movement which has flourished internationally since the early part of this century.¹ And, indeed, Borges' presence surfaces throughout a great deal of the magical strategies employed by the many practitioners of this textual sleight of hand. Moreover, his work also anticipates several of the major
textual concerns which have developed among the generations of writers who have followed him. As Robert Scholes observes in *Fabulation and Metafiction*, the "opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision, and to much of modern epistemology and poetic theory."\(^2\)

Even the term "magic realism" has engendered disagreement since Franz Roh introduced it into artistic discourse in the mid-1920s through the German phrase *Magischer Realismus*, a "counter-movement" in art through which "the charm of the object was rediscovered."\(^3\) When his *Nach-Expressionismus (Magischer Realismus): Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei*, published in German in 1925, was translated and disseminated in Spanish through the *Revista de Occidente* two years later, his articulation of this new sensibility in art doubtlessly had a strong influence on Latin American writers searching for a suitable means to express the "marvelous reality" unique to their own culture.\(^4\) In *German Art in the 20th Century*, Roh later schematized the differences between expressionism and post-expressionism (which he associates with magic realism), but his focus upon the visual arts reduces the usefulness of his charted oppositions in a literary context. Still, the differences between realism and magic realism could, following Roh, be presented in this manner:

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<td>History</td>
<td>Myth/Legend</td>
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<td>Mimetic</td>
<td>Fantastic/Supplementation</td>
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<td>Familiarization</td>
<td>Defamiliarization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empiricism/Logic</td>
<td>Mysticism/Magic</td>
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<td>Narration</td>
<td>Meta-narration</td>
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<td>Closure-ridden/Reductive</td>
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<td>Naturalism</td>
<td>Romanticism</td>
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<td>Rationalization/Cause and Effect</td>
<td>Imagination/Negative</td>
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Through these necessarily limited oppositions, it may be much easier to envision how magic realism, as Roh suggested, "turned daily life into eerie form."\(^5\) Roberto González Echevarría, in *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*, traces the historical development of this concept from Roh, to Carpentier's *real maravilloso* and connections with surrealism, to Angel Flores' influential but limited 1955 essay, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," so that any further recounting of its growth may well be superfluous. He maintains that the term arose from an
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"effort to account for a narrative that could simply be considered fantastic." The magic realist text "does not depend either on natural or physical laws or on the usual conception of the real in Western culture" because it is "a narrative . . . in which the relation between incidents, characters, and setting could not be based upon or justified by their status within the physical world or their normal acceptance by bourgeois mentality." But, again, the allowance of the fantastic within this realm has led some critics, such as Luis Leal, to assert that

magic realism cannot be identified with either fantastic literature or with psychological literature, neither with surrealism nor the hermetic literature that Ortega describes. Magic realism does not use, like superrealism, dream motifs; nor does it distort reality or create imaginary worlds, as do fantastic literature or science fiction; nor does it place importance on a psychological analysis of the characters, since there is no attempt to explain the motivations behind their actions or which prevent them from expressing themselves.

These differences in boundaries offer yet another example of the difficulties involved in defining the limits of any period or genre. "The formula" for delimiting magic realism "has been used by many [critics] . . . as though they will find comfort in a concept with universal validity, like Classicism, or Romanticism, or (even) Realism," Emir Rodríguez Monegal observes, adding that "it is necessary to insist on the danger of general use of a formula that . . . is anything but universal." As Fredric Jameson remarks, however, the term "magic realism"—despite its shortcomings—"retains a strange seductiveness." The similar interests of surrealism have also led to critical confusion regarding the concept of magic realism, especially since several writers have produced works strongly suggestive of both. In his book-length study of Alejo Carpentier, for example, González Echevarría stresses both Carpentier's ties with surrealism and those elements which set him apart distinctly as a magic realist. Even Carpentier's identification of "marvelous American reality" points to his preference for an ontological outlook toward the textual enterprise favored by Latin Americans, as opposed to the phenomenological, European stance proffered by Roh, as González Echevarría suggests.

The Latin American writer preferred to place himself on the far side of that borderline aesthetics described by Roh—on the side of the savage, of the believer, not on the ambiguous ground where miracles are justified by means of a reflexive act of perception, in which the consciousness of distance between the
observer and the object, between the subject and that exotic other, generates estrangement and wonder.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, both González Echevarría, and Rodríguez Monegal in "Lo Real y lo Maravilloso en El Reino de Este Mundo," note that Carpentier—and several other magic realists—chose to move away from some of the more restrictive tenets of surrealism and turn toward what has become known as magic realism. "In spite of his fascination with Surrealism at one time in his life, Carpentier never completely succumbs to Breton and his theories," González Echevarría contends. "On the contrary, Carpentier endeavors to isolate in his concept of the 'marvelous' something which would be exclusively Latin American."\textsuperscript{12} Others such as Borges and García Márquez, however, have departed from surrealism far more substantially than Carpentier.

Despite the various critical disagreements over the concept of magic realism, one element which does recur constantly throughout many magic realist texts, and therefore points to a unifying characteristic, is an awareness of the ineluctable lack in communication, a condition which prevents the merger of signifier and signified. Perhaps the problem with this type of supplementation is really nothing more than that of a rigorous, but overwhelmingly frustrated, endeavor to increase the likelihood of complete signification through magical means, to make the text—a decidedly unreal construct—become real through a deceptive seeming. Rosemary Jackson suggests that "the issue of the narrative's internal reality is always relevant to the fantastic, with the result that the 'real' is a notion which is under constant interrogation," and this seems to be the case. Use of the "real," in terms of signification, actually appears to eliminate the difference between the construct and the object it somehow reconstructs. Despite its undeniable artificiality, a super-realistic painting of an apple, for example, may appear more "real" than an impressionistic rendition of one.\textsuperscript{13}

Gabriel García Márquez, on the other hand, is a member of the generation of textual magicians to follow Borges (since Borges had a head start of twenty-five years). Like Borges, García Márquez employs a variety of supplemental strategies in an attempt to increase the significative force texts seem able to generate. In one of a series of interviews published as The Fragrance of Guava, he maintains that "realism" (he cites some of his realistic novels as examples) is "a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality. However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page."\textsuperscript{14} A "realistic" text is hardly a satisfactory mode, much less an accurate presentation of the thing in itself, García Márquez
contends, because "disproportion is part of our reality too. Our reality is in itself out of all proportion."\textsuperscript{15} In other words, García Márquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than a "realistic" text. And this realism is conjured up by a series of magical supplements—such as those found in his \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}.

To Jameson, Carpentier's concept of the "marvelous real" establishes a stance distinctly antithetical to the notion of supplementation as an active component of magic realism. Carpentier's "strategic reformulation" of the label of magic realism through the term \textit{real maravilloso} produces "not a realism to be transfigured by the 'supplement' of a magical perspective," Jameson claims, "but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic."\textsuperscript{16} But, with this assertion, Jameson seems to neglect the transmission and portrayal of the marvelous, an act effected through a textual medium which is clearly a supplementation of the agency of realism.

For someone who has said he would rather be a magician than a writer, García Márquez meets his desires halfway by being both in \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude}.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the many magical events (flying carpets, living dead, accurate portents, telekinesis, and so on), García Márquez claims he "was able to write \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists or Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand."\textsuperscript{18} In effect, he is arguing that the magical text operates virtually as a corrective to traditional tenets of mimesis, incorporating those unreal elements which in themselves antithetically ground reality.

\textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} offers numerous examples of magical supplementation amid the description of approximately a century in the history of one family, a genealogy which recounts fantastic occurrences as though they were quite commonplace.\textsuperscript{19} Generations of characters, beginning with the marriage of José Arcadio Buendía and Ursula Iguarán, also encounter the bizarre aspects of "real" life in the inherently supernatural tropics. Early in the novel, for instance, José Arcadio realizes that his plan to found a new village—Macondo—"had become enveloped in a web of pretexts, disappointments, and evasions until it turned into nothing but an illusion."\textsuperscript{20} This unreal reality is reinforced further as a contagion of amnesia infects the entire village. But a plan is developed to label everything in Macondo so that its increasingly forgetful inhabitants can remember reality by writing it, a strategy which reveals the unseen fantastic element behind writing and its magical ability to create a reality.
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As the amnesia worsens, the villagers' situation parallels the seemingly universal—and also realistic—dilemma that accompanies language's indeterminacies: "Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters" (OHY, p. 53). In the amnesia episode, accordingly, García Márquez discusses this decidedly realistic concern through a magical layer, a supplemental strategy that may enhance, through its own theatricality, the force of an otherwise commonplace development, boosting its significative show in the process through a transcendent power.

To prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief, magic realists present familiar things in unusual ways (flying carpets, Nabokovian butterflies, mass amnesia, and so on) to stress their innately magical properties. By doing this, magic realists use what the Russian formalists called defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. And through a process of supplemental illusions, these textual strategies seem to produce a more realistic text. But whether this endeavor succeeds is another matter.

Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" offers a distinct illustration of this point. Within its detective-story framework, his story describes a magical novel (The Garden of Forking Paths) which, through a play of textual supplementation, attempts to encompass infinite linguistic possibilities. The story revolves around Ts'ui Pên's labyrinthian novel, first thought to be, as his grandson Yu Tsun describes it, "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts" because it consists of a nearly endless series of events which involve the same characters in different roles.21 But a sinologist, Stephen Albert, whom Yu Tsun plans to murder, discovers another hermeneutical path through this textual maze. Albert claims that Ts'ui Pên's novel is designed to create a multi-narrative which saturates its textual capacity and thus achieves the desired state of complete signification. This textual strategy of magical supplementation seems to include everything, thereby overcoming the seemingly unavoidable linguistic lack.

Or does it? It is possible that Ts'ui Pên overlooks a basic problem concerning the text itself by taking its textuality for granted without calling its own provisional status into question. Ts'ui Pên (not unlike the surrealists) tries to subvert and overcome the text, but fails because he ironically remains bound by textual restraints. Still, this strategy, which reveals the desire to increase signification, to embrace the fluttering essence of illumination, always ends—because it begins—in loss.
Therefore, a magical text such as Ts'ui Pên's can never enforce a center by remaining forever decentered. Yet Borges (through Ts'ui Pên) forces the reader, as does Sterne in Tristram Shandy, to consider the properties often unknowingly granted to texts while they surreptitiously reveal a certain absence that usually goes unnoticed. If this absence is taken further, multiplied in a self-consciously reflexive manner as in The Garden of Forking Paths, the text seems to encompass everything and lack nothing—although finally it cannot. But the magical attempt is there: bypassing the commonplace unity found in most realistic texts, the magical text tries to go beyond, to make the necessary swerve that Harold Bloom discusses in a different context, a clinamen away from the shortcomings associated with "realistic" texts.

This plan appears to produce an "infinite text" such as the one Ts'ui Pên tries to create, even though its use of a static medium (language) constantly hampers its signification. Borges does manage to focus the reader's attention upon textual processes, producing as a result the defamiliarization which seems to form a major tenet of magic realism. And, the consciously poly-scenic text portrays more accurately an important aspect of reality, for there are always many different viewpoints of something at any given moment.

In Borges' story, for instance, Yu Tsun is not only a narrator; he is also concurrently an English professor, a prisoner, a friend (albeit newly acquired) to Albert, a spy for the Germans, an assassin, and a character in Ts'ui Pên's novel (as his actions magically duplicate those of several fictive pasts). Like the cubists who tried to show several perspectives of objects in order to capture three-dimensional essences, Borges constructs a multi-perspective text which appears to cover all fictional possibilities. Still, of course, this inherently faulted construct cannot go beyond its frustrating limitations as a linguistic text.

The stress here on the textual element of magic realism is not incidental, because its semiotic dysfunction may be caused by the medium magic realists use: language. Many theorists of the fantastic, in fact, identify the contemporary concern with language's shortcomings as a symptom of the modern temperament. To them, magical texts are one way of supplementing not only the failures of the modern text, but also the inadequacies of what is now called the postmodern condition (perhaps exemplified by existential thought) as well. Christine Brooke-Rose contends that this epistemological crisis has led to new desires in textual generation, revaluations of textual properties, and a poetics of defamiliarization:
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The burden of this meaningless situation being unbearable, we naturally escape, and easily, into our more familiar reality, endowed with significance by our desire, whatever it might be, and displace the meaningless situation into a mere backdrop, apocalyptic no doubt, but a backdrop we cease to see.23

Perhaps magic realism's goal is to return our focus to the backdrop of textual reality, its production and function, by defamiliarizing it.

Consequently, the supplemental strategies used by magic realists may be geared toward "improving" the realistic text, a movement which realizes itself by exploiting language's ability to represent reality through fictive constructs. Borges' "fictions and inventions," for example, "move language toward reality, not away from it," Robert Scholes contends.24 The textual project of magic realism, then, is displayed through its linguistically bound attempt to increase the capabilities of realistic texts. Yet this same strategy is necessarily undermined by the problematical nature of language. Borges' "The South" demonstrates this dilemma well as its protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, tries to use a magical text (The Thousand and One Nights) to direct his reality, to write (and rewrite) his existence fictionally. "To travel with this book, which was so much a part of the history of his ill-fortune, was a kind of affirmation that his ill-fortune had been annulled"; the narrator says, "it was a joyous and secret defiance of the frustrated force of evil."25 But Dahlmann catches on to the lack amid this solely textual reality, a drawback that undoes its effectiveness.

As his train ride continues, Dahlmann abandons the book for the more real (though slightly less magical) magic of everyday life, and the narrator comments:

The magnetized mountain and the genie who swore to kill his benefactor are—who would deny it?—marvelous, but not so much more than the morning itself and the mere fact of being. The joy of life distracted him from paying attention to Scheherazade and her superfluous miracles. Dahlmann closed his book and allowed himself to live. (TS, p. 170, emphasis added)

Here the narrator reveals the immanent failure of magical artifices as textual supplements: the magical text is not much more magical than reality itself, and to go too far beyond these natural perimeters seems an unnecessary and ineffective diversion. Dahlmann's observations suggest that even a more subtle magic still falls prey to this representational dilemma, although admittedly to a lesser extent. In fact, the diversion of a textual reality moves subjects farther away from reality itself, as Dahlmann, for instance, finds he cannot name the "trees and crop
fields” he passes, “for his actual knowledge of the countryside was quite inferior to his nostalgic and literary knowledge” (TS, pp. 170–71). The fictive reality, rather than offering a more accurate reality, actually distances itself away from what could be called “actual” reality. Thus when Dahlmann is later accosted by “some country louts,” he “decided that nothing had happened, and he opened the volume of The Thousand and One Nights, by way of suppressing reality” (TS, p. 173). The magical text, in this manner, overturns its assumed corrective nature and instead apparently displaces the reality it was thought to somehow enhance and re-ground.

Angel Flores traces the inception of magic realism during this century to a reaction to the “blind alley” of photographic realism, a textual approach that may undermine its effectiveness through its literality. Realism, in effect, produces a text plagued by the ordinary, the too real. And imagination, another aspect of the “real,” is given short shrift at best. As Borges’ narrator in “The Secret Miracle” says, compared with his imagination, “the reality was less spectacular...” Brooke-Rose identifies the particularly modern element of this concern by noting that

the sense that empirical reality is not as secure as it used to be is now pervasive at all levels of society. Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only “true” or “another equally valid” reality.

Amid this worldview it is not at all surprising that the “inversion of real/unreal is perfectly logical.”

Within this arena of uncertainty, magic realism demonstrates its hopeful scheme to supplement the realistic text through a corrective gesture, a means to overcome the insufficiencies of realism (and the language used to ground realism). Alain Robbe-Grillet describes his use of some imaginary seagulls that closely parallels this situation:

The only gulls that mattered to me... were those which were inside my head. Probably they came there, one way or another, from the external world, and perhaps from Brittany; but they had been transformed, becoming at the same time somehow more real because they were now imaginary.

This use of imagination claims to supplement reality by heightening its distinctive elements through ideal imagination, the essence and not necessarily the vehicle. Borges’ use of imaginary authors and works, a practice also found in such magical writers as Jonathan Swift and Flann
O'Brien, demonstrates this textual strategy as he creates a new reality through imagination, a reality which becomes "more real" (to return to Robbe-Grillet's assertion) as a result of the magical gloss applied to it through the process of creation.29

But this supplementary act also reveals an implicit despair, a collective lament about the problems involved in using language to convey reality (especially through the delusion of realism). (This is reflected by a comment about a later Aureliano in One Hundred Years of Solitude who abandons worldly pleasures for a lesser "written reality" [p. 357].) In other words, through the use of magical supplements, the linguistically determined text seems to span the chasm between signifier and signified. But it cannot. "Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it," Robert Scholes maintains. "It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come."30 Scholes's claim, however, betrays that very element which undermines such an assertion: attempts to signify can never overcome the deficiencies which any sign system presupposes. This is not to say that magical texts do not have any champions, however; Jameson, through a Heideggerian formula, observes that a magical supplement may allow the world-ness of the world to show itself.31

The magic realist's predilection toward the unreal may also reveal an awareness of the impossibility of successful signification—complete information transference—as magic is used to flaunt these same limitations. "You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?" asks Borges' narrator in "The Library of Babel."32 Magic realism courts the inevitable problem of signification by offering the impression of success, a supplemental diversion which appears to bypass the limitations of the realistic text, evading its failures through the incorporation of imagination.

Still, as neat as this sounds, perhaps it does not work. Although Jameson, while referring specifically to magic in the genre of romance, may be overstating the situation when he asserts that "the fate of romance as a form is dependent on the availability of elements more acceptable to the reader than those older magical categories for which some adequate substitute must be invented," he is also at least partially correct, for there is undoubtedly something unsatisfactory about the strategy of magic realism.33 Even the naive inhabitants of García Márquez' Macondo eventually become indifferent to flying carpets.
Plato contends in *Phaedrus* that the ideal language to use in any discourse is inescapably just that—ideal. In his Second Speech, Socrates says:

“As for the soul’s immortality, enough has been said. But about its form, the following must be stated: To tell what it really is would be a theme for a divine and a very long discourse; what it resembles, however, may be expressed more briefly and in human language.”

Socrates’ assertion also unveils a major dilemma of magic realism: the divine language needed to bring about complete signification (what it “really is”) can never transcend its illusory status. Supplementation (magic, in this instance) only adds another layer to the significative deception. The thing itself always slips away.

The textual economy that magic realism creates for itself undoubtedly introduces several problems. Angel Flores suggests that the desire to maintain some semblance of reality as a textual ground engenders an indeterminate element which further decreases what could be called reader comprehension. To Flores, supplementation of realism is far less preferable than working from an entirely fantastic base. After all, it is possible that the purely magical mode more closely approaches Socrates’ “divine language” than does realism heightened by magic. In addition to the previously mentioned linguistic drawback that magic realism faces, the concern for the limits of partial magic adds another difficulty to the act of textual transmission, for—as Coleridge noted—the reader’s doubt carries a great deal of weight. Yet Tzvetan Todorov offers an interesting counterassertion: “I nearly reach the point of believing”: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life.”

It is unlikely, however, that a reader would have any reason to “believe” what is said in a text; the question of doubt always lurks (or should always lurk, anyway) between the lines because the physical presence of the text ceaselessly calls attention to its inherent falseness as a construct.

This stifling predicament may, in fact, explain why Borges and Garcia Márquez themselves became disenchanted with magic and moved on to other concerns. In an interview Borges remarked:

I feel that the kind of stories you get in *El Aleph* and in *Ficciones* are becoming rather mechanical, and that people expect that kind of thing from me. So that I feel as if I were a kind of high fidelity, a kind of gadget, no? A kind of factory producing stories about mistaken identity, about mazes, about tigers, about
mirrors, about people being somebody else, or about all men being the same man or one man being his own mortal foe.\textsuperscript{38}

As Borges observes, the magical text cannot maintain its illusion under close scrutiny. García Márquez reveals a similar disquietude in this exchange with interviewer Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza:

\textit{A. M.:} Is it that you feel the success of \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} is unfair to the rest of your work?

\textit{G. M.:} Yes, it's unfair. \textit{The Autumn of the Patriarch} is a much more important literary achievement. But whereas it is about the solitude of power \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} is about the solitude of everyday life. It's everybody's life story. Also, it's written in a simple, flowing, linear and \ldots superficial way.

\textit{A. M.:} You seem to despise it.

\textit{G. M.:} No, but since I knew it was written with all the tricks and artifices under the sun, I knew I could do better even before I wrote it.

\textit{A. M.:} That you could beat it.

\textit{G. M.:} Yes, that I could beat it.\textsuperscript{39}

The underlying desire for rhetorical strategies which may increase the possibility of successful signification seems to be an optimistic semiotic gesture. Discontent with the strictures of realism, magic realists such as Borges and García Márquez construct elaborate magical supplements which imply a purifying concern for textual generation. "Fantasy has always articulated a longing for imaginary unity, for unity in the realm of the imaginary," Rosemary Jackson suggests. "In this sense, it is inherently idealistic. It expresses a desire for an absolute, an absolute signified, an absolute meaning."\textsuperscript{40} Still, as García Márquez and Borges demonstrate, the use of magic is a self-conscious (perhaps painfully so) attempt to overcome significative loss, to bridge that space between the ideal and the achievable (or, semiotically—to remove the bar between signifier and signified). And in this regard, magical texts necessarily reveal their limits in the course of their operation.\textsuperscript{41} But the magical text almost triumphs over its otherwise crippling imperfections by commenting on its own questionable condition while simultaneously presenting itself. In this manner, magical texts reflect upon their own blind spots, generating a metacritical discourse about their own indeterminate modality.
Such is the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which deals with this slippery situation by creating itself through the very workings of the novel it conceals itself within. Accordingly, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is “about” a book titled *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez’ novel becomes and betrays itself at the same time, playing upon the slippery textuality that can be granted only conditionally to any text, even one which tries to transcend this representational trap through magical supplementation.

García Márquez achieves—or attempts to achieve—this magical effect by having one character (Melquiades) write the novel, and another (Aureliano) decipher it from an unknown “code” (which is actually Sanskrit). The novel ends as Aureliano comes to the close of Melquiades’ manuscript, and by manipulating the unavoidable conclusion that any text presupposes by beginning (perhaps with the exception of such arguably cyclical texts as *Finnegans Wake* and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*), García Márquez correlates the two events as though it were a textual possibility—which ultimately it may be. By doing this, he manages to go beyond the bounds of realistic texts (mentioned earlier: “However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page”) as his text ends both literally and magically within itself. The text virtually supplements itself out of its textual plane through a magical dodge which appears to prevent its conclusion (that is, the physical end of the book). Yet, within the drive behind the magical supplement, a maneuver constantly outmaneuvering itself like a dog chasing its tail, the text always disappears into itself, an envelope of infinite beginnings forever grounded by the medium it employs to escape the textual dead end.

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4 González Echevarría develops this assertion at length in *Alejo Carpentier*, p. 115.

5 Roh, *German Art*, p. 84.

7 Cited in Rodríguez Monegal’s “Realismo Magico Versus Literatura Fantastica.” All translations of this essay and Rodríguez Monegal’s “Lo Real y lo Maravilloso en El Reino de Este Mundo,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, 37 (1971), 619–49, are by Kate Meyers. In Spanish, this passage reads:

> el realismo mágico no puede ser identificado ni con la literatura fantastica ni con la literatura sicológica, pero tampoco con el surrealismo o la literatura hermética que describe Ortega. El realismo mágico no se vale, como el sobrer-realismo, de motivos oníricos; tampoco desfigura la realidad o crea mundo imaginados, como lo hacen los que escriben literatura fantástica o ciencia ficción; tampoco da importancia al análisis sicológico de los personajes, ya que no trata de explicar las motivaciones que los hacen actuar o que les prohíben expresarse.

8 Rodríguez Monegal, “Realismo Magico Versus Literatura Fantastica,” p. 26. The second half of this passage reads in Spanish: “Es necesario insistir en el peligro de esta utilización general de una fórmula que . . . tiene de todo menos de universal.”


13 Thus Rosemary Jackson was probably off base when she concluded, in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 36:

> The text has not yet become non-referential, as it is in modernist fiction and recent linguistic fantasies (such as some of Borges’s stories) which do not question the crucial relation between language and the “real” world outside the text which the text constructs, so much as move towards another kind of fictional autonomy.


19 After all, as Alejo Carpentier notes in “Lo Real y lo Maravilloso en El Reino de Este Mundo, ‘what is the history of [Latin] America but a chronic of marvelous reality?’” (p. 686). In Spanish, this passage reads: “¿qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real-maravilloso?”

20 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p. 22. All subsequent quotations from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* will be taken from this text and cited parenthetically as OHY.
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24 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p. 10.
25 Borges, Ficciones, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 170. All subsequent quotations from “The South” will be taken from this text and cited parenthetically as TS.
26 Borges, Labyrinths, p. 92.
27 Brooke-Rose, A Rhetoric of the Unreal, p. 4.
29 Aureliano and his friend Gabriel suggest that texts verify reality when they settle a debate about the reality of an alleged event by asserting that “after all, everything had been set forth in judicial documents and in primary-school textbooks.” Writing is therefore granted the capacity to confirm reality. But the narrator points out this semiotic dilemma by noting that the two “were linked by a kind of complicity based on real facts that no one believed in . . .” (OHY, p. 359).
30 Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction, p. 13.
32 Borges, Labyrinths, p. 58.
35 Magic realism presupposes a certain amount of doubt from the reader who can never escape that element of make-believe which pervades magic. The reader, like José Arcadio, faces “the torment of fantasy” (OHY, p. 45).
37 Even those texts which question the notion of truth/fiction—such as the nonfiction novel, the new journalism—or even those forms of the media which present daily versions of current events, exhibit nothing more, in the long run, than a purely provisional status, a status forever shifting under the influence of relative values and acts (perception, interpretation, analysis, and so on).
40 Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, p. 179.
41 Borges’ narrator in “The Secret Miracle” comments: “Hladik felt the verse [drama] form to be essential because it makes it impossible for the spectators to lose sight of irreality, one of art’s requisites” (Labyrinths, pp. 90–91).
Big Mama in Postmodern Society:
Tracing Magical Realism in Popular Culture

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García Márquez's character, "Big Mama," the despot who ruled the Macondo region with an uneven hand, would have her troubles with postmodern society in the United States. For one thing, most of us would take a dim view of her claim to dominion over the land, the flora, the fauna and other natural resources, including the air we breathe. We are just not accustomed to making obeisance to that kind of power. However, elements of her story have become our story as the postmodern age has stretched the limits of the narrative to incorporate facets of discourse gleaned from other cultures.

The story of "Big Mama's Funeral," by García Márquez, can be located securely within the bounds of a primary magical realist text. In this case, the text presents itself as an amalgamation of Latin American history and experience, the result of five hundred years of progress through conquest and colonialism, through independence and the vicissitudes of governmental processes. "Big Mama's Funeral" serves as a benchmark for Magical Realism and a focus for understanding many of the elements which make up magical realist texts. Although Magical Realism cannot be lifted whole from Latin American literature and culture, or any other literature and culture where it is found, and applied to postmodern art forms, postmodern popular culture has tapped into and employed many magical realist elements in order to serve its own objectives.

While many literary critics of the 70s and 80s probed the phenomenon of Magical Realism in Latin America, during the "Boom" in Latin American literature, little attention has been given today to the ways in which Magical Realism has become a dominant narrative trope in contemporary fiction, film, and photography, essentially becoming a standard approach to postmodern discourse. The term "Magical Realism" can be used to examine the softening of the boundaries between realism and imagination found in selected examples of postmodern artistic production that appear in popular culture, such as film, television programs, photography and the world of computer gaming.

In order to form a theoretical basis that can be used to apply the term "Magical Realism" to selected manifestations of popular culture in the United States, I examine a representative short story from the works of Gabriel García Márquez, entitled "Big Mama's Funeral." This short story is typical of García Márquez's approach to Magical Realism, allowing an in-depth consideration of its function and practice. As a microcosm of Magical Realism, "Big Mama's Funeral" provides a perfect case study for understanding how Magical Realism functions as a whole. I will then apply the fundamentals of Magical Realism found in the García Márquez text to examples of visual media found in popular culture. These examples will include the work of photographer Pedro Meyer; the films Chocolat, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and the computer game, Majestic.

Magical Realism, a much-studied phenomenon throughout world literature, speaks to postmodern society in surprising ways. Although often showcased as an exclusively Latin American literary technique, it is, in fact, found in the literature of many countries, and has developed and changed as new generations of writers have molded it to their fictions. "Magical Realism" is a complex designation that can be identified by a number of elements or literary techniques. However, briefly, Magical Realism, or sometimes magic realism, integrates elements of fantasy, or an imagined world into a life-like, or realistic text. Magical realist authors include magical occurrences in texts that essentially and primarily reflect daily existence, or present recognizable human experience, no matter how seemingly extraordinary. In this discussion of Magical Realism, the term "real" will be used to describe those life-like, human experiences that authors identify in their writing. Magical Realism may appear to some readers to resemble fantasy. However, the magical occurrences in magical realist fiction enter the narration from within the story elements. Authors do not create whole fantasy worlds that relate to the realist text in some way, like Superman in science fiction, nor do they use magical occurrences as a mechanical technique, or type of deus ex machina to rescue their plots. The process of writing Magical Realism proceeds from the bottom up, not the top down; this fact serves to weave the real and magical elements together to make an integrative, inseparable whole. Magical realist authors discern moments when the text opens itself to the possibility of the magical. In other words, the realist text itself has yielded the magical. In the truest sense, the magical finds root in the real. As a result of this process of opening up to the magical, the text transgresses the traditionally agreed upon boundaries or limits between categorized texts which are essentially real, or realistic, and those that are fantasy. Once the boundaries have been softened, the magical realist text freely passes from the real to the imagined and back again. It is notable that postmodern expression emphasizes just such a softening of boundaries as it re-discovers and re-defines the shape of artistic production, making Magical Realism part of the larger postmodern discourse.

Although the term "Magical Realism" is often understood as a Latin American literary construct, the term itself comes to us from the world of art criticism. German art critic Franz Roh used the term in 1925 to describe the change in art form from expressionism to new realism. Artists rediscovered simple objects and depicted them in a newer and simpler form, but with a clarified sense of reality. Franz Roh explained that the new artistic view of objects was certainly not expressionism, but a view made possible by expressionism. He sensed that
post-expressionism did not slavishly represent objects, but represented objects with a heightened sense of understanding that went beyond their physical nature. Roh called this new view of subjects, "spiritual," referring to the artist's depiction of both a physical and metaphysical reality. As Roh explained, "After art has been spiritualized, objectivity once again becomes the most intense pleasure of painting." This new technique was also referred to as "new objectivity" by the German museum director, Gustav Hartlaub.

Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel Prize-winning author from Colombia, certainly not the first or only author of Magical Realism—but definitely one of the best known, weaves his narratives in, around, and through the real and the magical. He has spent many years of his career as a writer trying to persuade us, to teach us, that the magical can be found in the real and the real in the magical. He has laid before his readers transparent the borders between fact and fiction, fantasy and the belief. His works become a collection of painting, objectivity, and intelligence, which together create the reality of the community. Big Mama is the last story in the collection "Big Mama's Funeral," the reader is constantly reminded of the reality of the community. In "Big Mama's Funeral," the reader is constantly aware that the realist strand of narration, which mirrors human experience, is regularly enriched or expanded by the introduction of elements or events that exaggerate, parody, or defy that same experience. For example, the realist strain of narrative in García Márquez's story presents, on the one hand, a death, the natural process that occurs at the end of life, and the ceremonies that mark that life's passing. The magical strain, on the other hand, exaggerates and stretches the details of the ritual beyond reason. Big Mama's body awaits burial for many days while the "Wise Doctors of Law" search the statutes of law for the justification which would allow the President of the Republic to attend the funeral (164). The reality is that bodies often do wait for burial, but the magical strain here makes the body wait for days and days in the hot sun (164) while officials debate minute points of law. This parody of deliberation by the officials serves to subtly criticize the unwieldy process of decision making that government officials often adhere to, regardless of the exigencies of a situation. The funeral, when it finally does take place, mirrors a common event, but with a magical twist. It is usual for many types of people to attend the funerals of political leaders, but it is unusual that this particular funeral was attended by every conceivable type of person including the "255-mile-long-string-of-iguana-eggs-queen" and the Pope himself (169).

The realistic and the magical are boundaries that García Márquez crosses over and over again in his fictional works, until the reader questions whether they are boundaries at all. In his conversations with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, García Márquez outlines the origin of the magical in his works. He first traces the magical influences in his childhood, as he grew up in the home of his paternal grandparents surrounded by the beliefs and stories of his grandmother and aunts (Apuleyo Mendoza 58). But, this influence goes beyond stories to encompass a world view that does not easily make distinctions between the real and the magical. García Márquez finds in the history of his own family, not only Caribbean traditions and beliefs, but strains of the magical from his Galician ancestors (Apuleyo Mendoza 59). He believes that the Caribbean region and Brazil are unique with a culture woven of strands from indigenous peoples, as well as Spain and Africa. Each of these cultural influences has its own relationship to the magical, as evidenced in customs, traditions and rituals still practiced today. When he first visited Africa in 1978, for instance, he was amazed that he recognized so much in the culture, and that the stories and beliefs he found there were so natural and familiar to him (59-60).

García Márquez also reflected on the influence of the physical ambiance of Latin America on his writing during his Nobel acceptance lecture on December 8, 1982. In this speech, entitled "The Solitude of Latin America," he notes that nature alone in Latin America is so fantastic that it influences descriptions of day to day reality. It is a natural world full of exuberance and exaggeration, with exotic plants, for instance, which practically defy description. There are towering tropical plants that produce sweet fruits in numerous colors and shapes; there are trees which produce cashew nuts that grow suspended on the outside of large pods; there is the costly fruit of the cacao, the source of chocolate. This tropical environment so captured the imagination and the curiosity of the Spaniards in the sixteenth century that the King of Spain, Philip II, appointed Francisco Hernández as his official botanist and medical doctor, who would attempt to record this supernatural natural world the Spaniards had chanced upon (de Benitez 15). García Márquez says in both his Nobel lecture and his interview with Apuleyo Mendoza that these early narratives contain the "seeds of our present-day novels," (Nobel 1) and reveal "la primera obra de literatura mágica" (Apuleyo Mendoza 60).
What followed the wide-eyed documentation of the Spanish conquest, however, was that the conquering power moved in swiftly to subsume the existing culture and replace all of the key elements such as language, educational institutions, religion, and government with European experience and design. García Márquez, as a native Colombian inherited this weight of colonialism when he was born in the early years of the twentieth century, approximately one hundred years after the end of Spanish colonial rule in his native country. As a post-colonial writer, his works reflect the history and effects of three hundred years of Spanish rule. His language is that of the Spaniards, although tempered with indigenous influences, and his view is one of a society forcibly re-created by Spanish hands and minds, and now re-envisioned once again as a society in its own right. Of course, García Márquez joins, in this effort, the many Latin American writers who have worked to re-establish and reaffirm an authentic literary voice for the people of Latin America.

Lucy R. Lippard in The Lure of the Local, discusses the relationship between history and the concept of place: “History with a capital H has often been described as a fiction written by the conquerors, yet there are other histories, often hidden, sometimes literally buried… Yet the history of most places remains elusive, dependent upon cultural concepts of time. In this society, history tends to mean what we (or more likely some more powerful group) have chosen to remember…” (13). Magical Realism, in bringing together two disparate strands, the real and the magical, is a technique that approaches a unification of elements within the text that were previously viewed as mutually exclusive.

García Márquez brings into his narratives an understanding of a cultural stance that accepts the real and the magical as complementary to each other and forming a complete whole. Uniting these two strands, however, can be problematic, not only for the author and the reader, but also for the critic. For instance, Stephen Slemen, in “Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse,” explores the innate disjunction in the two streams of narrative, the realistic and the fantastic:

The term “Magical Realism” is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other,” a situation which creates disjunction, within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences. (Zamora 409)

Slemen’s opinion is contrary to the generally accepted critical perspective that the narratives of García Márquez are a fully integrated whole. He sees instead, an ongoing battle between two narrative powers that are evenly matched, causing a constant tension within the text. There is, without a doubt, a tension between the two types of discourse in García Márquez’s works. Slemen sees disjunction in the meeting of two so very different systems, but the silences he notes in the intersections may be a signal for something very different, a life-force, perhaps. The reader senses a creativity that comes from the tension of two forces in constant opposition. The interesting point is that neither of the narrative types “wins” the battle, but their very tension becomes a form of post-colonial resistance. Magical Realism is certainly not the first or only form of Latin American literature that has offered resistance to the colonial paradigm. It takes its place among a number of literatures of resistance such as the gaucho literature of Argentina. However, its particular post-colonial resistance can be found in its preoccupation with the everyday life of common people, as well as the inclusion of traditional indigenous customs, and parody of governmental systems.

Linda Hutcheon in “Decentering the Postmodern: The Excentric” highlights one of the elements of the postmodern which is integral to the writings of García Márquez, that of “valuing the local” (Hutcheon 61). This emphasis on the local finds expression in descriptions of hot, steamy, tropical villages and in introductions, by way of the text, to local characters that populate those villages. It is important to note that this particular aspect of García Márquez’s writings becomes an intersection of the post-colonial and the postmodern, as the post-colonial approach seeks to re-establish a cultural identity and the postmodern approach seeks to contest the current “centralization of culture” (61). Pre-modern and modern Latin American texts rarely considered or highlighted indigenous cultures, but imitated peninsular Spanish or European writing conventions of the time. However, the magical strain in magical realism has direct ties to indigenous cultures, centering on their reliance on religion, myth, and superstition, as well as the prominent place of nature within that mystical framework. The inclusion of these essential elements attempts to present a clearer picture of the indigenous foundations of Latin American society through literature.

Indigenous groups in Latin America have historically relied on oral tradition to preserve their cultural outlook and shared experiences. García Márquez places value in that oral tradition in the beginning of “Big Mama’s Funeral” when the narrator states: “now is the time to lean a stool against the front door and relate from the beginning the details… before the historians have a chance to get at it” (153).

In addition to noting the worth of oral tradition, the introduction also situates this particular story on the brink of change, between oral tradition and written history, between the old ways of remembering and the newer ways of recording. At the end of the story, it is clear that Macondo itself has crossed over a line into something new. Mama Grande is dead, the dynasty has ended, and a new age has begun. As the narrator notes: “the President of the Republic could
sit down and govern according to his good judgment...and the common people could set up their tents where they damn well pleased in the limitless domains of Big Mama..." (169).

The magical strain of narrative in magical realism often follows the in-grained myth-legend and religion that is so alive in Latin-American culture. Over time, there has been an amalgamation of traditions, those extant at the time of the conquest and those brought in as a result of the conquest. What developed over the colonial period and extends into today is a singular mixture of indigenous religions and Roman Catholicism: Peter Canby, in his book *The Heart of the Sky*, visits Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, during the Christian “Holy Week” (the week before Easter). While there he participates in ceremonies to honor “Maximón,” a Mayan god whose name comes from...a conflation of that of the ancient Maya earthlord, Maan (“grandfather”) and the Christian saint Simón (Simon Peter, the first apostle) (313). According to Canby, “Maximón participates in Maya ceremonies leading up to Good Friday” (314). Indigenous communities had to embrace Roman Catholicism, but they made it their own, by weaving the old and new traditions together, forming a spiritual outlook that is essentially Latin American. This viewpoint or spiritual stance is interwoven into the fabric of the daily lives of Latin Americans, a strand so integral that it cannot be separated without unraveling the whole. García Márquez expresses the essential nature of this position by his unquestionable inclusion in every text he writes. In “Big Mama’s Funeral,” the character of the doctor graviates between science, indigenous healing practices and religion. When Big Mama sends for him, he first treats her with the salves and medicines of science. As her condition worsens, he employs alternative medical remedies such as toads and leeches. Since all of these have no effect on her, he finally calls for the priest, Father Anthony Isabel, to hold an exorcism (156). Even these combined efforts, however, fail to save her.

“Big Mama’s Funeral” demonstrates the equal standing of the magical and real strains during the enumeration of Big Mama’s possessions before her death. She prepares, with the help of her eldest nephew, Nicanor, twenty-four folios that list all of her possessions. It takes her three hours to read the entire list to her assembled family. The process of reading the list itself contains both a realistic and magical strain; the reading of a list of possessions is common enough, but for it to last three hours exaggerates the situation beyond human experience. However, following her reading of all her material possessions, Big Mama dictates an extensive list of her non-material possessions to a notary. She dies before she can finish her list, but she mentions such “possessions” as “The wealth of the subsoil, the territorial waters, the colors of the flag..." and many others (161). Her material and non-material possessions are treated equally in the story, with legal rights pertaining to both; García Márquez presents the real and the magical strains with an even hand.

A different view of the aforementioned “opposing forces” within the narrative will reveal that the two narrative streams in Magical Realism offer equal options to the reader. These narrative streams can be interpreted as world views, or perhaps approaches to understanding the world. In this case, we could consider the real as the pragmatic or predictable force and the magical as the more spiritual or philosophical force. But what is interesting in Magical Realism is the equality of the options presented (Chanady 25). The magical is not perceived as the lesser option, or the real as the superior, or vice versa. As we have said, the characters and narrators themselves do not distinguish between the two. This equality marks another intersection in García Márquez’s works between the postcolonial and the postmodern. The postmodern text rejects, as Linda Hutcheon states, the creation of “other” from the “different” (196). The postmodern text fights this by “asserting ‘the plurality of the different’ and rejecting the binary opposition of the ‘other’” (italics mine; 196). Theo L. D’haen referred to this as “speaking from the margin” in his essay “Magical Realism and the Postmodern” (Zamora 194). García Márquez speaks “from the margin” when he presents the real and the magical as equal.

Another common component of Magical Realism is a highly elastic view of time. The reader finds that time in the text does not proceed as a sequential order of finely measured steps. It can appear as interminable as many lifetimes, as short as an instant, spiral forward or backward, or be suspended in order to accommodate the narrative. Angel Flores, in his seminal article “Magical Realism in Spanish America,” takes note of the singular nature of time in these texts: “Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality” (Zamora 115). In addition, García Márquez takes the view that time can be both cyclical and mythological. This variable view of time incorporates the magical into a completely finite element of existence. In the story of Big Mama, time presents itself as linear, but seems to drag on and on, as it takes fourteen weeks of preparation for her funeral. The Pope himself has to wait with everyone else for the officials to make the decision that will allow the President of the Republic to attend the funeral. The Pope uses his time to catch up on his reading and to visit with the children and Father Anthony Isabel: “Thus he lived for ininterminable weeks and months which were protracted by the waiting and the heat...” (167). The reader experiences the heat and the slow passage of time as daily life in the six villages of the Macondo district pauses and waits for the funeral day.

In “Big Mama’s Funeral,” there is not a reaction to the long wait for the burial, or any criticism of the excruciatingly slow proceedings of the legislature. The magical cannot obstruct as if it had been added only for effect, and the realism cannot interfere with the possibilities for the illogical or supernatural. We see the farm workers “sleeping on farm equipment and bags of salt, awaiting the order to saddle the mules to spread the bad news to the four corners of the huge
hacienda” (154). Later, at the funeral, García Márquez tells us that no one in the crowd even took notice at such things as the buzzards following the funeral procession, or the trail of garbage left by the grandees, or even that the relatives tore down the house and divided up the spoils as soon as the body had left the house (199). This acceptance by the characters in the story leads the reader to believe that these exaggerated details are normal, at least for this setting.

All of the pieces have to fit into an integrated whole, a seamless piece of writing. Amaryll Chanady notes this phenomenon in Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy when she says: “In Magical Realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic. Although the educated reader considers the rational and the irrational as conflicting world views, he does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomous with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (23). When readers enter the world of such a short story, they are forced to reexamine their own stance when they observe that the characters themselves are unperturbed by the magical or fantastic events presented in the story.

This idea of a fluid relationship between the rational and the irrational finds reflection in some general cultural trends we can see in contemporary society in many cultures. Just as the border between the real and the fantastic in the arts has become more and more permeable, other borders in society have also become less rigid. For example, there are many situations and events that are not viewed as totally right or wrong, black or white, male or female, as they were in the past. Societal opinions have changed in regard to such topics as divorce, marriage, pregnancy, and child care, to name a few. It may have been Albert Einstein who heralded a new outlook for society. In 1915, he published his Theory of Relativity in which he taught us that even the matter that makes up the universe is alterable:

Instead of static certainty, his work posited reality as a complex of masses and emotions. Matter became shapeless; unnamable to direct apprehension; describable only in abstract formulae and mathematical symbols. From then on matter and energy would not be conceived of as distinct but as interchangeable. The door was open for fusion, fission, and transmutation. (Fishwick, “Editorial” 248)

Einstein’s principles filtered down into everyday life in dimensions beyond the scientific. People have found themselves rushed into an age where definition by differences is no longer dependable and the truth is not so rigid.

Popular culture offers numerous instances where the real and the magical mingle. Two films, Chocolat (December 11, 2001) and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (March 29, 2001), apply, in a visual format, many of the techniques found in García Márquez. One of those techniques, as Chanady puts it, “naturalizes the supernatural and the strange world view presented in the text” (149). We don’t question, for example, how it was possible for the discussions and debates about Big Mama’s funeral to cross the ocean and find the ear of the Pope: “So much had been said that the discussions crossed the borders, traversed the ocean, and blew like an omen through the pontifical apartments at Castel Gandolfo” (165). Nor do we question, in Chocolat, when we immediately discern the magical in the North wind, as two mysterious wanderers, a woman and a child, approach their new home in a small village in France. We follow as the capricious North wind uses its magical power to bring about a positive change in a stodgy French village. That wind, personified as a chocolatier and her young daughter, sweeps through and warms the long-cold hearts of villagers. The workings of the supernatural are evident from the moment that Vianne and her daughter, Anouk, introduce themselves to their new landlady. When asked where she is from, Vianne is unable to come up with a specific place. The magic that the North wind blows in is a subtle kind of magic, which intertwines itself in the fabric of the everyday lives of the villagers, much in the same way as the magical strain in “Big Mama’s Funeral” normalized such a gigantic death.

The film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon shows another technique common in García Márquez’s work, a bent toward an exaggeration of details which has been called “narrative gigantism.” This technique creates a world in which certain details are bigger than life. In “Big Mama’s Funeral” it is found in the sheer number and diversity of people who attend the funeral, such as the “washerwomen of San José, the pearl fishers from Cabo de la Vela, the fishermen from Cléruga, the shrimp fishermen from Tasaajera, the sorcerers from Mojana” (167) and more. It is evident in the power and number of the words that it takes to make decisions, as “Interminable hours were filled with words, words, words, which resounded through the Republic . . .” (164). Also, in the end, the garbage men had to face the momentous task of sweeping up the garbage “forever and ever” (170). In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon there is a demonstration of the incredible and impossible ninja skills of its main character, Yu Shu Lien, a young aristocrat. There is a wonderful scene in which Yu Shu Lien has an extended sword fight with Master Li Mu Bai through and up into the bamboo trees surrounding the palace. As the two characters fly from tree to tree in a complicated symphony of motion, with trees bending over from the weight of their bodies, the scene emphasizes sheer physicality and beauty of motion. It must be said that these exaggerations are not questioned by the viewer or reader, but are so integrated into the text or film that they appear to have a natural, logical place both to the reader or viewer, as well as to the other characters within the work. This scene must be distinguished from science fiction, which also often includes incredible fights (like those of Luke Skywalker in Star Wars), because the rest of the plot presents a realistic and believable world. The Magical Realism is found in the magical use of realistic skills.
It is interesting that this phenomenon of Magical Realism has touched the area of contemporary photography as well as film. Linda Hutcheon, in "Theorizing the Postmodern," explores the role of photography as a postmodern artifact: "Within a positivistic frame of reference, photographs could be accepted as neutral representations, as technological windows on the world" (7). We have thought of documentary photos as presenting the "truth" of a situation. Of course, we recognize that the photos do not tell the whole story, that the viewer of the photos can present his own personal perspective. Hutcheon continues, "In the postmodern, photos still represent (for they cannot avoid reference) but what they represent is self-consciously shown to be highly filtered by the discursive and aesthetic assumptions of the camera holder" (7). However, not all artistic decisions are made by the photographer at the moment the shutter closed. It has nearly always been possible to retouch a photograph in order to alter the image. In "Big Mama's Funeral," a retouched newspaper photo of Big Mama as a young woman presented her in a different and more favorable light: "Big Mama lived again the momentary youth of her photograph, enlarged to four columns and with needed retouching..." (162). That retouched photo, which actually represented Big Mama's dim past, gradually became an icon which would "endure in the memory of future generations" (162). Advanced photo technology today, however, has changed the way we understand the photos we see. In the past, it could be proven through close analysis that photos had been changed. Today, computer technology has brought to photography the possibility of substantially altering visual representations of "reality" in a seamless and undetectable, or nearly undetectable, fashion. It is now possible, for instance, for a photographer to construct a picture using a sky from one location and a landscape from another, so closely and perfectly superimposing them that neither the viewer nor the analyst can distinguish the real from the magical.

Pedro Meyer, a contemporary Mexican photographer who creates such mixed computer images, still sees himself as a documentary photographer. Joan Fontcuberta, who wrote the introduction to Truths and Fictions, a book of Meyer's photographs, has called his work a "New Documentary Consciousness" (7) because Meyer's view is that "the interpretation of reality remains his main priority" (9). His work does not present an image of reality that we would normally call documentary, but calls the viewer to participate in the construction of that reality. One picture by Pedro Meyer, called "The Strolling Saint, Nochistlan, Oaxaca," shows what at first appears to be a day-to-day scene in Mexico, of a woman pushing aside a blue curtain, which covered a street kiosk for the night. While she is engaged in opening the kiosk for business in the morning, to the left appears the statue of a "saint" which happens to be floating down the street (79) toward her. Pedro Meyer explains how he constructed this picture from three originals: one of the empty street corner, one of the woman pulling aside the blue curtain, and one of the saint in his niche at a church nearby. Using digital technology, Meyer combined the three pictures, positioning the figures against an empty background, forming a totally new picture. Meyer points out the importance of this medium, "one can make images that are representations of dreams, here the imagination can flow, or levitate, much like the saint" (116). The same mixture of day-to-day reality and religious symbol is standard in Garcia Márquez's works. In "Big Mama's Funeral," for instance, the Pope comes to the village in a canoe filled with such cargo as "bags of yucca, stalks of green bananas, and crates of chickens" (166). Here Garcia Márquez juxtaposes the highest religious leader and symbol of the Roman Catholic Church with common items, such as produce and animals for slaughter. The narrator of "Big Mama's Funeral" notes that: "His Holiness suffered that night, for the first time in the history of the Church, from the fever of insomnia and the torment of the mosquitoes" (166). Just as Pedro Meyer's photos present disparate objects in new settings in order to create a new and enhanced reality, Garcia Márquez's text brings to the reader a collage of images carefully chosen and crafted to intensify the reality he sees in Latin America.

Garcia Márquez essentially combines two strains of organic elements in his fiction, one realistic and one abstract. The realistic strain includes descriptions of daily life and customs of people living against and in the backdrop of Latin American geography. The abstract strain presents layers of the myths of Latin American people. These strains are presented as a unified whole, which for many readers, composes a new reality to be experienced, one that allows for the workings of the fantastic, or unexplainable in a world of human experience. The photographic work of Pedro Meyer also presents just such a "new reality" formed from his unique combinations of photos. The reality of the photos gives commentary on everyday experiences and a view of the unreal, unexplainable or abstract. The films mentioned previously, Chocolat and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, mirror that same fresh, new reality, where the impossible is possible, and lends both grace and insight to the real. In the writing of Garcia Márquez, these two strains are organic in nature, because they both have definite roots in the culture of Latin America; that is to say that the author does not impose artificial or fantasy worlds that are futuristic or ex-cultural on the text. The term "ex-cultural" is used here in the sense of including story elements that are foreign to the cultural experience of Latin America. Returning to "Big Mama's Funeral," consider the three hundred and fifty-two families who worked the farms and lived in the villages in the district of Macondo. For two hundred years they had been subjects of the power of Big Mama and other members of her family. It had been so long that the peasants had lost an understanding of the extent of Big Mama's possessions. Their day-to-day reality was fed by the belief that Big Mama owned everything, even such events as rain, drought, heat waves
and leap years (155). The reality of Latin American history is that the hacienda owners were all-powerful. They did control all the facets of the lives of their campesinos. Having experienced that kind of control, it is not a great leap to believe that a personality like Big Mama also controlled nature itself.

The Magical Realism found in current photography and film resembles the history of Big Mama’s estate, as García Márquez describes it, “that unworked territory without definite borders” (159) which included not only the land, but these invisible attributes and others listed by Big Mama on her deathbed: “the colors of the flag...congressional records...public opinion...traditions...the underprivileged class...” and “transcendental speeches” (192). García Márquez begins his description of Big Mama’s estate with the tangible, in this case, the land itself. He then leads the reader beyond the concrete to the intangible and mythical. This description is not, however, simply a symbolic description of Big Mama’s empire. Within the framework of the story, the characters believe that this description is true, that Big Mama has power over the tangible and the intangible. In much the same way, film and photography start with recognizable, realistic images, but can, through the technology of the medium, lead the viewers across the borders of the ordinary into the realm of the possible.

The technique of Magical Realism, with its seamless interfacing of realistic human experience and the imaginative, has found a place in many of the arts, including literature, painting, photography, and film. It can be also be used, however, as a type of sociological lens to view some of the ways our society has rendered the borders between reality and imagination as transparent. An interesting and recent example of crossing that border comes from an exchange between the world of U.S. television and the California legislature. At the end of the season of the popular series West Wing, in May of 2001, the character Mrs. Landingham, the secretary to President Josiah Bartlett, died very unexpectedly in a car accident. Her character had supported and guided the president, as the series revealed, since he was a high school student at a private academy. Shortly after the episode aired, Assemblyman Kevin Shelley, a San Francisco Democrat, adjourned the California Assembly session with a moment of silence in memory of the TV character whose death was depicted on the series, calling her a “great American” whose “contributions to the nation were too numerous to count” (“Assembly Leader” May 10, 2001). Whether or not this tribute was tongue-in-cheek, it adds yet another dimension to the discussion of the interplay between the real and the imaginative in postmodern society. In this case, there is a real legislature honoring a fictional character as if she had made a significant contribution in serving our government. In addition, the newswire states that Assemblyman Shelley told his aides that “he wants his office to be more like the White House featured in the show” (“Assembly Leader”). Just as the border between realistic human experience and the fantastic becomes permeable in García Márquez’s fiction, we witness the melding of the real and the fictional in this tribute to Mrs. Landingham and the West Wing television show.

Another more recent example of just such a melding is the “CSI effect” that is being noted in the judicial system. Richard Willing reports in a Chicago Sun-Times news article on August 15, 2004, “Medium Sends Message to U.S. Court System; CSI Effect has Juries Wanting More Evidence,” that the popular television show has had a real effect on jury selection. He cites the Galveston Texas trial of Robert Durst, a millionaire accused of murdering a neighbor, Morris Black. A jury consultant, Robert Hirschorn, was hired to assist in the jury selection process. His goal was to fill the jury with people who were familiar with shows like CSI, since they would be more attuned to the presentation of forensic evidence, or the lack of it. Durst was acquitted of the murder. According to Willing, “To legal analysts, his case seemed an example of how television shows such as CSI are affecting action in courthouses across the United States, by, among other things, raising jurors’ expectations of what prosecutors should produce at trial” (Willing 1). In this case, viewers of a fictional series have been so convinced of its veracity, that their expectation is that their everyday lives will mirror the fictional episodes of the series. Also, as in the example of Mrs. Landingham and Assemblyman Shelley, they actually demand that the fiction become part of their reality. The jurors want more specific forensic evidence, and Shelley wants his office to run like the West Wing.

Another example of the blurring of fact and fiction in postmodern society comes from the popular world of on-line gaming. The online game “Majestic” first came to my attention after the tragedies of September 11, through an interview on National Public Radio with one of the creators of the game, who reported that they had suspended play for a time after the tragedy because, “the game blurs the borders between fiction and reality.” That description of “Majestic” immediately brought to mind the works of García Márquez because his works demonstrate that in the fictional world, the relationship between the realistic and the fantastic is dynamic and changeable. The name “Majestic” was taken from the name of an organization reported as was called together by Harry Truman in order to follow-up on reports of aliens and UFOs (Howstuffworks website 2). According to the “How Stuff Works” website, “Majestic is an internet-based interactive game that pulls you into the center of a suspense thriller wrapped around a grand conspiracy: a government cover-up of crashed UFOs and the existence of aliens” (website). The text comes from an original story line written by authors for the sponsors of the game, Electronic Arts.

Within the context of the game, players get real telephone calls, faxes, or e-mail from “characters” who go to them with clues or frantically seek help from them. The producers of Majestic felt that because the game overlaps the real world of work and home, it was inappropriate to continue in the face of such a loss of life in the recent tragedies. The idea of interacting with fictional charac-
ers in order to solve a mystery adds yet another dimension to the interplay between fact and fiction in society. Although the players also become characters with assumed identities, there is still realistic human experience interacting with an imaginative storyline. This game does not permit the player the luxury of distance that other art forms allow, to look or not to look, to read or not read, for instance, but actually seeks the players out and physically confronts them in their day-to-day-existence. The same website warns that: "As you dive into the game, the line between fiction and reality is quickly blurred by the fact that you no longer control how the game is played" (How Majestic works 1). It is as if this new art form had a life of its own and dictated its own interactions at will.

Throughout this article there have been numerous references to intersections of magical realist elements and real life experiences in postmodern expression. It is, however, not a surprise that the postmodern does not find a need to weave these disparate strains of Magical Realism into a complete whole, such as it exists in the Latin American fiction of García Márquez. In truth, that whole does not fit so neatly in our own present-day lives. We live lives as fragmented as the discourses we read and the art we see. Postmodern expression has, however, borrowed elements of Magical Realism that do fit neatly and do make sense in contemporary discourse. Magical Realism as evidenced in current expression may not be integrated in the same way as the Latin American example we have reviewed, nevertheless, popular culture has, and always will have, interplay between reality and the magical. Just as Einstein liberated us from a world where matter and energy are separate, our postmodern artistic production calls to readers and viewers alike to examine and explore the relationship between two sides of our very nature as humans, the real and the magical, the flesh and blood and the imaginative.

Notes


3 Irene Guenther in "Magic Realism, New Objectivity and the Arts during the Weimar Republic" discusses Hartlaub on pages 33-34 in Zamora.

4 A discussion of Magical Realism is not complete without considering some of the other characteristics which may present themselves in a magical realist text. For instance, the characters in these texts generally exhibit a reliance on belief systems, both indigenous and western, and often a combination of the two that is peculiar to Latin America. They may also experience the magical occurrences in the text as a community, a practice which illustrates the strong cultural identity within the community in Latin American society. Magical realist texts also often critique that same society, charting its flaws within the narrative for readers to discover and consider. In addition, the uniqueness of the natural ambience of Latin American geography is a strong influence in Magical Realism, developing from being the background setting, to becoming a catalyst or force behind the action. In some instances, the setting becomes another character in the narrative. Magical realist authors often stretch the limits of the natural world, presenting elements that are bigger than life, leaving their characters to deal with such things as unyielding, torrential rains, or unbearable, excessive heat. Besides stretching the limits of the natural and tangible world, Magical Realism often views time and space in a nonlinear, immeasurable manner. Time itself seems to spiral, moving forward and backward across a constantly shifting continuum. Those elements of Magical Realism that find voice in the text work together to offer an integrated whole to the reader.


6 "La primera obra de literatura mágica means the first work of magical literature.

"The inclusion of these characteristics shows the development of Latin American literature from a sub-heading of peninsular Spanish literature to a literature with a true Latin American voice.

Works Cited


"Suspended Between the Nastiness of Life and the Meanness of the Dead": Beloved as the Physical Embodiment of Magical Realism

No gasp at a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along.

—Beloved

"Anything dead coming back to life hurts."

—Amy Denver, Beloved

Toni Morrison's Beloved ties together history, the supernatural, and the realities of life for African Americans in the 1880s into a rich package that teaches us things we would prefer not to know, about places we would never want to go. In addition, the novel is perhaps the single best illustration of U.S. magical realism known to the mainstream reader. The events in Beloved do not constitute the occasional magic Wendy Faris claims them to be ("Scheherazade's Children" 165). Instead, Beloved's magical realism is pervasive: Denver will befriend it; Paul D will be ruled by it; Sethe, who is strangled and loved and tortured by it, lives with it. Yet the title character Beloved is magical realism. As a magical realist character, Beloved does more than represent Sethe's past or the history of slavery: Beloved "gives blood to the scraps" and lives them. By neglecting to distinguish Beloved as a character related to but ultimately independent of both the ghost and the "crawling-already!" baby, many readers also disregard the significance of the introduction of Beloved into the household of 124 and the surrounding community. Because Morrison draws on the distinctions between representation and actuality—on the interplay of symbolism and mimesis—to give literal and figurative flesh to Beloved, she allows this magical realist creation to play a complex, multifaceted role in the novel.
Critical perspectives on Beloved abound. She is described as demon, as possessed, as human, and as ghost—come-to-life. Most of these descriptions focus on her representational form rather than her physical body; many who discuss the corporeal aspect of Beloved still manage to connect her primarily with the ghost that Paul D beats away from 124 at the beginning of the novel. Critics identify her as the “ghost of the victim” or refer to the ghost itself as “Beloved”—a particularly ironic choice of wording, given that the baby has no name at all in the text until Beloved appropriates the word off the baby’s tombstone. Robert Broad, who calls Beloved “a puzzled and puzzling, poly-generational, mnemonic to torture, uncertain spirit” (192), must rely on the terms “spirit” or “ghost” to characterize her—although he has an awareness of both Beloved’s physicality and his terminology. Ultimately, however, such readings seriously neglect (or, at least, neglect to emphasize) that the ghost and Beloved are two separate and distinct characters. While the ghost represents only the spiritual world and the rages of the crawling—already? baby, Beloved belongs to multiple worlds and multiple rages. In Denver’s words, “At times I think she was—more” (266).

A few scholars have rightly begun to distance Beloved from the ghost itself, if only slightly, as illustrated by Deborah Horvitz’s “corporeal ghost” (93) or Denise Heinze’s “semiotic haunted” (208). Indeed, any attempt to define Beloved beyond “ghostly apparition” is a step in the right direction. An even clearer distinction is made by critics Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, who claims that Beloved is “the incarnation of the ghost of the murdered daughter” (570), and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in her evocative title “ghost—bome—presence” (14); both distinguish Beloved from the ghost by invoking the supernatural. Although defining the magical—finding words to describe what Beloved is or is not—can test a writer’s semantic skills, several critics clarify Beloved’s distinctions from and similarities to the ghost by discussing her in the terms of the supernatural. Trudier Harris calls her “the shape-shifter who takes on flesh—and—blood human characteristics” (131), and Kristine Holmes argues she is “literally embodied as corporeal substance and sustenance” (141). She is a “grown—up zombie” to Martha Bayles (36), and to Heinze, “part ghost, zombie, devil, and memory” (205), a “supernatural memory” (209) that, in David Lawrence’s words, “has the power to construct and circumscribe identity . . . in the image of its own contents” (231). As memory, Beloved most clearly connects with Sethe’s infanticidal. Indeed, Broad claims that, in Beloved, Sethe and Denver both see only “their daughter and sister returned from the dead” (190), and Morrison herself argues that her novel is about the “unburied” brought back to “living life” (Angelo 120).

Although Morrison won’t even let us capture Beloved’s bodily identity without a struggle” (Broad 195 n.1), those critics who do see Beloved as a corporeal character are hard—pressed to “acquire” that body, if only temporarily, in order to write about it. One popular interpretation refines Beloved’s body as the past, whether she is described specifically as the “external embodiment of Sethe’s past” (Finney 105), as “specific members of Sethe’s family” (Horvitz 93), or, more generally, as “the material projection of slavery” (Moglen 208). As “Sethe’s alter ego,” Beloved is “the custodian of the story that was not to be passed on” (Fox-Genovese 15). Lois Parkinson Zamora, calling Beloved “a symbolic and historical embodiment of both [Sethe’s] past and her future” (“Magical Romance/Magical Realism” 301), links the supernatural not only to Sethe’s individual past but also to her ultimate redemption and perhaps hinting that Beloved holds the key to both. As one of the “familial representations” that Dana Heller argues “take on shape within historically—specific communities of women” (107), Beloved is the maternal ancestor returned. But refuged as a larger past, Beloved is “the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten” (Rushdy 571), or “the inconvenient reembodiment of that which we would like to keep silent and submerged” (Holmes 145; emphasis added). Susan Comfort argues that bodily, Beloved “relives the past in the way a hysteric does” and connects her with the “transitional, liminal figures” described by Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement in The Newly Born Woman (123)—an apt title for Beloved herself. Yet Rebecca Ferguson believes Beloved approaches “most nearly Julia Kristeva’s concept of the pre—Oedipal ‘semiotic’” (117). Finally, “[i]n her most comprehensive context within the narrative, Beloved stands for all the ancestors lost in the Diaspora, demanding restoration to a temporal continuum in which the ‘present’ time encompasses much of the immediate past, including several generations of the dead” (Jesse 1991). In the end, we must accept Beloved as the “amalgamation” Holmes claims her to be (145)—but an amalgamation of many of these contingencies rather than the embodiment of any single theory or idea.

In a direct challenge to Beloved as the embodiment of anything, Elizabeth House expresses surprise at anyone who would believe her to be “unquestionably a ghost” or “a supernatural being of any kind” (117). House argues that Beloved’s unlined feet and hands can be justified by Stamp Paild’s hypothesis that Beloved is the girl from Deer Creek who had been locked away by a white man for her entire life. “This possibility would explain Beloved’s ‘new skin’,” her unlined feet and hands, “for if the girl were constantly kept indoors, her skin would not be weathered or worn” (120). Moreover, House contends, the scar on her neck could be from abuse. Yet when Janey, the Bowdin’s maid, finds out that Beloved does not have lines on her hands, she draws her own conclusion that “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” (255). In addition, Barbara Christian relates Beloved to her own Caribbean background, where ancestral spirits return to visit, eat, and drink in carnal form, yet differ “from the living in that while they do appear as bodies, their eyes and skin, like Beloved’s, are those of new—born babies” (367).

If these verdicts neatly explained away or accounted for Beloved, this novel would not be magical realism. Under Janey’s simple terms of revenge, Beloved could be accounted for as are most malcontented “haunts”—as a punishment returned from the other side with unresolved issues or for past deeds, in which case Beloved would be a stereotypical ghost story. Yet Beloved wants all of Sethe, not just her remorse, but her love and attention and her life. If her sole purpose was “an—eye—for—an—eye” vengeance, she would have completed her strangulation of Sethe in Baby Suggs’s field and have been done with it. Janey’s hypothesis is under-
standable; indeed, Ella and others in the community put forth the same theory. Similarly, Christian’s context allows a plausible explanation for the new skin (if not the scars) on the young woman’s body. Only House, who contends that Beloved is merely the girl from Deer Creek, must warp both history and the novel to supply support for her claims. Not only does she claim that Beloved could have been a passenger on the slave ships (a near impossibility, since the slave trade to North America was nonexistent by the early nineteenth century); she even invents a second pair of earrings for the mother the girl left behind in Africa. Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that, beyond the earrings, she never accounts for Beloved’s intimate knowledge of the household and its inhabitants, particularly her ability to put the single word on a tombstone together with Sethe and her crime. Finally, House simply disregards the magical aspects of the character. If we are to believe that Beloved is the escaped girl, her supernatural qualities—the disappearance in the shed, her removal of and sexual assault on Paul D, even her apparent need of Sethe in particular—must be attributed to illusion, lust, and chance.

In order to reach her conclusions, House must ignore the evidence, physical and otherwise, that Beloved has an immediate connection with Sethe’s past. In dismissing the similarities between Beloved’s scars and those of the crawling-already? baby, she discounts signs that transcend coincidence and refuses Beloved that portion of her reality that should be regarded as a homecoming. Most important is that she misses what Morrison is attempting to tell us by embodying Beloved but also by leaving her a nearly blank slate. Beloved’s smooth hands and feet lack not weathering, but rather the finger, palm, and sole prints that make us individually distinguishable. Lacking these marks allows Beloved to be more than House wants to admit, more than any individual person could be, and, at the same time, less than human.

Identifying what Beloved is not is at least as important as pinning down what Beloved is. Beloved and the ghost that haunts 124 at the beginning of the text are not synonymous. They are, at least to an extent, two separate and individual characters. Beloved cannot simply be the ghost that many claim her to be, nor is she the human Elizabeth House argues for. Comfort suggests that “Beloved’s power and magic derive from her discursive liminality: she is both a child and a woman but neither, both a ghost and a living human being but neither” (123). Certainly, one aspect of her magical realist quality revolves around what she might be—the possibility that she is a real girl from Deer Creek, or that she is somehow Sethe’s mother returned, or any number of other possibilities. In short, she cannot be confined to any one of the above descriptions. As a ghost, the crawling-already? baby is, and is only, the murdered child haunting 124 who can do little more than demonstrate her anger. When Beloved encompasses that spirit, however, she takes on new hurts and needs, as if becoming “real” involves taking on the world’s problems, including, as Heinz suggests, the readers’ own need to purge themselves of what Morrison calls the “national amnesia” (208) that has disassociated us from the history of slavery. Just as Sethe’s re-memories are more tangible than memories, Beloved is more tangible than a ghost.

Beloved’s palpable physicality does not make her less ephemeral. “Beloved can never be fully conceptualized because she is continually in a state of transition” (Heinze 208); “she assumes the shape of something slightly different to all who embrace her. She is their worst fear and their most profound need combined” (Heller 115–16). Significantly, Denver asks “What is that?” (51; emphasis added), rather than “who,” when she sees Beloved sitting on the stump. In his review of Morrison’s novel, Thomas R. Edwards says

Beloved thus proposes to be a ghost story about slavery, and Morrison firmly excludes any tricky indeterminacies about the supernatural. This ghost of the elder daughter is no projection of a neurotic observer, no superstitious mass delusion. . . . Morrison provides us no cozy corner from which to smile skeptically at the thrills we’re enjoying. If you believe in Beloved at all you must accept the ghost in the same way you accept the other, solidly realistic figures in the story. . . . But then Morrison, with even more daring indifference to the rules of realistic fiction, brings to Sethe’s house a lovely, historyless young woman who calls herself Beloved and is unquestionably the dead daughter’s spirit in human form. (79)

Sally Keenan, too, notes, “Morrison’s text. . . draws attention to its decidedly fictive quality by constantly transgressing the bounds of even realistic fiction” (49). Though we might quibble with Edwards’s “unquestionable” notion of Beloved’s origin, he spells out the dilemma over reading Beloved as a ghost story. After all, were this an actual ghost story, we should be frightened of Beloved’s presence, not smile at the thrills we’re enjoying. The fact that we are not indicates her position as a supernatural force that descends on the complacent, accepting remnants of Sethe’s family. Instead, we are more afraid of what she represents for the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road.

Beloved is haunted by more than one ghost. Sethe hears the Miami who ride the wind above the pig yards as she is walking home. Stamp Paid discovers that the voices surrounding 124 “like a noose” (183) are from the “people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” (181). Hence, Baby Suggs all but dismisses the ghost in their midst: “Not a house in the country aint packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this baby” (5). Christian says that “for African Americans, at least until the recent past, the experience of spirits communicating with the living was a natural one rather than a weird, unnatural act” (366). While ghosts are not anomalies in this text, Beloved nonetheless defies convention. When Beloved violates the rules of the dead by assuming both shape and attitude, the neighbor woman who had helped Sethe when she first arrived feels obligated to assist her again: “As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion” (257). Like Ella, Beloved “is not concerned with the claims the past may make upon the present, but with how far those claims may conceivably be met and on what terms” (Ferguson 111). Baby Suggs is prescient not of the baby’s death or even of its reappearance as a haint, her fears and premonitions focus on the trouble in “the high-topped shoes she didn’t like the look of” (139). Like
the "angel" in Gabriel García Márquez's "The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," Beloved no longer conforms to the stereotypes assigned to the supernatural and becomes an object of anger and rejection.

Because Beloved challenges the notions of a traditional ghost story, one goal of many critics has been to reclassify both Beloved and the novel accordingly. Heinze claims, "Beloved is Morrison's most unambiguous endorsement of the supernatural; so rife is the novel with the physical and spiritual presence of ghostly energy that a better term than supernatural would be the uncanny, defined by Schelling as 'the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light'" (205). Similarly, Ferguson evaluates Beloved by Freud's definition of the uncanny: "She is, in Freud's words, 'something repressed which recurs,' something supposedly 'dead' returning painfully to life, through the supernatural at work in the 'world of common reality,' yet 'in reality nothing new or alien, but ... familiar and old-established in the mind'" (113). Granted, in spite of the novel's own decree that "[i]t was not a story to pass on" (274–75), Beloved cannot remain secret or hidden if Sethe is to heal. But Sethe, to whom Beloved should be the "familiar and old-established in the mind," does not recognize Beloved until well after her appearance on the stump in front of the house. What is more, Denver initially identifies Beloved as her returned sister, kindred spirit to the exiled ghost, but eventually finds her to be "more" than the familiar or expected.

The "more" of Beloved and its title character is magical realism. While such scholars as Bayles and Francis Joseph Schaack have taken the first step and connected Beloved with magical realism, they have done very little to defend their points of view. Indeed, Bayles's primary intent is to show, "[b]y embracing the genre, Morrison[, who may be the first to combine black folk culture with the romantic impulses of magic realism,] also embraces its willful romanticism, which, in the context of black America, leads to the corollary that the most marginal people are the least corrupted by the false values of the dominant white society" (38). She sees this as reverse racism, "excusing Sethe from lasting blame" and "almost equat[ing] her infanticide with Sixo's pilfering" (40). Finally, she says, "[i]n Morrison's mind there seems to be only one crime, that of slavery itself, and no person who lives under it has to answer for anything. So intent is she on showing the inhumanity of the master, she dehumanizes the slave" (40). Yet Heller argues that Morrison "unsettles the definitional boundaries of the Western European traditions of family romance and novelistic realism" and that "experienced readers of African-American fiction" will see her work as a de-romanticization of the black family romance, a result of the "complex forms of economic and psychological oppression that black women and men have experienced both within the nuclear family and within the larger economic structure" (106–7). Halle, the ironic and mysteriously M.I.A. father and husband, is no longer himself when he "deserts" his family. In a way, then, he is no more to blame for deserting his family than Sethe is for killing their child. Like Sethe, Halle is a victim of the institution; the "rape" of Sethe's breast milk undoes his noble ideas for both of them. The scene Paul D recounts of seeing Halle covered in butter and clabber (another form of "mother's milk"),

though, suggests that Halle is broken more easily than Sethe can be, even after she kills one of her children. Rather than having "betrayed the black family by failing to shoulder responsibility for restoring to it an image of wholeness and unity" (Heller 105) as media and critics like Bayles suggest, Beloved returns the father figure to the text in the end, providing Sethe with a man who is strong enough to put Sethe back together. Bayles's reading of Morrison's magical realism also fails to connect Sethe's crime with Beloved's reappearance. Much like the community that ostracizes Sethe for eighteen years, Beloved symbolizes the "payment" for Sethe's actions; both disallow Sethe to forget her crime. Bayles does not acknowledge Beloved as both muse to and incarnation of the magical realism in the text.

Beloved (novel and character) not only relies on magical realism for its present but also connects magical realism with the past. Helen Lock's notion that Sethe's "rememory as narrative principle ... enables Beloved to mediate between past and present realities, blurring the distinction between them and remembering the disremembered" (205), provides a valuable tool for describing the magical realism of the novel. The use of magical realism as a narrative mode enables Beloved to mediate not only between past and present realities but also between the natural and supernatural worlds. "Beloved is also a novel that constructs the ideal 'listener.' Denver will tell and re-tell the story that she now understands. ... Denver represents the implied community of ideal readers, the 'aural being'" (Rushdy 586), sentiments that echo Amaryll Chanady's discussion of the implied reader and authorial reticence.¹⁰ Morrison takes the edge off what even she has described as a "ghost story" by turning the events into matter-of-fact realities that are as believable as the atrocities that the black characters suffer at the hands of Southern whites.

Schaack's discussion of magical realism notes that "almost every critic of the fantastic mentions the supernatural event as issuing from and dependent on and reflecting a particular 'worldview'" (31 n.10), and Beloved is no exception. Sharon P. Holland and Michael Awkward believe that "while Sethe needs an alternative worldview to survive in and out of slavery, it can blur her perception of events affecting her approach to living. Beloved consistently addresses this sense of paired realities and the choices each person is responsible for making in relation to existing or created space, reality, and time" (51). Arguably, Beloved is the physical manifestation of Sethe's own skewed worldview; in any event, she does issue from, depend on, and reflect a "world with limited notions of reality" (Heinze 206).

Because Paul D exorcizes the ghost from Sethe's house,¹¹ he robs the supernatural of its ability to function within the realm of the natural world. He tampers with the balance between the customary supernatural and everyday in this community, and by doing so he arguably threatens the magical realism in the novel. To maintain the magical realism and to intervene in the real world more directly, the spirit must assume a human shape, must become a physical presence in the novel. Once she does, her actions are harder to "classify" since, as a ghost, she displays typical ghostly behavior: she rants, she knocks things around, she haunts through noise...
and color and tantrum-like displays. Paul D forces Beloved to "grow up," though with Beloved perhaps the more appropriate term is "grow out."

Although logically Beloved should focus her rage on Sethe, she initially diverts it toward Paul D, the aggressor who kills 124 of its baby ghost. Beloved's revenge on him for interfering in Sethe's life is a very grown-up one, in that she manipulates him with sex. After Beloved discovers sex through the turtles in the creek, the following chapter begins, "Paul D began to tremble" (106). Although the sentence refers directly to the flashback of his days in Arnold, Georgia, the words carry an ominous foreshadowing of Beloved's use of him. But Beloved's seduction of Paul D is more than revenge on her mother or Paul D. Sex stresses her fleshly shape, and it gives her a power over him that the ghost did not have. Paul D is unable to exorcise this new form from his bed or the house from which she slowly removes him. He only thinks her out of the house and she "strangles" on a raisin, planting her more firmly in Sethe's and Denver's sympathies. Even Paul D feels wrong about trying to remove her from 124: "It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless colored girl out in territory infected by the Klan" (66). Ironically, Beloved is not merely a "girl," and because she is actually less helpless now that if she were a ghost, it takes something stronger than Paul D (i.e., the humming anger of the female neighbors) to expel her the second time.

Once Beloved, with the inadvertent help of Stamp Paid, removes Paul D from the house, she concentrates on Sethe. Beloved wants to be Sethe's daughter and double. Although her imitations certainly show Beloved's desire, she fails because she is not real in the sense that counts—she is born not of Sethe but of water, and her connections to the supernatural are at odds with any human qualities she has. "Beloved's double presence, for all its potency, suggests equally powerfully a kind of absence. Being in both realms, she seems to exist fully in neither" (Ferguson 114). Beloved's double presence in the text is perhaps best symbolized by the name she appropriates off the tombstone, a name that cannot truly represent the crawling-already? baby, since her name either never existed or was absorbed by the tragedy of her death. Being nameless keeps the ghost in the world of the supernatural; she has lost touch with her human form, and because we never learn the baby's name, we get the sense that she was never human, either. "The loss of name, [Hortense] Spillers argues, is 'a metaphor of displacement' for the cultural and social practices lost in the Middle Passage. The naming by Morrison summons up this profound absence in the historical record" (Comfort 123). In a sense, though, Beloved invents herself through self-naming. By her "misreading" of the message on her gravestone, Beloved simultaneously constructs her own existence as a human being and compromises any sense of what her "person" really means to Sethe and Denver. Her mother trades sex for Beloved's name merely because she does not think to bargain for "Dearly" as well, and the words themselves are put into Sethe's mouth by the minister at the funeral, not by the emotion she has for her unnamed, dead daughter.

Perhaps because of her connection with Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved's body seems subject to the forces of both the spiritual and the natural worlds. "The only relatively sure thing about Beloved is her bodily identity" (Broad 190), that is, that she has a body representative of Sethe's act nineteen years earlier. When Beloved says, "I am Beloved and she is mine," we see her need to possess both the body of the character Beloved and the spirit. As Ferguson points out, Beloved spends considerable time and effort "holding herself together, defending herself from being engulfed or exploding in the space between the two worlds in which she simultaneously exists" (114). Ferguson illustrates her point via the shed scene where Beloved is "eaten alive by the dark" (114), but the passage where she loses a tooth and fears flying apart is likewise exemplary. Beloved's physical and spiritual aspects do not always work in tandem, and at times her struggle is made manifest in her relationship with others. For example, the spirit (rather than the logical, easier-to-manage-and-manipulate body) is what chokes Sethe in the clearing; the body kisses the wounds. Ironically, before Beloved's arrival, "the ghost [is] the only member of the family who seeks the intimacy of physical contact" (Lawrence 237). Even though the contact the two make with the living is violent in nature, Beloved and the murdered daughter are nonetheless linked by their mutual need to touch.

We can associate Beloved with at least three forms in the text, then—the baby girl, her ghost, and the physical form called "Beloved." In spite of this ironically reconfigured "trinity," Beloved's return is no religious journey. Instead, hers is a stagnant characterization. For one thing, each of these forms maintains the same emotional maturity. In spite of the scope of her physical growth, a physicality suggesting the grown-up daughter herself had she survived Sethe's attempt to "save" her from slavery, Beloved cannot duplicate that growth mentally. She still behaves like the two-year-old ghost throwing tantrums in the house. "There is always that aspect of the child and of the dislocated being in Beloved which cannot be mediated, even though it so powerfully communicates with Sethe and Denver" (Ferguson 118). Indeed, everything about Beloved attests to arrested mental development, even given the contradictory evidence of her physical progression. She has the "lineless and smooth" (50) skin of a newborn, but her well-aged scars are remnants of the crawling-already? baby's experience. She looks and acts sick but can lift a rocking chair by herself. She attempts to strangle Sethe and then bathes her neck with kisses. She embodies "resurgent desire" (Lawrence 232) but is unable to satisfactorily convey her needs. Furthermore, in spite of Sethe's repeated confessions, she offers neither forgiveness nor an explanation for her presence and behavior.

Another telling aspect of Beloved's fleshly existence is how she is nourished in the text. Beloved does grow, even if that growth is not emotional maturation. Aside from Beloved's sweettooth, she is fed by Sethe's storytelling, by her love and attention, but most importantly by her pain. When Sethe stops going to work, both she and Denver begin to starve, but Beloved grows plump and glows with good health because "Beloved ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250). Like sex, consumption emphasizes her physicality. Beloved's apparent pregnancy seems less the consequence of her rape of Paul D than her saturation with Sethe's misery. As the ultimate nourishment for this dead thing who hurts, Sethe's anguish and attempts to make up with Beloved only feed her evil side.
Because of Beloved’s supernatural status and her vendetta through most of the
text, she is a character with whom it is most difficult to sympathize—an irony,
given the pasts through which she seems to have suffered. Whatever her connec-
tion with the dead baby, the incident in the woodshed robs both the child and Be-
loved of any innocence. Like Baby Suggs, we see only trouble in the new hightop
shoes. At the same time, we begin to sympathize with Denver’s dilemma—her dual
urge to protect her sister (her only companion, in her opinion, and whose blood
“nourished” her as she drank her mother’s milk) and her mother.

If Beloved’s afterlife (as described in the chapter told from her point of view)
conformed to the constraints and glories of heaven or hell as we know them, we
might see her story as one of angels or devils walking the earth. If the entrance and
exit of Beloved were timed with Sethe’s psychological or emotional epiphanies, we
might be able to read this work as a didactic tale. Were the actions of Sethe less
complicated to understand, we could accept Beloved as a purely physical symbol of
her mother’s guilt. Had the ghost simply disappeared after Paul D’s exorcism, or
had Beloved’s reappearance not pervaded the rest of the book, we might see certain
incidents or characters as “occasional,” as Faris claims. Morrison leaves none of
these options clearly open for us; instead, she muddies the waters with Beloved’s
seduction of Paul D, with Denver’s love for her “sister” and Denver’s own develop-
ment into a strong young woman, and by making Beloved’s destruction a commu-
nal occupation. Beloved, as the title suggests, will encompass Sethe’s story, and she
does so with magic that bumps up against the very existence that Sethe is trying
to carve for herself.

In spite of the wealth of magical realism centered at 124, all supernatural events
are confined to the present and recent past of the novel. Morrison refrains from
painting the South of her novel in terms of magical realism. The Southern scenes,
with Sethe and Paul D (among others) as slaves under the yoke of whites, are, sim-
ply, realism—extremely graphic, unsettling reality. Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the
nephews, and Schoolteacher all represent the old ways, slavery at its best and worst,
but the narrative connects them to the individual price of slavery. Mr. Garner robs
his slaves of their manhood even as he “confirms” that they are men; the nephews
rob Sethe of her complacency and her ability to be a mother when they steal her
milk. Paul D reflects on Mr. Garner’s naming of his slaves and wonders what he
meant. “Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home, and
by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?” (220).
Moreover, Sethe, while telling Paul D about the tree on her back, stresses not the
whipping she received for telling Mrs. Garner about what the nephews did, but
rather what she feels is their true crime:

“They used cowhide on you?”
“And they took my milk.”
“They beat you and you was pregnant?”
“And they took my milk!” (17)
committed to here is excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign. . . Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another" ("Opening Sentences" 91-92). Thus, the "complex narrative strategies of the novel reflect the way in which Toni Morrison sees slavery as a disruption of all the normal relations and processes of human experience" (Birat 324). Beloved confronts this version of slavery by revisiting the past, by proposing "an alternative to [that] past" (Lock 202), and by revising slavery's effects on individuals. Since Beloved "also contains the effects that slavery had, its profound fragmentation of the self and of the connections the self might have with others" (Pergusa 114), she is the alternative to the past. She is also the embodiment of "a particular historical contradiction" who "also represents the threat of being engulfed by that past" (Keenan 74). If Sethe and the community allow Beloved to engulf their present, they can no longer hope for a future. Thus, the "dangerous power of [the myths of slavery] to rigidify meanings and fix identities" (75) and the linear progression of history must both be exploded in order to reorder the community.

In their own attempt at "reordering" the past, the members of the community endeavor to exorcize Beloved one final time. But is Beloved's existence explained away? Faris notes that "right at the end we get what could be interpreted as a disclaimer concerning her magical existence. The people who had seen her "forget her like a bad dream," and finally "realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all." In the final analysis, though, her existence remains shadowy, for we can—and perhaps should—discount this disclaimer, this after-the-fact rejection of her magic, and consider that just because the people "began to believe" this, it is only part of the whole story. ("Scheherazade's Children" 183)

Arguably, rather than discrediting Beloved's existence, such belated denials, ironically, only emphasize her existence. The community illustrates the ultimate power of Beloved's psychological impact when they attempt to rationalize her away after the fact and not during her tenure at 124. Similarly, the townspeople asking questions about whether Beloved really existed does not serve to diminish the effect of the magical realism in the text. Instead, like the official version of the Banana Company massacre in One Hundred Years of Solitude that sweeps everything under the rug, it stands as commentary on the willingness (and perhaps even the need) for people to force things to conform in order to deal with them or even to do away with them entirely. Just as "there haven't been any dead here" in Macondo (García Márquez 313), there hasn't been a Beloved ("any dead") here in a community that chooses to "quickly and deliberately forget her" (274; emphasis added). Both are ways of dealing with "impossibilities," and yet neither ultimately discounts the truth nor explains the disappearances away. Comfort notes that "the novel speaks of her absence in the same moment that it evokes her continued presence" (130). After physically exorcizing Beloved, the community (through language or pre-lan-

guage) attempts a psychological exorcism, an effort to remove her even from memory. But while it is not a story to "pass on," the community cannot "pass" on Beloved, either.

Beloved's presence in the text is a reality while she is there. Furthermore, she is privy to information outside the immediacy of Sethe's present existence, including her knowledge of the crystal earrings—ornaments that simultaneously represent Sweet Home and exclude the present, where the earrings are no longer a reality. Her being is more significant than the community's attempts to explain her away after she is gone. Because no one ever tries to modify or justify her existence until she no longer exists, she is not merely symbolic.14 Although we can read Beloved as a negative symbol of Sethe's psychological baggage, she will also have been an ironically positive force in Denver's and Sethe's lives in addition to existing as a physical entity. At no time in the text does Morrison give us the reason for Beloved's existence. The extent of Beloved's success is left a mystery because we never fully know what she wants of Sethe. She seems to need her love and her destruction at the same time. We know something about what motivates her, just as we know something of Sethe's motivations as she cuts her baby's throat, but we are never told the full story.15

It seems that Sethe does not understand the game in which she is a pawn. She does not identify Beloved as her daughter when the young woman appears on the road, an appearance that Lawrence argues triggers for Sethe a reenactment of "Beloved's natural birth" (239).16 Beloved's appearance is all the more supernatural for when it takes place in the novel. Sethe lives a life of few pleasures and still seems to be serving time for her sins. Not until Sethe lets down her guard and attends the carnival will Beloved make her reappearance. Notably, "everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of the rotten roses' [on the lumberryard fence. Thus, the possibility of a new life juxtaposed with the sickly sweet aroma of imminent death anticipates Beloved's image and the confrontation of the living and the dead that her arrival occasions" (Heller 110). In fact, the symbol of rotten roses is the first in a long line of "deadly" associations for Beloved and Sethe. However, "Beloved's arrival at this pivotal moment [also] suggests both her desire to be included in this family-like group, and her infantile need to sever Sethe's new-found line because her memory be reconciled and her name forgotten" (109). In other words, by arriving immediately after the carnival, Beloved fills her own agenda as much as she fulfills Sethe's projected guilt and penitence. Sethe already lives in the shadow of her sins; Beloved's return is not solely responsible for or representative of Sethe's guilt.

To the extent that Beloved personifies Sethe's own skewed sense of redemption, her appearance represents or embodies Sethe's psyche. It would, however, be a mistake to read Beloved as the living symbol of Sethe's deeds. A brief comparison of Beloved with Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" better illustrates the difference between the symbolic and the magically real. Like the crawling-already baby, Beatrice is a child whose life is literally at the mercy of a parent. Her father, in his pursuit of science, recreates her into a magical, mortal version of the
purple flower in his garden. Indeed, Beatrice is the living personification of his science. Though her beauty originally convinces Giovanni to overlook the evidence against her, his attraction to her threatens to be fatal. Rappaccini's and Sethe's actions both isolate their children from the community; in this respect, Denver, the crawling-already? baby, and Beatrice are all affected by their parents' needs to gain control over the natural world. As slavery epitomizes the ultimate evil in Beloved, science fulfills a similar role for Hawthorne. Yet the difference between these two parents and their seemingly callous use of their children also comments on the distinctions between Sethe's unwilling participation in slavery and Rappaccini's ardent embrace of science. Rappaccini chooses, and even prefers, science; Sethe's actions are a direct reaction against the ultimate evil. Hawthorne attempts to symbolize the psychology of the parent, while Morrison attempts to move beyond the symbolic. Unlike Hawthorne's didactic intentions for "Rappaccini's Daughter," symbolism is not the primary means by which Morrison intends to make her point. Furthermore, whereas any supernatural elements are mitigated by scientific, rational explanations in Hawthorne's short story, Morrison's novel successfully muddies the waters, refusing to explain away Beloved or any other supernatural element. Reading Beloved as a primarily symbolic character compromises the magical realism of the text, since such symbolism would rationalize her existence, imposing an authorial intent that Morrison never intended over the supernatural elements.

That Beloved is not merely symbolic is illustrated by her slanted interpretation of Sethe's past and needs. Sethe "projects Beloved in a maternal and filial fantasy as a perfectly dutiful daughter who 'came right on back like a good girl' and 'understands everything already,' effectively denying Beloved the expression of her anger at the savage separation" (Ferguson 116). Sethe takes to heart Baby Suggs's advice when she tells her congregation "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (88). As Baby Suggs says, Sethe literally sees the "grace" she imagines for herself (i.e., the physical form of Beloved). "Rather than a divine state of being that descends from above, grace is a humanly conceived, embodied experience" (Lawrence 235) for Sethe. Only when Sethe allows herself to imagine that she might be worthy of Paul D's love does Beloved appear on the scene. But Beloved's tainted redemption is the only grace that Sethe feels herself good enough to receive. To Heinze, Beloved's own self-loathing ultimately seems more a projection of the punishment Sethe imagines she deserves than a reincarnation of her daughter (206).

Sethe's self-imposed penance begins long before Beloved arrives on the scene, and her actions signify on her own sexuality, motherhood, and illiteracy. Lawrence argues, "In order to acquire the inscribing power of the white man's chisel, [Sethe] must transform her body into a commodity[,] . . . must temporarily 'kill off' her own body (she lies on a headstone, 'her knees wide open as the grave') to purchase the text that she thinks will buy her peace" (234–35). This ritualistic suicide illustrates Sethe's own self-loathing. "For Sethe, the price of inscription is sexual degradation, and her sex is worth only the seven letters comprising the word 'beloved'" (Holmes 140). Beloved and the crawling-already? baby are both "born out of" this sex, since both are absent from and nameless in the text at the time of Sethe's act and the engraving. Beloved's appropriation of the name that Sethe "buys" for her baby's tomb requires Sethe's own (temporary) death, foreshadowing Beloved's attempts on and continuous absorption of Sethe's life during her stay. Sethe's knees being "wide open as any grave" also references not only this sexual act—ironically referred to as "the little death" in Europe (Holmes 140)—but the act of giving birth as well; both of Sethe's actions symbolize the grave of the crawling-already? baby, whose mother robs her of the very life she gives to her.

Finally, her efforts to engrave the tombstone equate Sethe's sexuality with her illiteracy, and not for the only time in the text. When Paul D makes love to Sethe, he "reads" the scars on Sethe's back, a feat of which she is incapable. "Because reading as a form of knowledge privileges visibility, Sethe's inability to view this inscription on her own body leaves her illiterate with regard to her body's text and thus vulnerable to the readings of others" (Holmes 139). Sethe is disempowered by her incapacity, since Beloved consistently relates "the question of authority over one's own body. . . . to that of authority over discourse" (Lawrence 233). Likewise, when Paul D says "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165), he inadvertently resurrects Schoolteacher's journal and his discursive (as well as literal) attempt to own Sethe's body. His reaction to her secret threatens to rewrite her 'on the animal side of the page,' the very page from which she hoped to spare herself and her children when she escaped Sweet Home. Fox-Genovese argues that Paul D "ultimately shares Schoolteacher's view of Sethe's deed as the deed of an animal" (14). But Paul D's next thought is of the calves of Sweet Home and Beloved's use of him. "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret to her too-thick love" (165). Paul D recognizes, even if Schoolteacher cannot, that "we cannot entirely divorce the murder of this baby from the slavery that shaped its murdering mother's life" (Fox-Genovese 16). Like Paul D's thoughts of Sweet Home, Beloved's multiplicity suggests that the crimes of slavery continue to add up.

As with Paul D, Beloved evokes the memory of Schoolteacher in her relationship with Sethe. "In her insistence on absolute possession of her mother, Beloved resurrects the slavemaster's monopoly over both word and body, enforcing the internalized enslavement that has become a legacy of institutionalized slavery" (Lawrence 240). That Beloved and Sethe cannot seem to get enough of each other is clear enough in the text; that this destructive obsession will not serve any purpose for either is less obvious, perhaps only hinted at through Beloved's conversations with Denver and other foreshadowing in the text. For example, Beloved hovers like a "familiar, . . . never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to" (57). Unlike the three shadows that walk to and from the carnival hand in hand, Sethe's and Beloved's "shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords" (57). As Denver realizes early on, neither Beloved's revenge nor Sethe's explanations will settle anything. Their "mutual hunger for a loving union" and "their inevitable struggle for control" perpetuate the pre-oedipal cycle of love and hate between mother and daughter until it threatens to destroy
them both (Mathieson 212). Of the two, Beloved is playing the more dangerous game. Beloved is, Denver rationalizes when Beloved plays her own version of hide-and-seek on the very site of the baby’s death, “[a] magical appearance on a stumpthe face wiped out by sunlight, and a magical disappearance in a shed, eaten alive by the dark” (122–23). This image solidifies Beloved’s magical status and brings her full circle; not only has she assumed Sethe’s psychological projections of her crime, but she has also taken on the role of Sethe’s past and of the baby who, because of her and her mother’s “darkness,” is “eaten alive” by the teeth of the saw in this same shed.

According to Susan Willis, for Morrison “the psychological, like the sensual and sexual, is also historical” (102), and Sethe’s present psyche in Beloved is most definitely linked with her historical past. The novel invokes “the supernatural as both a figurative and actual means to reunion with the past” (Heinze 210). In order to survive, Sethe believes she must forget the painful events from her past. “Supernatural to a world with limited notions of reality, Beloved is nothing more or less than a memory come to life that has too conveniently been forgotten” (Heinze 206). Indeed, “Beloved haunts” her mother and the others because they work at repressing the painful memories of being under slavery” (Jessie 199). Though Sethe is haunted by her past later in the story, we ultimately realize that she is pursued by it actively when she first shows up on Bluestone Road. It is the past and not any lack of motherly love that prompts her flight to the woodshed when Schoolteacher shows up. “She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (163). Indeed, “in the face of slavery’s destruction of the mother-child relationship, she insisted upon its dissolubility” (Keenan 71). Beloved foregrounds “the varying ways in which a people try to impart human love in inhuman times[,] . . . about the ability, the willingness of those who were not beloved, to love” (Denard 42–43).

Sethe’s day-to-day reality has more to do with her past than with the present or even her future. “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42). In fact, she finds that she has no imagination for drumming up notions of any future for herself. Sethe’s brain has no room to ponder the future because it is so loaded down with the past (71). “For Sethe, in particular—whose name echoes Lethe, the mythical river of forgetfulness—rememory provides the key to unlocking, and ultimately transforming, a past her rational memory has repressed” (Lock 203).

Eventually, of course, Sethe must revisit her past (literally and figuratively) in order to discover a future in which she can exist without Beloved. The novel does not describe Sethe’s growth as a character in psychological terms but rather by providing the site of the re-enactment of her past. Sethe takes “a crucial step towards self-ownership in directing her protective violence against the oppressor (Schoolteacher in the form of Bowdin) instead of against her own flesh and blood” (Lawrence 242). Her “visceral reenactment [when white men return to her yard] enables Sethe to see past the ‘facts’ and place the blame for her daughter’s murder where it belongs, exorcizing at least part of the guilt (and, finally, the ravenous Beloved) herself” (Lock 204). If, in the act of killing her baby, Sethe lost the self-claim she asserts by escaping Sweet Home and crossing the Ohio River (Rushdy 584), she reassess that claim by redirecting at least part of the blame for her crime. This redirection refug es “Sethe’s response to Schoolteacher’s arrival in her yard as one extreme point in a range of possibilities in which mothering or the rejection of it becomes a register of female resistance to the condition of enslavement and the commodification of the female body” (Keenan 67). In other words, Sethe’s past defines her as more of, rather than less than, a mother. Morrison chooses to signify on Sethe’s mothering abilities by linking Sethe’s escape and the female cycle of fertility. Although Rushdy is careful to note that Sethe is free for twenty-eight days (584), he does not point out that Sethe’s “freedom” to claim her own body lasts for the typical length of a menstrual cycle, a cycle that her deliverance of Denver would once again have set into motion. By arriving in the yard just as her menses comes to an end, Schoolteacher seems especially to emphasize the end of Sethe’s cycle of freedom and to reassert his claim over her as a reproducing product of slavery. As we examine Sethe’s past and not merely the effects of her past on her present but also its causes, we begin to discover “what constitutes justifying a murder that arises out of the paradox of a mother’s love (for her child) and hate (for slavery)” (Reyes 78). At the same time, Morrison “wants readers to understand that while blacks were often driven to excess by the cruelties of slavery, slavery was not allowed to excuse those crimes” (Denard 46) or the individuals who are driven to them.

While the community will not allow slavery to excuse Sethe’s crime, they are also reluctant to celebrate an individual's triumph over slavery. Witness their outing of Baby Suggs after her feast for ninety: “Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an exslave . . . [who] had, in fact, been bought out of slavery by a doting son and driven to the Ohio River in a wagon” (137). The community is eager to remember Baby Suggs’s place because it reestablishes her at their level, solidifies their mutual pasts at this tenuous border between freedom from and domination under whites. Sethe believes Beloved to be “the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love,” (251) the love that Paul D says is “too thick.” When Sethe finally guesses at Beloved’s identity (or at least a part of it), Sethe does not read the situation as a return of her past so much as a sign that she can be forgiven and forget that past. Yet she forgets the strength community can provide, and, more important, the punishment (withdrawal) it dispenses if it feels it has been wronged. Sethe never realizes that the community feels she owes them an explanation or apology. “[T]hough the horror of slavery seems a reasonable cause for a violation of ethics, it does not exempt from punishment the violators of the community’s codes” (Denard 43). At the very least, they reason, she should act more repentant, as befits her crime. Her neighbors turn their backs on Sethe because they demand either her explanation or
her humility—neither of which she provides. The community intervenes in Beloved's case for two reasons: first, because the community does not send Sethe "a warning which might have prevented the slaughter of one of their own" (Lawrence 237), and in neglecting to do so, implicate themselves in her crime. Second, the women intercede in order to displace Beloved, reaffirming that, while forgetting the past is simply not possible for Sethe, finding some sort of peace with that past is. Because the crawling—already! baby dies a victim of her mother's perception of slavery, she never allows her mother to escape to the North; Sethe remains "haunted" by slavery. The "other side" for this text can mean either the afterlife or the North, as when Sethe crosses to the other side of the river, the free side. No matter what, Sethe intends for her children to know only "the other side"; she is even willing to kill them to ensure it. Baby Suggs cannot "approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (180) because she knows what she is choosing between.20 Halle's purchase of his mother's "freedom"—a freedom that represents geographic rather than psychological distance from slavery—shows that slavery followed Baby Suggs and every other ex-slave across the Ohio River. Halle, by buying his mother's freedom, displaces himself—her eighth and final child—away from her just as slavery has done with her other children. Halle seems to think he can remove the burden by granting freedom, but for Baby Suggs, slavery and freedom effect the same removal from family.

Like Baby Suggs, who understands that freedom out of slavery is not enough to rescue her heart, Sethe learns that her escape will never be enough to set her free. Sethe and Denver accept the supernatural forces in the home, initially, because they see both the ghost and Beloved as Sethe's penance. Her attempt to kill her children ultimately intrigues readers—who, like Paul D, cannot stay away from her or quite pass judgment on her, even when we know all the facts of her actions. Stamp Paid, who sells her out to Paul D, later tells him, "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (234). Like Helene Moglen, we realize she is "implicated in the cycle of violence by which she was herself produced" (210). Whether we see her as wrong, loving, crazy, or a mixture of these, we are unable to dismiss her. In fact, we find ourselves hoping that Paul D and Denver can "revive" her, freeing her from the past and offering her a future in which she can truly live.

While Beloved is perhaps first Sethe's past, she also represents the past itself, including that inhumane chapter in history known as the Middle Passage. "Sethe's killing of her already-crawling baby is not only the killing of that individual baby but also the collective anguish African women must have experienced when they realized their children were cut off forever from their 'living dead,' [ancestors] who would never be called upon, remembered, or fed" (Christian 369). Of course, Beloved's connection with the Middle Passage means "that we cannot entirely cast the murder of a baby as an act of heroic, if tormented, resistance" (Fox-Genovese 16). Sethe must acknowledge her act, accept responsibility for her individual actions, and recognize "the reason for her act within a framework larger than that of individual resolve... [Thus,] Morrison insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment—the wrongness of assuming a transhistorical ethic outside a particular historical moment" (Rushdy 577). Were Beloved not spurred by Sethe's own tortured memories of her past actions, she would not exist in the novel. Were she solely the history of slavery incarnate, she would haunt everyone in the community and not just Sethe. Still, this story of one family evolves into a communal history, and Beloved's association with the Middle Passage and other histories illustrates the degree to which Sethe's infanticide is tied to slavery's transgressions against the human spirit. If the Middle Passage is the first in a long line of atrocities, Sethe's act represents the "final" one—and suggests perhaps the only way in which the slave could take back a child from the master.

Geoff Hancock claims that magical realism absurdly recreates history while working with a collective sense of folkloric past (36); Beloved's ability to work within these confines on the past, as well as Morrison's attempts to explode them, creates a distinct magical realism that is at once aware of the past as past and at the same time not yet willing, or able, to part company. By "demanding to be remembered" (Keenan 72), Beloved takes Sethe hostage and represents the very real danger of the past overcoming the present (Daily 145, Keenan 74)—no surprise, according to Christian, since children represent both past and future, particularly in African cosmology (369). Beloved attempts to rewrite the past in present tense, but the past cannot be relived, only relieved. The past can only be "internally confronted and externally shared through the telling and exchanging of stories. So why then the echoing of the final line, 'This is not a story to pass on?' Perhaps this is a warning that the cycle of separation and loss must not be repeated" (Heller 116).

Beloved takes the reader beyond this cycle of history by delving into the supernatural. While "Toni Morrison writes Beloved in direct response to the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 180), her topic emphasizes the dichotomies of slave-life, and in doing so, allows for magical realism to flourish in the text.

By centering in her narrative a black woman who is, not incidentally, a mother, Morrison documents the tragic human cost of being "other," and takes us into the dim regions of desubjectification and undifferentiation that were not explored by Freud or by Lacan. As a result, she refuses the conventional oppositions of realism and the fantastic, of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and of the sociopolitical and the psychological. (Moglen 205)

Beloved's fascination with color (particularly "darkness" and the lack of color) suggests that race issues traverse the border between the natural and supernatural; she dwells on "color" because, based on her experience(s), that feature of reality is what precipitates death. The afterlife, at least for the soul(s) not at rest, is a more gruesome kind of existence than that conceived of in most religions; as Beloved's stream-of-conscious passages illustrate, the evils of the natural world continue to haunt the dead. Beloved's recollections of the "other side" are the supernatural re-
flection of the South (and of the Middle Passage spawned by the South’s commodification of black flesh) in the text. Sethe’s house on Bluestone Road is the middleground, the only place in the text where the two realms meet, and thus where both magical realism and the contemplation of color occur. Baby Suggs spends her last days studying the colors like blue that cannot hurt—unlike black, which she learns brings pain. And the hurt generally comes in the form of men without skin, as Beloved refers to whites, who are “colorless” because they are missing their black covering. It is a lesson Beloved knows well, since the crawling-already? baby is killed because her color compromises her freedom, as her mother knows.

Perhaps the magical realism of Beloved does for slavery what the fairytale or folklore ethics of Uncle Remus does—it puts a storyteller’s spin on an historical event that is so graphic, so dehumanizing that it “cannot involve any form of closure which would bring healing and order sufficient to counterbalance the initial disruption” (Birat 324). Beloved “invites in the ghosts of slavery’s horrors” (Daily 141). In addition, Beloved is certainly a symbol of the dehumanizing effect of slavery on people. She represents her mother’s need to find her children safety no matter the means. Sethe and the crawling-already? baby have both been dehumanized by the whites who come into the yard. Beloved is left not quite ghost (once she appears in physical form on the doorstep) and not quite human, and all because Schoolteacher happens to consider her and her mother his property.

Beloved never asks Sethe why she was murdered, and, in so neglecting this question, seems to prove that her “anger stems from a trauma completely different in time, place, and nature from the expected one” (Brod 191). Beloved’s return, then, symbolizes not just Sethe’s past, but the community’s—Ella’s child, the runaway captive from Deer Creek, Middle Passage. “This communal reclaiming is exactly what happens when Beloved returns to 124 Bluestone Road: Looking for their ‘beloved,’ Sethe and Denver get their people, too. All sixty million of them” (Brod 192). Beloved’s stories and actions suggest that “whoever Beloved is, and whoever she is for others, her longing is the longing and her rage the rage of all children abandoned in untimely separation from their mothers and oppressed as others in an alien culture” (Moglen 211). Beloved “signifies on history by resurrecting one of its anonymous victims” (Rushdy 578). Yet, as a character, Beloved defies the anonymity of the past.

The naming by Morrison, like the naming by the Mothers of the Disappeared (in Latin America . . .) enables her to ‘harness the magical power of unquiet souls’ in order to imagine and affirm a living community of resistance. Thus, the name ‘Beloved’ evokes not only the dead child, not only those who have died in the Middle Passage, but also the living African-American community. (Comfort 122)

If, as Karen E. Fields argues, “the essence of slavery was the creation of free-standing individuals, not families or communities” (163), then the task for former slaves upon arriving in the North was to reestablish those communities and families. Ultimately, that is the work that the magical realism of Beloved undertakes.

“In Beloved family and language must be jointly reconstructed” in order for the family and community to be “mutually restored” (Heller 110, 116); thus the voices Stamp Paid hears swirling around 124 are a confusing mass of murmurs. The work to reconstruct this family, their history, and their language has yet to be completed, and this work must be done before the rift within the community can be repaired. No one from the community warns Baby Suggs and hers of the coming of the strangers, thereby investing in Beloved’s death before it happens (Fox-Genovese 15), since those who know the South know its dangers on Northern soil. But the roaring that drives Stamp Away does not emanate solely from within the house. “Beloved magnetizes 124, attracting all the lost life now returning to lay claim to its own” (Lawrence 239), but she evokes more than the ancestral generations lost in the Diaspora. When “Paul D relates her bewildered state of mind and the slow and painful spelling of her name to his recollections of the crowds of stunned, exhausted Negros wandering the roads after the Civil War had ended” (119), he links Beloved with another “critical transitional point in black history,” that is, with Reconstruction (Jessee 199). Thus, Paul D associates Beloved with other “lost souls,” the post-Civil War African Americans who, though neither dead nor enslaved, were both literally and figuratively lost to their severed family ties, as well as to the society that granted them judicial but not absolute personhood.

Just as Beloved cannot be contained by one past, the magical realism of the novel bearing her name cannot be limited. Moreover, although Beloved and magical realism go hand in hand in the text, Beloved is not the only supernatural element at work. Denver’s deafness, the white dress kneeling beside Sethe as she prays, Baby Suggs’s return near the end to push Denver off the porch and into the community again—each represents a portion of the supernatural tapestry sewn throughout the story. From almost the beginning of Sethe’s life on the outskirts of Cincinnati, magical realism plays a role in her life and the lives of those she loves. Not incidentally, most of those magical realist elements in the text are tied either to Beloved or to the baby whose place she takes. The house at 124 Bluestone Road, like Beloved herself, reflects the influence of magical realism behind its doors. It begins as a “spiteful” place when it is merely haunted, progresses to the “loud” spot that Stamp Paid hears from the road, and subdues into the quiet home that Denver, Sethe, and Paul D make of it by the end. Of course, Beloved’s supernatural talents are not confined to the house, like the crawling-already? baby ghost. Beloved takes over the shed and even Baby Suggs’s clearing in her attempt to control Sethe and those who love her. In fact, the Clearing is the only place where Beloved directly and physically abuses Sethe after she returns. Still, the house bears the brunt of the violence done by and to Sethe after she escapes Sweet Home; the women’s growing seclusion in the house ensures that Sethe is constantly present for Beloved’s “feedings.”

When Denver goes deaf from hearing about her mother’s deeds, only the baby ghost’s noises on the stairs can wake her from her soundless world. Chronologically, this moment is perhaps the first instance of magical realism in the novel. We are not to believe that Denver imagines her hearing loss, nor does the text give us
any viable explanation for it, other than her hearing Nelson Lord’s inquiry and linking it with the jail cell she shared with her mother—certainly not a scientific explanation, even if the psychological readings of the situation might suggest otherwise. Denver is literally (and without much fuss over the fact) dead. It makes sense that, unlike Sethe and her "sister," Denver, even after her hearing returns, does not want to know her mother’s history "pre-Denver." Not only does Denver not figure into that past; she has also already lost (been exposed to the ramifications of) that past in a way that Sethe has not—because Denver gets her mother’s milk but at the cost (and physical ingestion) of her sister’s blood. Denver’s hearing loss, once reversed, makes her a keener listener. She is the one who filters Sethe’s articulation of her reasons for killing Beloved; she hears Sethe’s words to Beloved and is finally convinced herself. Most importantly, she learns from listening “that because of a larger communal history, her mother’s deed might not be so heinous as she had at first thought” (Rushdy 583).

Denver’s recognition of the complexities of her mother’s choice forces her to give up her “willful isolation” (Rushdy 580) and to rejoin the community she left at such a tender age. She buys her mother’s freedom from Beloved much as her father Halle bought Baby Suggs out of slavery (Heller 115). When Denver takes “her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (152), she consumes “both the life-giving nourishment and the act of violence which was the condition for her future as a free woman” (Keenan 76). She also becomes a metaphor for the larger community, “the post-Civil War black family [that] was nourished by the combination of these essential elements: mother’s milk, the blood of relations lost to the violent reality of slavery, and the stories that are passed down to each subsequent generation, even if they require raising the dead” (Heller 114). Denver “is the site of hope in Morrison’s novel. She is the daughter of history,” “signifyin(g) history” (Rushdy 571, 579) in the text. Although Denver does not initially conjure up much compassion in the reader, her growth is the most hopeful aspect of Beloved, and by the end of the novel she shares as much “space” in the text as either her sister or her mother. Denver saves her family and herself by pulling them out of willful isolation. Because they reconnect with the neighbors, Sethe and Denver can now confront the historical and psychological baggage that Beloved brings upon herself and into the community.

Each of the events that can be construed as magical has in common a link—and generally a very direct one—to history. The historical in this text is frequently, and effectively, brought up into the present by the supernatural. Morrison offers us a scene that is at once historical and current, and uses magical realism to connect the two. We live through such powerful images of slavery and the lengths to which it drives her characters that Morrison allows us to see the supernatural in an almost pragmatic light. The specter of Beloved seducing Paul D and torturing Sethe pale in comparison to Paul D’s earlier subjugation or Sethe’s victimization at the hands of the young white boys who steal her milk. Because we see slavery in such a light, because Morrison forces us to deal with hatred and racism and evil, two things happen for the reader: we can forgive Sethe’s actions, and we can accept Beloved’s presence as easily as the main characters do. After all, this spirit plaguing the text, comparatively, is neither fantastic nor terrifying.

Beloved refuses, however, to prescribe magical realism as a balm for the past. By using the mode as a vehicle for her resurrection of the past, Morrison illustrates that, “[h]owever compelling the claims of the past may be—and this novel never ceases to make them so—it cannot interpret itself for us” (Ferguson 123). The use of the past, the history (whether shared or individual) of the characters, is one way in which Morrison shows the excessiveness and horror of a reality that makes the supernatural almost tame by comparison. At the same time, Sethe’s past is what provides the fear that drives her to infanticide, and her actions will breathe life into Beloved’s magical, real form. But the novel refuses to equate belief in the supernatural with capitulation to that magic. P. Gabrielle Foreman argues, “Beloved’s most basic premise lies in the magic: it is the community’s shared belief in magic that enables them to save Sethe from [Beloved’s] magical effects” (299). Ultimately, Beloved is not a champion of the present but rather a remnant of the past. She is “the last that remained of a past whose annihilation had not taken place because it was still in a process of annihilation, consuming itself from within, ending at every moment but never ending its ending” (García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude 409). “If history is what happened, then literature . . . is what what happened means” (Denard 40). Morrison’s literature rewrites the “what happened” of slavery into the magical realism that is Beloved.

NOTES

1. Fox-Genovese, 15. Many other critics, including Robert L. Broad, Susan Comfort, and Kristine Holmes, refer to Beloved’s character as “a” or “the” ghost—whether or not they will elsewhere argue that she is more than or different from a ghost. In doing so, they blur the lines between the haunt in 124 at the beginning of the novel and Beloved herself.
2. In fact, although readers can assume from the baby’s age that she was called by some name, we cannot even be certain that she had one. Even in the flashbacks dealing with Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home, the baby is referred to as the “crawling-already?” baby.
3. Broad quotes David Bradley’s The Chaneyville Incident: “Ghost isn’t the right word. Ghost is a word that was invented by people who didn’t believe. . . . Ancestors is a better term” (189). His realization that “the spirit that inhabits Beloved’s body is more than that child’s soul, more than Paul D, Sethe, or Denver ever bargain for” (190) also illustrates that his definition of Beloved moves beyond a simple word like “ghost.” Though “[a]ll the empirical evidence, in other words, points to a good, old-fashioned, unified spectral identity, when we gain access to her thoughts, with the benefit of the interior monologue beginning on page 210, . . . this tidy conception [flies] apart” (190).
4. Heinze, 207. Though Heinze discusses Beloved as a psychological projection—Sethe’s double—she does not seem to rule out the physicality of the character in doing so.
5. Kristine Holmes points out that embodiment “implies a connection between lived (bodily) and literary (representational) experiences” (135). Perhaps it is because Beloved puts the physical body in “embodiment” that so many critics rely on the term as they attempt to interpret Beloved—including, of course, the author of this text. (The purpose of this chapter, after all, is to argue that Beloved embodies magical realism.) For example, still other scholars see Beloved as “an embodiment of reensuing desire” (Lawrence 232), of “story
Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas

Paul Neubauer reaches a similar conclusion regarding Beloved's humanity (or lack thereof).

If the ghost represents action, Beloved represents the word—specifically, the story that can't be "passed on.

Ella and Sethe's own mother share in common the "throwing away" of babies forced on them by white men. Once Ella sees this common bond between Sethe and herself, that is, makes the connection between these babies who have been resigned to the afterlife by their mothers, she convinces herself that enough is enough. It takes Beloved's physical form, however, to push Ella into this stance.

Bayes—who claims that Morrison's "embrace of magic realism has led her to neglect her strengths and indulge her weaknesses—traces what she sees as Morrison's growing trend to incorporate the supernatural in her texts and then asks, "Now, what does all this have to do with magic realism?" (37). Unfortunately, Bayes never satisfactorily answers her own question.

Christian explains, "When one views the novel from [an] African cosmological perspective it is especially significant that the embodied past is represented by a girl-child who is simultaneously a woman, the character Beloved. It is not surprising, then, that the spirit who is the most wrathful and most in pain is that of a child who dies in a violent, unnatural way, for the child represents the sustenance of both the past and the present, as it becomes the future, not only for an individual family but also for the group as a whole. (369)

Since both the South and the afterlife get very little "playing time" in the text, they heighten the real and supernatural qualities, respectively, of the work without overshadowing the magical realism in the novel.

Beloved as the Physical Embodiment of Magical Realism

son walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still" (31). Here, her motherly love gives both Sethe and her baby a chance to make it to Ohio.
argue that 'the relatively minor status of literature for children' is due to 'its close connection with mothering and the feminine' (p. 149). In La Ciudad de las Bestias, the young female, Nadia, is said to be equivalent to nature and also neither Indian nor foreigner, neither woman nor spirit (p. 91/p. 109); she, like the Indians and perhaps the jungle itself, is a non-binary entity beyond the rigid realm of masculine patriarchal logic.

Similarly, Allende does not pretend to be a highly rational intellectual but merely an emotional communicator, responding to a question about critical assessments of her oeuvre with: 'I don't know how to answer in an intelligent, academic, scholarly way. I can only tell you how I feel. I write [my work] with my feelings ...' (Rodden, p. 2). Allende is above all a popular writer, writing on the whole middle-brow novels that aim to transmit some degree of emotional understanding about human beings and the social and political issues that affect them. Rather than a cynical attempt to plunder J.K. Rowling, just as she was accused of plundering García Márquez, her turn to children's literature is a simple yet challenging way and via a popular format what she feels to be important - of reaction Allende would have hoped for.


Unsavory Representations in Laura Esquivel's Like Water for Chocolate

Helene Price

'He maintained that magic, like cooking ( ... ), was a particularly feminine affair.'

Of all the novels to come out of Latin America, Laura Esquivel's Como agua para chocolate (1989)² is surely one of the most commercially successful. The same may be said of its cinematic counterpart, which was directed by the novelist's then husband Alfonso Arau in 1992, when Arau wrote a screenplay that faithfully emulated the structure and spirit of his wife's work. The film was, to a large extent, responsible for the regeneration of the Mexican film industry, as the country's most commercially successful film of the decade of its release. The statistics are now familiar: the book was the second best-selling novel in Mexico in the year of its publication and its English translation rocketed into the New York Times best-seller list in 1993 and remained there for a significant period. It has already been translated into twenty-nine different languages. The film, clearly boosted by sales of the novel, won eighteen international awards and was the highest-grossing foreign language film in the U.S. in 1993.³

There were several reasons for this phenomenal success. The book contained all the right 'ingredients': a fast flowing plot, a heart-wrenching love story, an original yet familiar structure (the cookery-book 'mode') and, last, but most certainly not least, a tablespoon of magic. It is this last element that has led critics to speak of Like Water for Chocolate as a work of magical realism. Yet little more than a second glance at either the text or the film reveals that these works go entirely against the grain of the revolutionary ethos associated with magical realism. Esquivel's employment of elements of magic bolsters an entirely


² Laura Esquivel, Como agua para chocolate (Mexico City: Planeta, 1989).
reactionary ideology that serves to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes of femininity and condone the master-slave dialectic, whilst fetishising Mexican identity. In the absence of the transgressive and subversive impulses that Parkinson Zamora and Faris speak of, the works of Laura Esquivel and Alfonso Arau reinforce the "traditional" boundaries of gender, race and class. In fact, they reveal more about the ways in which Europeans, Americans and even urban middle-class Mexicans wish to perceive Mexican rural reality. The prevailing ideology of the text is conservative, so it follows that Like Water for Chocolate differs from the majority of other magical-realist narratives in that it is not intrinsically postcolonial.

I. Magical Elements in the Text

Like Water for Chocolate follows the fate of Tita, a young woman from the landowning classes in Mexico in the early twentieth century. She meets and falls in love with Pedro, but their desire to marry and consummate their love is thwarted by an archaic family tradition that requires Tita, as the youngest daughter, to care for her mother for the rest of the latter’s days, forgoing marriage and a life of her own. Tita’s elder sister is offered to Pedro in her place and the couple live in the family home whilst Tita is relegated to the kitchen where she grows up under the compassionate guidance of Nacha, the family cook, who is of Amerindian origin. All Tita’s emotions of frustration, anger, desire and clandestine passion are poured into the dishes that she cooks up with startling results. For the emotion with which Tita approaches each new recipe is magically transmitted to whoever consumes her dishes and all the while the tabooed love that she and Pedro share boils and bubbles beneath the surface. The novel’s structure is of integral importance to the plot since each of the twelve chapters, which span approximately forty years of Mexico’s revolutionary and post-revolutionary history, are preceded by a recipe, whose creation and consumption form the basis of the chapters’ events.

Both book and film do emulate the magical-realist style, in that fantastic occurrences are recounted, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if they were commonplace events. In other words, within the ontological parameters of the text, magical things really do happen. The narrative adopts the mise en abyme format, as it is Tita’s grand-niece who recounts her life story via the reading of her recipe books in the present tense of the novel’s narrative. The ‘metaphysical dimensions . . . common in contemporary magical realism’ are seen in Alba’s reordering of her grandmother’s notebooks or the parchments of Melquiades that Aureliano finds and reads. As it is the reader of the notebook, in each of the three cases, who gives birth, in effect, to the telling of the tale through his own reading, the narrative is effectively set within an ‘other’, inter-literary dimension, placing it a step away from the intended reader of the phenomenal world. This ‘world within a world’ impression adds to the insular, enclosed and hence magical nature of the text, as the text appears to create itself. Furthermore, the action is set in temporal terms at a point in the past which is conducive to its romantic feel, and geographically at a frontier between two lands (the U.S. – Mexican border) with their conflicting cultural orders. Lastly, the narrative contains all those elements of ‘otherness’ (according to the moral and scientific laws that govern official Western discourse) conducive to the creation of a magical universe, such as taboo, apparitions and the occasional appearance of elements pertaining to a non-Western culture and worldview such as superstition and folklore.

Gender and Reinforcement of Patriarchy

The book opens with Tita’s birth on the kitchen tabletop and, in a clear example of hyperbole, the infant is ‘literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the floor’ (p. 10). This flood of tears soon evaporates and the residue of salt is swept up and used for seasoning food, as if Tita’s culinary abilities were embedded within her actual physical being. Hence we have an improbable event that is accepted by the characters as quite normal, followed by their manipulation of its outcome for practical usage – here, enters the realism, just. It is because Tita was born in the kitchen, we are told, that in later life she will have such affinity for and adopt it as her space: ‘Thanks to her unnatural birth, Tita felt a deep love for the kitchen, where she spent most of her life from the day she was born’ (p. 10). Hence the improbable circumstances of Tita’s birth produce her love for the kitchen and its activities, leading to her willing adoption of the traditional female space and role of nourisher that reinforces conventional notions of female-hood within the text. Unlike her fellow countrywoman centuries before her, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who used her relegation to the traditional female space of the kitchen for the acquisition of knowledge via a series of scientific experiments, Tita happily becomes an accomplished cook and revels in her role of feeding her family. Her magical birth, rather than liberating Tita, as one might expect, merely propels her

6 See Allende, La casa de los espíritus, pp. 453–4: ‘Mi abuela escribió durante años en sus cuadernos de anotar la vida... Les tengo ahi, a más pie’.
8 All translations are taken from Like Water for Chocolate, translated by Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen (New York/London: Doubleday/Black Swan, 1993).
into a role that reinforces negative gender stereotypes — indeed, had Tita been male, one must wonder whether the tears of a male child could conceivably have materialised into the food of life.

Tita’s relegation to the kitchen is completed by her mother who, in true fairy-tale fashion,’ forbids her to marry Pedro and banishes her to the kitchen. Whilst the battle-axe Mamá Elena is a strong and dominant woman, she cannot be considered a positive role model for women, for her cruelty and despotism imply that for a woman to be strong, she must be a ruthless, masculine and authoritarian woman who rules with an iron fist. She effectively becomes the patriarch (or matriarch) of the novel, merely perpetuating the status quo that leads to the subjugation of women and possesses none of the positive attributes typically associated with femininity such as compassion or the will to defy stereotypical gender roles; interestingly, she is unable to breast-feed her youngest daughter upon the death of her husband. This obstacle to true love would have been an opportune reason for Tita to rebel against tradition by defiance or flight. However, Tita accepts without question her mother’s desires and reinforces the notion of women as passive and dependent subjects.

The first of the magical episodes begins when Tita’s tears of desperation and frustration fall into the cake she is baking for Rosaura and Pedro’s wedding. The first of these magical incidents begins with the description of the emotions that Tita felt upon baking. It is the fusion of her tears, her self-loathing, and the presence of Pedro’s love that seeps into the cake and divides. In a similar vein, Tita, as she consoles herself over her lost true love, ‘collective vomiting’ that ruins Rosaura’s day. The impression given is that the emotions that Tita felt upon baking have seeped into the cake and divide. In a similar vein, Tita, as she consoles herself over her lost true love, ‘collective vomiting’ that ruins Rosaura’s day. The impression given is that the emotions that Tita felt upon baking have seeped into the cake and divide. In a similar vein, Tita, as she consoles herself over her lost true love, ‘collective vomiting’ that ruins Rosaura’s day. 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yearning for Odysseus. This common motif advocates female passivity, fidelity and dependence on the male subject. Women in *Like Water for Chocolate* are sentimentalized, much as they were in nineteenth-century fiction and the romance novel, acting from the heart and not from the head.

The portrayal of women is also essentialist. When Rosaura is unable to breastfeed her daughter, it is from Tita’s virgin breast that the child is fed. Tita herself questions this miracle: ‘Tita couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t possible for an unmarried woman to have milk, short of a supernatural act’ (p. 70). This ‘supernatural’ act aligns Tita with the concept of the ‘eternal feminine’, the naturally maternal woman whose role is to nurture and protect. She is described as ‘Ceres herself, goddess of plenty, (p. 70), which elevates her maternal instincts to the realms of mythology. Tita’s main strengths lie in her mother-earth-like qualities of nurturing and nourishing, the text even makes plain that: ‘If there was one thing that Tita couldn’t resist, it was a hungry person asking for food’ (p. 70). By contrast, Rosaura, unable to feed her child, fails in her womanly duties and, in this way, women in the story are divided into categories of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, based on their abilities to nurture, feed and love. When the infant is separated from Tita she starves and dies. Ultimately, a supernatural act has been used to reinforce the idea that what is positive in a woman is centred upon biological abilities that associate her with reproduction and motherhood. The film goes further in romanticising Tita’s earth mother appeal by focussing on (and thus fetishising) her breasts under the idolising gaze of Pedro, who is clearly aroused by the scene of mother and child before him. The frame of Pedro gazing lovingly at Tita is redolent of the holy family. In this way, visual imagery is used invincibly to reiterate and valorise the hegemonic religion of Catholicism. Furthermore, in the film Tita has a very feminine look about her. Her dresses are long, flowery and billowing, her hair falls gently over her shoulders, framing her face; Lumi Cavazos, who interprets her, has a graceful air about her and a delicate sort of beauty.

Tita and Pedro do consummate their love in what could be seen as Tita’s attempt to rebel against the established order, but the novel is merely fooling us. As Deborah A. Shaw points out, temptation to rebel, ‘is motivated by Tita’s desire to conform to traditional notions of femininity where an ideal woman is to be a wife, mother and nurturer if she is to be fulfilled’ (Shaw, p. 117). Tita’s raison d’être is to bear Pedro’s children and serve him as a loyal wife. The novel ends with the couple, finally reunited and making love. Unfortunately, Pedro dies and Tita chooses to follow him by eating matches to set herself alight, an instance of a supernatural act. Despite the fact that it is Tita’s grand-niece who has narrated the story by way of voiceovers up to this point, as the ranch burns, it is the voice of John Brown, reciting his grandmother’s theory, with which the novel ends. Hence it is a man who has the final say in this female-dominated film. Neither is there anything to suggest that attitudes have become more progressive. As Tita’s niece marries John’s son, it is she that seems to have succeeded, attaining her destined role, where her spinster aunt, left unmarried and alone, has failed.

Race and Class

Gertrudis, the product of her mother’s clandestine affair with a mulatto, was an illegitimate child of mixed race. The actress chosen to play her in the film, inexplicably, has ginger hair and in no way resembles a woman of mixed race, which seems to be a weakness on behalf of Arau and the casting director with regards to the incorporation of representatives of ethnic groups. Her presence, however, along with that of the Indian servants Nacha and Chencha introduces the notion of Mexico as a heterogeneous nation into the work. The inclusion of members of theautochthonous culture, in the form of servant workers from poorer classes as well as those brought into the country for slavery, would have been an ideal opportunity for Esquivel to employ the magical-realist mode to examine ideologies of racism and servitude but is one that she entirely passes up. What is more, in a cynical fashion, the narrative almost promotes racial stereotypes. An example of this is seen when Gertrudis returns to the ranch with her lover and his troops and a dance is held in their honour. Her dancing abilities whip up a stir and whilst Rosaura remains puzzled as to the source of such talent, Tita, having chanced on a photo of a ‘well-dressed mulatto’ is acutely aware: ‘she knew perfectly well who had given Gertrudis her rhythm and other qualities’ (p. 162).

In this instance, ‘other qualities’ refers to Gertrudis’s insatiable sexual appetite, which requires her to work as a whore in order to satisfy her needs. Whilst this is an unusually liberating proposition in the text from the female perspective, the comment equates Gertrudis’s natural feel for rhythm and her sexual prowess, common stereotypes associated with the black race, with the black blood in her veins. The implication that blacks are good dancers and great lovers is not overtly negative; however, it does tend to caricature and naturalise the race, reiterating popular stereotypes that associate Blacks with carnal and primitive instincts.

Neither does the text adopt a liberal premise with regard to the ranch’s Indian servants, as it avoids challenging their subjugated position in Mexican society. In point of fact, the servants appear to be utterly content with their lot. The way in which they are incorporated into the family, especially by Gertrudis and Tita, presents them almost as family members, proposing an idyllic acceptance of harmony between races which quite clearly did not exist in Latin America at the turn of the century. In this way the film masks the reality of the social and racial inequalities that existed at large in Mexico at that time. John Kraniauskas identifies this as one reason for the film’s popularity with middle-class audiences: ‘Despite all the changes brought about in Mexican society by the Revolution and its aftermath, they (audiences) can still feel comfortable with those things that