

CAMD Paper Final Draft

“Mira Que Larga Tienes La Cola”: Magical Realism in Latin American Literature as
Descendant and Antidote of Colonial Trauma

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PERSONAL STATEMENT

It's midnight and I'm in the pantry, illicitly rummaging for Oreos or Lays or anything I really shouldn't be eating less than an hour before I fall asleep. The crumple of aluminum reverberates, a rowdy pack of metallic bats unleashed into the darkness of the silent house. Scared of waking everyone up, I follow them back into my room.

The next morning my mom sees the door open, the bags rearranged precariously, the napkins ruffled and she turns to me and says "Mira que larga tienes la cola," look how long your tail is. I picture myself with a lion's tail between my legs as I close the Oreo package.

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For as long as I can remember, my life has been filled with magical realism. I haven't always had the name for it but the sayings my family uses, the stories I've loved most, and the ways of thinking that have appealed to me have all had to do with a "transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal," in the words of Angel Flores, one of the first critics to use the term "magical realism."¹

This way of viewing things has long intrigued me and, in some ways, defined me. I am both Latin American and a storyteller, and magical realism is to this day seen as the defining literary movement of the region. For much of the world, this genre has been their introduction to, and inseparable from their perceptions of, the wide-ranging canon of Latin American literature. The concept of magical realism has shaped how the world sees Latin America as much as it has shaped me and how I view the world and my culture, so when given the opportunity to do this project, I decided I wanted to explore it in the hopes of uncovering the roots and effects of "the awesome and the unreal" in Latin American culture.

¹ Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." *Hispania*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1955, 190. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/335812.

At the same time, I also aimed to explore storytelling as resistance and response to trauma, especially that of colonialism. The majority of my education around colonialism has focused on the United States, so, in an effort to cultivate a more global perspective for myself—and to understand my roots better—I decided to root this essay in the complicated relationship between two cultural forces in Latin America: the traumatic legacy of colonialism and the twentieth-century literary phenomenon of magical realism. The final product melds literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and trauma theory to present this relationship, along with examples from two important works of the genre—*One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Together, these approaches reveal that magical realism is directly descended from a colonialist perspective, and so reinforces an exoticized image of Latin America for the Western world. In order to truly provide a healing force, magical realism must instead function as individual narrative therapy to process colonial trauma and, on a cultural level, to challenge Eurocentric thought.

PART I - BACKGROUND

“Humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dream and adherence to the world of reality. And really, if this breathing rhythm of history were to cease, it might signal the death of the spirit.”

—Franz Roh, *Magical Realism: Post Expressionism* (1925)

The History of Magical Realism and “Boom” Literature

Magical realism's past is as convoluted as that of Latin America's; throughout the 20th century, four essays helped establish "magical realism" as a literary and artistic genre. The term was coined in 1925 by a German art critic named Franz Roh to define a style of European painting responding to Expressionism, but it would be ten years before the idea traveled across the Atlantic. Once there, in 1949, Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier cited Roh's essay to argue that Latin America had a unique storytelling perspective that relied on the "marvelous real" of the continent. By the 50s and 60s, this idea morphed back to the name of magical realism, referencing a genre of Latin American literature defined by Angel Flores's "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" in 1955 and Luis Leal's response, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature" in 1967.

1967 would turn out to be a seminal year for magical realism for more than just Leal's essay, though, as that year, a publishing house in Buenos Aires catapulted Gabriel García Márquez into global literary fame with *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*. Through a combination of aggressive marketing campaigns and increased middle-class readership throughout Latin America, Márquez's novel sold hundreds of thousands of copies and launched the so-called "Boom" period of Latin American literature.² Critic Neil Larsen points out that the Boom was represented three simultaneous revolutions in Latin American culture— in aesthetics, in marketing, and in political thought; Boom literature, he theorizes, represented a new way of aesthetically representing Latin America and brought Latin American literature commercial viability in the international literary market, as well as being a part of a wave of increased political consciousness brought about by the Cuban revolution in the late fifties.³ As the sixties

² John King, "The Boom of the Latin American Novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel*, ed. Efraín Kristal (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 59-61.

³ Neil Larsen, "The 'Boom' Novel and the Cold War in Latin America," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (1992): 775-776, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26283498>.

wound to a close, magical realism was set as a major player in Latin American culture, bound to influence how the continent viewed itself just as much as how other countries viewed it.

So... What is Magical Realism?

Defining “magical realism” requires returning to the four original users of the term to cobble together what they meant when they introduced it. At first, Franz Roh defined the attitude of magical realist painters as “calm admiration at the magic of being,” in other words, looking at the world “with new eyes” and calling into question the “obvious” quality of objects. He also pointed out that magical realists often focus on details to emphasize this simple magic of reality.⁴

Flores and Leal’s definitions differ slightly since they apply the term to literature. Flores begins similarly to Roh, defining the genre as a “transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal” where “time exists in a timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as a part of reality.”⁵ Leal later added that magical realists do not explain their breaks from reality, which centered tone as a distinctive feature of the genre.⁶

As time has gone by, though, critics have pointed out how loosely delineated the genre is. Most critics I encountered in my research spent a requisite page or two bemoaning the difficulty of defining the term (what distinguishes magical realism from, say, fable or surrealism?), but I am not concerned with exact categorization. The definition I will be using throughout this essay focuses less on the content of magical realist narratives and more on its tone. Fredric Jameson argues that magical realism is about a “metamorphosis in perception” that, like Roh’s

⁴ Franz Roh, "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism (1925)," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Duke University Press, 1995), 17, 20, 30.

⁵ Flores, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction,” 189, 191.

⁶ Luis Leal, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature (1967)," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 123.

post-Expressionist painting and Leal's emphasis on tone suggests, is a particular way of seeing and narrating the world that allows the real and the fantastical to exist side by side.⁷

A great example of what Jameson means occurs a few pages into *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. José Arcadio Buendía, a founding member of the town of Macondo, leads an expedition into the wilderness to make contact with civilization outside of the village's isolation during which:

The men on the expedition felt overwhelmed by their most ancient memories in that paradise of dampness and silence, going back to before original sin, as their boots sank into pools of steaming oil and their machetes destroyed bloody lilies and golden salamanders... They could not return because the strip that they were opening as they went along would soon close up with new vegetation that almost seemed to grow before their eyes.⁸

Several elements of the passage, from the “pools of steaming oil” to the “golden salamanders” to the fast-growing vegetation, seem questionably truthful. Márquez's narration, though, takes them in stride, never questioning their place in the narrative. We as readers do not know whether there truly were golden salamanders in the jungle, but that is besides the point because Buendía felt as though there were. We are experiencing the world from a perspective at the porous border between the real and the magical— that is magical realism.

Magical Realism and Postcolonialism

⁷ Jameson, Fredric. “On Magic Realism in Film.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1986, pp. 301. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1343476.

⁸ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 11.

Since magical realism was intimately intertwined with the Latin American Boom, the Western literary world⁹ came to associate it with a perspective of “living on the margins.”¹⁰ This also linked magical realism to postcolonial thought as it flourished in colonized areas like India and Latin America and was often used to critique colonialism.¹¹ Stephen Slemon, a scholar of magical realism, argues that magical realism is particularly fitting for postcolonial writers because the genre relies on tension between two incompatible systems, the magical and the real, which resembles the tension between Indigenous and colonial culture in postcolonial audiences.¹² Writing in this mode then tends to reflect the cultural clash aspects of colonization, and so, authors from areas still reeling from colonization have turned to it, whether consciously or not, to express this aspect of their reality.

While on the subject of colonialism, it is also important to acknowledge its complexities when it intersects with race in Latin America. From an outside perspective, Latin Americans are subjugated to the Western world as a product of colonization. Within, though, different hierarchies emerge, as white Latin Americans hold more institutional and cultural power than Black and Indigenous Latin Americans. These latter groups were impacted far more by colonization, and it is their voices that I have attempted to look for when looking for pathways to healing Latin American culture from colonialism.

⁹ Throughout this paper, I will be referring to Europe and the United States as “the Western world,” shorthand for colonizing powers that exert cultural and economic influence over Latin America, past and present.

¹⁰ Slemon, Stephen. “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse.” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 408.

¹¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed., Very Short Introductions (Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

¹² Slemon, “Magical Realism,” 409-411.

PART II - COLONIAL EXOTICISM AS EXPORT

“We were all amazed and we said that these lands, temples and lakes were like the enchantments
in the book of Amadís.”

— Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain* (1568)

A “Wealth of Mythologies”: The Colonial Roots of Marvel

Magical realism’s tone relies on a sense of “marvel” at Latin America, but this marvel parallels and reinforces colonial-era exoticism. The colonial influences in magical realism can be traced back to its inception and original intent. In his essay defining the term, Carpentier argues that Latin America is inherently “marvelous;” where European countries had to manufacture marvel with surrealism, Latin America’s history renders it marvelous on its own, making magical realism a natural fit for Latin American authors in Carpentier’s eyes.¹³ This is allegedly the case because Latin America’s “virginity of the land,” the “revelation” of its recent discovery, the “Faustian” presence of Black and Indigeneous people, and its “fecund” racial mixing give Latin Americans a “wealth of mythologies” to draw stories from.¹⁴ The first two phrases in Carpentier’s explanation connect the first definitions of the genre to the pristine myth, a colonial fallacy that paints colonized countries as untouched prior to colonization. The next two phrases, in attributing the uniqueness of Latin America to non-Europeans, further tie marvel to its status as a new and different from Europe. Looking back even further to colonial texts, Friar Ramón Pané recounts the culture of the Taínos in the Dominican Republic in a way that resembles

¹³ Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America," trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 85-86.

¹⁴ Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real," 88.

magical realism, melding myth with history until they are indistinguishable. He prefaces the myths by saying that “todo esto les han hecho creer sus antepasados; porque [los Taínos] no saben leer, ni contar sino hasta diez,”¹⁵ casting the mythology in a minimizing tone, as if the Taínos are incapable of keeping history in a Eurocentrically “objective” sense and must instead turn to myth, and ignoring myth’s capacity to function as a culturally uniting force.¹⁶ Similarly, Spanish friar Pedro Simón’s accounts of Colombian Indigenous mythologies include “supernatural elements [that]... may represent an effort to recast indigenous beliefs in European and Catholic terms.”¹⁷ These texts show that the melding of realism and fantastical is not a recent phenomenon, but rather one that goes back to colonial narrations of Indigenous cultures. Marvel is thus explicitly tied to a colonial worldview, which carries with it a weight of exoticism that haunts the beginnings of magical realism.

This pattern connecting colonization and magical realism deepens as major figures in the genre reference conquistadores and their legends in their work. Carpentier calls Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s 1568 non-fiction chronicle of *The Conquest of New Spain* even more wondrous than the works of European romance and fantasy writers. Not only that, Carpentier cites the Spanish conquest myths of El Dorado and the fountain of eternal youth as proof of how the marvelous real is “inscribed” in the history of Latin America, even though they were nothing but fantastical justification for the violent exploration/conquest of the continent.¹⁸ Gabriel García Márquez, in

¹⁵ “Their ancestors have made them believe all this, because [the Taínos] do not know how to read or even count beyond ten.” Translation mine.

¹⁶ Ramón Pané, *Relación Acerca de las Antigüedades de los Indios*, 8th ed., trans. José Juan Arrom (n.p.: Siglo XXI de España, 2004), 21-22.

¹⁷ Alejandro Patiño-Contreras, "Fantastic Primeval Beings and Their Roles in Reconstructions of Indigenous Colonial Cosmologies from the Eastern Andes of Colombia," *Ethnohistory* 67, no. 4 (October 2020): 629, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/ethnohistory/article-abstract/67/4/621/167236/Fantastic-Primeval-Beings-and-Their-Roles-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

¹⁸ Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real," 83, 87.

his Nobel prize lecture, also references El Dorado and eternal youth, as well as pointing to instances of the fantastical occurring in supposedly nonfiction text in the chronicles of Antonio Pigafetta.¹⁹ Even Angel Flores credits Christopher Columbus and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca with framing Latin America in fantastical terms.²⁰ These examples emphasize that the assumption that somehow Latin America *itself* is magical has been repeatedly and consciously linked to colonizers and to the exoticism that drove them to term the continent an “earthly paradise”²¹ of riches ripe for their taking, therefore linking magical realism to a history of exoticizing magic.

Writing for the European Gaze: Magical Realism as Export

Latin America’s alleged uniqueness then presents Latin America’s authors with the question of how to write about such a marvelous place. The lack of “conventional” (think European) means to express Latin American reality until the inception of magical realism is, according to Márquez, what puts Latin America in a “solitude” that renders its problems difficult to explain.²² This belief that Latin America has never before been given expression recalls the pristine myth in literary form. Such a belief can be explained with the postcolonial theory that since language structures the worldview of those that speak it, it often takes time for the language of the colonizer to adapt to expressing the civilization of the colonized, which functions on a different linguistic structure up to colonization.²³ Within this context, magical realism can be

¹⁹ Gabriel García Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," lecture, December 8, 1982, The Nobel Prize, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1982/marquez/lecture/>.

²⁰ Flores, "Magical Realism," 189.

²¹ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America : Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, 25th anniversary ed., trans. Cedric Belfrage (Monthly Review Press, 1997), 31, digital file. The phrase “earthly paradise” comes from one of Amerigo Vespucci’s accounts of his travels.

²² Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," lecture, The Nobel Prize.

²³ Slemon, "Magical Realism," 411.

understood as Eurocentric literature's attempt at a narration of Latin America's "inherently" magical reality. To this point, critics lauded magical realism as Latin America's "authentic expression, one that is uniquely civilized."²⁴ In other words, the genre embodies an evolution of the colonizer's language to fit the history of Latin America within European ("civilized") standards of literature.

In terms of exoticism, authors, historians, and explorers all serve as authorities since they disseminate knowledge about a place to the rest of the world.²⁵ This weaponizes their apparent knowledge of a place into power over it.²⁶ Because of this position, Latin American authors of magical realism, in creating an expression of the continent viewed as authentic, come to hold power over the perception of the continent.

The particular danger of magical realism, then, is that since it has positioned itself as an "authentic" and especially Latin American way of writing, its notions of the magical rooted in colonialism validate exoticist views of the continent. The link between magical realist wonder and colonial ideas grows tighter in light of how closely wonder resembles orientalism, a term coined by scholar Edward Said to describe the exoticism and assumptions of the West when describing the East.²⁷ Orientalism relies on "exteriority... on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West."²⁸ The habit of "speaking for" the marginalized, specifically Indigenous people, has been a

²⁴ Flores, "Magical Realism," 191.

²⁵ Paul H. Fry, "Introduction to Theory of Literature: Post-Colonial Criticism," lecture, Open Yale Courses, last modified Spring 2009, <https://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-300/lecture-22>.

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 34.

²⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 3. Though Latin America is not the East in the traditional sense (as in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East), its status as a colony of the West and its history of exoticism align allow it to fit within this concept relatively well for the purposes of this paper.

²⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 20-21.

mainstay of thought in leftism in postcolonial Latin America.²⁹ Magical realism is no different. Its removed, wondrous tone describes to the reader an exotic magical land, and in doing so evokes the “anthropological curiosity, the study of other cultures without participation” that is often a characteristic of exploitative imperialism.³⁰ The insistence of magical realist authors that they are merely narrating the “true” reality of Latin America, besides hearkening back to the quasi-anthropological chronicles of colonial times, also connects to orientalism’s habit of positioning the Orient as something to study or illustrate—in essence, something to subject to knowledge.³¹ To suggest that Latin America was, is, and will be “marvelous” plays into orientalism’s reliance on the “timeless eternal” to fixate the Orient as an object outside of the realm of the Western.³² Magical realism relies on orientalism as explored above to reinforce colonial exotic notions of the continent.

Magical realism’s economic and cultural impact within Western cultural institutions reveal that its success is tied to its appeal to the exotic. Since (and because of) colonialism, Latin America has been stuck in systems of exploitation benefitting the West.³³ This exploitation goes beyond the economic, though, as orientalism is maintained by a largely one-sided cultural export of the European to Latin America.³⁴ This applies to literature, too. As a capitalistic endeavor, magical realism commodifies Latin American and Indigeneous cultures for the rest of the

²⁹ Catherine Walsh, "'Other' Knowledges, 'Other' Critiques: Reflections on the Politics and Practices of Philosophy and Decoloniality in the 'Other' America," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 3 (2012): 13, <https://doi.org/10.5070/T413012880>.

³⁰ Melanie Otto, "Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in the Work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Wilson Harris," *The CLR James Journal* 23, no. 1/2 (2017): 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26752150>.

³¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 40-41.

³² Said, *Orientalism*, 72.

³³ Galeano, *Open Veins*, 2.

³⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 324.

Western world.³⁵ For example, magical realism has been used by Western establishments to uphold Eurocentric values through lauding it as an example of the “uniquely civilized” possibilities of Latin America. In Franco-era Spain, censors valued magical realism for its “preservation of what they defined as the Spanish language,” allowing it to make its way into the country despite some works’ political ideology.³⁶ Similarly, since many magical realist works feature depictions of an alternative, non-specific Latin American past, they risk creating “nostalgia images” that, in creating “images and simulacra of the past,” place the continent’s colonial past as an object for consumption.³⁷ This readily posits magical realism as an economically viable prospect. Much of magical realism’s European success can then be seen through the lens of an appeal to exoticism, and this appeal to exoticism affects how it is perceived by the Western world.

Magical realism blends Western influences— such as Kafka and Faulker— with colonial perspectives and Indigeneous Latin American oral storytelling.^{38 39} The genre becomes an “attempt, albeit imperfect and artificial, to represent an indigeneous [to Latin America] worldview by means of a non-European focalizer,” which means that it uses Indigenous influences to differentiate itself from other works.⁴⁰ Still, within the context of export, these

³⁵ Wendy B. Faris, "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 5, no. 2 (October 2002): 105, <http://janushead.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/faris.pdf>.

³⁶ Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola, "Publishing Matters: The Latin American 'Boom' and the Rules of Censorship," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 9 (2005): 196, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/378452/pdf>.

³⁷ Jameson, "On Magic Realism," 310.

³⁸ Larsen, "The 'Boom' Novel," 773.

³⁹ Flores, "Magical Realism," 189.

⁴⁰ Amaryll Chanady, "The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 140.

Indigenous perspectives end up being overshadowed by the fact that the Western worlds' valuing of magical realism, as discussed in the previous paragraph, relies on its interpretation of Latin America through an exoticist lens. Merely blending cultures, then, ends up replicating colonial power structures; to illustrate, we can turn to the story of Warren Hastings of the British East India company. During his tenure, he learned Indian dialects and about Indian culture and customs. At the same time, he did not budge an inch of official authority, continuing to run the colonizing enterprise, having gained more power through his knowledge of local cultures.⁴¹ White Latin American magical realists, whether consciously or not, are perceived by the West to perform this masquerade since they already hold institutional power. Writers fall into using magical realism to wrap the allegedly exotic in an equally exotic stylistic package made so by its incorporation of Indigenous perspectives, and thus, fit the perceptions of Latin America by the West. What these writers present to the West, becomes not the actual place, but rather a "mirror image of their own assumptions."⁴²

Still, when in the hands of writers that knowingly use its past to deconstruct colonial power structures rather than replicate them, magical realism can point the way toward healing from colonialism. Paired with historical authenticity and a therapeutic use of magic, the recreations of the past in magical realism can be positive. When it actively dismantles rather than upholds Eurocentrism, centering Indigenous traditions and perspectives, magical realism can function as an antidote to colonial trauma.

⁴¹ Fry, "Post-Colonial Criticism," lecture, Open Yale Courses.

⁴² Young, *Postcolonialism*, 2.

PART III - THE “NERVOUS CONDITION” : HEALING COLONIAL TRAUMA

“Trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. It draws one away from the center of group space while at the same time drawing one back.”

—Kai Erikson, American sociologist

Origins and Impacts of Colonial Trauma

To understand how magical realism can begin dismantling colonialism, it is helpful to posit colonization as a trauma. This highlights the aspects of magical realism that can be used as narrative therapy to help present the past. By focusing on psychologically beneficial depictions of the past, magical realist authors can avoid exoticizing depictions rooted in colonialism. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz theorized that the cultural impacts of colonization could be seen as “transculturation,” a process through which two cultures combine to create something different from either with elements of both. Transculturation takes two steps: deculturation, a loss and uprooting of a previous culture in the inhabitants of the colonized land, and neoculturation, the creation of a new cultural phenomenon.⁴³ Through the lens of trauma theory, deculturation can be seen as trauma for the Indigenous inhabitants of the continent, since as European colonizers encroached upon Latin America, a violent clash of cultures began to “undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of [Indigenous] culture,” a characteristic of collective trauma according to sociologist Neil Sessler.⁴⁴ Not only that, but colonization mirrors individual trauma in that both induced a total breakdown in the daily routine

⁴³ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Duke University Press, 1995), 102-103.

⁴⁴ Ron Eyerman, "Social Theory and Trauma," *Acta Sociologica* 56, no. 1 (2013): 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23525660>.

of those who experienced it.⁴⁵ Within this framework, the “nervous condition” of ambivalence and in-betweenness in those colonized that postcolonial scholar Frantz Fanon describes can be seen as a manifestation of collective trauma.⁴⁶ Ambivalence becomes a symptom of a wound in the cultural memory of Latin America, a point of contention between Indigeneous and colonizing cultures. Thinking of the effects of colonization as a “nervous condition” emphasizes that colonialism, as a trauma, had individual psychological effects on the inhabitants of Latin America.

The traumatic impacts of colonization play out in literature too, particularly magical realism. Joshua Pederson proposes that, in literature, traumatic experiences are sometimes renarrated with “augmented narrative detail” and descriptions that are “temporarily physically or ontologically distorted,” otherwise known as peritraumatic dissociation.⁴⁷ These descriptions fit magical realism, with its barrage of detail and distortions of reality that mirror peritraumatic dissociation; magical realism can therefore be framed as a traumatic response. Still, magical realism offers more possibilities to the postcolonial writer than simply as an expression of colonial trauma, possibilities such as providing an active coping mechanism. Within the fractured cultural psyche of Latin America, magical realism can be used as a way to process the clash of cultures that induced this trauma.

Literary Case Study 1

⁴⁵ Eyerman, "Social Theory and Trauma," 43.

⁴⁶ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 27.

⁴⁷ Joshua Pederson, "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory," *Narrative* 22, no. 3 (2014): 338-339, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24615578>. Pederson has a somewhat unorthodox understanding of trauma theory, but one that is productive in this context.

Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, employs magical realism precisely within the context of colonial trauma. After a brutal beating by Trujillo loyalists, a character named Belicia Cabral encounters a golden-eyed mongoose that convinces her to stay alive.⁴⁸ Díaz never explains whether or not the apparition was real, but this break in reality expresses Belicia's post-traumatic state. In the context of the novel, Belicia's beating reflects the family's intergenerational fukú curse, which Díaz explicitly connects to colonization in the opening pages of the novel.⁴⁹ He even goes so far as to posit Trujillo, with his economic control and emphasis on the "Spanish character of [Dominican] nationality" rather than its Black and Indigenous roots, as an extension of colonialism, further tying the events in Belicia's life to colonialism.⁵⁰ Díaz's deployment of a break in realism functions as a way to portray the impact of colonization on Belicia as an individual, with the supernatural fukú showing its impact on the family as a whole.

Felt Reality and Habituation: Antidotes

When used specifically at instances of pain, magical realist narratives allow readers to enter a space in which they can feel their trauma retold and thus gain more control over it, becoming a healing mechanism by emphasizing subjective experience. According to sociologist Ron Eyerman, re-narrating the past allows societies to move through collective trauma.⁵¹ Agency and an explicit focus on history must be stressed in this theory, however, as a step to avoid

⁴⁸ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Riverhead Books, 2007), 149.

⁴⁹ Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, 1.

⁵⁰ Emily Shifflette, "The Novel Mezclada: Subverting Colonialism's Legacy in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" (master's thesis, University of Tennessee - Knoxville, 2010), 7, https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2387&context=utk_chanhonoproj.

⁵¹ Eyerman, "Social Theory," 48.

retraumatization. Narratives of the past should be conscious for those traumatized, rather than an involuntary “flashback,” to gain more control over the effects of the past in a process called “habituation.”⁵² Literature in general can fulfill this conscious narration; because of its frequent distortion of reality, magical realism is especially well suited for approximating traumatic experiences, allowing for the narrative to more closely mirror the reader’s perceived experience. The genre often uses metaphor to convert pain or a reaction to it into a tangible object, as seen in the above example from *Oscar Wao*.⁵³ A fantastic representation of pain can feel more truthful to readers, especially when it portrays an event that tests their perception of the real— a trauma. Magical realism’s breaks from reality then create a “felt reality” that “privileges experience [of pain] over knowledge,” which in itself, is a challenge to the Western emphasis on empiricism.⁵⁴ In the end, this provides postcolonial readers with a narrative that allows them to reconstruct the subjective experience of something as abstract as the pain of colonial trauma in a tangible way within the constructed realm of the author. To deal with colonial trauma specifically, though, the pain of colonialism must be brought forward to the reader’s present.

Magical realism creates a space to relive historical events from a place of control, leaving room for the habituation of historical events. Novels dealing with the past or history ask the reader to live through a “present” in the narrative that has been designated as the past outside of the novel.⁵⁵ This creates a sense of distance away from historical trauma, separating it from any retraumatizing effects in the present day. While reading a historical novel, the author recedes into

⁵² Pederson, "Speak, Trauma," 339.

⁵³ Eugene L. Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (2008): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304877>.

⁵⁴ Arva, "Writing the Vanishing," 61, 79-80.

⁵⁵ Jameson, "On Magic," 306.

the background of the narrative as the reader interprets the text in their real time.⁵⁶ This phenomenon mirrors live storytelling's ever-evolving "here and now." Both create a relationship between teller and audience where the teller, or author, guides the audience through a past, a process which in reading becomes a conscious guidance not unlike habituation.⁵⁷ Magical realism specifically tends to use a technique referred to by Stephen Slemon as "foreshortening" of history to achieve this sense of a present past. Essentially, magical realism tends to make a small local region a stand-in for a postcolonial culture as a whole, then compresses— or foreshortens— history so that the narrative timeframe of the work encompasses a much longer span of historical time.⁵⁸ Such a method is useful for writers looking to create a coping mechanism, as it allows the reader to step into the traumatic past and relive it with the chronological flexibility often present in traumatic memories.

The therapeutic portion of magical realism comes from the fact that the magical aspects of the genre allow the reader to relive historical traumas with narrative distance. Critic Frederic Jameson argues that violence and sex allow texts to break from historical conventions to focus on "uncodified intensities" of the narrative present— I would argue magic does the same.⁵⁹ As explored in previous paragraphs, breaks in reality serve to narrate "intensities," but avoid replicating the exact trauma by allowing the reader to work through the emotional impacts of trauma using the emotional authenticity of felt reality. The magical aspect of the genre allows authors to narrate instances of colonial trauma that are emotionally accurate but not so explicitly as to traumatize. When deployed in the context of directly engaging with the harms of history

⁵⁶ Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real," 72.

⁵⁷ Jaime Riascos, "Ancient and Indigenous Stories: Their Ethics and Power Reflected in Latin American Storytelling Movements," *Marvels and Tales* 21, no. 2 (2007): 258, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388838>.

⁵⁸ Slemon, "Magical Realism," 12-13.

⁵⁹ Jameson, "On Magic," 321.

and not merely retelling it with anthropological distance, a magic-superimposed reality then makes magical realism particularly useful as narrative therapy for dealing with the traumatic effects of the clash of colonization.

PART IV - CHALLENGING EUROCENTRIC THOUGHT

“Then the wind began, warm, incipient, full of voices from the past, the murmurs of ancient geraniums, sighs of disenchantment that preceded the most tenacious nostalgia.”

—Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)

Literary and Historical Alternatives to Eurocentricity

Magical realism can challenge Western binaries and historiographies, showing the world alternatives to Eurocentric thinking and making it a resistance to colonialism beyond the psychological. The genre, for one, inherently questions the West’s fundamental belief in rationalism and literary conventions. For example, realism, a European import, has long been seen as the “language of the colonizer” in Latin America; magical realism’s addition of magic to a realist worldview destabilizes this language.⁶⁰ Similarly, the lack of clarity in magical realism’s genre classification so bemoaned by Western critics is itself a rebellion against European convention.⁶¹ In this way, when magical realism leans into its lack of classification, rather than attempting to fit into it, the genre challenges the value of the literary norms imposed on the

⁶⁰ Faris, "The Question of the Other," 103, 113.

⁶¹ Slemon, "Magical Realism," 9-10.

continent by Western intellectualism. Colonies often assert their legitimate autonomy by either portraying their culture as superior, as similar and equal to the colonizer, or simply as valuably different— magical realism does the latter through its unique philosophy of genre and style.⁶² It establishes alternative ways of thinking about literature, and, through its wide recognition, asserts that they can be as valuable, artistic, and innovative as the veneratedly European.

The genre's flexibility regarding time also challenges Eurocentric historiography, instead opting for a non-linear way of experiencing history that can point world audiences to Indigeneous and Afro-Indigeneous thought. Magical realism in film, for example, often relies on the "superposition of whole layers of the past within the present," according to Jameson.⁶³ In literature, "foreshortening" history functions in the same way, to break linear perceptions of history. Such a break from linear structures matches with some Indigeneous and Afro-Latin American philosophies, such as *cimarrón* thinking, an Afro-Andean tradition of thought rooted in "collective consciousness in the present, but in conversation with... ancestors."⁶⁴ When it draws on such traditions and credits them appropriately, when it centers these philosophies rather than using them to exotize, magical realism retells the history of colonialism from a non-Western perspective with an emphasis on its present effects. Rearranging history, after all, allows a text to focus on deeper, emotional truths about the connections between past and present than a more distancing linear approach.⁶⁵ In short, magical realism reveals alternative ways of thinking about how the past interacts with the present, highlighting the way colonial history mingles with the present to show it is not truly past.

⁶² Chanady, "The Territorialization of the Imaginary," 137.

⁶³ Jameson, "On Magic," 311.

⁶⁴ Walsh, "'Other' Knowledges," 18-21.

⁶⁵ Chanady, "The Territorialization of the Imaginary," 139.

Literary Case Study 2

Gabriel García Márquez's narration of the banana company massacre brings to light the effects of neocolonialism on Colombia and serves as a rebellion against the Colombian government's version of history. In the novel, José Arcadio Segundo witnesses the slaughter of banana company workers by the Colombian army and the subsequent hiding of their bodies. The narrative spins into magic, describing a train with "two hundred freight cars and a locomotive at either end and a third one in the middle."⁶⁶ He later recounts the story, but future generations believe it to be "a hallucinated version, because it was radically opposed to the false one that historians had created and consecrated in the schoolbooks."⁶⁷ This mirrors the real-life takeover of 30,000 acres of Colombian land by the New Jersey-based United Fruit Company.⁶⁸ As in the novel, the event was subsequently wiped out or minimized from official texts by Colombian authorities.⁶⁹ In making the reader experience the massacre first hand through José Arcadio Segundo, Márquez's depiction brings to life a history hidden by history books. In depicting the workers' suffering and deaths, Márquez reintroduces to the collective memory of Colombians an event where the government, in distorting the truth, sided with the invasive forces of the United Fruit Company.

⁶⁶ Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 307.

⁶⁷ Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 348.

⁶⁸ Regina Janes, "Liberals, Conservatives, and Bananas: Colombian Politics in the Fictions of Gabriel García Márquez," *Hispanófila*, no. 82 (1984): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43808107>.

⁶⁹ Éder García Dussán, "La Identidad Social en Colombia y El 'Macondismo'" [Social Identity in Colombia and "Macondismo"], *Signa: Revista de la Asociación Española de Semiótica*, January 1, 2016, 574, <http://e-spacio.uned.es/fez/view/bibliuned:signa-2016-25-7240>.

As in the real world, colonization in the novel goes beyond European conquest; it is as much about privatization of land taken from Indigenous people as it is about Columbus.⁷⁰ The fact that, even after the banana company is rained away, Macondo experiences devastating instability, points back to Fernando Ortiz's dependency theory, which argues that even after the Columbian period, Latin America remained economically dependent on the West.⁷¹ Through this piece of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez illustrates those effects, and more importantly, centers his retelling of history on the Latin American countries that neocolonization left exploited, providing an alternative perspective to official narratives.

Collective Belief and Uniting Mythologies

According to Jacques Stéphen Alexis and Wilson Harris, myths, legends, and superstitions often function as a “counterculture of imagination” in situations like colonialism or slavery.⁷² Magical realism can fuel this counterculture, since its magical elements' foundation of collective faith liken it to myth and its communal properties. Historically-founded myths build a sense of community in Latin America, especially in the wake of any loss or distortion of mythology through deculturation. One such communal myth is the story of François Mackandal, a Haitian cimarrón rebel leader who was executed by French colonial authorities in the 18th century. In the end, however, Haitian communities preserved his memory with a variety of myths of Mackandal turning into a winged creature and flying away from his execution. In the wake of an important event, Haitian communities retold the story of Mackandal on their own terms

⁷⁰ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 136.

⁷¹ Frederic Jameson, "No Magic, No Metaphor: Fredric Jameson on 'One Hundred Years of Solitude,'" *London Review of Books*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n12/fredric-jameson/no-magic-no-metaphor>.

⁷² J. Michael Dash, "Marvellous Realism — the Way out of Négritude," *Caribbean Studies* 13, no. 4 (1974): 66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25612571>.

through a collective “mythology, preserved by an entire people.”⁷³ Similar to the collective preservation of the Haitians, the magical realist “phenomenon of the marvellous [the magical] presupposes faith.”⁷⁴ Mythology draws on the same collective faith and marvel that magical realism does, making them similar phenomena in terms of uniting cultures. This collective faith helps both mythology and magical realism build a sense of identity on a continent where colonization left collective identity fractured. Frantz Fanon theorizes that colonization relies on a destruction of Indigeneous past.⁷⁵ Magical realism that draws on Black and Indigeneous cultures in a way that aims to reframe history from a new perspective validates mythology in the very ways that Friar Ramón Pané and colonial authorities refused to do. After all, magic based on collective faith provides an opportunity for recovery of this past through storytelling, a recovery of not just actual history, but the mythology that shapes a sense of culture and community.

PART V - EPILOGUE

“Let’s go, comrades, the European game is definitely finished, it is necessary to find something else.”

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

Conclusion

As I finished this paper, I found myself thinking about the Ecuadorian Indigeneous rights movement and its roots in the concept of interculturality, which emphasizes interrelation between

⁷³ Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real," 87.

⁷⁴ Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real," 86.

⁷⁵ Shifflette, "The Novel Mezclada," 10.

cultures and the recognition that Western knowledge is, in and of itself, insufficient. Knowledge, in other words, is always “in construction,” being nourished, evolving.⁷⁶ Magical realism’s healing role in the future of Latin America lies here, in helping construct new knowledge. Within Latin America, this means writers empowering an understanding of the impacts of colonization, bringing to light new ways of thinking about how the past connects with the present. In the broader world, it means using its platform and seal of European approval to elevate Indigenous mythologies and worldviews into the public eye. By reaching into the harms of the past and working to present them in a healing way, distanced and accessible, in ways that challenge Eurocentricity by relying on the Indigenous, then can magical realism avoid the pitfalls of colonial exoticism.

The relationship between magical realism and colonialism ultimately revolves around the question of an author’s responsibility in confronting history. Literature does not exist in a vacuum, and it is an author’s job to understand and acknowledge the cultural forces that have led to them writing what they do. Looking back at my mother’s quote, I see it as a result of a history of wonder ingrained in my continent from colonization. It is the product of centuries of tensions, between empiricism and feeling, between Indigeneity and Eurocentrism, between the fantastical and the real— whatever those may mean in Latin America. As arbiters of culture, storytellers have the chance to show those gaps coexisting and, sometimes, to bridge them. They have the opportunity to reshape our sense of the past, to bring forward perspectives that may have been lost, tamped down, or forgotten. Magical realism shows that there is a possibility for literature to be psychologically and culturally valuable, and not just valuable, but revitalizing.

Reflection and Acknowledgements

⁷⁶ Walsh, "'Other' Knowledges," 16.

I cannot even begin to put into words how proud I am of this paper; I did not even think I was capable of doing this. This paper has expanded my horizons as a writer, researcher, and thinker. It was by no means an easy task, giving me plenty of headaches, leaving my room littered with index cards, and putting several pounds of books into my backpack. Still, I wouldn't trade it for the world. The paper showed me the value of organization, of specific research, and, most importantly, of merging different approaches. No topic exists solely within one discipline, and so, approaching a question such as the ones posed here from a variety of angles yielded more fruitful answers than any single framework ever could.

Of course, I wish I could have had more time. I wish I could have explored global magical realism, from Toni Morrison to Salman Rushdie, to see how it connected to Latin America. I wish I could have included sections on the history of Indigenous rights in Latin America, or even postcolonial feminism. If anything, though, I have been introduced to many areas of study that will not just go away. In my endeavors as a student, artist, and Latin American, this paper will stick with me for a long time to come.

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