CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ETHNIC AMERICAN LITERATURE

03

UNCERTAIN MIRRORS

MAGICAL REALISMS IN US ETHNIC LITERATURES

JESÚS BENITO, ANA Mª MANZANAS AND BEGOÑA SIMAL

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Jesús Benito
Ana Mª Manzanas
Begoña Simal

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The volume is a three-layered effort: we enter and exit magical realism from different critical perspectives. Ana Mª Manzanas (University of Salamanca) has authored the foreword, as well as chapters 1 and 2. Jesús Benito (University of Valladolid) has penned chapters 3, 4 and 7. Begoña Simal (University of A Coruña) has written chapters 5 and 6.

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Foreword: Louise Erdrich's "Father's Milk": Magical Realism's Oxymoronic Nature

> All life forms are interdependent and may even participate in some fundamental unity.
> —Robert Nadeau, *Readings from the New Book of Nature*

Scranton Fox, youngest son of a Quaker father and a reclusive poet, enlisted in the U.S. Cavalry in St. Paul, Minnesota. His company launched a spectacular cruel raid on a peaceful village that immediately turned into chaos. In the midst of the unexpected hatred that suddenly seized him, Fox bayoneted an old woman. As she died she uttered a groan, and the soldier saw his mother. The vision yanked him out of his killing stupor, and the cavalry soldier begun to run. It was then that he saw a dog with a baby strapped on its back escape the confusion of the camp. Like an odd trinity, man, dog, and baby left the stench, screaming, and death yells behind and walked into the surrounding wildness. Away from the rituals of violent separation on the Ojibwa village, Scranton commenced another set of rituals as he learned the basics of parenting; he bathed the baby girl and tried to feed her tiny pieces of rabbit. Nothing worked until, ready to do anything to appease the child, he opened his shirt and put her to his nipple. The answer was immediate; "[s]he seized him. Inhaled him. Her suck was fierce" (2009: 301). His nursing was a shock to his own body, and most of all for the "inoffensive" nipple he had never noticed or appreciated till that very moment. The evening passed and Scranton was forced to change nipples, for the first one hurt, and he felt asleep with the baby tucked beside him. When he tried to pry her tiny body loose the following morning, she would go wild, so he started walking holding her attached to his body. As man, dog, and baby proceeded into the wilderness, the baby continued to nurse and refused to stop. It was a very confusing situation for the former soldier, whose nipples soon became toughened. He was overwhelmed with pity for the baby, yet it occurred to him that in her inexplicable perseverance, she was

teaching him something. It was then that the word *faith* "hooked" him. "She had it in such pure supply. She nursed with utter simplicity and trust, as though the act itself would produce her wish" (2009: 302). Sure enough, half asleep one morning, with the baby beside him, he felt a slight warmth, then a tingling in one side of his chest. An odd dream, he thought to himself. Yet he woke up to a huge burp from the baby, looking "impossibly" well fed, its tiny fists unclenched in sleep. Such is father's milk, the crux of contraries: a matrix that makes possible the utterly impossible; that feeds on absences to create a presence; that threads through fragmentation to suture an impossible oxymoron. Milk is never a father's. Or it is.

This is the beginning of Louise Erdrich's "Father's Milk," a story in the collection *The Red Convertible*. The writer constructs this apparently natural continuity between wish and occurrence, yoking them by the pivotal *faith*. Attached to the chest and impossible to remove, faith reaffirms and re-roots the continuity that was broken at the village. If the bayonet's role is to separate and distinguish the empowered from the powerless, the armed cavalry soldier from the unarmed old woman, the father's milk is based on a different set of preoccupations—the urge to link, to connect—and on a refusal to stop. The blood spilled within a ritual of cutting and separation is replaced by the unnatural trickle of milk, a reparation of sorts that reconnects fragments and partitions. And the thin drop of milk Fox tastes when he puts his hand to his chest is the inexplicable medium between wish and occurrence, a liquid frontier where opposites naturally converge. The female and the male, the possible and the impossible, the obliterated and the productive nipples are cancelled out in this rearrangement of contraries. Yet it seems accurate to say that the opposite elements the narration threads together "have meaning only in terms of their participation in one another, and can never be finally viewed as categorically different," to make use of Robert Nadeau's words (1981: 53).

What happened to Scranton Fox brings up the dilemma of magical realism and the question of where it is to be found. Where are its repositories? Does it inhabit the larger memory the narrator mentions, distant and vanishing? Is it limited to quaint, "primitive" anecdotes from vanishing cultures, separated from the actual concerns of the "real" world? The answer is no. As it foregrounds the

limitations of either-or categorical thinking, magical realism not only converses with two of its immediate allies, postmodernism and postcolonialism, but also dialogues with the tenets of an analytical tradition of Western thought such as quantum theory. Although at times described as "quaint," magical realism performs a wide and profound cultural and ideological work. It yanks us out of the comfortable complacency that assesses the real as an either-or kind of argument, placing us in an alternative intellectual landscape, one where the real is neither stable nor static nor subject to rigorous determination and measurement (cf. Nadeau 1981: 29). This relocation of the real in the magnetic fields of contemporary critical theory and of ethnic literatures of the United States is the main purpose of *Uncertain Mirrors*. In its six chapters magical realism is realigned on a changing critical landscape, from Aristotelian mimesis to a vast array of critical "-isms" to finish with Adorno's concept of negative dialectics.

If the volume closes with dialectical instability, it also opens with the mutability of the term *mimesis*. In chapter 1, "Mimesis, Realism, and Counter-realisms," Ana María Manzanas traverses a wide critical and intellectual geography in order to explore the evolution of the concept from Aristotle's formulation to nineteenth-century realism. Even if mimesis bifurcates into two varieties of mimetic theory, the world-reflecting model versus the world-simulating or world-creating conception of artistic representation, the conflictual nature of mimesis was radically curtailed by realist writers. This limitation of the concept can be at least one of the reasons that, for some critics and writers, mimesis is simply a notion of the past, constantly at war with avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Futurism, or Surrealism. And yet, the chapter argues, what seems to be forsaken in these apparently anti-mimetic movements is not the concept of mimesis per se but its reduction to a "world-reflecting" model. As Manzanas argues in chapter 2, "Romance, the Imaginary, and Magical Realism," the oxymoronic construction of magical realism goes back to the conflictual side of mimesis as both a "world-reflecting" and a "world-creating" mechanism. The chapter examines magical realism as the repository of the imaginary faculty, and it addresses its ties with the romance and Surrealism; as it does so, it also revises the most widely spread coinage of realism and its ideological basis. Magical realism, the chapter contends, offers

another stance of the possible and of the transformational variant of artistic representation. It also situates us at a hybrid aesthetic matrix inextricably linked to postcolonial theory, postmodernism, Bakhtinian theory, and quantum physics.

These are the alliances that Jesús Benito reshifts in chapter 3, "The Crisis of Representation: Post-realism, Postmodernism, Magical Realism." Despite their formal similarities, Benito claims, magical realism and postmodernism stem not only from a different "location of culture" but also from a different "direction of culture." For even if the two narrative modes participate equally in the modern "ruins of representation," their historical routes have been distinctive, and the ideologies behind such ruinous presentation of realism may be read as differential, even if tightly imbricated. The analyses of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* illuminate both the pervasive presence of postmodern narrative elements and the possibility of a supplementary magical realist reading that pays attention to both novels' exploration and exploitation of ex-centric, alternative ideologies. If magical realist texts partake of modernist exhaustion as much as of postmodernist replenishment, they also problematically participate in postcolonial agendas, as the next chapter explores. In chapter 4, "Juxtaposed Realities: Magical Realism and/as Postcolonial Experience," Benito traces the contemporary uneasy translation and relocation of magical realism into both a U.S. ethnic trademark and a global postcolonial phenomenon. The chapter identifies the dangers implicit in such extrapolation. For rather than anthropological texts attempting to represent particular worldviews and cultural experiences, postcolonial and U.S. ethnic magical realist writing offers complex aesthetic artifacts that dialogue with and participate in distinctive cultural contexts. The chapter then centers on two novels rarely read as magical realist, though pervaded by some of its central motifs. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* offer two distinctive versions of the magical realist dislocation of hegemonic texts and ideologies, and the re-creation of alternative spaces, geographic and semiotic. Gloria Naylor's magical "Other Place" becomes an elusive geographic space beyond the reaches of Western empiricism, replicated in Thomas King's enunciation of a fluid semiotic space beyond Western textual authority. Both imaginary spaces, though resulting from the uneasy juxtaposition of

distant realities, emerge as third spaces that allow the ethnic "other" to magically rearticulate the flow of power and agency and to bring it to bear on present experiences.

In chapter 5, "From Identity to Alter-Entity: Trans-selving the Self in Magical Realist Narratives," Begoña Simal inflects magical realist narratives with Levinasian philosophy. Simal explores the multiple ways in which traditional understandings of identity are problematized in magical realist texts. Particular attention is paid to the "trans-selving" moments where the realist conception of a unified, coherent self is totally dislocated. In those episodes a given character undergoes a process of momentary convergence with, and final "substitution" for, another self. Simal argues that such a phenomenon can be read as a literalization of Levinas's ethical theory of substitution. Three novels illustrate the connections between magical realist approaches to self and Levinasian philosophy: Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997). In these three novels, Simal contends, the notion of "alter-entity" is put forward as an alternative conception of self. In chapter 6, "Of a Magical Nature: The Environmental Unconscious," Simal explores the interconnections between magical realism and eco-criticism. Before doing so, she offers a detailed discussion of the manner in which magical realism and environmental criticism coalesce. First, in going beyond the limits of realist epistemology, magical realist strategies facilitate the questioning and, ultimately, the deconstruction of traditional dichotomies such as human versus non-human, nature versus culture; second, magical realism also furthers and enables the perception of usually hidden connections and connivance between material practices (late capitalism, globalization, social injustice), spiritual/ethical concerns (lack of ecocritical awareness and/or activism), and environmental degradation; finally, as the analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* illustrates, magical realist texts provide spaces for alternative experiments with "reality," from utopian to more feasible alternatives to the present situation.

Imaginary spaces, like utopian spaces, are the repositories of a certain nonrealistic excess; as such, both spaces retain their "negative identity" and refuse to be either reduced to synthetic sameness or dismissed as dissonant fantasy, as Benito claims in chapter 7, "A

Negative Sense of Reality." These two spaces significantly participate in what Theodor Adorno terms "negative realism," for they remain excessive throughout, discordant and antagonistic, unintegrated into any totalized system. The unrealistic excess, claims Benito, effects a breach in the totalized unity represented by bourgeois realism and plays the dissonant cord of the particular, the nonidentical, against its social identification.

1
Mimesis, Realism, and Counter-realisms

> And, in those happy, lively days, an awareness of form was flowing from Sallust to me—the kind of deep and true inner form of whose existence one can have no suspicion while still within the province of rhetorical tricks; which is no longer just lending order to the material, because it permeates it, abolishes it, and creates poetry and truth all at once; a play of eternal forces, a thing as magnificent as music or algebra. That was the project dearest to me...
>
> I could no longer grasp [people] with the simplifying gaze of habit. Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea. Isolated words swam about me; they turned into eyes that stared at me and into which I had to stare back, dizzying whirlpools which spun around and around and led into the void.
>
> —Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Lord Chandos Letter"

I. "This is so-and-so": From Ritualistic Mimesis to Mimesis as Imitation

Lord Chandos's words to Francis Bacon in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter" stand as an eloquent instance of how the dream of writing turns into nightmare. Lord Chandos describes the initially happy indeterminacy of his writing as he creates fiction and truth in one single pulsation, in an eternal game of alternations. The eternal binary of the actual versus the imagined is solved at this joyous stage through the coexistence and overlapping of the two elements. Hofmannsthal is in fact striking a careful balance between two fundamental views of mimesis: first, the notion of mimesis as devoted "to depicting and illuminating a world that is (partly) accessible and knowable outside art, and by whose norms art can therefore, within limits, be tested and judged"; and second, the vision of mimesis "as the creator of an independent artistic heterocosm, a world of its own, though one that

[...] may still purport to contain some kind of 'truth' about, or grasp of, reality as a whole" (Halliwell 2002: 5). These two varieties of mimetic theory can be reduced to a well-known dichotomy between two distinct conceptions of artistic representation: the "world-reflecting" model versus the "world-simulating" or "world-creating" model (Halliwell 2002: 23). In the first, art is like a mirror turned to the world; in the second, art is like a mirror turned to the spectator and his or her beliefs (Potolsky 2006: 4).

Interestingly, the dialectical and double nature of writing that Hofmannsthal describes in the letter is at the heart of contemporary studies of mimesis. Stephen Halliwell premises *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* on the notion that "mimesis is an intrinsically double-faced and ambiguous concept" (2002: 23). In *Mimesis and Empire* (2001), Barbara Fuchs argues that as complementary opposites, sameness and difference cannot be demarcated from each other, for "the study of fidelity in representation leads necessarily to a consideration of adulteration" (2001: 4). In *Theories of Mimesis* (1995), Anne Melberg also stresses the instability of mimesis, stating that our notion "is inherently and always already a *repetition*—meaning that *mimesis* is always the meeting-place of two opposing but connected ways of thinking, acting and making: similarity and difference" (1995: 1). There are "movements of difference even in those versions of *mimesis* that suggest similarity" (1995: 1), for *mimesis*, as she clarifies, is never a homogeneous term and is open both to similarity and to difference (1995: 3). By the same token, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's *Mimesis* (1995) is based on the attempt to rehabilitate mimesis "in opposition to a tradition that rigidly deprived it of the creative element." They maintain that such tradition rests on a false premise, that of "the assumption of a world existing outside codification systems, the idea that truth is the correspondence between statements and an extralinguistic world" (1995: 17). Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) further points at the tension between sameness and difference and at the impossibility of distinguishing between the imitator and the imitated, between the copy and the original. Yet as this chapter illustrates, many of the interpretations of mimesis have eluded the heterogeneous nature of the term—a suppression that constitutes a historical mutilation (Girard 1978: xii).

This chapter is concerned with the unstable and conflicting nature of mimesis—a mimesis that, as a deliberate performance of sameness, is always going to alter the original. This "alteration" and instability is also at the heart of the "holding up the mirror metaphor" traditionally associated with mimesis.[1] For, as Pam Morris argues at the opening of *Realism*, words function completely differently from mirrors. The mirroring of a particular world is never going to be complete, for "no writing can encompass every tiny visual detail as a mirror faithfully does. Writing has to select and order, something has to come first, and that selection and ordering will always, in some way, entail the values and perspective of the describer" (2003: 4). Unlike a mirror, which reflects automatically, writing involves glossing over differences as well as abstracting.[2] Moreover, as the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges's "El Aleph" muses, the writer faces an irresoluble problem, for even if what the eye beholds is simultaneous, what one writes will be successive, because language is successive (2005: 192). So even if the mirror is turned to the world, it cannot help but be turned to the beliefs of the spectator, and to reflect his or her ability to translate a simultaneous world into a sequence.

As this chapter attempts to illustrate, mimesis has proved to be a most unstable concept whose meaning and status has fluctuated through the different stages of literary history, from Aristotle's *Poetics* to magical realism and other variants of postmodern realism. Despite this conceptual instability, the history of literary criticism shows that traditionally mimesis has been interpreted as the literal copy of reality. Nineteenth-century realism, in fact, consolidated the concept of mimesis as a world-reflecting mechanism of exterior reality. For realist writers, Aristotle's formulation in *Poetics*, "This is so-and-so," established a presumably univocal and objective correspondence between the word and the world. Yet even during the rise of realism in the nineteenth century, the genres understood as being non-representational, such as the romance, made their way into realist writing. In spite of this constant overlapping, as Damian Grant laments, the alleged univocal mechanism at work in realism is what has actually governed the word *mimesis* in common usage (1970: 74).

The contradictory notion of mimesis is perhaps more clearly grasped if we compare a painting with its original model. Even if the original is openly and visibly recognizable in the picture, a series of transformations have taken place, for the portrayed is not made of

canvas; is not flat or two-dimensional; does not accommodate to the particular size of the canvas; is not made of brushstrokes and oil pigments. That is, the portrayed does not share the properties that make a painting what it is. The portrait does not have any of the properties of the portrayed; in the realm of factuality, both are entirely apart (Bozal 1987: 38). This insurmountable difference within similarity may constitute an apt start on the study of mimesis. Yet we would like to move from the likeness as created by painters to the likeness as described by poets or fiction writers. The previous description could be thus rewritten in the following terms: The portrayed is not made of syntactical structures; does not participate of the network of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships sustaining—cobweb-like—a particular word. The real person cannot possibly accommodate to the final verbal description on the page, for the person is not made of words; is not aware of the intricate selection behind every word pronounced, of the expectancy of the rest of the words that remain unpronounced in a verbal limbo. The real person does not share the properties that make a description what it is. As Bozal suggested, the portrayed that is likened or identified with the visual or verbal rendition is automatically extricated from the world in which it is found. I see it and therefore recognize it against others within an infinite representable horizon. And yet this recognition is traversed by myriads of interconnections where "simultaneities intervene, extending our point of view outward in an infinite number of lines connecting the subject to a whole world of comparable instances, complicating the temporal flow of meaning" (Soja 1989: 23). Still, even if the portrait and the portrayed are different, the former can conjure up the latter through the word.[3] Through mimesis, we establish an intimate relationship between previously unrelated realms. We make a replica of an original; we establish a "This is that." Thus yoked together, two different and independent spheres are "mimetized," compared or identified as they come under the yoke of similitude. Yet the "This is that" at the heart of mimesis is question ridden.[4] When and under what circumstances does this coupling hold?[5] What differences does it gloss over? How (un)stable is the "is"? The purpose of these preliminary considerations is to offer an overview of mimesis and its first articulators in order to understand the former's "matching mechanism."

In all its variations, mimesis has proved to be the longest-lasting and most intellectually accommodating of all theories of art in the West (Halliwell 2002: 5). Traditionally mimesis has been translated as "imitation" and "representation." Yet both terms have come under criticism. For Malcolm Heath, "representation" fails to convey the essential role of similarity in Aristotle's description of mimesis in *Poetics* (1996: xvii).[6] If we foreground its "imitation" aspect, mimesis describes the relationship between artistic images and reality. Art, from this perspective, is a copy of the real (Potolsky 2006: 1). Yet there is more to this inaccurate description, since we have to distinguish between the different ways historians and poets imitate reality. For the latter, imitation is similar to counterfeiting in the sense that the poet's imitation connects with the unreal and the fictional (Barnes 1995: 275). Imitation, however, was not always the key word in mimesis. Long before Aristotle expressed his vision of mimesis in *Poetics*, the concept had already traversed a vast critical geography. The Greek term for mimesis probably originated with the rituals of the Dionysian cult and referred to the cult acts performed by a priest (Tatarkievicz 1980: 266). Mimesis, the word that would later refer to the act of reproducing reality in sculpture and theatrical arts, was applied only to dance, music, and mimicry. Interestingly, Tatarkievicz explains, *imitatio* implied the imitation not of an exterior or outer reality, but of the inner one, hence it was not applied to the visual arts (1980: 266). This ritualistic mimesis, as Valeriano Bozal clarifies, does not identify two elements that are similar; rather, it identifies elements that are essentially dissimilar and that belong to different realms. Mimesis therefore established identity in difference and did not look for those traces of similarity that could possibly explain the identification; it was not concerned with imitating as much as with representing, that is to say, with incarnating or impersonating a being that is not the self. Interestingly, mimesis affirmed identity through or in difference (Bozal 1987: 70). No single translation, therefore, is sufficient to yield the intricate nature of mimesis, as well as the tradition of scholarly commentary the word has elicited; for mimesis is always double and responds to contradictory impulses (Potolsky 2006: 2).

In the fifth century B.C., a second stage of mimesis departs from the world of ritual to designate the reproduction of the outer world (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 29). This new stage of mimesis is achieved

within the realm of fiction, for gods are no longer incarnated in the actors: now the latter just pretend to be the incarnation of a god. For Bozal the consequences of this fictionalization of mimesis are far-reaching: since the participants in the ritual become the passive audience, representing requires taking care of all those elements that contribute to making the scene credible and verisimilar (1987: 73). This is, in fact, the moment when similarity comes into play, for only through the intensification of resemblances can the distance between the play and the audience be diminished or cancelled all together (1987: 73). In Bozal's view, the theater deceives the audience—and this, he qualifies, constitutes its major greatness—for it offers as mimesis what is only simulation.

The visions and revisions of this notion of imitation, as well as the different responses to the question concerning the nature of the reality to be imitated, range from Plato's well-known rejection of mimesis as a passive and delusive imitation of appearances in book 10 of the *Republic*,[7] to Aristotle's championing of the concept in his *Poetics*.[8] Mimesis, for Aristotle, is connatural to man from childhood, for we are natural imitators. Human beings, Aristotle claims, have an innate love of imitation that derives from the capacity of imitation to convey general truths:

> Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitations. What happens in practice is evidence of this: we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses). The reason for this understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but often for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. This is the reason why people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g. "This is so-and-so"). (1995: 6–7)

Mimesis is pleasant for Aristotle because it establishes the reasoning "This is so-and-so" or "This is that," through which we learn.[9] To take part in the activity of making and responding to likeness, we have to recognize the relationship between the representation and its object (Heath 1996: xiii). Yet the instability of the two elements is clear for Aristotle, for imitation is not passive but can represent the world in a

creative way; things can be represented as more or less beautiful than they are, as they could have been, or as they should be. Art imitates reality. However, imitation does not imply a detached, objective perspective, but a personal outlook on reality (Tatarkievicz 1980: 268; Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 26). In a way, Aristotle accepts Plato's opinion that mimesis leads to untruth and deception, for in Aristotle's understanding, mimesis produces fiction, and whatever its ties to reality, these are entirely indirect. The poet thus creates something which did not previously exist and for which there are no available models (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 55). Therefore, mimesis does not imply an exact or straightforward copy of the object imitated; this similarity between the object and its likeness may reside in a more oblique correspondence (Heath 1996: xiv). This obliqueness is crucial, for mimesis is not just a reflection but also a method of strengthening and deepening the moral understanding of the real (Baxter 1993: 592). Even more important, mimesis is a way of challenging received notions of reality; for it is tied not only to the customary, but also to what is possible and probable. As Aristotle states, "The function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity" (1995: 16). The poet, therefore, is a fiction maker, not a historian, and, as such, is less concerned with documentation than with artistry (Lee 1990: 7). In Aristotle's vision, this ability of mimesis to probe into the nature of the real makes it more "philosophical" than history, since it is not restricted to facts but to "what may happen." Throughout antiquity, then, mimesis had a plurality of glosses. The concept embraces the re-creation of existing objects, and also the creation of fictional worlds with no unmediated reference to reality (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 26).[10]

The Middle Ages stands as a supreme example of the shifting status of the real. In fact, what is now regarded as the "real" world—that is to say, the world of empirical experience—was regarded in the Middle Ages as the world of "appearances" (Swinfen 1984: 10). As Ian Watt explains, the scholastic Realists held that it was universals, classes, or abstractions, as opposed to the particular, concrete objects of sensorial perceptions, which were the true "realities" (1977: 12). We may also recall that in his treatise on reading, *Didascalicon*, Hugh of St. Victor describes the limitations of a superficial "reading" of the visible world:

> This whole visible world is a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power; and individual creatures are as figures therein, not devised by human will but instituted by divine authority to show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God. But just as some illiterate man looks at the figures but does not recognize the letters; just so the foolish natural man, who does not perceive the things of God, sees outwardly in these visible creatures the appearances but does not inwardly understand the reason. (In Davis and Finke 1989: 116–17)

Obviously, the attempt at interpreting an all-encompassing reality made up of the visible and "the invisible things of God" is fully steeped in Platonism. Yet the terms of this act of interpretation are not open, but strictly dependent on a direct and univocal correspondence between the visible and the invisible. St. Victor thus provides an example of reverse mimesis. If Aristotelian mimesis is the imitation of life through writing, St. Victor—and, in general, medieval interpretations of reality—proposes the opposite: the imitation or understanding of the real or visible as a mimetic emanation of God's writing. In contradistinction to what St. Victor understands as a very limited manifestation of outer realism that only sees and tells of appearances, he argues for the in-depth vision of what we can call "spiritual realism." It is a type of realism that admits only one way of interpreting the visible, the Book of Nature. Erich Auerbach's words about how we perceive the peculiar and selective realism of Scripture stories are particularly illuminating in regard to this mode of authoritative writing: "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels" (1973: 15).

During the Renaissance, imitation was, once more, a key concept in art theory (Tatarkievicz 1980: 270). The issue became highly controversial, because it updated Aristotle's double vision of imitation: if art should imitate nature, then how close to reality should this imitation be? Or what nature, for that matter, was to be imitated? Is imitation strictly linked to nature as it is, or to nature as it should be? What selection of nature should imitation carry out? Some writers, Tatarkievicz explains, opined that art should not imitate nature in its rough state. Other theorists suggested that imitation was not a passive art, for nature, in order to be imitated, should be interpreted first, and this act of interpretation irrevocably subjectivized our vision (1980: 271–72). In *The Defence of Poesy*, Sir Philip Sidney presents the poet

as the figure who, subjected to no ties, and "lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew—forms such as never were in Nature [...]" (1987: 107). Poetry does improve nature inasmuch as it creates a rich tapestry well beyond nature's reach. For Sidney, nature's world is brazen, while "the poets only deliver a golden" nature (1987: 107). Yet this amelioration of nature, Sidney is careful to caution, does not mean that poetry is not mimetic: "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth (to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture) with this end, to teach and delight" (1987: 108).

The conception of imitation from a passive to an active endeavor, from an impossible to an insignificant task, oscillated throughout the early modern period.[11] This instability of the concept of imitation was made manifest in the seventeenth century, when *imitare* became a loose concept that allowed things to be represented not as they were, but as they might or should be (Tatarkiewicz 1980: 278). The early modern period thus posited the well-known bifurcation of the concept of mimesis as it recast the old dilemma: What reality should art imitate: the selected, sublimated reality of the beautiful or, rather, the tangible, "true" reality? The imitation of a perfected nature thus became a flexible maxim that was available to and used by neoclassicism's opponents as much as its upholders (Halliwell 2002: 358). However, even if we take the eighteenth century alone, we find that any monolithic orthodoxy of the relationship between art and nature is not tenable; what we find, instead, is that the period offers competing conceptions of mimesis. Against the master narrative that establishes a stable theory of mimeticism during neoclassicism—one that becomes, in turn, the target of the new antimimetic model of romanticism—revisionary perspectives of the period, such as Halliwell's, propose that there cannot be a radical separation between neoclassicists and romantics because "the imitation of nature" was never a unitary principle but a formula interpreted in various, and sometimes incompatible, ways during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Paradoxically, the underlying dictate that literature imitates nature cannot but intensify the subjective as opposed to the objective aspect of literary production in reference to external objects (Gebauer and Wulf 1992: 157). How can we maintain

the similarity between an object and an idea? How can we assert that mental representations are similar to things as they appear to us? As Gebauer and Wulf explain, in attempting to substantiate their interpretation of mimesis, eighteenth-century aestheticists in fact promoted the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity of the individual artist (1992: 158). As an example of the sharp turn away from the general understanding of representational art as imitation, Halliwell reminds us that in his *Meditationes Philosophicae* (1935), Alexander Baumgarten configured a model of poetry as the domain of "heterocosmic"[12] fictions that were understood as self-contained worlds produced by a human maker who was analagous to the divine creator himself (2002: 9). Yet the eighteenth-century invention of a new category of autonomous and disinterested experience is incapable of breaking with the earlier accounts of artistic experience and the previously accepted intersections with ethics, emotion, and truth (Halliwell 2002: 10). In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, for example, Samuel Johnson upholds Shakespeare as the "poet of nature" and his drama as "the mirror of life." However, he also faults the writer for his lack of instruction: Johnson argues, "He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose" (in Con Davis and Finke 1989: 412). In Johnson's eyes, Shakespeare fails to fulfill a writer's duty "to make the world better" (in Con Davis and Finke 1989: 412). For Johnson, Shakespeare had produced a "heterocosm," "a faithful mirrour of manners and life" that was yet to be subjected to and judged by a reality outside. Joseph Addison, another key figure in eighteenth-century criticism, also offers interesting derivations of Aristotelian *Poetics*. For him, all poetry is an idealized imitation of nature; interestingly, the ideal incorporates the marvelous as the most defining feature of epic poetry. For Addison, the epic poem stands halfway between history, as a probable fable, and romance, as only a marvelous story, and combines the two elements as it produces in the reader both belief and astonishment (Herrick 1976: 105–6). Yet, as Marvin T. Herrick argues in *The Poetics of Aristotle in England*, the different responses to Aristotelian criticism ranged from total adherence to open rebellion (1976: 80–140). What had become apparent by the eighteenth century was that the imitation of human nature, as Aristotle had postulated in *Poetics*, had come to mean

primarily the imitation of poets who had already succeeded in the endeavor (Burwick 2001: 7; Herrick 1976: 85)

If the eighteenth century does not offer a unitary vision of mimesis, neither does the alleged anti-mimetic period of romanticism. For romanticism does not imply a complete rupture with the traditions of mimetic theory, and much less the "death" of mimesis. Even if it is commonly accepted that romantic literature signals the transition from the predominantly mimetic to the "expressive" aesthetic (Snyder 1980: 19), romanticism involves the revision and renegotiation of mimesis rather than its outright rejection (Halliwell 2002: 351–52). In his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Samuel Coleridge lists as one of the cardinal points of poetry its ability to excite "the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature" (1921: 160). Furthermore, when he explains the power of the imagination to blend and reconcile opposite and discordant qualities, he asserts that "while imagination blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, [it] still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter" (1921: 166). For Coleridge, however, this subordination of art to nature does not mean that poetry is directed to the production of world-like appearances. Rather, as he concludes in the preface, he is concerned with nature's underlying forces and creative power: "Good Sense is the body of poetic genius, fancy its Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole" (1921: 167). Essential to Coleridge's vision of poetry is his distinction between "copying" and "imitating." As he writes in "On Poesy and Art," "If the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturans*, what idle rivalry! ... you must master the essence, the *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man." Coleridge thus recasts mimesis as the means to capture not the detail of external reality, but the inner truth of the self, the essence that binds nature and humanity. Instead of pitting the expressive versus the mimetic, Coleridge revises mimesis as he turns from an outer reality to an inner one—not a radical movement in the tradition of mimeticism after all. For Coleridge, therefore, art is mimetic, but the originality of his formulation lies in his turning mimesis inward and not outward: art "imitates how the mind beholds, not simply what it beholds" (Burwick 2001: 9–11).

Interestingly, mimesis would take a radical turn toward the outer world during nineteenth-century realism.

II. Nineteenth-Century Realism[13] and the Reinterpretation of Mimesis

> There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said: "On the table stood a glass of water," there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them.
>
> But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems [...] The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each proclaiming "I mean what I mean!" The dictionary that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, where in pious Roman homes the household gods were kept, has become just one code among many.
>
> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

> When we thought we had only to open our eyes to see a common world, we could suppose that realism was a simple recording process, from which any deviation was voluntary. We know now that we literally create the world we see, and that this human creation—a discovery of how we can live in the material world we inhabit—is necessarily dynamic and active; the old static realism of the passive observer is merely a hardened convention.
>
> Raymond Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel"

> This world, indeed, is the one most often taken as real; for reality in a world, like realism in a picture, is largely a matter of habit.
>
> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*

In his edition of *American Realism*, Eric Sundquist cautions that any assessment of or attempt to describe American realism should keep in mind the following entries in Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*: "*Realism*, n. The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads." *Reality*, the following entry, is defined as "[t]he dream of a mad philosopher." Its related adverb, *really*, appears as tantamount to *apparently* (1982: vii). Realism is perhaps better explained circumstantially, as that term we cannot apparently do without (Kolb 1969: 11). Yet as we do "with" it, we realize that far from univocal, it is a pluralistic term: "there are many realisms" (1969: 12), claims Kolb in *The Illusion of Life*, and the term diffuses itself as it encompasses a vast array of counter-realisms. These many realisms, inevitably escorted by an

adjective as if to further anchor realism's elusive meaning, have been listed by Damian Grant, at least provisionally, in alphabetical order. They range from "critical realism," "durational realism," "dynamic realism," "external realism," and "fantastic realism" to "subjective realism," "super-subjective realism," and "visionary realism" (1970: 1). The list is open and keeps growing in part because of its complex and hybrid nature, with "K-mart realism" or "neon-realism" (Fluck 1992: 69; 74) as other possibilities, along with TV realism, specular realism, uncertain realism, recycled realism, synthetic realism, and layered realism. Realism in general and American realism in particular include "the sensational, the sentimental, the vulgar, the scientific, the outrageously comic, the desperately philosophical; in style it ranges from the exquisitely fine craft of James to the resonant colloquial idioms of Twain to the blocklike profusions of Dreiser" (Sundquist 1982: vii). Realism, therefore, is no monolithic entity, but a shape-shifting term whose uses varied according to its different proponents (Glazener 1997: 13). Furthermore, realism shares textual qualities associated with romanticism; it also mixes with modernism in its use of subjective narration and its stress on the fragmented self, and even forays into symbolism and impressionism (Borus 1989: 17). As James Wood comments in *The Broken State*, "it is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on" (1999: ix), and consequently realism can be better understood as a ragbag of opposites, a vast, primordial matrix that engenders both nineteenth-century realism and its negations.

Interestingly, although realism begins with Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophers, as the reification of the ideal belief in the a priori reality of universals and in the merely contingent reality of things, due to a well-known historical quirk, realism ends up meaning its opposite: "The elements are the same: ideas and things. But now things are independent of consciousness, ideas empirically contingent upon things" (Levine 1981: 8). Realism's etymological parent, *res*, explains the realist's reverence for facts as a way to truth, and for the material surface of things (Kolb 1969: 26); it also accounts for the fact that realism, as an alleged mimetic theory of representation, takes upon itself the role of approximating word and thing. Unlike previous stylistic traditions, realism allegedly concerns itself with the correspondence of words to things (Watt 1977: 30). For Georg Lukács, realism implies a moral effort, that of looking a stark reality

in the face instead of looking back to the false but "poetic" dreams about reality (1972: 1). From Lukács's perspective, realism fulfilled the demand of holding the mirror up to nature (1972: 13).[14] Dealing with "the real" and, hence, with what was assumed to be true and verifiable constituted late nineteenth-century authors' major concern. At the time, the grounding of the narrative in the concrete and the reproducible represented a significant step toward "truthful art" (Borus 19889: 17).

Most of the attempts at defining realism in the United States were conducted by W. D. Howells in the "Editor's Study" of *Harper's Monthly*.[15] For Howells, fiction was to be true to life. "Realism," he claimed, "is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material." Thus anchored in the tangible, literature had to stand the test of truthfulness: "We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?" (Howells quoted in Kolb 1969: 21). Fiction, Howells wrote, should stop lying about life. The novel delimited its space as the expression of the quotidian, the expected, the probable; it also exemplified a period of literary maturity that had left behind the embarrassing aspects of romance (cf. Glazener 1997: 42). Exterior reality thus conditions and determines whether the information we find in literature is cognitively adequate. But the moment we "read for life," we leave aside the literary world and step into something else, something like the social sciences (Gibson 2004: 113). Situating life at the center of the literary endeavor implies, furthermore, embracing the premise that literature is nothing but an imitation of preexisting reality.

G. H. Lewes, George Eliot's mentor and friend, expressed the engagement between realism and the real in the following terms: "Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth; and no departure from Truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*" (quoted in Becker 1963: 6). It is not hard to imagine what "falsism" would stand for: the representation of the irrational, the imaginary, the fantastic, the fairy-tale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the improbable, the extraordinary, or the possible: that is, the aspects that have traditionally crystallized in the romance. The imaginative faculty is thus ridiculed as a childish property that simply arrests individual progress toward maturity. Desire, as the nourishing element of

romance, is understood most frequently as the source of an excessive and morally reprehensible behavior such as adultery, alcoholism, or a ruthless drive for success and power (Fluck 1996: 432). The sane, rational, and responsible citizen entitled to play a part in society was supposed to be able to distinguish between the actual and the imagined, between reality and delusion. Only deviants, saints, or psychopaths take their voices and visions for truth (Belsey 2005: 3). Yet even if romance was thus demonized, the novel adapted it and frequently made use of its general structure (Frye 1976: 36). We find, for example, that romance, melodrama, and the exploration of the unconscious are key ingredients of Henry James's version of realism.[16] Surprisingly, though characterized as a residual impulse and stigmatized as infantile, the romance does not go away even during the apogee of realism (Fluck 1996: 440; Grant 1970: 60–61). Both the idealistic and the realistic modes are present at any given point in the history of literature (Durand 2005: 395). In every stage of history we can distinguish two antagonistic mechanisms: one oppressive system that determines images and symbols; another that sketches a rebellion, a dialectic opposition generating antagonist symbols. This, for Gilbert Durand, is proof enough that human imagination escapes fatalism and total repression (2005: 395).

This overlapping of mechanisms has been illustrated by critics such as Wellek or Becker, who have pointed at the "falsism" or antagonistic symbols and messages that are at the heart of realism and its attempted "verism." In this sense, it is useful to recall that, as Frye states in *The Secular Scripture*, "All fiction is conventionalized." Furthermore, he claims, "literature cannot be presented at all except within the conventions of literary structure, and [...] those conventions must be understood first" (1976: 43). From this premise it follows that we consider a work is realistic if it does not violate our conventional sense of authenticity. Hence, works seem realistic to us as readers not because they conform to an external reality, but because the key to reading and interpreting them is so commonplace that we do not recognize it as a key (Potolsky 2006: 97, 102). Contrary to the implication that realism penetrates directly into life and reality, it clearly has its own conventions, devices, and exclusions (Wellek 1963: 254). As Brian McHale has pointed out, the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction were just conventions, "not a transparent window on reality" (1987: 220; see also Lee 1990: 3, 5; Watt: 1977:

35). Realist literature assumed that the world was rational and describable, that there was a correspondence between reality and its description. From Aristotle's notion of mimesis, mimetic representation has been traditionally interpreted as the basic relationship existing between representation and the "real" world. This premise, however, implies another series of assumptions: first, that the world is knowable and therefore susceptible to textual representation; second, that language is an apt means of representation and transcription of facts; third, that the writer is the neutral mediator between words and worlds (Hume 1984: 44; Lee 1990: 12). Fourth, we can add, the premise supposes that mimesis is a one-sided concept, a world-reflecting mechanism that cuts off the "world-creating" side. This static correspondence between fiction and the "real truth" poses a simplistic mimetic theory of art that establishes exterior reality as the ultimate reference for and test of fiction. Real life, so the argument runs, is the measure of fiction. If art is not to lie, it must refine its links to the real. Yet this "matching" has proved to be highly conventional. For rather than attempting to mirror and report the world as it is, realism seeks to match our own window on reality. The recognition of this conventionalized matching process places realism—as an interpretation of mimesis—in the interaction of work and viewer (or reader), not of work and world (Potolsky 2006: 97).

But this argument also has another ramification: the claim that realists were dealing with "truth" casts a shadow of unreality on previous literature. It might be useful to recall that even if the romantics frowned on a literature bound to the description of the tangible, they never thought of themselves as writers of lies. In the romantic tradition, whose predecessors include Plato as well as the medieval writers, truth was to be found in the intangible, not in the perceivable and measurable: "Observed phenomena were merely the appearance that truth took" (Borus 1989: 16–17). Nineteenth-century American realism does precisely the opposite in that it revises the apparent world of observed phenomena to transform it into the "real," true world. Daniel Borus's chiastic formulation expresses the radical change of values: "Where romantics had read Keats to indicate that Beauty was Truth, realists reversed the emphasis and contended that truth was beauty." The "material world" thus figured as a dominant characteristic of the new literature (1989: 14, 19). Yet this depiction of the material, tangible world could in fact liberate as well as constrain

representation, for in selecting the different dimensions of the real, realism defined the features of fiction, the vision of the characters, as well as the range of predicaments they came up against. If the characters of Hawthorne and Melville faced metaphysical problems that drove them to confront ultimate essences, those of the realists found life's enigmas within the boundaries of the secular world (Borus 1989: 20).

Nevertheless, the question remains as to why this change of taste occurred. As Daniel Borus explains in *Writing Realism*, the fact that realism makes its appearance during the dynamic phase of capitalism explains why it was so vitally concerned with the relationship between humans and things. Furthermore, realists brought to literature the method of observing what was deemed as the real in order to report the observable details of common experience (Borus 1989: 21, 14). The compilation of facts about the external world set the bases for the formulation of laws; the concrete and the verifiable—the material world as opposed to the abstract—"constituted" reality. "Only through conscientious adherence to a methodology patterned on that of natural science," writes Borus, "could intellectuals understand how people actually behaved. In these new investigations, facts themselves took on a new status" (1989: 13). Interestingly, the alleged mimeticism of the realists actually reversed Aristotle's formulations, for whereas Aristotle had widened the limits of the real to incorporate the possible, the realists inverted Aristotle's priorities to value the historian over the poet, that is to say, what happened over what may happen.

Other variables came into play as well. Ian Watt's classic study *The Rise of the Novel* explains the impact of "philosophical realism" on the novel with this basic premise: as Descartes and Locke postulated, "truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses" (1977: 12), and the novel is the literary form that "most fully reflects this individualist and innovating orientation" (1977: 13). In other words, the novel legitimated the study of the particulars of experience by an individual investigator who was allegedly free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs. As Watt asserts, this is as an individualist and innovating reorientation that establishes truth to individual experience as its primary criterion. "Formal realism," the literary corollary of philosophical realism, is based on the premise that the novel is "a full and authentic report of human experience." Therefore, Watt adds, it is "under an obligation to satisfy

the reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions" (1977: 35). In providing such an amount of detailed information, the novel uses language in a more referential way than other literary forms do (1977: 35), thereby firmly securing the correspondence between word and thing. This referential role of language had aesthetic repercussions, for according to this "realist logic," the novel is conceived as "a natural object" and should not be identified as an "artifice" (Borus 1989: 22). Since a natural object is supposedly divested of craftiness, the realists rejected a stylized language of elevated expression in favor of everyday speech. "Attempting to approximate word and thing," Borus explains, realists "strove to convey to readers the existence of a reality 'out there.'" This exercise of approximation involved discarding everything that could alter that univocal correspondence. The circumlocutions of earlier literature were replaced by language that was considered direct and simple. Thus simplified, the realists hoped to make the novel read as if it were an account of actual events: "using the most neutral language possible allowed things to speak, as it were, in their natural voice" (Borus 1989: 22–23). As opposed to allegorical interpretations of facts, the realists claimed to report the unmediated, natural, and unconstructed voice of things (cf. Lee 1990: 9). Thus, realism presupposed the belief that literature is to reflect an external reality that exists a priori; conversely, literature "failed" when it tried to draw its sustenance from the imagination. From this perspective, realism acts as the "conscience of literature," which owes a duty to the world (Grant 1970: 13, 15).

Yet for critics like Noah Porter, Hamilton Wright Mabie, and E. C. Stedman, this copying was of little merit; they insisted that the realist novel was concerned with surfaces as opposed to essences and was, consequently, inferior work (Borus 1989: 15). It was thus the range of what was represented that was objectionable for these critics, not the reporting itself. Interestingly, both realist writers and their critics embraced the belief that things had a voice that could be recorded, thus sidestepping the fact that using events as words was inevitably a way of making things point beyond themselves—an interpretation that, in itself, went beyond the alleged "copying." As the narrator in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* points out when explaining the term *realism*, the procedure, as pioneered by Daniel

Defoe, was simple enough: "Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves" (2003: 4). The problem, however, was how to allow for significations and voices to become audible. For medieval writers only God could use events as words, causing them to speak beyond themselves (Singleton in White 1987: 183); by contrast, realist writers optimistically usurped the divine right to construct what was deemed to be the unmediated voices of words. Moreover, if the realists had to tackle the issue of the instability of mimesis, they also had to come to terms with another major query that had besieged mimesis since the Greeks: what was the purpose of fiction? Should it represent reality as it is or as it might or should be? Since different forms of selection of the representable reality mediated the mimetic effort and presented different manifestations of that reality, it becomes clear that the realists' interpretation of mimesis hinged on unasked questions such as what reality was real.

Yet nineteenth-century realism has opened up new areas of experience, such as the examination of social situations and processes such as strikes or wage slavery. This happened despite the handful of words that realism repeats in its formulations—*truth*, *actuality*, *reality*, and *objectivity*, words that raise more problems than they solve—and notwithstanding its claims to represent and apprehend reality. Along with this "horizontal extension" of realism that first characterized the movement, Becker adds what he terms "a vertical extension of realism" (Becker 1963: 26), a concept that was pioneered by Dostoievsky and studied and probed by Freud. It is useful to recall here that it is the romance that traditionally presented a "vertical" perspective that, in Frye's words, "realism, left to itself, would find [...] very difficult to achieve" (1976: 49). In fact, the presence of this vertical axis in realism would illustrate another way in which the realist novel adapts the features of romance as it announces the psychological novel. In *Mimesis* Auerbach had already introduced a version of vertical realism linked to the figural interpretation of facts. This interpretation suspends the causality of a horizontal connection and dissolves the here and the now as constituents of classical linear writing. For Auerbach biblical discourse stands as paradigmatic of this vertical connection, since in biblical writings a fact is not itself but something else that will happen in the future. Everything that occurs converges on God, the only connection that provides sense and coherence. This narrative verticality stands on a particularly middle

ground, for even if it is impossible to document and is eminently subjective—and would thus fall into the category of falsism—it is not "invented" and does add, as Becker points out, "a needed dimension to the representation of total reality" (1963: 26). This "vertical realism" could be part of what Becker terms the "post-realism" of our age (1963: 4) and could be applied to modernist probings of the mind, as exemplified in novels by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, and to other versions of post-realism that view realism as a plural concept.[17] These examples illustrate the fact that the notion of realism is vague and elastic (Grant 1970: 54) and cannot be resolved in "the correspondence theory of realism," a theory premised on the belief that literature is to reflect an external reality that exists a priori.

Realism, in fact, allows for a competing theory, "the coherence theory of realism," which represents "the consciousness of literature: its self-awareness, its realization of its own ontological status" (Grant 1970: 15). Here, Damian Grant cautions, realism is accomplished not by imitation, but by creation. This creation works with the materials of life, but absolves them from factuality through the imagination and translates them into a higher order (1970: 15). As a mimetic theory of representation, realism participates in the double nature of mimesis described above. Thus, Grant's theories of realism roughly coincide with the world-reflecting and the world-creating conceptions of mimesis with which the chapter opened. This instability is inherent to the philosophical strand of realism on which formal realism is premised: given that the former stressed the importance of individual experience and vision in the process of presenting truth, it seems only logical to assert that objective reality necessarily becomes fragmented and dispersed among limitless subjectivities. These subjectivities inevitably transform and translate the factual into a personal cartography of the real (cf. Grant 1970: 52). As new worlds and levels of experience augment or alter our perception of the real and the verisimilar, new modes of expression necessarily emerge to keep up with an ever-expanding sense of the real. The terms employed to refer to this literary mode vary, ranging from "post-realism," "postmodern realism," "magical realism," and "magic grotesque" to "psychic realism" or "hallucinated realism." What all these "-isms" have in common is an effort to augment the scope of nineteenth-century realism yet retain some of the conventions of its practitioners.[18]

III. Is Mimesis Enough?

Are we, then, in a post-mimetic era, as Halliwell (2002: 344) wonders?[19] Or, to ask the question in another way, is mimesis no longer useful? Has the concept fallen into helpless disrepute, forever marginalized and forsaken as a figment of the past? René Wellek argued in 1963 that "art cannot help dealing with reality, however much we narrow down its meaning or emphasize the transforming or creative power of the artist" (1963: 224). From this perspective, all art is to some extent mimetic and realistic, as Malcolm Bradbury states: "The front edge of realism keeps shifting, so that one generation's realism is another's romanticism or high fantasy or escapism, and the definitions are extraordinarily multiple; truth or authenticity is, just like reality and history, open to extremes of disputatiousness" (1973: 19). Similarly, Raymond Williams points out that the term *realism* has always been used in a "technical" way "to describe the precision and vividness of a rendering in art" (1972: 581). Still, this technical realism cannot be practiced in the same manner in contemporary novels as it was practiced in the nineteenth century, for it is essential to understand realism as a process in direct response to the changing nature of reality (Levine 1981: 22).

Not surprisingly, we find that for Thomas Pavel, the question of mimesis is back—perhaps because it has never abandoned us—with three possible positions: "the full rejection of the mimetic character of fiction, the recognition of the partial role imitation plays in fiction, and the firm assertion that human imagination and therefore fiction are essentially mimetic" (2000: 521). Yet Pavel's stance is that although mimesis is essential for understanding what fiction is, mimesis is not adequate for understanding what fiction does (2000: 520). It seems undisputable that fiction is mimetic to a certain extent, for it helps us to achieve a better understanding of our world. Here Pavel seems to echo the pleasure that we take when viewing representations of the real, as Aristotle wrote in *Poetics*. However, he destabilizes the more widespread aspect of mimetic theory, the "world-reflecting" model. He describes not only our ability to recognize our world in the works of the imagination, but also the reverse journey, the power of fiction to infiltrate and alter our world:

> [W]e also appreciate fiction for its ability to make us less dependent not just on actual stimuli but on actuality as such. In other words, we also appreciate

> it for its power to create alternative sets of situations, thereby putting the actual world into perspective, challenging its supremacy. (2000: 529)

Through fiction, then, we carry out the kind of association that Aristotle refers to in *Poetics* with his phrase "This is so-and-so." That is, we appreciate fiction for its analogical powers, yet analogy does not exhaust the effect of fiction. One of the most intriguing aspects of the poetic utterance, Pavel claims, is "its power to transfigure everyday realities to reveal properties that cannot be immediately observed. Fiction defies the visible" (2000: 530). Interestingly, Pavel reaffirms and revises Aristotle's "This is so-and-so" formula: This is that and then is not, for the verbal or fictitious rendition affects the originally "real" to such an extent that the latter is transformed and transfigured.

This critique of univocal correspondences is also at the heart of Lubomír Dolezel's *Heterocosmica*. For this critic the mimetic doctrine implies a major reduction, wherein "the vast, open, and inviting fictional universe is shrunk to the model of one single world, actual human experience" (1998: x). Interestingly, Dolezel seems to disregard the world-creating model of mimetic theory; he emphasizes only the matching mechanism that assigns an actual prototype to a fictional entity (1998: 6). What happens, Dolezel wonders, when no actual particular can be discovered behind a fictional entity? Mimetic criticism is forced into what he terms "an interpretive detour" whereby "fictional particulars are taken as representations of actual universals" (1998: 6). It is precisely this matching mechanism and its variations that are at the heart of Dolezel's critique. If literature, the critic argues, "is a force of individuation" that counters and undoes the universalizing pressures of language, customs, and social representations, then in depriving fictional particulars of their individuality, a universalist mimetic interpretation places them into one of its a priori categories. As a result, Dolezel says, "what fictional literature achieves, mimetic criticism undoes" (1998: 8). His suggestion for breaking free of this process of reduction, interestingly, can be considered a revision of Aristotle's understanding of a possible reality: he suggests that critics replace their one-world semantics, founded on the assumption that the actual world is the only world, with a possible-world frame.[20] What Aristotle regarded as poetry's superiority to philosophy—that is, to what may happen according to

the law of probability—is thereby replaced by the macrostructural concept of possible worlds.

Similarly, Dolezel accords fictional entities the status of constituents of a higher-order, "emergent" structure: the fictional world (1998: 15). In fact, Dolezel proclaims the independence of fictional worlds as he extricates them from the matching mechanism described above. He questions the mimetic premise of "This is so-and-so" and instead claims, "This is this" and "So-and-so is so-and-so." In so doing, he breaks the reductive reasoning that links particular characters to particular people by positing that characters, as nonfactual possibles, are ontologically different from actual persons (1998: 16). While in the traditional interpretation of "mimetic semantics" the distinction between actual and fictional entities is blurred, Dolezel accords fictional particulars a different ontological level (1998: 10). Possible-worlds theory opens a new scenario that includes not only fictional worlds analogous or similar to the actual world, but also the most fantastic worlds, far removed from or contradictory to reality. For Dolezel, "[t]here is no justification for two semantics of fictionality, one designed for 'realistic' fiction, the other for 'fantasy.' Fictional worlds are not constrained by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness or plausibility" (1998: 19); both tendencies, as Lord Chandos wrote in his letter, are at the heart of the conflicting status of mimesis. From a traditional mimetic perspective, only the physically observable was possible; by contrast, Dolezel cites the "enlargement" of the "possible" described by Bradley and Swartz: "Countless worlds which are physically *im*possible are numbered among the possible worlds," they claim. Physically possible worlds, the basis of nineteenth-century realism, form only a proper subset of all possible worlds and stand on the same logical basis as physically impossible worlds (quoted in Dolezel 1998: 116). If the physically possible established what was real and true for the realists, possible-worlds theory paradoxically returns to Aristotle's concept of the possible. In supporting the "world-simulating" or "world-creating" conception of artistic representation, Dolezel does away with the question of truthfulness; the physically possible and the physically impossible are equally (un)true. Fiction is granted a different ontological level, as it is extricated from the "world-reflecting" model. Contrary to Howells's formulation, fiction cannot lie about the real[21] because this understanding of truth presupposes a

correspondence between extralinguistic and linguistic domains. What possible-worlds theory proposes is that within the fictional universe of discourse, truth is determined not relative to an extratextual universe, but in relation to a fictional world. This assertion does not mean that we can give up on some notion of truth for distinguishing true from false fictional assertions; a fictional universe has its own complex modal structures in which some states are factual and others are hypothetical or impossible. Yet this notion of truth clearly rejects the matching mechanism or correspondence as a criterion for truth, as it is based on the notion that truth is relative and no longer involves a fixed and absolute standard by which true and false world-versions are judged (Ronen 1994: 36–42). The world of romance, inextricably linked to the world-creating side of mimesis, will prove to be an appropriate means to circumvent the issue of truth, that "obedient servant" in literary history.

Endnotes

1. When Hamlet is instructing the players of the play within the play, he encourages them to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2. 16–17); for it is the purpose of playing, "both at first and now," "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature" (3.2. 20–21). It has been argued that through these words Hamlet sets down the basis of a traditional vision of mimesis: one in which the action is suited to the word; one in which no one is holding up the mirror. Yet it is useful to remember that in the context of the play, Hamlet is also admonishing the players to avoid the excesses of the traditional characters of the cycle plays.
2. A notable case of impossible literary mirroring could be J. L. Borges's story "Funes el memorioso," the story of a youngster who could not sum up his memories because the present was intolerably rich. He equated thinking with remembering.
3. For Du Bos it is precisely this difference that elicits the aesthetic appraisal of a work of art; it is the difference that lets us appreciate the imitation of the object (in Burwick 2001: 81).
4. For John Baxter both mimesis and imitation "denote an art of representation or resemblance," but the emphasis is different. Imitation, a latinate abstraction, "implies something static, a copy, a final product; mimesis, the Greek term, involves something dynamic, a process, an active relation with a living reality" (1993: 590). Time plays a major role, for the range of meanings of "imitation" for a neoclassical intellectual possesses a suppleness of meaning and resonance that are absent for the standard modern significance of "imitation," now commonly understood as a limited exercise in copying (Halliwell 2002: 14).

5. Strictly speaking, it seems accurate to say that the coupling can hold only when language is considered a transparent means that establishes a univocal relationship between the mark and the thing. In *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault writes: "In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them [...] This transparency was destroyed at Babel as a punishment for men. Languages were separated and incompatible with one another only in so far as they had previously lost this original resemblance to the things that had been the prime reason for the existence of language" (2002: 40). Foucault claims that "language sets itself the task of restoring an absolutely primal discourse, but it can express that discourse only by trying to approximate to it, by attempting to say things about it that are similar to it, thereby bringing into existence the infinity of adjacent and similar fidelities of interpretation" (2002: 46). The happy correspondence or unity between and among things is similarly expressed in Lord Chandos's words: "I lived at that time in a kind of continuous inebriation and saw all of existence as one great unity" (2005: 120).
6. It is useful to note that Aristotle explains how similarity may or may not wholly rest upon convention (Heath 1996: xvii), but is frequently oblique and depends on the poet's subjective vision.
7. Richard Kearney explains that for Platonism, the creator of an image is by definition an imitator. "Accordingly, every human activity which relates to the making of images—be it painting, sculpture, poetry, music, the use of rhetorical or metaphorical speech or the other creative arts of human culture—is understood as an imitation of the original act of the divine demiurge. And since the original act is the only true one, all subsequent copies of it must be false to some degree" (2001: 90).
8. Yet both positions are closer than it is commonly acknowledged. John Baxter maintains that for Aristotle, as for Plato, the fundamental role of mimesis is to reveal universals, a process that in his view makes poetry more philosophical that history (1993: 592): "For this reason poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars" (Aristotle 1995: 16).
9. Gebauer and Wulf make another point that, it seems accurate to assert, derives from the Aristotelian formulation: "[M]imesis entails an *identification* of one person with another. People identify themselves by means of their mimetic abilities when they see themselves in the Other and perceive a state of mutual equality. In this sense mimesis is distinct from mimicry, which implies only a physical and no mental relation. There is a complementarity of perspectives in mimesis: a person regards the Other as equal and assumes the Other to be doing the same in reverse. Such an act of complimentary seeing produces a correspondence between people" (1995: 5).
10. For Juan David García Bacca, Aristotle's definition of poetry responds to his notion of the middle way. Just as in ethics Aristotle defines virtue as the middle position between two extremes, poetry is similarly situated in a strategically intermediary ground: between the factual real, which is the domain of history, and the necessary real, the eternal, the immutable, which is, in turn, the domain of philosophy (Pujante 1992: 31).

11. Further, even if mimesis stands alone as one of the major aesthetic theories of ancient Greece, Tatarkievicz points out that there existed other rival theories. Among them, the illusionistic theory defended that art's supreme achievement was to represent things "so deceptively like the real model as to create the illusion of reality" (1980: 277).
12. Note the resemblance with Lubomír Dolezel's notion of "heterocosmica," which is examined later.
13. Realism is understood in this chapter as "Western" realism. Placed in a wider historical context, realism is actually an exception in the history of representation, as Matthew Potolsky comments: "There are many other valid justifications for art than reproducing the real. Few cultures outside the West have regarded realism as an important goal" (2006: 93).
14. For Georg Lukács, realism solves the excessive introspection of romanticism by establishing a middle ground: "The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations... True realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality" (1972: 6).
15. Yet Glazener detaches American realism from the figure of Howells as she investigates the importance of *The Atlantic* in conferring literary status on authors (Glazener 1997: 24).
16. For if the magical spell of romance can only be dispelled by experience, experience has also to be interpreted. Interpretation in James, Fluck argues, creates a reality. Far from the consensual and tangible reality of the realists, reality for James becomes fully subjectivized. Facts and occurrences do not have unmediated voices, but become part of a meaningful set of relations through the imagination. Through this act of individuation in the work of James, the imagined may become "the real thing" (Fluck 1996: 433).
17. This would be Norman Mailer's vision of realism in works such as *An American Dream* (1965). Mailer, as Paul Reigner puts it, contains the "real" and the verisimilar, together with "the unreal world of psychic forces and witchcraft" (1977: 110). The writer, however, contends that he does not want "the work to be seen as fantasy or romance, but rather as a *more* 'real' version of his hero's life, one in which all sides of experience coalesce" (1977: 110). Mailer's version of postrealism has been termed by Leo Braudy "hallucinated realism" (quoted in Reigner 1977: 113).
18. Naturalism can be considered, at least in chronological terms, a form of postrealism. In Richard Lehan's words, naturalism "carried realism one step further, added a biological and phiolosophical component to the writing of fiction, and stressed the connection between literature and science" (2005: 3). Naturalism also changed the focus of realist writers. The naturalist "frequently descended the social ladder to portray the world of the poor and the outcast, taking a stark look at what before were forbidden subjects. The naturalists felt that the more attention that was given to lower or deviant aspects of life—poverty, alcoholism, degeneration, and the dysfunctional family—the more 'realistic' the writing would be" (2005: 7).

19. In "On the Mimetic Faculty," completed in 1933, Walter Benjamin claimed that "nature creates similarities" and that man's gift of seeing resemblances is only the echo of "the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else" (1986: 333). Like Aristotle, Benjamin returns to the notion of the mimetic as an innate human faculty that bridges and brings together what is split and divided (Demetz 1986: xxi) through the concept of "nonsensuous similarity" (1986: 334), a flexible notion that establishes the ties "not only between the spoken and the signified but also between the written and the signified, and equally between the spoken and the written" (1986: 335).
20. See also Ruth Ronen's *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* for another attempt to address the intersections between possible-worlds theory and the literary discourse about fictionality.
21. As Ronen explains, when "truth is regarded as a relation between an extralinguistic state of affairs and a linguistic expression, it cannot be applied to fiction since fiction does not commit itself to extralinguistic states" (1994: 36).

2
Romance, the Imaginary, and Magical Realism

> Truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant.
>
> —Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*

I. Romance and the Imaginary

In its traditional definition as a "quest for an elusive goal," and its divorce from common experience, the romance has provided changing manifestations of the "world-creating" conception of artistic representation.[1] As the fictional form that is ideally suited to articulating the imaginary dimension, the romance has managed to fashion possible worlds avant la lettre and has survived both realism and its own demystification in postmodern literature (Fluck 1996: 440). As Gilbert Durand explains in *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, every distinctive literary form is frequented by what he describes as all the regimes of the image. This constant overlapping explains why every manifestation of literary classicism is loaded with all the possibly imagined doses of romanticism, and vice versa (2005: 395). Given this internal dependence of the idealistic and the realistic modes, it comes as no surprise that the romance survived realism through the creation of the inner reality of experience, and permeated the novel in various ways. This happened even though the romance became identified with un-American materials and techniques during the rise of the realist novel (Glazener 1997: 51) and even though, in its use of the sensational and the improbable, it was not an appropriate mode for describing the new form of "domestic" heroism that the realist novel came to portray.[2] So much so that for those who conceived of the history of the novel as the rise of realism, and who attempted to barricade a great tradition of realist writers, the renaissance of the romance in postmodern and postcolonial literature

has come, indeed, as a surprise (Frye 1976: 42–43; Fluck 1996: 436). The rehabilitation of the romance as a literary form has come hand in hand with the rehabilitation of the imaginary and the fantastic. To those who minimize the imaginary and exclude it from intellectual development, Durand responds that the fantastic function is at the root of every creation of the human spirit. Moreover, the fantastic function is universal not only inasmuch as it is present in the human species, but also in its domain, for it is present at the root of all the conscience processes as the intellect agent (Durand 2005: 404). Durand describes the fantastic function as the safeguard against destruction and nothingness, and as a patron that favors and guides the rebellion against death and the insubordination against time, providing the inexhaustible reservoir of eternity against time (2005: 410, 415).

Taking Fluck's notion of the romance as a starting point, we would like to introduce magical realism as another stage of the representation of the "other world" of the imaginary. The basis for this "archeology" of the imaginary is well known. As Northrop Frye writes at the opening of *The Secular Scripture* (1976), "No genre stands alone," hence it seems possible to assert that both romance and magical realism are literary instances of the anti-mimetic model he terms "romantic" (1976: 37).[3] It seems possible to argue that like the romance, magical realism "remakes the world in the image of desire" (Fluck 1996: 423) in a changing landscape in which the real and the magical have shifted boundaries. Both forms are manifestations of the romantic tendency, which moves away from the representational and the "world-reflecting" or "realistic" vision of mimesis to offer examples of the "world-creating" conception of artistic representation. Yet romance and magical realism cannot be representations of the same kind of desire, for desire, like the imaginary, the real, the concrete, and the tangible forms of coercion, has undergone a series of metamorphoses in the second half of the twentieth century.

As a universal and timeless function, the imaginary has crystallized in the ever present and changing modes of the romance. In his article "The American Romance and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary," Winfried Fluck recasts the dichotomy "real versus imaginary" in the following terms: "In its characteristic movements from 'reality' to an unknown, imagined world, the romance dramatizes a clash between two aspects of our existence: an 'other world' of desires and imaginary self-empowerment, and the common-

place world of actuality which constantly frustrates but also refuels our longing for transgression and transcendence" (1996: 422). Like Durand, Fluck places the imaginary as that other realm of unquenchable rebellion against the mechanisms of oppression. In Fluck's analysis, reality not only flattens out our desire for some other world, but also establishes a dialectic with our personal longings. Far from essentializing and fixing the "real/imaginary" dyad at one particular point in time, the critic envisions them as mutually influencing and invigorating:

> While, at first, the painful search for individual identity seems to provide a sufficient form of self-assertion, the coercive dimension of all social identities, and, ultimately, of language and other discursive regimes are gradually realized and radically criticized. In the process of this discovery, the significance of an "unnameable" imaginary must increase, because it holds out the promise of a force that remains inaccessible to social control. At the same time, however, this imaginary must also constantly retreat in order to maintain this very status as an inaccessible and uncontrollable force. (1996: 444)

Fluck then proceeds to enunciate the paradoxical interplay between the real and the imaginary in the following terms:

> The stronger the promise of self-empowerment by means of fiction, the greater the sensitivity to historical, social, and cultural sources of coercion; the greater the sensitivity, the broader and more comprehensive the definition of what constitutes coercion; the broader the definition, the greater the retreat of the imaginary to that which cannot be controlled and domesticated by the social or linguistic system. (1996: 444)

The cluster of concepts we can classify as the real, the historical, the social, and the cultural forms of coercion are seen not as the forces that annihilate the imaginary, but as part of its changing definition. The imaginary thus becomes a form of unreachable terrain that recedes or advances depending on the notion of the real. Similarly, Durand argues that at any stage in history there is always a double and antagonistic motivation: there is an intricate web of images and archetypes tolerated by the social ambiance and spread through a pedagogy of imperialistic images, but there is also an alternative set of images, the archetypes of rebellion, which exist, in part, because of the repression exercised by the former set. We cannot understand falsism, therefore, as opposed to realism but as part of that same

interplay. By the same token, it is hard to comprehend the world-reflecting mechanism without being aware of the world-creating side of mimesis. Both seemingly contradictory sides collapse under the oxymoron of "magical realism."

II. Magical Realism: Terminological and Territorial Con-Fusions

> Any limit we set may perhaps be no more than an arbitrary decision made in a constantly mobile whole.
> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

"Postmodern realism,"[4] "magical realism," "the marvelous real," "psychic realism,"[5] "magicorealism,"[6] or "postmodern fantastic": the variety of denominations points at the wide range of interpretations and ascriptions of expressive modes that intend to subvert or go beyond the limits of what is commonly understood as realism. As an oxymoronic construction, magical realism seems to cancel itself out in its very formulation; magic and realism are clustered together in an "impossible" unifying term. Furthermore, magical realism comprises the two traditional impulses at the heart of literature: "These are *mimesis*, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and *fantasy*, the desire to change givens and alter reality—out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience's verbal defenses" (Hume 1984: 20).[7] Interestingly, in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) Kathryn Hume distinguishes between mimesis and fantasy as antithetical approaches to the real. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, mimesis and fantasy can be considered as stemming from the same impulse. What Hume understands by mimesis here would be equivalent to a "world-reflecting model"; fantasy could be considered the "world-creating" model of artistic representation. Putting together these antithetical terms and tendencies raises questions such as "What is magic?" or "What is real?" And, perhaps more important, for whom? Who is to determine what is real and what is magical? The instability of concepts such as "reality" and "the real" explains to some extent why some contemporary writers have rejected the denomination altogether. Louise Erdrich, for example, explains that the "marvelous" component in her work is one of the strategies she

employs in order to incorporate elements of the oral tradition (Stookey 1999: 16). Similarly, Toni Morrison maintains that the magic in her fiction stems from the reality she feels compelled to report: "My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew" (quoted in Faris 2004: 179). Magic and realism, therefore, do not work in the same way in diverse literatures and for different audiences. Jean-Pierre Durix has addressed precisely the problematic usage of terms such as *real* or *reality* in what he calls "New Literatures in English." As representatives of these "new" literatures, Erdrich and Morrison have established what can be termed a "mimetic pact" with their readers, one in which the writer has created a universe that qualifies as a valid "reality" (cf. Durix 1998: 73). Yet there always exists that "pact" between readers and writers. If texts read as "realistic" because the code to reading and deciphering them is so commonplace that we do not recognize it as a key (Potolsky 2006: 102), texts may read as "magical realistic" because of a similar covenant (or lack of it). Yet readers outside a given community may not share this common cultural ground and may hence label as "magic" elements that are nothing but unfamiliar.[8]

This discrepancy may explain the fact that what for Anglo-Saxon readers may read as irreducible magic can be part of everyday experience for others.[9] An interesting inversion of Western scientific standards appears not only in postcolonial literatures, as Durix illustrates (1998: 80), but also in any literature that evidences the lack of common cultural ground between writer and reader. One such example is Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, the African*. When Equiano sees the white crew of a slave ship, he thinks of the Europeans not as human but as spirits of evil tendencies. Tossed and handled by the crew, the young slave is persuaded that he had "got into a world of bad spirits" (1987: 33). Further, Equiano observes how "the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water, when they liked, in order to stop the vessel" (1987: 35). Astonished at the vision of whites on horseback, Equiano confirms the fact that "these people [are] full of nothing but magical arts" (1987: 37). The naive and uninitiated voice of the young slave emphasizes the strangeness of the so-called "civilized" ways of the whites. Through this process of defamiliarization of the commonplace as mysterious and magical, Olaudah Equiano subtly

reminds the reader that only the eye of the beholder distinguishes the magical or irrational from the logical and rational. With the naive voice of an uninitiated slave, he also raises vital questions about the cultural construction of the real. What may appear from the outside to be a magical practice may also constitute something as rational and real as a ship or a horse, or even a white man. Similarly, what for a white man may be magic or marvelous realism may be seen by its practitioners as an integral part of "social realism" (Alexis 1995: 197; cf. Alexander 1990: 13).

By now, what seems indisputable is that this enlarged concept of "realism" goes beyond its nineteenth-century formulations, for the concept is culturally, geographically, and historically inflected. For Alejo Carpentier, and other writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, the complexity and the vastness of the new lands revealed the limitations of realism as an expressive mode and demanded a combination of the rational and verifiable with the fantastic and fabulous. As Carpentier states in his seminal "Prólogo" to *El reino de este mundo*, the very reality of America requires a category that blends together antithetical terms—what he coins as "lo real maravilloso," "the marvelous real."[10] Carpentier transforms "lo real maravilloso" into an ontological category that is peculiar to the whole American continent (1995c: 14).[11] This attempt at "territorializing the imaginary" and ascribing it to a particular continent, as Amaryll Chanady has pointed out, is couched in ontological terms: Latin America is marvelous (1995: 133). The immediate consequence of this premise is that magical realism or the marvelous real[12] is a homemade product as well as the genuine expression of a number of writers who, like Carpentier, establish their independence from the metropolis and from Western thought. In this way, Carpentier articulated a peculiar duality: Europe was reality, whereas America was tantamount to the materialization of dreams (Durix 1998: 105; Aldama 2003: 11). For Amaryll Chanady, however, magical realism is a hybrid form that cannot be ascribed to a particular continent and cannot be separated from other cultural movements, such as surrealism. Although, as Brenda Cooper remarks, magical realist writers have tried to capture and celebrate ways of being and of seeing that are uncontaminated by European domination, inevitably such authors and their world visions are hybrids, and European culture is a fundamental part of their constitution (1998: 17). The notion that

magical realism cannot be couched in ontological terms is easily verifiable because many important works produced outside Latin America can fall under the magical realist rubric. These works join in the effort to subvert and redefine the borders of the tangible real, and extend from African fiction, with writers such as Ben Okri, to English-Pakistani literature, with representatives such as Salman Rushdie, and to North American writing, with novelists such as Erdrich or Morrison.

Recent scholarship, in fact, has underlined the necessity of establishing connections and areas of influence in the American continent. In 1991 José David Saldívar published "Postmodern Realism," where he established the connections between postmodernism and the magical realist narratives of Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, García Márquez, and a series of North American writers such as Toni Morrison, Arturo Islas, Maxine Hong Kingston, Helena María Viramontes, Alberto Ríos, Alejandro Morales, Kathleen Alcala, and Thomas King. For Saldívar, these two groups of writers share a vision of postmodernism that, far from being alien to reality and history, is politically conscious (1991b: 521). But Saldívar does not address the historical, cultural, or ideological conditions that turned magical realism or "postmodern realism" into a wider movement in the Americas. A later work, Roland Walter's *Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (1993), represents a solid and systematic attempt to study contemporary Chicano fiction using magical realism as the common theme linking the production of writers such as Ron Arias or Miguel Méndez to Latin American literature. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, represents an accomplished effort to systematize the origins of what we call "magical realism," as well as its literary manifestations in a vast array of literatures such as U.S., Canadian, Anglo-Hindu, Japanese, and North African. However, even though the contributors frequently consider North American writers such as Morrison, Kingston, or Erdrich, most of the volume is devoted to the study of well-known practitioners of the mode, such as García Márquez. More recently, Joan Mellen's *Magic Realism* (2000), in the Literary Topics series, offers an important pedagogical tool that manages to present a clear vision of the term without oversimplifying its connections with other genres. In *Mimesis, Genres, and Post-Colonial Discourse: Decon-*

structing Magic Realism (1998), Jean-Pierre Durix places magical realism at the crux of a hybrid aesthetic theory that dismantles the polarities "colonizer/colonized" and "metropolitan/indigenous artist." Durix addresses the presence of magical realism in postcolonial literatures with representatives from South America, Africa, the Caribbean, and New Zealand, but leaves out magical realist texts from North America. A more recent study, Frederick Luis Aldama's *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie* (2003), presents magical realism as a comparative matrix that allows a variety of ethnic and postcolonial texts—Chicano/a, Afro-Caribbean, British colonial, and so on—to be woven together. For Aldama, magical realism is an analytical concept capable of revealing both the specificity of the texts and their dialogic relationship to networks of world fictions. Far more ambitious in scope, Wendy B. Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004) purports to analyze magical realism as a "worldwide phenomenon" with representatives in Europe, the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Africa. Faris explains the need to articulate a theoretical framework that includes both the study of formal characteristics spanning different traditions and the interactions between diverse cultures. This theoretical perspective is hybrid and traversed by different currents of contemporary thought, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminist theory and criticism. However, the vastness of the literary and critical landscape encompassed by Faris's analysis renders *Ordinary Enchantments* extremely generic and descriptive. Maggie Ann Bowers's *Magic(al) Realism* (2004) is yet another illustration of the fecundity of the term. As part of the New Critical Idiom, Bowers offers a very practical and concise account of magic(al) realism vis-à-vis postcolonialism and postmodernism in a multicultural scenario. Addressing works by García Márquez, Morrison, Lesley Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Rushdie, together with representatives of Canadian literature such as Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins, Bowers presents a wide literary panoply that she supplements with a brief discussion of magical realism in film and painting.

Taking into account Aldama's vision of magical realism as a comparative matrix, this chapter addresses magical realism as a cross-cultural and hybrid aesthetic theory that is also applicable to fiction

written in the United States. Within a loose postcolonial theoretical frame, magical realism is addressed here as a hybrid form that offers another stage of the representation of the imaginary in its dialectics with the real. Magical realism moves away from the "world-reflecting" vision of mimesis to offer another variant—the "world-creating" vision.

III. Literary Antecedents

As a starting point, and notwithstanding the different manifestations and peculiar features in each literature and writer, we can go back to the first time the term *magical realism* was applied to literature. Massimo Bontempeli wrote in 1926 that literature's role was to create a space in which two levels of reality, the real and the imaginary, could be combined to render or represent "an all-encompassing reality" (quoted in Walter 1993: 13) that could put together the different dimensions of the real. However loosely we use the phrase *magical realism*, then, these two dimensions are going to be present in most definitions. For practical purposes, we will propose Roland Walter's definition in *Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction* as a valid starting point for qualifying its basic features. He determines that the literary mode called magical realism "is characterized, first, by two different levels of reality, namely, the real and the magical, second, by the harmonious integration of the two levels of reality, and, third, by a reduced authorial stance. The authorial stance [...] is necessary to create the harmonious interplay of the realistic and the magical standards of reality within the fictional universe" (1993: 18). *The Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Culture* defines magical realistic writing as "[f]iction that does not distinguish between realistic and nonrealistic events, fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical, or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptive break in the narrator's or characters' consciousness" (Standish 1995: 156–57). The magical in Walter's explanation of the term shares features with the irrational and the supernatural. Even if the magic realist and the fantastic employ some common elements, such as the description of unlikely events, in magical realist writing we witness instances of

supernaturalism (Mellen 2000: 39) only to be returned to the world of the real without transition.[13]

Magical realism thus assumes the indivisible unity of reality and rejects the artificial distinction between what is empirically verifiable and what is not. At the same time, it proposes the existence of another reality that supplements the one we see. In this other reality, logic and pre-logic coexist (Sosnowski 1972: 431). However, pointing out a transcendental dimension of reality is nothing new. The surrealists had already broken down the dichotomy "visible versus invisible," as André Breton pointed out in *Manifestes du surréalisme*. The *Avant-garde*, and surrealism in particular, returned to the romantic tenet of the imagination as the central power of the human mind. For the surrealists, imagination was the caged animal behind the bars of rationalism. At the opening of the first "Manifesto," Breton contrasts the limitless imagination of childhood, when the absence of norms offers the child the perspective of multiple lives lived simultaneously, with its subordinated position in the mature man, constrained within the limits of conventional utilitarianism. Surrealism, according to Breton, offers us an opportunity to return to the primordial imagination of childhood. In response to the rupture and the bloodshed of the First World War, and in opposition to the alleged order of things, surrealism intends to provoke a crisis of consciousness. Its aim, Breton claims, is to provide people with the means to escape what he calls "universal coercion," and thus allow them to return to the path of total comprehension and restore their original purity. Thus, surrealism brings to the foreground the values that centuries of Western culture—with the exception of the romantics—had relegated to the margins, such as eroticism, desire, and the imagination. Surrealism claimed to escape the limited consciousness of the waking world and "to overturn the quest for the probable in art by making an astounding bet on the imagination, presented as the central power of the human mind, from which emerges a whole life-in-poetry. In this life-in-poetry the improbable, the extraordinary, the incongruous would grow in abundance" (Chénieux-Gendron 1990: 2). Like the romantics, the surrealists accorded the imagination a cognitive function; consequently, the imaginary was envisioned as the subject's central function, the facility around which knowledge and action can be reorganized (Chénieux-Gendron 1990: 119). Rather than searching for abstract truth, the

surrealists searched for what can be termed "an experiential truth" based on living, but on living outside the prescriptions of society.

Surrealism sought to integrate the cultural divisions that had been the basis of rationalistic knowledge since the industrial and scientific revolution, such as the distinction between true and false, the real and the unreal, and dream and reality, as Breton claims at the opening of the second surrealist "Manifesto": "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions" (1972: 123). In contrast, realism and what Breton called "the realistic attitude" are envisioned as hostile to all forms of intellectual and moral advancement (1972: 6). For Breton, this attitude stemmed from mediocrity, hatred, and conceit (1972: 6). Similarly, in "Surrealism and Painting," Breton attacked what he considered the "narrow" concept of imitation, as well as the misleading status of tangible entities. Art, Breton insisted, is to be determined not by the outer, tangible world but, rather, by the depths of the unconscious (Briony 1999: 56). In this scenario of empty realistic representation, Breton regarded the irruption of Freud and his interpretation of dreams as a most propitious turn toward a comprehensive understanding of reality. Surrealism thus conflated the romantic illumination of the hidden places of the self, as Breton would put it, with Freud's interpretation of dreams. In the first "Manifesto," in fact, Breton legitimates dreams as a source of certainty similar to that of the waking state:

> [W]hy should I not grant to dreams what I occasionally refuse reality, that is, this value of certainty in itself which, in its own time, is not open to my repudiation? Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life? (1972: 12)

In contrast to the dream state, the waking state becomes "a phenomenon of interference" (1972: 12), for in dreams, Breton suggests, anything is possible, and thus the dream state "opens up the notion of possibility"; it is through dreams that we must attempt "the increasingly necessary conversion of the imagined to the lived or, more precisely, what we are to live" (Chénieux-Gendron 1990: 118).

The integrative quality of surrealism is patent in the resolution of the apparent opposition between dream and reality: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak" (1972: 14).

Before the surrealists, the Romantic movement had unveiled and legitimized other versions of the real through the unconscious levels of the self. These other supplements of what is usually called "the real" are masterfully exemplified in Hawthorne's "romances."[14] In his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, in fact, Hawthorne maps out a hybrid space of mutual interactions:

> a neutral territory somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts may enter here, without affrighting us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to look about us and discover a form, beloved, but gone hence, now sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moon-shine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had returned from afar, or had never stirred from our fireside. (1970: 66)

The "uncertain light" of romance invests the real with "a quality of strangeness and remoteness" as it wedges another dimension into what is commonly held as undeniable and commonplace.[15] For the romance does not separate the categories of reality and illusion, security and danger, the idyllic and the demonic (Frye 1976: 53). Young Goodman Brown, for example, observes during his journey into evil a version of heterogeneity as he sees how "irreverently consorting with these grave, reputable, and pious people, these elders of the church, these chaste dames and dewy virgins, there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame" (1982: 285). There is, therefore, no circular frontier separating the wilderness from the civilized and the restrained, the imagined from the "real." Hawthorne returns to the mirror of mimesis and offers a variegated picture. The effect here is not "to hold the mirror up to nature," for the writer's imagination is "a tarnished mirror" (1970: 64) that seems to detract from the conventional transparency of the reflection. To complicate the process of mirroring a step further, the writer describes a series of refractions within the mirror: "Glancing at the looking glass, we behold—deep within its haunted verge—the smouldering glow of the first extinguished anthracite, the white moonbeams on the floor, and a repetition of all

the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove farther from the actual and nearer to the imaginative" (1970: 66). This repetition within a repetition recasts the supposedly unmediated mirroring of mimesis in a new light, for Hawthorne's mirror "presents the ordinary world at a triple remove": "The more it reflects 'the actual,' the more the mirror carries us 'nearer to the imaginative'" (Greenwald 1989: 16). The dream of a univocal mimesis is therefore endlessly deferred into the field of the imaginary.

This surprising cohabitation embedded in the romance makes it, as Fredric Jameson would have it, a "place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage" (quoted in Faris 2004: 158). In the romance, as in magical realism, the magic and the real come into contact and a confrontation befalls. Yet the battle between the two oppositional systems does not render one dominant; rather, "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" (Slemon 1995: 409). This "continuous dialectic" bears similarities with Theodor Adorno's concept of "negative dialectics." This absence of synthesis is at the core of the "negative realism" Jesús Benito sketches out at the end of the volume. It is at the intersection of these two paradoxical impulses that the magical realist text originates.

IV. The Coexistence of the Heterogeneous

The notion of different levels and systems of representation overlapping each other is, in fact, one of the distinctive features of magical realism in Jameson's seminal essay "Magic Realism in Film." This influential critic has established the link between what may be taken as a formal feature, and the historical processes that have contributed to this coexistence: "[T]he possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present; or, to generalize the hypothesis more starkly, magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (1986: 311).[16] This imbrication is a key aspect of many magical realist works. Take, for

example, this description of layers at the opening of Toni Morrison's *Sula*: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom" (1982: 3). A similar overlapping appears in "Neighbors," a short story in Helena Viramontes's *Moths and Other Stories*: "[Fierro] was suddenly amazed how things had changed and how easy it would be to forget that there were once quiet hills here, hills that he roamed until they were flattened into vacant lots where dirt paths became streets and houses became homes [...] the endless freeway paved over his sacred ruins, his secrets, his graves, his fertile soil in which all memories were seeded and waiting for the right time to flower, and he could do nothing" (1985: 113). In both examples, memories coexist under a new layer of concrete to create a very peculiar way of juxtaposing times and cultures. This coexistence, as Rawdon Wilson explains, is at the heart of magical realist writing: "The magicalness of magic realism lies in the way it makes explicit (that is, unfolds) what seems always to have been present. Thus the world interpretation, the dual worldhood, the plural worldhood even, of magical realism are no more than an explicit foregrounding of a kind of fictional space that is perhaps more difficult to suppress than to express" (1995: 226). This co-presence creates a peculiar palimpsest of worlds, histories, and worldviews that produces what Kumkum Sangari calls "the simultaneity of the heterogeneous." The overlapping, as the critic explains, "results from the physical coexistence over time of different ethnic groups" (1987: 158). "Simultaneity" is a key concept inasmuch as it links formal and historical aspects: it is, as Sangari asserts, "the restless product of a long history of miscegenation, and syncretization *as well as* of conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence" (1987: 158). This historical sedimentation and the juxtaposition of different cultures and values are very clear elements in contemporary fiction. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, by Amy Tan, Kwan's stories hybridize Olivia's rational worldview to show her another reality that includes the unexplainable and the intangible. In Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, the paganism of the myth of "the Golden Carp" as well as Ultima's healing ceremonies live side by side with Catholic

orthodoxy. The sudden and disquieting presence of Beloved in Morrison's eponymous novel conjures up not only Sethe's dead daughter but also those Africans who either perished in the Middle Passage or were not accounted for. In Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, the radical materialism of characters such as Bernardette Morrissey and Margaret Kashpaw coexists with Moses Pillager's effective medicine sacks, as well as with the courtship of Fleur Pillager by Misshepeshu (the spirit of the lake). Which aspect is more real or less magical? Hard to say, since both realities are part of the characters' everyday lives and are presented as such to the reader. In Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Fausto is a conquistador with an uncertain mission in Cuzco, but also another version of the Faustian hero who authorizes his own death. At the same time, he is just a tired old man who longs for the domestic details of his routine. *The Rag Doll Plagues*, by Alejandro Morales, presents three doctors named Gregorio (and Gregory) Revueltas who are themselves but also those other characters called Revueltas living in previous or forthcoming centuries. A more elaborate illustration of simultaneity appears in *Green Grass, Running Water*, by Thomas King. This writer presents a level of "real" characters gravitating on the Blackfoot reservation, such as Lionel, Uncle Eli, and Latisha, who live side by side with mythological characters such as Coyote, "I," First Woman, Thought Woman, Old Woman, and Changing Woman. These last four Indian elders are brought to the present, and they go around interfering in the lives of the Indians on the reservation. To carry out their quixotic adventures, they appear disguised or changed into literary characters such as Robinson Crusoe, Hawkeye, and the Lone Ranger. In Alvin Lu's *Hell Screens*, a highway construction crew has accidentally unearthed sacred ground. Spirits become restless and might cause trouble (84). This new batch of ghosts is not like those in the days of Liao Chai in the seventeenth century, "sometimes murderous, but mostly eccentric and close to home." Today, the narrator is informed, ghosts are more materialistic and mobile. As in Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* where replicants are indistinguishable from humans, ghosts are consorting with the inhabitants of Tai Pei, sharing the same ontological and spatial coordinates. Built on a pit where the corpses of disreputable women and prostitutes had been buried, the narrator's place of residence has developed a reputation for harboring female ghosts. The ghosts

participate in the lives of the living, reading the tenants' books, and reclaim the place so they can use it as a bordello. Ghosts and humans partake of a peculiar adjacency. They are neighbors, living on the same premises.

Simultaneity is also an important factor to be considered here in the sense that it suspends a linear conception of time to allow a coexistence of temporalities. Furthermore, it cancels the horizontal axis of some manifestations of realism in favor of the vertical dimension of romance. The traditional action on two levels—one above the level of ordinary experience, the other below it—becomes "plural" in magical realism. The different worlds are not allocated to different sets of characters but may take place within a single individual. If the realistic tendency looks for analogies to its material in the world of waking consciousness, the up-and-down movement of romance and magical realist fiction is an indication that the writer finds material in a world where we may be asleep as well as awake (cf. Frye 1976: 53). Hence, in magical realist narratives we hear not only the histories on the surface but those that have been paved over by a concrete highway, that is, the other histories, those of the sacred ruins. Simultaneity offers a vision of time in which the past does not arrange itself into a pattern where memories melt into a line. Like Bhabha's vision of hybrid hyphenations or identities, there are "incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks" (1994: 219) of time and history. Simultaneity also dovetails with Jameson's notion of the holes of history in magical realist films and the kind of history they present and actualize:

> What is engaged is certain History, but then in that case history with holes, perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to its objects of perception. These holes may first of all be characterized as gaps in information, yet in a succession of spatial situations seen too intensely for the mind to have the leisure to ask its other questions. (1986: 303–4)

Interestingly enough, this notion of perforated history is formulated in very similar terms to Julio Cortázar's vision of the holes of reality and time in "El Perseguidor": "En la puerta, en la cama: agujeros. En la mano, en el diario, en el tiempo, en el aire: todo lleno de agujeros, todo esponja, todo como un colador colándose a sí mismo" (1978: 173) ("In the door, in the bed: holes. In the hand, in

the newspaper, in time, in the air. Everything full of holes; everything spongy, just like a colander straining itself …") (my translation). Whereas realism depicts one possible "horizontal" world that coincides with the tangible, the verisimilar, and the so-called "objective," magical realism presents a multifaceted and multilayered reality and history that allow a vertical perspective.

V. Magical Realism and Postcolonialism[17]

Magical realism is, therefore, at least one of the expressive modes of societies where forms of the past and the present naturally overlap. The coexistence of the pre-capitalist and the nascent capitalist or technological features pointed out by Jameson is one of the preconditions for the magical realism from South America. Elleke Boehmer has gone a step further in linking the common features between Latin American and postcolonial writing (1995). José David Saldívar, for his part, has established the direct links and literary influences between García Márquez and North American writers such as Toni Morrison. It seems possible to combine these arguments to argue that there is a major link between magical realism in postcolonial writings and North American narratives. The postcolonial paradigm, with its emphasis on the processes of cultural representation as instruments of social and political realization (Bhabha 1994: 171), can be extremely illuminating for the analysis of social and cultural groups that have been relegated to the margins of social, cultural, linguistic, or geographical North America. The postcolonial condition of these groups would be the result of subaltern conditions in the present and is oriented toward the subversion of dominant paradigms. In this sense, as Klor de Alva indicates, the postcolonial condition exists both in societies that are still colonized—where it works as the Derridean supplement that provides full significance to asymmetrical power relations—but also outside these societies, wherever there is a conscious revision of dichotomies such as "oppressor/oppressed," "in/out," and "superior/inferior" (1995: 245). It is not strange, therefore, that magic realist writers in the United States do not participate in the "American melting pot" but rather maintain the heterogeneity and simultaneity of cultural and ideological mono or

plural hyphenations[18] as the basis of cultural identifications (cf. Bhabha 1994: 219).

Establishing a loose postcolonial frame for the different literatures of the United States further allows us to address the similarities between Latin American and North American fiction writers.[19] For Stephen Slemon the concept of magical realism can provide us with a way of effecting important comparative analyses between and among separate postcolonial literatures inasmuch as it carries "a residuum of resistance" toward the imperial center and its totalizing systems of generic classification (1995: 408). This residuum of resistance reveals itself in the "conflicted consciousness"—to use Stephen Wilson's term—that magical realism dramatizes: we witness at least two views of culture, history, and reality (1995: 222). Wendy Faris aptly suggests that magical realism may well resemble the perspective of Caliban, who learns the master's language to counteract his control and tyranny on the island: "Just as Caliban's swear words are not the combinations of sounds Prospero intended for him to use, so magical realism's use of realistic detail to describe an impossible event [...] was not realism's original program" (2004: 28). Interestingly, Faris returns to the most widespread vision of realism as a "world-reflecting" version of mimesis and does not take into account the fact that realism may be accomplished not only by imitation but also by creation. Yet, for Faris, magical realism turns into a form of meta-realism that refracts the premises and foundations of realism. Magical realism can be seen as an expressive mode that reverses the direction in which critical tendencies have traditionally moved—from north to south, from east to west. In altering these established lines of influences, it seems accurate to see magical realism as a partial critical "writing back" (Faris 2004: 41), to borrow from Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back*. From this perspective, the "progress" of magical realism marks an unusual turn in the direction of critical history, for it forces the center to imitate the periphery (cf. Aizenberg quoted in Faris 2004: 41).[20]

This writing back from the margins is also present in Elleke Boehmer's words about the similarities between postcolonial writers in English and their South American counterparts. In Boehmer's analysis, the two groups of writers share "a view from the fringe of dominant European cultures and an interest in the syncretism produced by colonization. Drawing on the special effects of magical

realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement" (quoted in Cooper 1998: 17). This cultural displacement from the privileged centers of power places magical realist writers at a most creative juncture: it allows them to look at conventional realist aesthetics from a distance, as an aesthetics to be adapted and appropriated. As Theo D'haen has suggested,

> magic realist writing achieves this end by first appropriating the techniques of the "centr"-al line and then using these, not as in the case of these central movements, "realistically," that is, to duplicate existing reality as perceived by the theoretical or philosophical tenets underlying said movements, but rather to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this "reality" depends upon. Magical realism thus reveals itself as a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s). (1995: 195)

This second movement of appropriation holds up the mirror of realism to other realms and describes them "realistically." Thus realism as the representation of the verisimilar is dialogized as it makes room for other occurrences, allowing the possible to enter the page. The presence of the two radically antithetic discourses in the same fictional structure therefore results in a mutual questioning of each one's pretensions to totality (Durix 1998: 188).

As the concept of reality splits into "worldhoods," the concept of realism as an overall attempt to represent reality becomes controversial. The consequences of this bifurcation and destabilization of the real, of the original and its copies, have explicitly haunted fiction since the last decades of the twentieth century. As Raymond Olderman noted in his classic study *Beyond the Wasteland*, "[t]he criteria of what is realistic in a novel must necessarily become shaky when we lose our confidence in recognizable facts. If reality has become surrealistic, what must fiction do to be realistic?" (1972: 6). Along the same lines, Salman Rushdie claims that conventional, "world-reflecting" realism "can no longer express the absurd reality of the world we live in" (quoted in Faris 2004: 88). After all, at the core of realism there can be a strong conservative element, an acceptance of society in its present and apparent form (cf. Frye 76: 106).[21] Yet the conditions of realism are no longer operative; the kind of consensus required for realism to work does not exist anymore. Significantly, in a speech entitled "Realism" Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of

Coetzee's eponymous novel, refers to this new scenario in the following way: "The bottom has dropped out. We could think of this as a tragic turn of events, were it not that it is hard to have respect for whatever was the bottom that dropped out—it looks to us like an illusion now, one of those illusions sustained only by the concentrated gaze of everyone in the room. Remove your gaze for but an instant, and the mirror falls to the floor and shatters" (2003: 19–20).

Then we must ask, what happens when the mirror shatters? Although there is technical realism at work in the magical realistic text, its ideological bases have changed; the bottom, to go back to Coetzee, "has dropped out," and a new contract between the writer and reality is needed. Although it is tempting to think that magical realism clearly illustrates the bankruptcy of the representational theory of art, it is useful to remember that magical realism's break with mimesis is only partial, for while it may do away with the "world-simulating" side of representation, it adheres to the "world-creating" side.[22] Though mimesis, as we saw in the previous chapter, has been traditionally interpreted and translated as representation and imitation (with the caveats expressed above), critics such as Grant suggest that mimesis—and, implicitly, realism—be understood as transformation (cf. Grant 1970: 66). Transformation does away with the idea of a literal imitation, and hence with the "world-reflecting" concept, and points directly at the process of "world-creating." For Frederick Louis Aldama, magical realism contains "a rebellious mimetics" that subverts the uses of the real. In the magical realist text, he claims, the real is not an end in itself, but a state of transition, a "bridge" into and out of the story world. This bridge, Aldama explains, "purports to transform the magicorealist's imagination and to push him or her to question the traditional and often limiting categorization of his or her experiences of reality" (2003: 28). Yet this "rebellious mimetics" is at the very heart of the concept of mimesis.

Whereas nineteenth-century realism was based on an optimistic estimation of our capacity to know, apprehend, and describe the real, magical realism is predicated on a more modest perception of our truth-grasping capabilities. From this perspective, magical realism questions and destabilizes the intellectual and ideological dictates that gave rise to nineteenth-century realism in the first place—the belief "that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable" (Zamora 1995: 498). After the success of Newtonian physics in the eighteenth and

early nineteenth centuries, it was commonly held that science as such could provide humankind with absolute truth. This conception was premised on the belief that science could actually grant a direct knowledge of reality (Agazzi 1997: 9). This notion served as the basis of a literary or "formal" realism that allegedly secured access to the factual reality of the physical world. Yet the crisis of Euclidian geometry, which culminated in the advent of relativity theory and quantum physics, has made it clear that science is not endowed with absolute certainty and hence is not always able to provide us with a final truth (Agazzi 1997: 9). Now that the illusion is gone, magical realism reminds us, as the romance did earlier, that the world-reflecting model of mimesis is no longer operative. The formula "This is so-and-so" does not apply to a changing world, for it does not reflect a necessary agreement between writer and reader about the role and the nature of language, and about the world being described. The alleged univocal correspondence between the word and the real is now traversed and transformed by heterogeneity and mediated by the magic, the imaginary, and the possible.

VI. The Magic and the Possible

Just as the imaginary is not a univocal concept, forever fixed in a set of dreams or aspirations, but an agglomerate of diffuse feelings, images, and associations (Iser 1989: 232), the magic in magical realism is unstable and multifold. In fact, William Spindler has elaborated a typology of magical realism based on three possible meanings of the word *magic*. The critic characterizes "Metaphysical Magic Realism" as a strand of magical realism that introduces a sense of unreality in the reader, an uncanny atmosphere, by describing a scene as if it were something new and unknown, but does not deal explicitly with the supernatural (1993: 79). He mentions a vast range of works within this category: Albert Camus's *La Peste*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Kafka's *Das Schloss*, and some of Borges's stories. Spindler's second category, "Anthropological Magic Realism," widely coincides with Jameson's vision in "Magic Realism and Film." Spindler explains anthropological magic realism as "the survival in popular culture of a magical and mythical *Weltanschauung*, which coexists with the

rational mentality generated by modernity" (1993: 81). Furthermore, anthropological magic realism "gives popular culture and magical beliefs the same degree of importance as Western science and rationality" (1993: 82). This last version, Spindler clarifies, is not limited to Spanish America but can also be found in parts of the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Spindler describes his third version of magic realism, "Ontological Magic Realism," as an "individual" form of magic realism where "the supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason." Unlike the anthropological version, the ontological version makes no reference to the mythical imagination of pre-industrial communities, but the writer exercises total freedom in the creative possibilities of writing. Spindler includes in this subgroup some stories by Julio Cortázar, such as "Axolotl," and Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*.

The typology is useful, but as the critic cautions, the three types overlap to a considerable degree, and constantly cross and recross one another, and a single work by one author can participate in different kinds of magical realism. Whatever category of magical realism we choose, a double act of hybridizing is achieved, for the determinacy of a consensus reality is exceeded at the same time that the diffuseness of the magic and the imaginary is controlled and called into form (cf. Iser 1991: 3). Just as the magic hybridizes the real as well as the narrow realm of realism and its claims to truth and verisimilitude, a third element dismantles the alleged opposition between fact and fiction, real and unreal. This dialectics is resolved on a new level of factuality that Sangari calls the possible—the third category, which recasts issues on a dialectical level (1987: 161). The possible is related to the real but goes beyond it to encompass that which is immanent and conceivable (1987: 163). As a third category, the possible is imbricated in Iser's concept of the imaginary, inasmuch as it stems from the realm of reality but is not limited by it. Yet, like the imaginary, it acts and intrudes upon the real, hybridizing it with the realm of possibility. Magical realism, for Sangari, "is attached to a real *and* to a possible" (1987: 162). Magic realist writing, like postmodernist fiction, opens a third space and an alternative to the polarity of true or false by offering a mode of being between existence and non-existence (McHale 1987: 106).[23] Sangari's vision of the possible occupies that space in between—a borderland, to use Gloria Anzaldúa's term—and thus does away with the world-reflecting

model. Yet the category of the possible as a third element is implicit in Aristotle's vision of mimesis, as stated in the previous chapter. Mimesis has ties to the possible and probable, to "what would happen," "to what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity," as Aristotle stated in *Poetics*. Like the poet, the novelist is less concerned with documentation, as the limited interpretation of realist mimetics would have it, than with making fictions. There is, therefore, no external, factual reality behind fictional "occurrences"; they remain situated on the fictive level of the possible, where the correspondence between the word and the exterior thing is no longer a standard of truth. As fictional occurrences, they are, in Dolezel's terms, entities that are constituents of an emergent structure—the fictional world. The category of the possible replaces the either/or choice with another option that neither denies nor asserts extratextual reality. The possible opens up the past and the present to what might or might not have happened; but what is perhaps more interesting is that if we can, in fact, verify that something has not happened, that does not make it less real. Doctorow's words about *Ragtime* and historical accuracy are pertinent here: "I am satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen" (quoted in Hutcheon 1988: 146). As a fictional particular, to go back to Dolezel, Morgan is ontologically different from the real person. The possible and the magic/imaginary thus subvert and open up the borders of the real. Both the real and the potential or conceivable are rendered as "consorting together" and enjoying the same level of legitimacy.

VII. The End of Oxymoronic Constructions?

What is real, then, about magical realism? Or, to push the question further, what has stopped being real? Inasmuch as magical realism allows us glimpses into different versions and visions of the real, it can be argued that this expressive mode would, in fact, be well equipped to render a changeable and hybrid reality into words. From this perspective, magical realism widens our perception of the real, as it includes possible worlds, which are always, as Lois Parkinson Zamora points out, in a process of becoming: "Magical realist texts amplify the very conception of the 'experienced reality' by presenting

fictional worlds that are multiple, permeable, transformative, animistic" (1995: 500). But despite the multiplicity of its worlds, magical realism does not become lost in an indefinite refraction of what is commonly called the real; magical realism is, one could argue, anchored in reality, and is politically and historically "conscious." Moreover, as it confronts them with a more complex and diverse reality, magical realism engages readers and their capacity to determine what is "real" and what is not (Zamora 1995: 500). Like the romance, magical realism has an inherent potential for cultural contestation because it adds new elements and configurations to the ongoing conversation of a culture (Fluck 1996: 443). It is the old and new elements of a culture "irreverently consorting together" that provide the power of both romance and magical realism. Despite its popular image as a reality-distorting literary form, it seems accurate to conclude that magical realism, like the romance, can be regarded as another stage in what Fluck terms a "history of cultural dehierarchization." Although traditionally considered as an aristocratic genre, the romance, Fluck argues, has become an important genre of democratization, because as "pure fiction," "it is ideally suited to articulate an imaginary dimension that is the nourishing ground for ever new claims of the individual. In this, the romance and its changing functions are not only part of a history of cultural dehierarchization. They are, in fact, one of its driving forces" (Fluck 1996: 447).

Similarly, it is possible to argue that although seemingly primitive and childish, magical realism has become another important element of dehierarchization that brings a vision from the fringes into conversation with the center. This writing back implies not a mere replacement of the workings of realism but a heterogeneous coexistence. At the intersection of different worldviews, magical realism is cross-cultural and practices *mestizaje* (cf. Durix 1998: 148). From this perspective, magical realism is a hybrid genre where worldviews are constantly crossing over. As a mestizo genre, magical realism points to a new consciousness where, to draw from Gloria Anzaldúa's description of *La Mestiza*, we look at both shores at once—hence its contradictory and ambiguous nature. Not only does magical realism sustain contradictions; it turns them into "something else," a middle ground, a hybrid terrain of possibilities.

Does this power to subvert the center have an expiration date? If the end of nineteenth-century realism can be attributed to the increasing epistemological difficulties with knowing the self and the world, then when will this mimesis-as-play exhaust itself? The end of magical realism may come from within the genre, as its imitators endlessly repeat and exhaust its formulas. Nevertheless, it may also come from without, as the label *magical realism* is applied to "ethnic" texts entering the mainstream. For, as Manuel Martín-Rodríguez persuasively argues, the label reduces the texts to a quaint, facile imitation of the South American boom. Martín-Rodríguez convincingly asserts that the magical realist label is frequently used to exoticize the texts to which the term is applied, to make them foreign or "south of the border," rather than a product of the U.S. literary tradition (2003: 125). Yet there might be another possibility, one suggested in Durix's conclusion to *Mimesis*: "Perhaps the merit of the phrase 'magic realism' is to suggest a field of possibilities in which the term will no longer be an oxymoron" (1998: 190). This field of possibilities may be explained from the perspective of possible-world semantics, as we become aware, to follow Dolezel's argument, that the real, or what he calls "actual-world entities," have to undergo a process of conversion into nonfactual possibles, with all the ontological consequences that this transformation entails (1998: 21). As a non-actual possible, the "real" divests itself from the material consistency through which the nineteenth-century conception of realism established its status as "true." Furthermore, the tangible almost loses its condition as real if, following the findings of quantum physics, we understand the configuration of the physical as a state constituted not by substance but, rather, by an almost empty space traversed by the orbits and collisions of subatomic particles. This revolutionary vision of what reality is—presumably real, yet not tangible—necessarily impinges on the way we narrativize that reality (Collado 2004: 51). If the real thus verges on what has traditionally been considered the unreal, and the tangible is made up of almost intangible entities such as atoms, protons, electrons, and quarks, then what becomes of the imaginary and the magical? Many zones of the imaginary no longer stand in an oxymoronic relationship to the real, for the oxymoron is dispelled in the open arena of the possible and the heterogeneous. This space of simultaneity and heterogeneity could be akin to the "infinite space" Borges describes in "The Aleph": the place

where all the places of the world are located (2005: 188), a peculiar *multum in parvo*, the whole infinite variety of the universe compressed into a luminous microcosm. This is the Aleph, "the only place on earth where all places are, a limitless space of simultaneity and paradox, impossible to describe in less than extraordinary language" (Soja 1989: 2). That is precisely the intersection of different world-views that magical realism addresses in an "extraordinary language." This unlimited space challenges traditional orderings and privileges paradox. To go back to the Aristotelian formulation, "this" has entered another territory. As it crosses over, "this" is irrevocably contaminated by myriads of "so-and-so." "This is so-and-so" becomes just one of the multiple and possible combinations within the realm of infinite chances.

Endnotes

1. We are referring to Halliwell's double vision of mimesis as a "world-reflecting" and as a "world-creating" model (2002: 23). See chapter 1 in this volume.
2. A heroism, Glazener explains, predicated on predictable, regular living and on maturity, a cluster of virtues that bourgeois white men were especially suited to practicing (1997: 42).
3. Shannin Schroeder argues that magical realism shares a resemblance to American romantic traditions (2004: 61).
4. The connections between magic realism and postmodernism have been pointed out by critics such as José David Saldívar (1991), Linda Hutcheon (1995), Wendy B. Faris (1995), Theo D'haen (1995), and Martín-Rodríguez (1996). As all these critics suggest, the term postmodernism was traditionally restricted to North America, while magic realism was limited to Latin America. Territorializing magic realism as southern and postmodernism as northern, however, proves to be a blind alley, another way of containing and bordering literary and cultural influences; it also contributes to maintaining centers as opposed to literary and cultural peripheries.
5. For Justine Tally, "psychic realism would contain/explain that part of our reality that has to do with our own memory, interpretation, and psychological perception [...] but is no less influential than 'physical reality' in our construction of reality nor less determining in our daily lives" (1999: 14). Emily Hicks, for her part, favors the term *border writing* over *magic realism* to describe a writing that depicts a "kind of realism that approaches the experience of border crossers, those who live in a bilingual, bicultural, biconceptual reality" (1991: xxv).
6. Aldama proposes the term *magicorealism* as an attempt to dispel binary oppositions. For Aldama, "magicorealism" opens a new study that does not confuse the transcription of the real world, where the criteria of truth and falsity apply, with the narrative mode governed by other criteria (2003: 15).

7. See also Frye 1976: 37.
8. It does not come as a surprise, then, that recent anthropologists have concluded that "the entire category of magic is an artefact of European ethnocentrism, for which any unfamiliar forms of thought are defective or primitive rather than simply different" (Potolsky 2006: 139).
9. Salman Rushdie provides a clear example when he explains in *Imaginary Homelands* how in *Cien años de Soledad* the assumption into heaven of Remedios la Bella is accepted by the rest of the characters as a natural and expected occurrence; in contrast, the arrival of the first railway train "sends a woman screaming down the high street" (1991: 301).
10. For Carpentier, "lo real maravilloso" comes from a singular apprehension of reality: "una inesperada alteración de la realidad (el milagro), de una revelación privilegiada de la realidad, de una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad, de una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad, percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exaltación del espíritu que lo conduce a un modo de 'estado límite'" (1995c: 13). Although Carpentier recognized that surrealism pursues the marvelous, he distanced himself from the movement, claiming that "it very rarely looked for [the marvelous] in reality. It is true that for the first time the Surrealists knew how to see the poetic force of a window display or a market, but more often their fabrication of the marvelous was premeditated" (1995a: 103).

    It is not our intention to review an archeology of the term *realismo mágico* or magical realism. Roland Walter in *Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (1993); Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Magical Realism* (1995); in a more abbreviated way, Darío Villanueva and José María Viña Liste in *Trayectoria de la novela hispanoamericana actual: del 'realismo mágico' a los años ochenta* (1991); and Maggie Ann Bowers in *Magic(al) Realism* (2004) have already explored the term as well as its connections with surrealism ever since it was coined by Franz Roh in the mid-1920s.
11. This is also María Elena Angulo's stance in *Magic Realism: Social Context and Discourse* (1995).
12. The two terms have been generally equated by Fredric Jameson (1986) and Luis Leal (1967). See also F. Galván et al. (2001: 49–51). Yet critics such as Aldama distinguish between the two. For Aldama magic realism is "a vital and sophisticated use of language and storytelling device," whereas "lo real maravilloso" would correspond to "a more commercially oriented, lazy, and clumsy storytelling form" (2003: 12). Seymour Menton, on his part, distinguishes between the two on the following grounds: "Cuando esos elementos fantásticos tienen una base folclórica asociada con el mundo subdesarrollado con predominio de la cultura indígena o africana, entonces es más apropiado utilizar el término inventado por Carpentier: lo real maravilloso. En cambio, el realismo mágico, en cualquier país del mundo, destaca los elementos improbables, inesperados, asombrosos pero reales del mundo real" (1998: 30). More recently, Maggie Ann Bowers has refined differences among terms. Her 2004 *Magic(al) Realism* differentiates between *magic realism* as the concept which embraces the mystery that palpitates behind the represented world, and *magical realism* as the mixing of the improbable and the mundane. For Bowers, both magic and magical realism are different from marvelous realism, which "brings together the seemingly opposed

perspectives of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same novel" (2004: 3). This volume glosses over Bowers's distinctions and uses *magical realism* as an inclusive term.

13. See also Luis Leal (1995: 121–22) about the differences between magical realism and the fantastic.
14. The coexistence of the factual and the imaginary is also an essential aspect of medieval romance, especially in the so-called "Breton Lays" as popularized by Marie de France. In English literature, see for example *Sir Orfeo*, where the faeries create a symmetrical version of the so-called "real world."
15. It is Wayne Ude's contention that magical realism is the romance novel's contemporary incarnation. Like the romance novel, magical realism has forged an American style premised on its attention to the frontier and the wilderness. The romance stages the confrontation with the American wilderness, which is portrayed not only as an external set of conditions. The wilderness, characters find out, is within (cf. Ude 1898: 55). If eighteenth-century settlers sought to found a civilization away from and secure from the frontier, nineteenth-century American writers, influenced by a cluster of circumstances such as the European Romantic movement and the Gothic novel as well as folk tales, turned their attention to the frontier and the wilderness. Although novelists' focus shifted to urban and industrial America during the later part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, which coincided with the alleged closing of the American frontier and the belief that wilderness as such had ceased to exist, the romance novel as well as magical realism continued to allow an altered, fuller perception of reality (1989: 50–64).
16. It is worth noting that these historical processes Jameson alludes to are somewhat similar to the description of a creole identity as provided by Carpentier in "The Baroque and the Marvelous" (1995a: 98). Obviously, we would not like to restrict the appearance of magical realism to the set of circumstances Jameson states.
17. This section explores the ties between magic realism and postcolonialism, yet it does not imply that magic realism does not appear in other contexts and locations. It does not, therefore, intend to narrow down magical realist practices to postcolonial contexts and so-called ethnic cultures and societies.
18. We are using Deborah Madsen's concept of "multi-hyphenation" in her paper "The Black Atlantic in Yellowface? Re-Modelling Migration Effects in American Ethnic Studies," presented at the ASA Conference in Philadelphia in 2007.
19. In "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" (1995), Wendy B. Faris proposes a very useful list of characteristics of magical realist fiction that can be easily applied to both Latin American and North American narratives.
20. See Benito and Manzanas's article "Border(lands) and Border Writing" (2002: 1–21) for a similar change in the direction of history.
21. It is important to remember, though, that the reporting in itself can be subversive.
22. Alfred López argues that magical realism emerges precisely as "a mimesis of excess, of excessive and 'unbridled realit[ies],' which paradoxically turns out to be a more 'realistic' mode of representation than conventional Western conceptions of literary 'realism' (2001: 210). Thus López continues with the traditional realism/magical realism dichotomy. Yet López's conclusion in *Posts*

and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism contrasts drastically with his remarks at the opening of his chapter on magical realism, where he discusses the term as an attempt, on the part of the European critical framework, to categorize, understand, and appropriate the ineradicable difference of the other's difficult text. López argues that "the act of naming emerges as the allegory of a colonial fantasy" (2001: 143). As to the future of the term, López offers a grim—if confusing—prospect, as he imagines magical realism "consuming itself, Sphinx-like, in its own shame and anger at having been found out" (2001: 143).

23. James Wood has also repositioned the dyad "real/unreal" in his discussion of magic realism: "The argument against magical realism in fiction should not be an argument about what is real and unreal, but an argument about belief. Fiction demands belief from us, and this request is demanding in part because we can choose not to believe" (1999: 228). This critic supplants the demarcation of the real/unreal through another controversial term, *belief*, which, like *fantasy* or *reality*, is traversed by many variables such as culture and history.

3
The Crisis of Representation: Post-realism, Postmodernism, Magical Realism

> When ontological doubt, uncertainty about what is (fictively) real and what fantastic, insinuates itself into a Modernist text, we might well prefer to consider this the leading edge of a new mode of fiction, an anticipation of Postmodernism. For the ontological stability of external reality seems basic to Modernist fiction.
>
> —Brian McHale, "Modernist Reading, Postmodern Text"

I. The Ruins of Representation

Brian McHale's celebrated thesis situates the transition from modernist to postmodernist fiction at that very moment in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* when Quentin and Shreve stop trying to remember and start to invent. "It is incredible," laments Quentin Compson when trying to make sense of Sutpen, Henry, Judith, and the others. "They are there, yet something is missing" (124). When their historiographical endeavors are fully exhausted, both characters' re-creation of and belief in an imaginary world out there rescues them from the tyranny of time remembered. They "replenish" the "missing" something in their narrative by violating ontological boundaries, insomuch as their retelling crosses into another, alternative world, a time imagined, where the narrative can be successfully completed. It is at that particular moment in the text, if we follow Brian McHale and John Barth, that the exhausted perspectives of modernism and classic realism are transcended through the introduction of a third element, an alternative fictive world that contains the two preceding literary forms in paradoxical tension.

This newly replenished world, which according to Barth should have García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* at its very center, is the world of postmodernist fiction. The mixture of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, is in Barth's account what identifies an inevitably synthetic postmodernity. For Barth, as, in a way, for Brian McHale years later, the postmodern moment comes about not as an extension of modernism, nor as a wholesale subversion of it, but as a combination of the most deliberately experimental forms of modernism with the straightforwardness of traditional bourgeois realism. While premodernist culture overemphasized the world of objective reality, deliberately minimizing human participation in its construction, modernism blinded itself to the ontological "thereness" of the physical world. It is only in the postmodernist moment that the two worldviews come to stand side by side, simultaneously supplementing and undermining each other, as prefigured in that celebrated final twist in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

A parallel instant, and equally relevant, pervades the last passages in African American author David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*. In this undeservedly neglected novel, much in the vein of what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction," Bradley offers an African American take on the now classic topic of the literary reconstruction of history in an era when history itself is deemed inexorably gone. Pennsylvania author Bradley undertook the writing of *The Chaneysville Incident* after his mother, back in 1969, discovered the existence of thirteen unmarked tombs on the property of a white landowner in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Bradley also came in contact with a popular legend in the area that told about twelve runaway slaves who, when they were about to be captured by the slave catchers, committed suicide. In order to historicize the untextualized story of the twelve slaves supposedly buried in the unmarked graves, Bradley depicts a black narrator cum historian, John Washington, who traces back the steps of his father, Moses Washington, and his great-grandfather, C. K. Washington, whose life stories are closely connected with those of the unknown slaves. By the end of the narrative, exhausted after his frustrated historiographical efforts to reconstruct the story of the runaway slaves, protagonist John Washington stands alone at the crucial crossroads Quentin and Shreve faced in the Faulkner novel: the need to imaginatively re-create the

past. And his resolution is equally relevant, if significantly different. Though trained as a professional historian, John Washington engages in an act of imaginative completion, opting to disregard historical evidence and instead tap into the residue of traditional African beliefs. Turning into a fabulator, or a griot, Washington claims a mysterious perception of the voices of the slaves still moaning in the west wind, for, to him, they "ain't ghosts; they ain't dead. They're jest runnin' along" (63). By resorting to a body of folklore, music, and legend, John Washington constructs an alternative, mythological, and magical reality grafted onto the historiographical account he had offered so far. The novel's ending, distilled from African American oral sources, inserts the ontological doubt McHale mentions, the one prefigured in the canonical *Absalom, Absalom!* Yet despite the similarities in the ontological violation present in both the canonical and the ex-centric texts, which we take here as paradigmatic, we propose their inexorable, even if controversial, difference. For if the ontological instability, as the fantastic or magical crosses over and inundates the fictively real, stems from a similar uncertainty as to the possibility of a truthful knowledge and/or representation of reality, both the sources and the cultural relevance of such crossing can be differentially read.

Avant-garde Experimentalism versus Folklore and Myth

Whether it develops naturally from modernist experimentalism and the debunking of bourgeois realism, or as a retreat into folklore and myth, the narrative presentation of fantastic worlds seamlessly conflated with the fictively real represents a fundamental element of the postmodernist moment. It also figures, however, as a distinct feature of so-called magical realist literature, which originated mostly in the Third World and in the cultural margins of the West. And just as the conflation of the fictively real and the irretrievably magic can hardly be untangled in most of these narratives, the boundaries between postmodernist fiction and magical realist narratives hardly exist. Many of the distinctive characteristics of postmodernist fiction, such as the crisis of representation, the rejection of Western empiricism and rationalism, the denunciation of binarism, and the preoccupation with borders, mixing, and hybridity, are traits that define magical realist texts equally well.

Much recent criticism has variously discussed the status of magical realist fiction in the postmodern cultural milieu. The numerous positions, ranging from the staunch negation that such a thing as magical realist writing ever existed, to its postulation as the defining postcolonial or Third World style, simply testify to its continuing presence and relevance in the literary debate. A paradigmatic position in this dispute holds that any effort to distinguish and differentially identify postmodernist fiction and magical realist texts is, at best, a gratuitous enterprise, or is simply doomed to failure. In one of the seminal pieces in the postmodernist debate, "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth declared García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* as the supreme example of postmodernism, recognizing magic's particular role in that work. However, as D'haen acutely points out, the term *magical realism* is never mentioned in the article. In "Postmodernist Fiction in Canada," Geert Lernout offers an easy terminological explanation, claiming that "what is postmodern in the rest of the world used to be called magical realist in South America and still goes by that name in Canada" (qtd. T. D'haen 1995: 194).

A more incisive perspective within the same position argues not only that such distinctions are inadequate but also that they are complicit, even if unconsciously, with the structures of power. By separating magical realist works from modernist and postmodernist Western texts, Western criticism engages in a kind of nostalgic primitivism, simply a disguised version of imperialism. In "Discarding Magic Realism," Liam Connell argues that the formal characteristics of magical realism are hardly distinguishable from those of modernism but that "non-western societies are persistently characterized through a series of indicators which are categorized as primitive—one of which is a residual belief in myth, magic, and the use of ritual" (1998: 95). In contrast, Western nations are seen as progressive, developing, and modern. While the aestheticized and highly experimental texts of industrialized culture result in literary modernism and postmodernism, their marginal and non-Western counterparts are limited to writing magical realism. In this sense, the label *magical realism* becomes an othering, reductive category. Michael Valdez Moses goes even further, claiming that the exotic and marvelous appeal of magical realism can be taken as a "compensatory response" (2201: 124) to the triumph of modernity. Magical realism is

not only the result of the modernist nostalgic gaze, but also the cure for it.

More widely accepted, even if equally open to contestation, is the position that assumes magical realism not as equal to but as a particular strain of postmodernism. Seen in this light, magical realism uneasily, though inevitably, becomes one of many postmodernist subsets. In "Scheherazade's Children," Wendy Faris claims 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" (1995: 165). Straddling primitivism and late capitalism, magical realist texts seem to be rooted as much in the aftermath of high modernism, struggling through Lyotard's "crisis of representation" (1984: viii), as in the residue of folklore and myth from preindustrial, premodernist cultural moments. At the same time, magical realist texts bridge the divides between modernism and postmodernism, between the central and the peripheral and postcolonial, and between the scientific and the mythical.

In "Magic Realism and Postmodernism," Theo D'haen adopts the views of Linda Hutcheon (1987) and Brian McHale (1988), claiming that there is a hierarchical relation between magical realism and postmodernism, that magical realism is simply one trend, though probably the most relevant, within the larger movement of postmodernism (1995: 194). For D'haen, the notion of the "Ex-centric," in the sense of speaking from the margins, is the essential feature of magical realism and constitutes its essential contribution to the postmodern movement. D'haen describes this eccentricity as "a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central to the line of technical experimentation starting with realism and running via naturalism and modernism" to postmodern experimentalism (1995: 195). Though these deliberately experimental discourses—which can go by the name of "surfiction," "fabulation," "metafiction," and "historiographic metafiction," among many others—saw themselves as essentially alternative or critical, they nonetheless originated at the very center of their cultures and would soon become canonized. For writers coming from the periphery, whether in terms of nationality, race, class, ethnicity, or gender, a wholesale assumption of postmodernism represented complicity with the centers of power. Then magical realism came along, offering

another alternative position within a no longer alternative movement. From D'haen's perspective, the radical aesthetics of metafictionists was not radical enough to represent the more pressing experiences of marginality and alterity and thus gave way to another sort of experimentation focused on the presentation of "alternative worlds."

Yet the very alternativeness of this position could appear initially thwarted by the fact that magical elements have been used by central and canonical writers as well as marginal and alternative ones. William Kennedy and E. L. Doctorow, as well as younger writers such as Jeffrey Eugenides and Jonathan Safran Foer, have incorporated magical realist elements as compellingly as writers like Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, or Louise Erdrich. In this context, D'haen sees magical realism as serving two different purposes, whether written by the central or by the ex-centric. For authors whose voices emerge from outside the cultural centers of the West, magical realism becomes a way to provide "access to the main body of 'Western' literature" and yet avoid the risk of assimilation or direct adoption of the views and values of the dominant discourses. In this light, magical realism can provide marginal and ethnic writers with adequate means to write themselves into the pages of the Book of the West without completely submitting to its central discourse. Marginalized individuals who were traditionally denied a voice in the master's discourse are thus written back in through the use of magical realist elements. The recuperation of the voice, says D'haen, can only happen by "magic or fantastic or unrealistic means," since in most cases those characters' voices are irretrievably lost, as Morrison's *Beloved* amply proves. On the other hand, when used by writers coming from the privileged centers of culture, magical realist techniques can allow them to "dissociate themselves from their own discourses of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged" (1995: 195). In D'haen's optimistic perspective, whether seen as ex-centric expression or as central resistance, magical realism emerges as a sociopolitical instrument written simultaneously within and against the ideologies of Western modernity and targeting both the discourses of canonized experimentalism and the discourses of bourgeois realism.

Yet it is the very notion of Western modernity, and of the differential access to it by the dominant and emerging communities, that in our view can account for a distinctive reading of magical

realism vis-à-vis postmodernist texts. For while postmodern experimentalism comes as a rupture and an ironic distancing from the Western tradition of realism, rationalism, and empiricism, magical realism is frequently the result of a continuity with local, "ethnic," marginal, or silenced traditions. While dominant Euro-American writers may arrive at postmodern textual fabulation as a natural outcome of the reaction against nineteenth-century realism and subsequent developments by the modernist avant-garde, writers from emerging communities have taken significantly different literary and sociopolitical paths.[1] As has been amply postulated, in dominant societies nineteenth-century realism emerges as the most appropriate narrative form "to express the textures and tragedies of middle-class quotidian life" (Franco 1994: 351), at a moment when materialism as represented by money and money values was gradually replacing Christian-based morality. However, this sociocultural situation hardly translates to the non-Western world and to cultural margins. Many ethnic and emerging communities were still devoid of a significant middle class at the turn of the century. Furthermore, the individualism that figures both as cause and consequence of the new relevance of the middle class was mostly alien to those same communities, still based on more community-oriented worldviews.

At the literary level, Western individualism brought about a profusion of realist texts in both Europe and the U.S. The "rise of the realist novel," to paraphrase Ian Watt's celebrated study, was a distinctive cultural consequence of an individualism that took the individual as the basis and the primary unit of all reality. Individualism places the self in direct and privileged relation to the real, without the mediation of society, the state, religion, or ethnicity. Such individualism was not replicated in the postcolonial world or in most emerging communities in the West. In the case of the U.S., even if some ethnic American literary traditions saw a fruitful production of realist works (most notably the African American tradition), their relation with realism was distinctive, for in these realist texts the ethnic character appears generally as the subjected other, the victim whose problems are hardly those of the middle class. In this sense, the postmodern writer's rebellion against the rational-scientific perspective of realism—and its development from modernist experimentalism—is clearly asynchronous and therefore rarely replicated in the postcolonial and ethnic eruptions of magical realism.

The modern critique of reality and realism as "mystified terms," followed by the postmodernist comic withdrawal from reality altogether (Rowe 1992: 181), does not parallel the contestation of the more pressing politics and economics of colonialism and its aftereffects in the writings of postcolonial and emergent magical realists. While both postmodernist and magical realist texts may appear as a replenishment of fiction, the steps leading to this end are also distinguishable. Whereas postmodern narratives may come after the aesthetic exhaustion and the silence of too many writers with too little to say (cf. Payne, qtd. in Schroeder 2004: 25), the magical realism of emerging communities comes as an instrument for recovering and replenishing an otherwise void sphere: the unspeakable of their past.

However, despite the particular routes through which writers from mainstream and emergent traditions may have arrived at magical realist writing, their allegiance to modernity seems equally undeniable. For, as Moses insists, both highly experimental postmodernist texts and magical realist texts are essentially premised on the belief that modernity will inevitably triumph and that the premodern was a "historical anachronism." The primitive world that magical realist texts represent for the reader, indicates Valdez Moses, becomes more acceptable precisely because the texts themselves represent that world as essentially vanished, gone, a victim of a modernity that is fictionally resisted, but ultimately embraced. In this sense, magical realism offers no more than a "purely symbolic or token resistance" (2001: 106) to the inexorable advance of late capitalist economies. However, a distinctive relation to such modernity can also be perceived: even if early magical realist texts showed a tendency to return to a golden age of past grandeur and cultural harmony, most modern magical realist texts bring magical elements to bear on contemporary reality and experience. There is no escapism, no regression to remote or static mythical times in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. Vizenor's *Bearheart* is deliberately set in the not-so-distant future. Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* may employ mythical material, but only insomuch as it speaks to the contemporary Asian American experience. The return to mythical stories is not the result of regression, for the presence of the past in no way serves to elude the pressing demands of a problematic present and future.

Magical realism's accommodation vis-à-vis the ideology of modernity, therefore, is uneasy, and its situation in literary modernism is no less problematic. The past's recurrence in the present and future in a number of magical realist writings accounts for the mode's allegiance to modernism as much as for its inscription within postmodernism, to such an extent that a number of scholars have described the mode as embedded between modernism and postmodernism. If, going back to McHale's popular division,[2] modernism offers a preoccupation with the grounds of knowledge, or epistemology, while postmodernism shows a preoccupation with the grounds of being, or ontology, magical realism could easily, albeit not unproblematically, be inserted between the two. McHale argues that modernist texts propose a never-ending quest to know what goes on in the world as we know it. In its turn, postmodernism asks questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (1987: 10). McHale adds, "What happens when different kinds of world[s] are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (10). While modernist fiction tries to unravel the "real" situation in a world that is given, postmodernist fiction examines the worlds of being, the "anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural" (2004: 37). In "Isla a su vuelta fugitiva: Carpentier y el realismo mágico," Roberto González Echevarría adopted those concerns to the point of distinguishing between ontological magical realism and epistemological magical realism. Ontological magical realism is based on material beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which the text is set. In this sense, it is another term for what Alejo Carpentier called "lo real maravilloso," or what Spindler calls "anthropological" magical realism. Epistemological magical realism, on the other hand, is rather scholarly (Delbaere-Garant 1995) and takes elements from a variety of traditions; it is linked more closely with literary experimentation. As a continuation of McHale's and Echevarría's theories, Wendy Faris inserts magical realist texts between modernism and postmodernism. The epistemological concerns of magical realism, argues Faris, "along with the mythic elements, the primitivism, the psychological interiors and depths, align magical realism with much of modernism" (2004: 32–33). Conversely, the ontological doubts evident in magical realist writing, which constantly looks into the abyss where the real collapses into the magical, "align it with postmodernism" (2004: 32–33). In

keeping with this double allegiance, magical realism frequently fluctuates between questions of knowledge (as in Lu's *Hell Screens*, which reads as a detective novel throughout, inevitably engaging questions of who, why, and how) and questions of being (constantly appearing in Lu's novel through the persistent doubt about some characters' ontological status: uncertainty about whether they are ghosts or humans).

Postmodernism/Magical Realism/Post-realism

> Postmodernism is, of course, postrealist also.
> —K.A. Appiah, *In My Father's House*

In his monumental *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard requests, "Let us be witnesses to the unpresentable" (1984: 82)—a formula against the way modernism has splintered life from art. For Lyotard, postmodernism should "put forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (1984: 81); and this task is rather daring, for, as he argues, "we have the idea of the world (the totality of what is) but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it." Along the same lines, Jameson comments that the world is not unknowable but "it is unrepresentable, which is a very different matter" (1991: 53). Postmodern metafiction revels in the permanent failure of representation to offer access to the real thing, recurrently exposing the human urge to reach after systems to order experience; on the other hand, even at their most fantastic, magical realist texts strive to retain a sense of the real and to reconstruct a feeling of order by filling the gaps with magic. But in its attempt to express the unrepresentable—frequently testifying to the silenced experiences of marginality—magical realism approaches the ideologies of the postmodern by continually breaching the mimetic contract, transcending the limits of realistic representation, and breaking away from the mimetic compulsion. While proposing alternative, non-empirical perspectives on the real, magical realism adamantly remains within the realm of significant deception. It is a kind of writing both within and against the realist symbolic mode; its magical excess simultaneously points at and questions and escapes the realist boundaries.

An apparent duality obtains between some postmodernist writing and many magical realist texts in their differential attempts to go beyond the rigid limits and techniques of literary realism. The

philosophical skepticism inherent in the postmodernist moment is rooted in the belief that "reality" is our ideas about "reality" hypostatized, as Barth amply proved in his seminal article. In their celebrated *Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann define reality, in a typically postmodern way, as "a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language" (1966: 37). Reality is constructed through a range of social and cultural arrangements and practices that in time become institutionalized and are, in the end, unwarily internalized. In late capitalism, as Jameson likes to propose, advertising and reproductive technologies have led to a further reduction in the individuals' direct experience of the world. In this sense, the world where the modernist character was seen to enact its alienation is, in the postmodernist moment, considered to be just not there, simply not natural phenomena. To be sure, not all postmodernist thinkers would align with this skeptical position, and the disquisition itself is nothing new; it dates back a few centuries.[3] Yet it is clear that such issues play a fundamental role in postmodernist texts. Then again, it is no less true that magical realist narratives also take traditional realism as their target. In both narrative trends, even if they profusely and variously use realistic techniques, realism itself is, at best, under erasure.

So what elements could account for a presumed constitutive difference? A cursory look at some representative texts of postmodernist metafiction and magical realism offers a possible distinction in terms of the sources that sustain the attempts to debunk realism. Perhaps postmodernism represents a debunking from above, in the sense that here science and technology emerge as the sources for the discrediting of older forms of realism. In many cases, the postmodernist text envisions alternative worlds of being through a scientific lens, engaging science-fictional conventions. A paradigmatic case here is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the presumably hard historical facts of the bombing of Dresden during World War II share the narrative space with the openly science-fictional presentation of life on Planet Tralfamadore. The postmodernist challenge to the rational-scientific worldview is effected from within the dominant culture using the tools generated by that culture. In contrast, some magical realist texts represent a debunking from below, in that the texts' struggle to dismantle the

notions of realism is embedded in ex-centric discourses and in the regression to older, presumably mythical, spiritual, or communal forms of experiencing reality. Even if this tendency seems more directly attributable to the "marvelous realism" strand within magical realism, it also pervades magical realist texts inserted in more "urban" and late capitalist contexts. Works loosely aligned with magical realist poetics, such as Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Susan Power's *Grass Dancer*, and Vizenor's *Bearheart*, present contemporary or even futuristic worlds where science and technology directly affect people's lives. In their different contexts, the eruptions of magic come from beyond the scientific realm. The magical elements spring from the interstices of the past, the communal history of the people, and are usually a counterforce to technological advances.

But even though science was originally one of the guarantors of realism and would later become the ally of antirealist constructivism, the postmodern era has revealed science to be a possible ally of magical realist approaches to the real. Quantum mechanics, theoretical physics, and other forms of recent science[4] are ways of explaining reality that have not yet been incontrovertibly proved and that are only barely understood by scientists themselves. Those scientific worlds can be explored and expressed only in darkness, as through an effort of the imagination. Indeed, as Bainard Cowan argues, imaginative descriptions of the quantum world by science writers resemble the "'instantaneous' world suggested by much magical realist writing" (2002: 7). Incidentally, Yamashita's magical realist depiction of the physical stretching of the Mexican American border and of the highway in *Tropic of Orange* is not necessarily far from the quantum mechanical view of an ever-expanding universe. However, while the more radically postmodernist texts often leap into fantastic, metafictional, or virtual worlds,[5] highlighting the crossing of ontological boundaries, numerous magical realist texts, as Amaryll Chanady argues (1985: 24), portray similar ontological transgressions in a more matter-of-fact manner, striving, perhaps, not to disconcert the reader. It seems as if postmodernist texts present fictional and alternative worlds as deliberate, though nonetheless relevant, products of the writer's imagination. In contrast, magical realism continues to explicitly emphasize the "thereness" of the magical world, its existence independent of the writer's gaze.[6] Magical realism struggles to maintain an unambiguous sense of the real, clearly presented,

because the full effect of a magical realist text depends on the faithful representation of a reality that admits no doubt—a reality which appears fully credible in the fictional world and upon which the magical elements are seamlessly grafted. The realistic world is continually kept in place, though it appears inexorably contaminated, mediated.

The alternative worlds of magical realist fictions come to impinge on and pollute the here and now of the characters, not as a breach in their everyday experiences, but as an expansion and continuation of those experiences. If modernism, as Faris argues, placed the characters in contact with mythical or historical pasts through mental processes and rhetorical experimentation, and postmodernism displaced both world and characters into an ironic and chaotic pastiche, magical realism brings those mythical and personal pasts to life in the referential realm of the text (Faris 2004: 30). And it is in this effort to represent the "thereness" of alternative realities that magical realist texts recur to the narrative techniques of realism. In this sense, magical realism highlights the internal conflict between realism's techniques and methods, on one hand, and its object, on the other. Playful postmodernist narratives show a deliberate tendency to disrupt realist syntax and structures, going one step beyond the modernist "ruin of representation." In contrast, many magical realist texts employ realistic syntax, but at the same time propose a semantic, even if apparently oblivious, "ruin of the represented" (cf. Faris 2004: 28). If we can say that postmodernist texts expose and simultaneously embody the impossibility of representation, magical realist texts instead opt to emphasize the mediated nature of reality. The magical realist text does not represent a conscious departure from the mimetic referent; rather, it functions, just like realism, to mediate the historical world.

The more consciously aesthetic subversions of postmodernist texts, with their emphasis on the emptiness of representational efforts, are replaced, in magical realist texts, by the more politically oriented subversions of the represented, as Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Vizenor's *Bearheart* exemplify. Both novels fast-forward in time to a near future where multiplicity and mobility, represented by homeless people and pilgrims, question and put under erasure our views of progress and civilization. Both texts place themselves next to the abyss of a highly technological world gone awry, a world where a new

and closer sense of the real comes encoded in magical realist signals. While both texts represent aesthetic moves into the poetics of postmodernism, they use magical realism to reinscribe justice and solidarity into the aseptic reality of an unjust world.

II. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*: Magical vis-à-vis Virtual Realities

In her novel *The Grass Dancer* (1994), Native American writer Susan Power portrays the United States' scientific and technological development as it resonates in the lives of the members of several families on a Sioux reservation in North Dakota. Susan Power juxtaposes modern technological breakthroughs with Native rites. The traditional preparation of corn soup as Margaret Many Wounds lies on her deathbed aptly dialogizes the 1969 moon landing, which is being simultaneously reported on television. Through such juxtapositions, Power reexamines and questions the significance of the technological revolution from a decentered perspective. Western technology and Western epistemologies are dialogized in the presence of alternative ways of perceiving reality (cf. Schweninger 2004: 47). As Power's novel exemplifies, many eruptions of magical realism are predicated on the opposition between the scientific/technological approach to the real, and its magical revision in more holistic or spiritual perspectives. In such instances, science and technology emerge as ultra-objective doors into an otherwise exclusively material reality, leaving magical perception closer to the realm of faith and spirituality. Yet as Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* illustrates, other alignments are equally possible, portraying the real as closer to magical perceptions, and practically inaccessible via high-tech means.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita plays with similar juxtapositions insomuch as the highly technologized and media-saturated world of a modern-day Los Angeles is disrupted by the intervention of the disenfranchised, whether Latin American immigrants or the urban homeless. A Japanese American writer from California who lived in Brazil for nine years, Yamashita champions odd and complex combinations in her fiction. Her texts recurrently dramatize a double allegiance to both postmodernist practices and magical realist strategies. In *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, her first novel, the

story is narrated by a little ball that hovers around the forehead of the main character, Kazumasa Ishimaru. The narrative incorporates constant magical realist elements, such as a three-armed American businessman who naturally falls in love with a three-breasted French ornithologist. Her second novel, *Brazil Maru*, again set in Brazil, centers on Japanese immigration into the country, tracing the story of a Japanese colony called Esperanza, whose colonists "came to create a new civilization based on the ideas of Christianity and freedom of religion" (97). Yamashita's third novel, *Tropic of Orange*, fast-forwards to modern-day Los Angeles, with occasional detours south of the Mexican American border. In *Tropic* Yamashita makes an extraordinary attempt to rewrite the North American experience from a hemispheric perspective: the horizontal axis is replaced by a vertical movement that brings the South to impinge on the North. At both the thematic and narrative levels, the novel dramatizes dislocation and crossing as it effects a peculiar combination of magical realism, noir, fantasy, and postmodern textuality. *Tropic* superimposes the 1930s L.A. on the high-tech L.A. of the 1990s, the hardboiled detective genre on the postmodern metaphysical detective novel, the Latino experience south of the Mexican American border on the Hollywood life to the north, the realistic border on its fantastic "stretched" version. Such odd combinations account for the overabundance of multicultural characters, themselves the subjects and objects of cultural transfers and crossings. The deliberately complex narrative is intersected by multiple episodes affecting seven individuals, placed both north and south of the Mexican American border. *Tropic of Orange* basically has two interwoven levels. The first takes place in what the typical reader considers ordinary reality and presents the interlaced stories of seven people, all representatives of a multicultural American society. The characters range from a Chicano news reporter to a "Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown"; from an old Latino mystic to an L.A. television news executive; from an African American "angel of mercy" to an aged Japanese American homeless conductor. The other level of the story is the surrealistic (or magical realist) world that centers on the physical displacement of the Tropic of Cancer. An orange growing at the Tropic of Cancer mysteriously catches the "line" of the tropic and will travel north with Arcangel, a Latino mystic and performer who drags the line of the Tropic northward on

his pilgrimage. Yamashita's depiction of the South's invasion of the North becomes a daring narrative move as she literalizes the metaphor, making the land itself slide toward the north. This causes distensions and warpings of time and space: the land mysteriously expands and collapses, stretches and compresses. Most of the characters will perceive, at different stages, the constant motion of presumably fixed spatial markers, "the elasticity of the land and of time" (149). Beside the fantastic displacement of the tropic, the notion of spatial dislocation is forcefully conveyed through the novel's focus on the nonplaces, the transitional places, and the freeway, as well as through its portrayal of the homeless community of L.A. The two narrative strands of the novel, and the issue of spatial disruption and mobility, coalesce in a monstrous traffic jam on L.A.'s Harbor Freeway: "In both directions of the freeway, spread across ten lanes, hundreds of cars piled one onto the other in an almost endless jam of shrieking notes" (55). In this nearly apocalyptic atmosphere, the semi-surrealistic elements emerge as "the homeless encampment around the area heads down onto the freeway" (113). As the homeless take up residence in the abandoned Mercedes and Cadillacs, the L.A. mass media witness the beginnings of a new and potentially revolutionary community.

With all its strange combinations, its pastiche and juxtapositions, *Tropic of Orange* reveals its postmodern allegiances on every page. The grid structure of seven interlocking narratives at the beginning of the novel clearly situates the text within the postmodern preference for nonlinear, fragmentary episodes. At some stages, the novel reads like a metaphysical detective fiction, deliberately exposing its links to Thomas Pynchon's work. The anxiety over the existence of a universal plot (158), in this case an "international infant organs conspiracy" (246), pervades the text. Mysterious oranges imported into the U.S. from somewhere in Latin America, believed to be a hidden form of illegal transport, underline the dissemination of conspiracies, overtly insinuating its own connections with, among others, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*: "Some're saying it's orange trees growing in poppy fields in Bolivia. Others say it's a dangerous tropical virus" (163). As Buzzworm comically states, "Most everyone on the street's got a conspiracy theory. What's yours?" (109). The novel also connects with postmodern topoi through the recurrence of gratuitous associations, connections, and conjectures. This is the case

with Arcangel's theory of the end of the world: "he predicted doomsday based on the ancient belief that doom comes in fifty-two-year cycles" (48).[7] However, the text casts the presumed mythical authority of the theory into doubt by pointing out that "the only problem was to decipher when the first doom had occurred" (48). This postmodern L.A. of universal conspiracies, news media, Hollywood, and the Net overlaps with the 1930s L.A. of gangsters and detectives, as seen through the eyes of Gabriel Balboa, a Chicano L.A. newspaper reporter.

A witness to most of the events of the novel, Balboa draws together the different characters and narrative strands. Most of the novel's action is presented from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator; Balboa is the only character who narrates in the first-person singular. Even if fully immersed in a world of mass media contamination, Balboa sticks to real facts in the traditional ways of the detective, while his narrative "I" struggles to keep authority over his (textual) world. In contrast, Balboa's fiancée, Emi, a Japanese American news executive fully engulfed by the media and the Net, is fully conscious of representations' elusiveness and inherent fictionality. As a reporter, Balboa imagines himself in a world of detectives and mysteries, whereas the high-tech Emi believes that "that film noir stuff is passé" (18). As Emi complains, Balboa would rather be "in the nineteen thirties back in black and white with that detective Philip whatshisname" (22). In contrast, Emi enjoys the "paperless existence" (22) of high technology, satellite dishes, and the Net. As a detective in the traditional sense, Balboa firmly believes in the capacity of reason to reconstruct the chaos of the world. However, though he assumes the materiality and accessibility of things and experiences, Balboa's faith in a transparent reality "out there" will gradually dwindle under the presence and pressure of numerous unrealistic and unrepresentable characters and events. The problem of representation first hits Balboa when he is facing the story of Manzanar Murakami, a former sansei surgeon who now, in his delusional mind, conducts traffic from a freeway overpass. As Balboa muses, Manzanar's story fully depends on its emplotment: "It wasn't going to be easy. For the moment I couldn't see any way to do justice to the story. He might just look like one more crackpot homeless figure who got stepped on by the system" (108). The possibility of locating the one single truth appears to be under erasure here.

By the end of the novel, Balboa has completely abandoned the 1930s L.A. of Philip Marlowe to embrace the world of the cyberdetective. Just like Daniel Quinn in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, Balboa becomes engulfed by the mystery he believes himself to be pursuing and by its "digital connections." "I never looked for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off my storylines," he muses. "If I had begun to understand anything, I now knew they were simply the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger and larger" (249). As Balboa transfers all his detectivesque actions to the Net, the overabundance of clues and leads—a postmodern element in itself—is displaced from the private-dick universe onto the digital world: "Maybe it was a net of loose threads, but I was onto it. For every budget, I set up a newsgroup over the net" (246). The result is a digital nightmare of clues and more clues spamming Balboa's laptop. Balboa sees himself wading through "massive amounts of drivel" (247) trying to sort out the most far-fetched clues imaginable. As Emi ambiguously confesses to Buzzworm on her final death scene, "Gabe's into the net" (251): Chandler's Marlowe has been transformed into a Dean Koontz cyberdetective. We last see him plugged into the Internet following narrative threads while describing himself as "truly noir, a neuromancer in dark space" (245). In her death scene Emi expresses all the anxiety of Balboa's postmodern digital nightmare: "Maybe the big sleep is just a big digital wet dream. And life is just a commercial break" (252). In this way the novel traces the movement of one of its characters from the presumably "real" world into the postmodern world of cyberspace. In Balboa's perception, as reality disintegrates, the hyperreality represented by his fiancée, Emi, emerges and inundates peoples lives. However, the novel also explores another dissolution of reality. The Mexican American border represented in the novel emerges as the place where the hyperrealism of the North converges with the magical or spiritual realism of the South. If Balboa represents the pilgrimage from an outmoded reality into its postmodern dissolution to arrive at its hyperreal re-creation, another pilgrim, this one named Arcangel, will represent the diffusion and expansion of the real into the supernatural and magical.

Magical Realism Goes North, Together with the Tropic

If Kafka's *Metamorphosis* somehow brought the old-time fable to the quotidian and modern world of central Europe, and Gabriel García Márquez relocated it in the Latin American Third World, Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* drags it up north and across the Mexican American border. Yamashita's narrative dramatizes the process whereby the presumably primitive, intuitive, and marginal overlaps and takes over the world of technology, news media, and virtual reality north of the border. The hard reality, which is simultaneously soft, inundates the virtual reality in two simultaneous processes: just as Arcangel transgresses the Mexican American border bringing magical warpings in time and space along, L.A.'s homeless people carry their unaccountable bodies and experiences into the postmodern world of luxury cars and freeways. Both spatial transgressions prompt unfamiliar perceptions of the everyday. Arcangel's ontological transgression of reality is replicated by Murakami's and the homeless people's epistemological revision, as they cast their renewed perspective on L.A. realities.

The familiar touch of magical realism emerges from the very first scene of the novel, when Rafaela, Balboa's housekeeper, calmly sweeps crabs from the terra-cotta floors of Gabriel Balboa's landlocked house in Mazatlán, just south of the Mexican American border. The scene clearly reminds the reader of Gabriel Balboa's namesake, Gabriel García Márquez, and his classic story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," which begins with a house eerily trespassed by crab and insects of all kinds. In García Márquez's story, at the end of a three-day rainstorm Pelayo discovers an old man, bald and nearly toothless but with enormous wings, lying face down in the mud of his courtyard. After consulting with a neighbor who identifies the man as an angel, Pelayo drags the filthy, passive creature into a chicken coop. Soon people visit—first to mock and tease the winged captive, then to seek miracles. The local priest tries to determine whether the mysterious prisoner is truly an angel or merely some diabolic trick, but ends up writing to the bishop and eventually Rome for a verdict that will never come. After a while Pelayo and his wife begin charging admission to see their angel, and they make enough money to build a fine two-story mansion. Several years pass in which the feeble angel drags himself around Pelayo's property, greatly to his

wife's annoyance. He also loses his last bedraggled feathers. One winter the old man almost dies of fever, but by spring his feathers begin to grow back. One day, as Pelayo's wife watches from the kitchen, the old man clumsily takes flight and flaps away across the sea.

In no way disguising its allegiance to García Márquez's story, Yamashita's *Tropic* re-creates a similar Old Man: Arcangel, a prophet, miracle-worker, and performance artist. Just like García Márquez's angel, Arcangel seems ageless, his body thin and decrepit. He even once "wore wings and sat in a cage" (48) while García Márquez himself sat in the audience, drinking martinis. At some point in the performance—as if García Márquez had intervened—"someone noticed that the wings didn't seem fake, weren't strapped on or glued to his back, but were growing there" (48). However, unlike García Márquez's angel, Arcangel is a man—or an angel—with a clear sense of a mission. As an over-replenished symbol, Arcangel signifies all of Latin America: its history, its past glories and defeats, and its hopes and aspirations for the future. A character endowed with a magical aura, he transcends himself and his times and becomes the representative of the history of the Latin American community. Just like Red Dress, in Susan Power's *Grass Dancer*, can continue to speak to and reinvigorate his community a hundred years after he's shot dead,[8] Arcangel has lived for five hundred years on a political pilgrimage across most of Latin America. As a transversal character, he has followed a path across the continent, always heading north and gathering together the different histories along the way:

> He said that he had come from a long way away, from the very tip of the Tierra del Fuego, from Isla Negra, from the very top of Machu Picchu ... but perhaps it was only a long way in his quixotic mind. And yet his voice was often a jumble of unknown dialects, guttural and whining, Latin mixed with every aboriginal, colonial, slave, or immigrant tongue. (47)

As he nears the Mexican American border, Arcangel not only carries the whole Southern Hemisphere with him but mysteriously also drags the Tropic of Cancer all the way to L.A., thus symbolically merging the two sides of the border temporally and spatially. The palimpsest of worlds, histories, and worldviews that Kumkum Sangari calls "the simultaneity of the heterogeneous" is magically represented in the figure of Arcangel. If García Márquez's angel represented the descent

of the miraculous into the everyday world, Yamashita's Arcangel represents the metaphorical trip of magical realism northward and across the American borders, in a peculiar representation of the "vertical extension of realism" (Becker 1963: 26) that supplement the traditional "horizontal" view. And this is a rather daring move. At a time when some newer Latin American writers are rejecting magical realism as limiting and stereotypical, Yamashita keeps it alive, literally dragging it north to the U.S. Appropriately, as Arcangel approaches the border dragging the tropic with him, people on both sides of the border start to notice subtle and inexplicable changes. Rafaela, Balboa's improvised housesitter, gradually perceives the inexplicable transformation of the everyday: "Approaching the house, Rafaela looked for the usual landmarks: the orange tree, Rodriguez's brick work, and the new fence. Perhaps it was the rain—a thick wet lens through which she perceived this wet world. She was not sure, but the fence was somehow curved, or maybe even longer, or stretched" (70). In a similar vein, Rodriguez, the expert bricklayer, perceives the elasticity of his construction: "this wall that I planned very carefully to be straight was suddenly curved" (142). It seems like reality itself is expanding and collapsing, just like the skin of Arcangel when he is pulling the truck, stalled in the middle of the road: "*The skin against his abdomen / spread itself / as tanned leather over a drum, the hooks / drawing the large lobes of skin / backward*" (74; italics original).

Simultaneously, reality is becoming malleable and fluid north of the border as well. It is Balboa, himself a Chicano and presumably more attuned to magical perceptions, who first senses something strange: "Something is wrong today," he confesses to the unbelieving Emi. "I mean the length of the day. The weather. The light for Godssake. Time. It's got something to do with time... Every which way you turn, the sun is in your windshield" (61). Equally attuned to alternative realities, Manzanar Murakami, a sansei surgeon who conducts freeway traffic as one conducts an orchestra, emerges as a magical character of the North, a kind of Whitmanesque figure. Manzanar celebrates people and traffic and transforms the controlled chaos of L.A. into a musical score. The constant passing of trucks and vans becomes, for him, a symphony titled *The Hour of the Trucks* (119), with trucks, semis, vans, and concrete mixers acting as "the largest monsters of the animal world" (119). As "a recycler of the last

rung," Manzanar uses the residue of sound in the city to compose his symphony of life in town. In his view, a tremendous accident involving a monstrous tractor-trailer filled with gas becomes an ecstatic symphony. After witnessing the terrible wreck, Manzanar "recorded everything—every horrible, terrifying thing—in music" (55). The monstrous traffic jam that ensues on the L.A. freeway, though itself perfectly possible and imaginable, is nonetheless endowed with magical realist excess: "One more giant Molotov cocktail on wheels. Beside which, a truck crashed into the second semi spilling thirty three thousand pounds of meat. That's when the whole thing blew up. It is dead cows all over the freeway" (112). The image of the immense barbecue of dead cows on the freeway has a clear magical-realist touch; it is implausible, but not impossible. Standing on the freeway, a representation of California's development and progress, a line that figuratively separates the haves and the have-nots, Manzanar Murakami is endowed with revolutionary overtones as he unites the homeless in orchestral solidarity. Meanwhile, Arcangel is crossing another line, the Mexican American border, with a similarly revolutionary mission. Once on the other side of the border, Arcangel metamorphoses into El Gran Mojado, a fighter who is going to meet SUPERNAFTA in "the Greatest Fight of the Century." The heroic metaphorical battle to terminate American economic expansion south of the Mexican American border (represented by NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement) ends on a dark note as the audience witnesses Arcangel's defeat. He embodies the aspirations of the unprivileged to attain a better life, yet he is simply an illusion: he tells the Mexicans south of the border, "I ... am a vision in your very mind" (133). However, there is no naive idealism here. The magical vision is soon, in the mind of the Mexicans, confronted by the harsh reality: "What good is a vision up against something like SUPERNAFTA? When he appears, where will you be? In our heads?" (133). The confrontation between vision and reality brings together echoes of parallel confrontations between North and South, rich and poor, legal and illegal, the history of past colonialism and present, contemporary transnationalism. As Murakami and Arcangel magically trespass borders and lines, their actions reverberate with the potential transformation of the border itself. As the "open wound" where two different worlds clash and interact, both the border and the freeway emerge here as sites of interaction and social transformation.

"The revolution will not be televised": Magical Realism and Social Transformation

> Even where digitalization enters the realm of the fantastic, it is seldom to confirm the existence of realms of the imagination, but rather to reify the products of the imagination, and, ultimately, to sell them.
>
> —Gerald Gaylard, "Postmodern Archaic"

Yamashita's social transformation of Los Angeles begins with several disturbing juxtapositions. As the homeless people take over the commuter luxury cars abandoned in a traffic jam and threatened with fire from a gas truck explosion, Arcangel is himself pulling a broken-down bus, as well as the line of the tropic, across the Mexican American border. Both moments transpire magical qualities, enacting equivalent reversals of accepted notions of development and progress. Through magical realist excess, Yamashita reconfigures borders and towns, collapses boundaries, and imagines new utopias; by envisioning "the fusion of possible worlds, spaces, systems, that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (Zamora 1995: 6), this magical realist text reverses the social alienation of the automobile and the divisiveness of the highway and the borderline. Just as the disenfranchised homeless take over luxury cars and turn them into the scaffolding of their community, Arcangel transgresses the political and economic border as he pulls the bus across the line. Both moments equally testify to the resourcefulness and strength of the marginal others in their assault on the high-tech Western centers. These two parallel actions anticipate a magical collapse of boundaries, to be followed by the social transformation of Los Angeles into an embattled utopia for the marginal others. It is on the ever-moving space of the road and the freeway that both Arcangel and the homeless initiate their particular appropriation of space. Theirs is a transgressive movement, a preliminary emptying out of the premises of borders and highways that hints at a utopian redefinition of such spaces. Since, as Lefebvre explains, "a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential" (1991: 54), the homeless create their own space on the freeway in anticipation of the revolution to come. For the revolutionary potential of these appropriations of space are hardly understated in the narrative. While Manzanar is, in his apparent

delusion, harmonizing all the chaotic noises of traffic into a perfect soundtrack for the city, the homeless enact a similar spatial ensemble in their occupation of the abandoned cars: "They're all singing, humming," says Balboa. "I mean it's sporadic, but yeah. Homeless singing, harmonizing" (155). Gradually, in Manzanar's view, the great traffic jam turns into "the greatest jam session the world had ever known" (206). The homeless are "creating a community out of a traffic jam. There's already names to the lanes, like streets!" (156). The new homeless city is equipped with all required services, in a kind of revolutionary atmosphere. Contrary to expectations, the whole place is imbued with neighborly solidarity: it is clean and tidy, there is trash pickup once a day, there are urban gardens, and so on. The revolution is as much imagined and orchestrated in Manzanar's delusive mind as it is real on the streets. And that revolution acquires dangerous proportions as the official "grids" of the city, where roads, streets, and maps reign supreme, are replaced—and not only in Manzanar's mind—by the nets created by Manzanar's vision. This new, revolutionary grid of reality is now defined "by himself and others like him" (238). The new reality resulting from the gigantic jam is an expanding symphony conducted by innumerable homeless people:

> On a distant overpass, he could make out the odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton. And beyond that, another homeless person had also taken up the baton. And across the city, on overpasses and street corners, from balconies and park benches, people held branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks, and conducted. (238)

As the social and geographic realities of Los Angeles are changing, Arcangel is also dismantling the linear geography of the Mexican American border by dragging another imaginary line, the Tropic of Cancer, over and across it. The metaphorical overlapping and crossing of one line over the other also represents the implanting of Latin American realities onto the North American ground: "Such a commotion was aroused that no one noticed, either on one side or the other of the Great Border... everything else South were about to cross it: the very hemline of the Tropic of Cancer and the great skirts of its relentless geography" (206). As Arcangel pushes the tropic up across the border, a long history of past colonization and present deprivation is grafted onto the American present. Arcangel is headed toward the

Village of the Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula, the second largest city in Mexico, also known as Los Angeles. Upon crossing the border Arcangel is told, "Go back, old man... It's not what you think. What do you think you will do there anyway?" (211). When he responds that he is going to sell his art and read his poetry, he receives this quick reply: "In the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe, go back old man. Do you have a green card? Do you have a social security card? Do you have any money? ... go back! You are illegal" (211). To which Arcangel responds: "Is it a crime to be poor? Can it be illegal to be a human being?" (211). As North and South collide on the border, as different layers of history are seen overlapping, history is being recomposed as a series of simultaneous moments. When Arcangel explains that he is a pilgrim, the crowd corrects him with a traditional lesson on Americanism: "Old man, the only pilgrims here came on the Mayflower. And that was a long time ago" (212). In a significant rewriting of this notion, encoded in magical overtones, Arcangel explains that he was there, for he was "everywhere every time" (213).

Despite, or probably because of, the extraordinary epochal quality of both the homeless people's and Arcangel's transgressive moves, the media refuse to represent them in their full significance. The social transformation does not result in a corresponding virtual revolution, despite the proliferation of media technology on the scene of events. In their representation of both episodes, the news media fragment, multiply, and disseminate the "real" but do not carry, image, or prefigure a similar social union, and their failure to do so recalls the celebrated Scott-Heron poem and song: "The revolution will not be televised" (219). However, the revolution on the ground becomes more real in that the hegemonically controlled media fail to capture and control it. The systems that produce fiction and unreality can't image magic they didn't create, as is exemplified during Arcangel's dissolution of the U.S.-Mexico border:

> Televisa, Univision, Galaxy Latin America and local border stations congregated to eyeball the event. If there were a dozen local and national stations, there were a dozen eyes, translating to a dozen times a dozen times a dozen like the repetitious vision of a common housefly. Arcangel strained for this vision even though live television had no way of accommodating actual feats of superhuman strength. The virtually real could not accommodate the magical. Digital memory failed to translate imaginary memory. Meanwhile, the watching population surfed the channels for the real, the live, the familiar. But it could not be recognized on a tube, no

> matter how big or how highly defined. There were not enough dots in the universe. (198)

Thus Yamashita creates an antithetical relationship between the "real"/"magical" and the "virtual"/"televisual." Oddly enough, the magic allies itself with the real and against the virtual, as the following lines from the final encounter between Rafaela and Bobby dramatize:

> They straddled the line—a slender endless serpent of a line—one peering into a private world of dreams and metaphysics, the other into a public place of politics and power. One peering into a magical world, the other peering into a virtual one. "Will you wait for me on the other side?" she whispered as the line in the dust became again as wide as an entire culture and as deep as the social and economic construct that nobody knew how to change. (254)

In the postmodern world, magic and reality are not opposites; they are part of the same extra-technological reality. Technology is diametrically opposed to the magical insomuch as the magical cannot be created (or even conveyed) by it. Rather than reveling in imagining possible worlds, high technology has paved the way for a digital virtuality industry that deliberately emphasizes its naturalism and realism. As Gerald Gaylard argues, far from attempting to convey a magical or imaginary expansion of reality, hyperreality relishes "its increased high-focus representational resolution" (2004). Digital technology falls short of its presumed potential for imagining new worlds and significantly limits itself to reifying and normalizing deep-rooted representations of the world. Surveillance cameras, "reality TV," and "realistic animation" all strive to normalize our sense of the real. In this sense, technology, especially digital technology, dispenses with the imagination and recreation of possible, alternative worlds and thereby fails to achieve its liberatory promise.[9] Far from providing space for revolution, postmodern hyperreality simply reinforces the status quo insomuch as it creates the ideological illusion of participatory democracy, as in the case of "reality TV." This form of TV is still trapped in normative forms of realism, for it continues to put forward deep-seated notions of mimesis, representation, and referentiality.

It is Buzzworm, the African American angel of mercy now turned news commentator, who first detects the media's reluctance to

represent the social revolution on the ground or to realize the geographical distortion of the border. "Buzzworm wondered about this reality. If they didn't see it, they didn't see it. Like the homeboy said, anyone on the ground'd know. These folks weren't on the ground. They were on-line or somewhere on the waves" (190). Buzzworm is the representative of an alternative kind of TV, what he calls "TV from the bottom" (192). This possible TV contrasts with the one Emi is used to, the one that cannot accommodate "actual feats of superhuman strength" (197). The L.A. on the ground is radically different from the L.A. represented on the news, radio, satellite images, and disaster movies. Manzanar inquires into the nature of this duplicated, specular world, the televisual and the real, when, while observing the rhythms of the Greater L.A.—"the greatest leisure world ever devised" (205)—he marvels at the fact that people are all acting their own part in the great American spectacle; "how was it possible," Manzanar wanders, "that everyone could be physically there with the live action and not watching it on TV?" (206). In Emi's death scene, rather than the dark materiality of Emi's own physical death imposing itself on televisual realities, Emi experiences her own death through multiple specular reflections:

> In the corner of Buzzworm's eye, she could see the monitors in the van flickering beyond the palms. There she was, the NewsNow producer sunning on the NewsNow van. There was the shot and Buzzworm heroically scrambling up to pull her off the roof. The camera swung wildly looking for the direction of the shot. (250)

In Emi's view, the digital overlaps with the real and significantly mediates her experience of her own death.

The virtuality of the Net is another alternative postmodern reality that stands opposed to the revolutionary and magical reality of the socially transformed Los Angeles. Satellite and news maps of L.A. proliferate on television in answer to the growing geographic disorder on the ground. Just as Manzanar is remapping the city through his envisioning of new grids, new maps of the city to substitute for the official grids of roads and sewage systems, harbors, and railway lines, Balboa and the international crime cartels are going digital, online. They map everyday reality through a constellation of satellite dishes that makes Manzanar's grids of L.A. seem significantly less fantastic. The Internet is positioned as a postmodern space where the people

who embrace the split nature of reality can reside. Emi hints at this possibility when she mentions a project to digitize Los Angeles and put it online. Similarly, Balboa, the digital neuromancer, tries to save a destroyed village by uploading to the Internet a previously recorded digital archive representing it:

> The first is a database: names, dates, descriptions, work, family, relations, everyone who lived in that village. Everyone who died or was killed or disappeared, and who did the killing if it is known. The second and third have the stories, the past, memories. The entire history of the village since anyone can remember. (195)

If not televisual, this social transformation of L.A. is both realistic and magical, though finally short-lived. Its outcome is far from utopian. As Emi is shot while suntanning on top of the van, the terror of gunfire rips across the valley of cars. It is the end of the vision, and the beginning of familiar forms of division:

> The assemblage of military might pointed at one's own people was horrific, as was the amassing of weapons and munitions by the people themselves. If half of the homeless were veterans of war, then half of the current occupants of the valley suddenly returned to familiar scenes of fear and bloodshed, jumping in the foliage, cowering behind jeeps, lugging knives and rifles, carefully surveying the fray from that big ditch. (239)

Violence appears here as a new layer of a now-multilayered reality. It is another version of Manzanar's overlapping maps of the city: "*There are maps, and there are maps, and there are maps*," but no one except Manzanar can "see all of them at once" (56; italics original). They all exist simultaneously and comprise a wider perspective on the real, and none of them is disposable. Reality is a palimpsest made of multiple levels and disturbing juxtapositions, where space is allotted for the imagination of social transformation. Distinctive experiences of reality are time and again superimposed on the "standard" version, just as the homeless people appropriate the spaces of the wealthy, while the line of the tropic coalesces with the Mexican American borderline. In *Tropic of Orange*, magical realist techniques effect a highly complex representation of spatial and temporal crossings. Conventions of causality and materiality are regularly violated as the city physically and socially changes shape and distinct worlds, nations, and cultures

congregate and collapse into one metropolis. Los Angeles, formerly a postmodernist city of separation and alienation, now converges with the dismantled Mexican American border and is transformed by magical realist poetics into a celebration of plurality marked by ontological uncertainties. It "becomes the formal embodiment of boundary crossing, of migration, of the unstoppable flow of people and of the literary imagination across the borders of nations" (Rody 2004: 135). The single-mindedness of a border that was previously overdetermined nationally, racially, and economically is dissolved. In its wake we have a multilayered possible world, a Los Angeles socially transformed through the homeless revolution and historically restored through the superimposition of the Latin American experience on the North American present.

III. Gerald Vizenor's "Mythic Verism" in *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*

A similar juxtaposition of spatial and temporal experiences, with equally revolutionary overtones, emerges in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*. And like Yamashita's text, Vizenor's narrative continually deploys postmodern topoi while reveling in fantastic, magical, and mythological storytelling. Chippewa author Gerald Vizenor stands out in American literature as a peculiarly ambivalent figure: while his texts are filled with trickster figures, shamanic experiences, and Native expressions, theoretically the author fully aligns himself with the most canonical postmodernist tradition. Authors such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan emerge recurrently in his essays and criticism, and his novels bear prefaces that time and again invoke postmodern images. "Writing is a search for the meaning that writing itself violently expels. At the end of the search meaning evaporates and reveals to us a reality that literally is meaningless": this quote from Octavio Paz serves as the epigraph to *Griever*, and Vizenor has often expressed elsewhere as well his readiness to assume the postulates and lingo of Western postmodernist writing.

Vizenor's first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978) —published again in 1990 as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*— offers a profusion of Anishinaabe (Chippewa or Ojibway) oral stories

deployed through a series of postmodern narrative strategies. The novel envisions a postapocalyptic world where a Native American mythical outlook blends with a semi-science-fictional universe. Set in the United States after the country has run out of oil, the novel imagines the American government turning to lumber as an alternative source of energy. Proude Cedarfair, or Bearheart, and his wife Rosina are expelled from their homeland, the soon-to-be-logged woodland known as the cedar circus, on the White Earth reservation of the Anishinaabes in Minnesota. The cause of their expulsion is the shortage of energy supplies, which has left the cities "gasless and dark," forcing the federal government to requisition all the trees still standing, including the cedars of the surviving tribal people. In the pilgrimage that ensues, Bearheart and Rosina journey along the empty freeways of an expired world with their two mongrel dogs and seven clown crows, attracting an increasing number of bizarre pilgrims. Within this doomsday scenario, the pilgrims have numerous picaresque adventures, occasionally hitching rides on one of the few cars, boats, vans, or trains still running on a full tank. Heading southwest, the pilgrims stop over in inns, monasteries, and cities till they finally arrive at the fictional village of Walatowa—intertextually linking back to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. Here they discover a stone arch, a mythical vision window through which two of the remaining pilgrims float into the fourth world, thus appropriating a Native Southwest emergence myth.

The novel is playfully postmodern in many of its elements, whether in terms of expression, structure, or ideology. The novel is authored by Vizenor, of course, but the section after the title page "The Heirship Chronicles"—that is, practically all of the novel—is attributed to Saint Louis Bearheart, invoking postmodern notions of authorship, authority, and the nature of texts. Ironical turns, language games, intertextuality, and pastiche fill every page. Most of the characters in *Bearheart* are resurrected in other Vizenor's novels, even after their own fictional deaths. The narrative also highlights its own nature as a "writerly" text: the novel deliberately thwarts the reader's expectations, withholding meanings that were already thought to have been deciphered. Reading close to science fiction, the novel has been considered a hyperreal text (Keady 1985: 61) set in a probable future where the emptiness of modern values is tragically and obscenely exposed. Its central organizational element, the journey motif,

encourages comparisons to other celebrated canonical pilgrimages, namely those of Chaucer and Bunyan; "more pointedly," too, as Louis Owens suggests in the afterword to the 1990 edition of *Bearheart*, the novel parodies "the westering pattern of American 'discovery' and settlement" (1992: 229).

However, even if the novel has been considered an example, perhaps the best example, of Native American postmodernism, *Bearheart* also qualifies, albeit not unproblematically, for a magical realist reading. Granted, the novel clearly inscribes itself within the Native American trickster aesthetics, calling up the oral tradition of storytelling at every turn. However, in its deliberate mixing of the realistic and the fantastic, the absurd and the comic, the grotesque and the macabre, the novel also links to the magical realist mode. Even more, it directly invokes numerous topoi commonly associated with magical realist texts, such as the flying motif and the circus experience. The narrative inserts the reader into a circus-like universe—the cedar circus, inhabited by freaks and fabulous characters. As the place where the physically and mentally different congregate and which deals with illusion and make-believe, the circus is emblematic of magical realist fiction (cf. Hegerfeldt 2005: 132). Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a relevant example here, though the motif has also flourished in North American fiction. Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* plays with circus aesthetics in its presentation of Arcangel, the mystic performer who shares significant traits with Proude Cedarfair. Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, a novel traditionally read as magical realist, also presents many similarities to *Bearheart*, among them the circus as originating space. Kroetsch's novel narrates a fictional westward journey or pilgrimage through Canada; its point of departure is the circus where Magnus Eisengrim, a Canadian Proude Cedarfair, performs his tricks. The circus world coalesces the outlandish and marvelous on stage, with the mundane reality behind the scenes. In this circus-like world the unreal and abnormal, the fantastic and eccentric, become the new norm, even if the hard reality represents the continuous threat on the backstage. As the stage master of this upside-down world, Cedarfair can speak with full authority. The fantastic adventures and improbable happenings the pilgrims experience are naturalized within the circus world. Finally, *Bearheart* coalesces the circus-like atmosphere with postmodernist fabulation, futuristic fantasy, and Native storytelling.

"More Than Mimesis": From "Terminal Creeds" to "Mythic Verism"

> If you look at our traditions all the way back to the plantations you see that satire and signifying are widely used. It's a way of subverting the wishes of the people in power. And that is one of the techniques I've used a lot in my work. One could call it "magic populism." ... it's a variation of the usual social realism approach... the narrative, however, is strange and fantastic.
>
> —Ishmael Reed, "Interview"

Despite its openly postmodernist positioning, Vizenor's *Bearheart* significantly incorporates magical and fantastic elements common to the magical realist tradition. However, unlike Yamashita's *Tropic*, Vizenor's novel in no way invokes magical realism openly, and it is only if we assume a rather loose definition of the narrative mode that we can read magical realist motifs into it. Rather, it aligns with the culturally specific version of magic Ishmael Reed proposes in the epigraph above, one distinctively attuned to the playful and subversive experiences of his ethnic community. Whereas the African American author Reed suggests *magic populism* as a term for describing the use of the subversive and satirical wordplay of the signifying trickster, the magical mode in Vizenor's narratives comes encoded in traditional Native American storytelling techniques, legends, and folklore. In their deliberate stretching of the borders of realism and verisimilitude, as well as in their conscious denunciation and subversion of the power dynamics inscribed in realistic and pseudo-scientific discourses, Vizenor's narratives are, at the very least, closely related to magical realist texts. In any case, recalling a favorite magical realist motif, one of the first things we learn about the novel's protagonist, Proude Cedarfair, is that he "soars through stone windows on the solstice sunrise" (5); this comment foreshadows the moment in the final chapter when Proude and Inawa Biwide travel "in magical flight over the mountains and across rivers" as they follow their vision and "float through the corner window" (242) and into the fourth world. The motif of flying is common in magical realist works. We can see it, for example, in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: in the last scene Milkman Dead flies into the air, thus reenacting the myth of the flying Africans. This motif is also present in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*,

where Sapphira undergoes a similar journey flying back to Africa in a ball of fire, as well as in Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*, where Tilo takes a reverse journey as she flies into American lands aided by the mythical bird across the ocean.

Yet this popular magical realist motif, like most other elements of magic and fantasy in Vizenor's text, is inserted within what he terms "mythic verism," whose links with normative magical realism are as obvious as the many differences between the two modes. In his article "Trickster Discourse" Vizenor defines mythic verism as "a discourse, a critical concordance of narrative voices, and a narrative realism that is more than mimesis or a measure of what is believed to be natural in the world" (1993: 190). In supplying "more than mimesis," mythic verism runs counter to what Vizenor elsewhere terms "terminal creeds," that is, those beliefs that impose a static definition upon the world, arresting all possibilities of creative play, of motion and mutation. In this sense, the notion of terminal creeds stands directly linked to Western realism itself insomuch as both struggle to represent and fix a reality and experience that are presumably objective and external to the text. In an extraordinarily humorous and playfully postmodern chapter, "Word Wars in the Word Wards," Vizenor sends his pilgrims to Bioavaricious, Kansas, where they encounter the "Bioavaricious Regional Word Hospital." At this hospital, as at the other eight such hospitals funded by the government around the country, the employees investigate "the breakdown of language" by use of a "dianoetic chromatic encoder" to "code and then reassemble unit values of meaning in a spoken sentence" (167). This is their deliberate attempt to resuscitate terminal creeds, to go back to mimetic language and rectify the linguistic breakdown. This effort to arrest the free play of language leads hospital employees to use "bioelectrical energies and electromagnetic fields" to enforce words, ideas, even conversations, and to arrive at predetermined values.

Bearheart takes to task those individuals who weave a terminal web of words to protect themselves from reality, thereby degrading those very words they use. The terminal creeds appear as a symbolical haven, even if an illusory one, of full meaning and presence, one that most people turn to in moments of tension and chaos, as represented in the novel: "Economic power had become the religion of the nation; when it failed people turned to their own violence and bizarre terminal creeds for comfort and meaning" (23). In Vizenor's view, terminal

creeds are especially suicidal and destructive for Native American people. In their attempt at cultural representation, these creeds impose a stagnant anthropological gaze, freezing the reality of the Native others in a museum-like setting. Most of Vizenor's texts pursue what he terms "the idea of the invented indian" (Bowers and Silet 1981: 45–47). The Indians of the Western metanarrative, "stuck in coins and words and artifacts," are inventions that later become Native disguises as they are assumed by the Natives themselves. These inventions are taken as real, and many Indian lives (as Belladonna's case makes explicit in *Bearheart*) are molded on them. Vizenor's linguistic intervention, his "word wars," is liberatory, even if troubling. "Some upsetting is necessary," Vizenor proposes. And the upsetting, in a deconstructionist move, must expose the inventions, must free the Indian character from the romantic entrapments. This is what Vizenor sets out to do in *Bearheart*. When the romanticized images have turned into presumably realistic depictions (a direct result of overuse), Vizenor's upsetting of such images brings forward the wildest flights of the imagination, enmeshed in Indian oral storytelling. Imagination, in Vizenor's sense, has to do with the presentation or projection of tradition into the modern and future context. In *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives of Mixed Descent*, Vizenor elaborates on the writers' responsibility to imagine new worlds instead of clinging to "the perfections of the past": "We are aliens in our traditions: the white man has settled with his estranged words right in the middle of our sacred past. Severed from sacred places ... we dreamed so much about the past that we became our invented past... our vision is to imagine like earthdivers a new world" (1981: 107). And this visionary world will be elusively invoked at the end of *Bearheart*, even if only two of the pilgrims are allowed access to it.

Vizenor refuses to become what he terms "mouth warriors," that is, he eludes the writing of pseudo-naturalistic tragedies in which the Native protagonists struggle with the dominant society only to inevitably lose in the end. Instead, he considers himself a "word warrior," a trickster who uses chance, humor, and communal discourse to outwit the conditions and limits imposed on Native culture by the discourse of the social sciences. This way Vizenor links with many other Native American authors whose narrative realism liberates itself from the narrative "terminal creeds" of Western realism by including supernatural events and beings, by breaching the mimetic

contract. Yet Vizenor takes pains not to fall into the new trap of counterhegemonic nativism, a position that he deliberately allows some of his pilgrims, as well as the individuals they encounter along the way. Most of the pilgrims in *Bearheart* have, and are willing to tell, stories of victimization and suffering that contain large amounts of truth. However, these stories, as perverted in the mouth of the tellers, become excuses for all their actions, whether good or evil. These stories are the "terminal creeds" that the pilgrims live by and die by: the pilgrims become, in the appropriately mocking words of the Evil Gambler, "terminal believers in their own goodness" (129). When challenged by the Evil Gambler to a game risking their own lives for a few gallons of gas, the pilgrims hide behind piles of words that they choose as shelter. "We could each choose a list of words," proposes Bishop Parasimo, "the words we most appreciate, words that have power and special meaning to each of us" (111). The words they each choose are, appropriately enough, a condensed version of their life stories and obsessions. However, these words are simply the result of an evasive game, the fear of confronting the Evil Gambler and risking each other's lives. The pilgrims propose their words as a shelter against danger—that is, they hold on to them as terminal creeds, and appropriately enough, they will perish by them.

Belladonna's case is paradigmatic in this regard. When the pilgrims arrive in Orion, a walled-town now inhabited by the descendants of hunters and bucking-horse breeders, she openly reveals her entrapment in terminal creeds. When challenged to define her Native values and her understanding of the essence of Indianness, Belladonna engages in a series of romantic statements: "We are tribal and that means that we are children of dreams and visions... Our bodies are connected to mother earth and our minds are part of the clouds... Indians have more magic in their lives than white people" (194–95). In these pronouncements Belladonna herself falls victim to the terminal creeds that she believes she is criticizing, as one of the hunters forcefully makes clear to her: "Indians are an invention... You tell me the invention is different than the rest of the world when it was the rest of the world that invented the Indian" (195). She defines Indianness as a stable, motionless, static signifier, therefore denying the possibilities of change and adaptability. This view from the outside, even if it comes from a presumed insider, relies on the stereotypical views of Native American life and experience. Though

she sees herself as revering tradition, Belladonna has unwarily assumed the Native simulacrum.

"Mythic Verism"

Belladonna's terminal creeds, her unquestioning assumption of the given discourses on and about Indian life and experience, link with Vizenor's views of reality as always already defined and made stagnant for the individual. The terminal creeds are part of what Vizenor terms "word wars," or the never-ending struggle to free oneself from entrapment by the metanarrative of the social sciences. It is that view of a ready-made reality, responsible for the presentation of cardboard Indians, that Vizenor's texts set out to upset. Vizenor's texts struggle to expose the new versions of Vanishing Indians and their diminished reality and to replace them with more playful, liberatory views of Native American experience. However, this subversive move requires the previous upsetting of the representational politics of the social sciences. It is in this sense that Vizenor proposes mythic verism, and the alternative worlds it puts forward, as an attempt to discard the institutional and academic stereotypes "invented" for Native Americans by Western culture.

The final inquisition scene in *Bearheart* reads much like a judicial confrontation between the elusive poetics of mythic verism/magical realism and the empirical narratives of realism/the law. The inquisitors try to pin reality down to one single, verisimilar sequence of causes and effects, while the poetics of the pilgrims elude those forces through silence, metaphor, nonsense, magic, visions, and the like. This confrontation of worldviews is self-evident in the inquisitors' questioning of Rosina Cedarfair, the first of the pilgrims to go through the inquisitorial process. To the inquisitors' puzzled responses to Rosina's mixing of verisimilar and fantastic stories, Rosina replies:

> "Not so strange when you think about some of the things we have seen," said Rosina in a plaintive voice. "We have been walking from the cedar nation for more than two months now and there has been violence and death... Death and whitepeople punishing and killing each other for no reason... So when the head of the witch came back on a stick we never thought much about it." (225–26)

The realistic and the fantastic share the same space in Rosina's account, to the surprise of the inquisitors. Vizenor's irony is clear in his choice of the inquisition as the enemy the pilgrims will have to confront at the end of their journey. Hardly any other Western institution could be more involved in a magical view of the world than the inquisition itself. However, whereas the inquisition projected a magical view of evil in the world, the pilgrims expose their different view, as is evident in Sun Bear Sun's exchange with the inquisitors:

> "Does Proude have magic power?"
> "He knows things... He sees spiritual things."
> "Does he do evil?"
> "Never evil... He takes care not to upset balances of good and evil and the energies of demons... What reason is there to find evil in what lives[?] ... When our world is gone the tribes will still be dancing in great circles over the earth." (233)

The alternative worlds of mythic verism, just like the entrance into the fourth world envisioned at the end of *Bearheart*, represent a metaphorical liberation both for Vizenor's characters and for his readers. Vizenor's stories are, as he himself puts it, "mythic stories of transformation and survivance, and not a course on naturalism or realism" (1999: 110). It is not cultural representation, or the reflection of a culture in stasis, that Vizenor is interested in. The author avoids the tendency to engage in Native cultural representations and opts for stories of Native transformation. Thus the Natives remain elusive, the tease of representation, but never fully represented. Some readers, as Vizenor himself laments (1999: 110), approached the novel looking for those cultural representations, only to be frustrated. The blending of the natural with the supernatural in Vizenor's text emerges as an insurgent force against the realism of the social sciences.

Yet in a certain way Vizenor's text is more realistic than the realism of ethnographers and social scientists. As in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, despite the futuristic setting of the novel as seen from a present-day perspective, the world it re-creates has its clear connections with both the past and the future of American reality. After all, *Bearheart* was written when the oil crisis was on everybody's mind, and the possibility of a return to older forms of energy was an outcry of many groups. And at the same time, it speaks against the American history of expulsion of Native communities and

exploitation of their natural resources, with Proude Cedarfair recalling other Native victims of American expropriation, like Fleur in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, among many others. Similar linking of historical claims and present concerns abound in *Tropic of Orange*, where Arcangel brings together the long history of Latin American colonial exploitation and neoliberal economic practices, such as those implemented by the NAFTA agreement. If late-twentieth-century multiculturalist policies struggled to create a dehistoricized mosaic in which, as if in a second colonization of the continent, the U.S. ethnic individual is newly born to a land of equality and democracy, *Bearheart* and *Tropic of Orange* historicize these new utopias. Though both novels put forward futuristic scenarios, they manage to maintain a clear sense of reality. For the writer himself, the stories in *Bearheart* were realistic to the point of becoming haunting: "I lived in terror, as if, in fact, the characters of my creation were on the streets," explains Vizenor, who later complained, "The characters almost made me an aesthetic victim of my stories" (1999:112). As Elizabeth Blair contends (1995: 88), "*Bearheart* redresses old losses by replacing that part of the text which was excised in ethnographic transcriptions of the oral tradition." The perverse, scatological, cruel, and inexorably humorous world of trickster stories is allowed freely into the text again, liberating the Native American imaginary. The terminal creeds, with their emphasis on anthropological representation, explode into humorous excess, language games, and the role of the imagination. After all, as Louis Owens argues (1998: 91), in the oral traditions of Native Americans, the different peoples would define themselves and their place in an imagined universe. As "a narrative realism that is more than mimesis," mythic verism links to the author's imagining of an alternative world, rather than to the mere invention of it. In this sense, Vizenor's hermeneutics stands at a certain distance from Quentin and Shreve's inventions in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* While Faulkner's characters "replenished" their narrative by inventing the missing links in Henry Sutpen's life, Vizenor's characters dive deep into Native American life experiences to imagine new worlds. And this imagined universe is constantly being re-created in the stories, in the telling. Understandably, for Vizenor the verisimilar accounts of the social sciences represent a fixing, limiting, deadening force on the dynamic flow of Native American stories and experiences. It is through the recourse to magic, to the mixing of

sacred and profane, history and fact, myth and fantasy, that Vizenor effects the "necessary upsetting" that he envisions for his texts.

Endnotes

1. R. Radhakrishnan (1993) differentiates metropolitan hybridity from postcolonial hybridity, which is an expression of "extreme pain and agonizing dislocation." Metropolitan hybridity, a celebratory, comfortable jouissance of cultural heterogeneity, hides "the subject of the dominant West." We could propose a similar distinction between celebratory metropolitan magical realism and painful and agonizing postcolonial magical realism.
2. McHale argues that "postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (1987: xii).
3. Mary Brent Madison argues that this cultural war can be traced back to Plato's Greece, in particular to the confrontation between those who held that true knowledge was knowledge that conformed to the dictates of nature itself (*physis*) and those who held that knowledge was a matter of mere convention (*nomos*) and was thus arbitrary and culturally relative (2001: 2).
4. According to string theory, one of the latest developments in theoretical physics, everything that exists is made up of unimaginably tiny strands of energy. The vibrations of these "strings" give rise to the stars in the Big Dipper and the atoms in a drop of water, the push of the wind and the pull of gravity. There is as yet no way to verify through experiment that strings are real: they are too small to be observed. Their existence is inferred only through higher mathematics, the language by which theoretical physicists explore and describe the world. And the math of string theory points to other, equally startling ideas: that in addition to the four dimensions we know (length, height, depth, and time) there are seven more dimensions of space that we don't experience; and that a multitude of parallel universes may reside alongside our own.
5. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale contends that "postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic, as much as it has affinities with the science fiction genre" (74). It draws equally on both genres for motifs and *topoi*.
6. In any case, and though it has frequently been posited that the magical realist, at least in the Cortázar strain, represents a reality already magical and miraculous, we can never forget that both the consciously postmodern and the magical realist are literary constructions, and therefore deliberately fictional.
7. However, conjecturing, albeit in the form of folk wisdom, is also a classic motif of magical realism, forcefully present in García Márquez´s *Cien años de soledad* and regularly replicated in numerous other works. In Naylor's *Mama Day*, the legend says that the seventh daughter/son of a seventh daughter/son will have special powers (thus Naylor connects with Du Bois, who in *The Souls of Black Folk* calls "the Negro ... a sort of seventh son" in the history of civilization).
8. Red Dress traces his spatiotemporal pilgrimage thus: "I am hitched to the living, still moved by their concerns. My spirit never abandons the Dakota people, though sometimes all I can do is watch. I was there when the army confiscated our

horses to cut off our legs. I stood behind the Ghost Dancers, and when they fainted in desperate, useless ecstasy, I blew a refreshing wind into their faces. There have been too many soldiers and too many graves. Too many children packed into trains and sent to the other side of the country. Many times I ran alongside those trains and waved at the bleak copper faces. You are Dakota, I called to them. You are Dakota. One time I stood in front of a chuffing engine and tried to keep it from moving forward, but it blasted through me. I saw the language shrivel, and though I held out my hands to catch the words, so many of them slipped away, beyond recall. I am a talker now and chatter in my people's ears until I grow weary of my own voice. I am memory, I tell them when they're sleeping."

9. Significantly, the introduction of newer forms in the representation of the real was always endowed with revolutionary overtones and emancipatory potential. Such was the case with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which destroyed the literacy monopoly of the Catholic Church and the feudal state. The printing press fulfilled its liberatory potential inasmuch as it freed the texts of the great Greek and Latin thinkers from the religious cloisters and made them available to the common man. In *Tropic of Orange*, Buzzworm's new kind of TV seems to point at a similar accomplishment of the revolutionary potential of electronic media.

4
Juxtaposed Realities: Magical Realism and/as Postcolonial Experience

> Now then if surrealism pursued the marvelous, one would have to say that it very rarely looked for it in reality. The marvelous real that I defend and that is 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.
>
> —Alejo Carpentier, "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real"

I. From Paris to the Postcolonial World: Juxtaposed Realities

During his stay in Paris in the 1920s, Alejo Carpentier participated in the early stages of surrealism, a cultural movement whose declared intention was to produce fully new aesthetic effects and to generate a new reality, a reality over and above the real. This new reality was, as Breton postulates in the Surrealist Manifesto, following Pierre Reverdry, the direct result of "a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities." The juxtaposition, however, is "spontaneous," "despotic," the product of a thinking completely unfettered insomuch as it reaches beyond the limiting function of reason and of moral and aesthetic preoccupations. To the young Carpentier, the surrealists' emphasis on the connection between the beautiful and the marvelous—"Let us not mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful," claimed Breton—would work as a catalyst for his own fiction beyond the surrealist poetics. After his early participation in the movement, Carpentier moved out, only to initiate a cultural counterpoint to the marvelous effects fellow European artists were

trying to produce. He proposed to translate those attempts to generate the marvelous effect onto what he regarded as an always already marvelous Latin American reality. This effort would lead both to a critique of the emptiness and artificiality of the European marvelous and to a new valorization of the aesthetic potential of Latin American folklore, ontology, and reality. In "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso," Carpentier concludes, "Aquí lo insólito es cotidiano, siempre fue cotidiano" (2004: 67). Gabriel García Márquez follows Carpentier in his attention to the marvelous nature of the Latin American everyday reality: "Creo que si uno sabe mirar, lo cotidiano puede ser de veras extraordinario. La realidad cotidiana es mágica pero la gente ha perdido su ingenuidad y ya no le presta atención. Yo encuentro correlaciones increíbles en todas partes" (Menton 1998: 56) ("I believe that if one knows how to look, the everyday can be truly extraordinary. Everyday reality is magical, but people have lost their ingenuity and do not pay attention anymore. I find incredible connections everywhere"—our translation). In contrast to what they deemed the aesthetic exhaustion revealed by the European avant-garde's failure to produce a feeling of the fantastic and marvelous, Carpentier and (perhaps to a lesser extent) García Márquez championed the full potential of American reality as a source of magical (aesthetic) effects.[1] This significant critical move opened a gap between the formal or experimental transgression of realist aesthetics, which involved Western writers looking for new artistic effects, and the representation of realities always perceived as magical, which engaged mostly non-Western and postcolonial writers. As many critics have pointed out, Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* is, at most, only a particular strand of magical realism. However, even if taken as distinctive narrative modes, both magical realism and *lo real maravilloso* can be grouped together in their championing of indigenous and postcolonial cultural perceptions and in their rejection of the playful literary experimentation associated with the West.

Following Carpentier's thesis, magical realism—incorporating *lo real maravilloso* as a basic, almost indistinct component—was first critically acclaimed as a unique Latin American phenomenon. It was in the 1990s, with the internationalization of this mode of writing, that such reductive spatial ascription would be discredited as a "territorialization of the imaginary" (Chanady 1995: 131), if not as a downright "geographical fallacy" (Wilson 1995: 223). And it is only

recently that magical realism has come to be acknowledged—though not without ample contestation—as the postcolonial mode par excellence. In its focus on the hybridization of irreconcilable opposites, the straddling of borders between cultures, and the blurring of distinctions between opposed worldviews, magical realism easily accommodates postcolonial literatures. The coexistence, in certain magic realist texts, of a dominant rational-scientific worldview and a premodern mythical perspective lent itself readily to many postcolonial spaces, where it was seen to channel their oppositional stances. Stephen Slemon argues, "Magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of borders and centers, and to work toward destabilizing their fixity" (1995: 13). In a similar vein, postcolonial texts frequently debate issues of centrality and marginality, the urban and the rural, the Western and the indigenous, replicating central magical realist issues.

In sight of the contemporaneousness of postcolonial writing and magical realist writing, Elleke Boehmer sees the two tendencies as "almost inextricable" (1995: 235). For Boehmer, postcolonial writers in English draw on the special effects of magical realism to represent a world "fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement" (1995: 235). In this sense, magical realism can be construed as an oppositional instrument, overtly critical of imperial and colonialist politics. For a reputed postcolonial critic like Homi Bhabha, magical realism has become "the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (1990: 7). Along the same lines, Anne Hegerfeldt considers magical realism "an inherently postcolonial mode," since it seeks to subvert colonial cultural hierarchies "by revaluing the alternative, non-Western systems of thought, presenting them as a corrective or supplement to the dominant world view" (2002: 63). By blending "the supernatural with local legends and imagery derived from colonialist cultures" (Boehmer 1995: 235), magical realist narratives highlight the unsettling elements of invasion, occupation, and political corruption, directly derived from former colonial situations. Similarly, Fredric Jameson notes that "magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlaps of the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (1986: 311), in what has become another common trait of many emerging postcolonial communities. The uneasy juxtaposition of mythological beliefs and the rational-scientific outlook, frequently

seen as a defining feature of magical realism, is a constant in the literature of formerly colonized societies. In turn, José David Saldívar claims the special influence of the Latin American brand of magical realism on writings by North American ethnic minorities as much as by Third World writers. For Saldívar, García Márquez's writings emphasize the "oral expressions" of Third World cultures and thus accent the collective voice of the folk world, the unofficial, the anti-official (1991a: 94–95). The main contribution of García Márquez and others to Third World writing has been, in Saldívar's analysis, the disruption of status-quo versions of reality through the emphasis on the oral, mythic, folk views of reality.

However, the translation and relocation of Latin American magical realism to a U.S. ethnic space, a postcolonial space, or even a global space is not devoid of its particular problematics, as this chapter reveals. Though the central motifs and narrative elements of magical realism can be replicated by writers from many different geographical locations, the sociopolitical and cultural conditions within which these texts are produced and received are radically different, as is the cultural work the texts themselves undertake. It is precisely the perception and analysis of these differences that can make magical realism relevant as a postcolonial, global phenomenon, rather than their blurring or complete erasure in the willful search for a central postcolonial genre. For it is self-evident that many postcolonial texts replicate key magic realist techniques in a variety of ways. The unproblematic juxtaposition of the real and the supernatural, as well as the untroubled acceptance of such phenomena by the characters in the novel, are trademarks of magical realism found equally in Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Colombian García Márquez, in Nigerian Ben Okri and Australian Peter Carey, in Native American Louise Erdrich and Canadian Robert Kroetsch. However, beyond the structural replication of narrative motifs, the ideological sources and results of magic realist texts can vary greatly depending on the sociopolitical conditions of their emergence and reception.

Moreover, the formal elements of magical realism can be put to use and successfully replicated by canonical Western writers, as William Kennedy's Albany novels clearly prove. And Western writers, though comfortably situated at the very center of their hegemonic cultural formations, can experience similar uneasy juxtapositions in their own sociopolitical environments. After all,

Euro-American history, from the Enlightenment to the present, is hardly devoid of problematic mixings, cultural and religious schisms, and ethnic ruptures, and these affect its cultural margins as much as the mainstream. William Kennedy's uneasy grafting of Irish Catholic backgrounds onto Albany's skid-row experiences naturally results in the constant emergence of fantasy, magic, and surrealism in the midst of starkly realistic or stylistically mundane passages.

In any case, and granted that the magical realist mode is also ubiquitous in the West,[2] its rather peripheral presence in Western *canonical* literary traditions contrasts with its contemporary centrality in postcolonial and U.S. ethnic environments. It is less important to assess the widespread nature of the mode, however, than to critically explore its aesthetic and ideological complexities, as well as the cultural work it does: rather than attempting to represent particular worldviews and cultural experiences in a straightforward or anthropological way, postcolonial and U.S. ethnic magical realist writing offers complex aesthetic artifacts that dialogue with and participate in particular cultural contexts. Instead of simply exploring local empirical circumstances, magical realist texts mostly provide unconventional ways of representing such circumstances, whether by opening up imaginary alternative spaces, both geographical and literary, or by subverting and reformulating traditional ways of representing ethnic and marginal life experiences. After exploring the ambivalent presence of magical realist writing in postcolonial and U.S. ethnic culture, this chapter dwells on two novels infrequently analyzed as magical realist, but nonetheless pervaded by some of its central motifs. In dislocating and resiting Western canonical texts, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* offer two distinctive versions of the magical realist re-creation of alternative spaces, geographic and semiotic. Gloria Naylor's representation of the magical "Other Place" of Willow Springs as a geographic space beyond the reaches of Western empiricism has an appropriate replica in Thomas King's articulation of a fluid semiotic space beyond Western textual authority. The magical interventions in both texts emerge through the representation of imaginary, nonempirical spaces occupied by liminal characters who easily traverse both worlds.

Postcolonial Marvels

André Breton's narrative juxtaposition of "two more or less distant realities" in the Paris of the 1920s aptly epitomizes the unwanted but inevitable state of mind of postcolonial communities in Africa and Asia after the demise of the colonial empires. The straddling of two remote cultures, with their concomitant cross-pollination, is generally recognized as a distinctive mark of many postcolonial societies. The mestizo nature of most postcolonial cultures results in the frequent presentation of dualities and juxtapositions, the "double consciousness" that Du Bois explored in the African American experience, or, in a somewhat different context, the "dual consciousness" theorized by Frantz Fanon in *White Skins, Black Masks*. Two different cultural outlooks may coexist in a problematical, confrontational relationship. "A negro is forever in combat with his own image" (1967: 194), indicated Fanon when discussing Africans' dual consciousness. Beyond the sphere of identity formation, this duality is also at work in the colonized culture's view of reality. In this sense, the dual consciousness, or what Rawdon Wilson terms "conflicted consciousness" (1995: 222), invokes a perception contaminated by others, an experience and a voice inhabited by an alien culture. It is the always problematic hybridization of those two distant realities that results, as Bhabha argues, in the "third space" of postcoloniality (1994: 211).[3] In this "third space," *mestizaje* or creolization becomes the inescapable consequence of the interweaving of elements from diverse and irreconcilable perspectives, most notably the residual elements of colonizing cultures engrafted onto the emergent and reconstituted indigenous cultures. The "two more or less distant realities" frequently re-created in postcolonial narratives fulfill key aspects of many definitions of magical realism. Rawdon Wilson, for one, considers magical realism the "fictional space created by the dual inscriptions of alternative geometries" (1995: 225). Along the same lines, Slemon proposes that in magical realist texts two oppositional discursive systems are at war, each struggling to create a different fictional world; since neither of them can succeed, both remain finally suspended. That sustained opposition between the two systems precludes "the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation" (1995:

409–10). The similarities between that suspension of discursive systems and the suspension of the cultural systems of the colonizer and the colonized are especially pertinent in the case of ethnic authors writing in the magical realistic mode. Exploring further the interconnection between magical realism and the postcolonial world, Slemon goes on to claim that magical realism can express three postcolonial elements: "First, due to its dual narrative structure, magical realism is able to present the postcolonial context both from 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 point of view of the colonized" (qtd. in Bowers 2004: 97). The literary exploration of conflicting worldviews in the postcolonial world, and of the tensions and gaps of representation, results in the recurrent portrayal of realist worlds permeated by disruptive extrasensory realities (as in the presence of ghosts and ancestral spirits) or by openly magical entities.

However, assuming the juxtaposition of two clearly delineated realities may not be true to the diversity and multiplicity of postcolonial experiences. The capacity to "trace two original moments" (Bhabha) from which the postcolonial third space emerges depends on particular histories and directly impinges on the narrative dramatization of conflicting realities. In some postcolonial environments—especially in newly decolonized African countries—the juxtaposition of distant realities may spring from a recent history of tragic dislocations, temporal intrusions, colonial displacements, and foreign interventions still vividly felt; but in other countries—most notably in Latin America—a long history of cultural syncretism has effected a more organic integration of diverse cultural elements. For Carpentier, some versions of Latin America's *lo real maravilloso* seem to emerge from a very immediate and unified view of reality, one that has fully internalized its own organically hybrid nature and now champions it as its most distinctive characteristic.[4] In the narratives of *lo real maravilloso* there is no dramatization of internally conflicting worldviews, for these have fully integrated their diverse cultural origins into a single mestizo culture. Whether it is ultimately a residual effect of sociocultural amalgamation and juxtapositions that

originated in distant colonial experiences, or a vivid memory of traumatic colonial practices, a manifestly magical and multidimensional reality does permeate the everyday experience of many postcolonial peoples. As Parkinson Zamora and Faris explain, following Alejo Carpentier, in Latin America "improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto" (Zamora-Faris 1995: 75). Even if the magical element is inextricably linked to former colonial times, its present existence may be deeply rooted, internalized, and organically integrated into the social perception of the real. In Carpentier's fiction, the Cuban blending of African religions, native Caribbean beliefs, and Spanish Catholic images results in a peculiar view of life—necessarily hybrid, but fully accepted—more than a century after the end of the colonial experience. Ben Okri's depiction of what Wole Soyinka called "the African world view" (1976: 33) results, in Okri's own words, in "a world where the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality" (Ross 1993: 338). This extended reality, Okri contends, is not the result of a fictional manipulation of perception. Rather, it "is just the way the world is seen" (Ross 1993: 338). Similarly, Native American writer Susan Power stated in an oral interview that "[g]iven the culture I was raised in, this is not magical realism, this is actually reality to me." Carpentier, Okri, Soyinka, and Power are not, they claim, making deliberate efforts to transcend an established notion of reality; rather, they are consciously attempting to expand novelistic discourse to make room for alternative and complementary views on the real. When seen from inside their originating cultures, the magic introduces no ontological rupture: it is simply another element in the fictional representation of an immediate, intimate reality.[5]

However, even Carpentier's allegedly ontological, organic *lo real maravilloso* discloses the presence of a disguised layer of intentional, epistemological magical realism. Whereas the magical perspective may be organically, even seamlessly, integrated into the everyday life of the people—therefore perceived as magical only by outsiders—the novelistic rendering of magic may equally arise from the deliberate fictional juxtaposition of two opposed perspectives. What we could term "intentional" magical realism, following Bakhtin's distinction between organic and intentional hybridity in *The Dialogic*

Imagination, distances itself from Carpentier's "organic" perspective insomuch as it considers the magical elements as carefully chosen instruments for ironizing, relativizing, and questioning certain long-established boundaries and fixed beliefs. In this consciously experimental strand, authors deploy the magical element as a calculated fictional creation designed to eschew realist absolutism by rejoicing in mongrelized, impure, highly asymmetrical combinations. When this irreverent blending emerges in postcolonial environments, as in the paradigmatic case of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the resulting narrative is far from a "faithful" representation of a particular cultural worldview; rather, the problematic mélange of magical and realistic elements ultimately underlines its own oxymoronic nature. This intentional contamination frequently occurs in situations where the colonialist presence still directly affects people's lives and imposes a necessarily problematic view of reality; where the colonial experience has resulted in unintegrated tensions, clashing temporalities, and dysfunctional blendings in postcolonial spaces. In this sense, the magical element is not the positive result of *mestizaje* effected at different levels (social and literary); instead, it springs from and reveals a systemic malfunction. The magic in Toni Morrison's novels, whether the magical flight back to Africa in *Song of Solomon*, the blue-eyed illusion in *The Bluest Eye*, or the return of the repressed past in *Beloved*, is not so much the outcome of amalgamation and hybridity as the dysfunctional result of a history of subjugation and deprivation that refuses to be obliterated. At the same time, Morrison's novels betray the destructive effects of a continually shifting story of domination lingering into the present.

Yet despite the presumed applicability of the magical realistic label to much postcolonial writing, if the term *magical realism* is to have any descriptive potential, we must resist totalizing tendencies and pay close attention to the uneven historical formations and geographical spaces where it emerges, rather than conflating all its disparities into a center/margin, realistic/magical opposition. Sweeping generalizations about magical realism as a global postcolonial aesthetics will always fail to recognize local particularities. Critical insight must be directed toward the different impulses behind the use of magical realistic techniques in the many different postcolonial environments where it is currently found.

The Dogmatic Mimesis of "Pure" Representation

> From within the system you cannot hope to generate anything that negates the system as a whole or portends the experience of something other than the system, or outside the system.
>
> —Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism"

The association of realism with former colonial times, and postrealism—or nonrealism—with various processes of decolonization, opposition, and resistance, is common among postcolonial writers and scholars. Realism is regularly linked not only with the colonizer, but also with the colonizing project and the civilizing mission resulting from the European Enlightenment. For many postcolonial authors, the realism that appeared by the end of the nineteenth century—generally tied to its new partner in crime, "representation"—was the most abhorred of literary forms. Postcolonial writers resented what Frye describes as a strong conservative element at the core of realism, with the concomitant acceptance of society in its present form (cf. Frye 1976: 106). However, narrative forms become ideologically loaded mostly as a result of their deployment in particular historical contexts over time. It was indeed the long historical evolution of the disputed notion of realism—and its sister notion, mimesis—that transformed narrative realism into the favored tool in the hands of dominant writers and hegemonic cultures during the colonialist era. No doubt, under many different guises and through a wide variety of interpretations, the preoccupation with realism has pervaded Western culture since its earliest origins in Greek philosophy. Realist concerns were already implicit in the Greek philosophical trinity: the Beautiful, the Good, and the True. This trinity, proposed initially by Socrates and recorded by Plato in his *Philebus*, was to pervade Western culture over the centuries, whether embedded in its philosophical constructions or in its religious systems. Realism saturated the three categories, for nothing could be beautiful, true, and good without being regarded as intrinsically real, or realistic. Indeed, Plato himself included "the Real" as one of the four universals, together with the True, the Beautiful, and the Good.

Though originally a philosophical elaboration, the triad was extraordinarily enforced by Christianity, acquiring ontological status

in Western culture over the centuries.[6] During the Middle Ages, Beauty, Goodness, and Truth were all seen as directly derived from God. These three universals were the result of the perfect analogy between the "Book of God's Works"—the Book of Nature—and the "Book of God's Words"—the Scripture. All Beauty, Goodness, and Truth on the earth were but a reflection of the qualities of the divinity, carefully implanted on all of nature. The perception and true interpretation of physical reality was only a path toward the invisible and the eternal. The individual simply had to discover the true nature of reality behind its physical appearance, since all natural objects were divinely ordered and related to one another. That is, the perception of reality depended on the human ability to read the two books simultaneously and find the hidden connections. Apart from the imposition of a particular apprehension of reality, a fundamental result of the religious triad was the veiled construction of its own devilish opposites: the ugly, wrong, and evil. If the observation of true reality led to the divinity and to order and harmony, any communion with the unreal, superstitious, fanciful, occultist, or magical was directly related to the dark powers of evil.

The gradual transformation of the religious triad—the Beautiful, the Good, and the True—into a secular, philosophical triad began in the seventeenth century, as scientists and philosophers of nature ventured beyond the strict limits of religious understanding. Scientists such as Kepler, Galileo, and Newton attempted to separate the study of the Book of Nature from its strict adherence to the Book of God's words. It was Francis Bacon—the spokesman for the new age of learning and science—who first proposed that the two books, Nature and Scripture, should be studied separately: "Let no man out of weak conceit of sobriety, or an ill-applied moderation, think or maintain that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works; divinity or philosophy; but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficiency in both" (1974: 9). The physical world was not submitted to God's words and could now be analyzed through alternative perspectives. For Galileo, for example, rather than in divine words, the Book of Nature was "written in the language of mathematics" and could be understood only by the application of mathematics. The result of the scientific interventions of the seventeenth century was that the Book of God's Words no longer dictated the true reality behind the individual's

observation and interpretation of the physical world. In the wake of a receding faith in religiously sanctioned approaches to the real, scientific observation and experimentation occupied a preeminent role in humans' access to and perception of the physical world. The Beautiful, Good, and True gradually became disentangled from religious dogma and tied to scientific observation.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, which produced rationalist, empiricist approaches to nature during the eighteenth century, would, by the beginning of the nineteenth, align itself with industrialization and colonialism, both powerful instruments in the human attempt to master nature. The systematizing of the knowledge of nature during the eighteenth century ran parallel to the rise of the Western bourgeoisie and its colonial ventures around the globe. Nature analysis and nature exploitation ran hand in hand. In its turn, these developments were being appropriately reflected in the world of the novel, perceived as the most suitable representational instrument. In the midst of a radically changing world, where the former religious truths no longer provided a credible sense of reality, the realist novel became an adequate secular substitute. The realist novel presented a stable, ordered, and objectively verifiable world, the perfect context for the development of industrialization and colonialism. In its empiricist, materialist approach to reality, the realist novel—essentially a bourgeois genre—both embeds and reifies the ideology of the bourgeoisie. Mostly devoid of religious justification, the colonial ventures of the bourgeoisie found in realism a renewed version of the triad in that realism emerged as the sole purveyor of the one and only real and true story, as pure representation without any relational link to particular modes of perception. Realist depictions of the colonial world were good, beautiful, and true, for they appeared to be founded on empirical, nonideological perceptions. Hence, as Slemon argues, that realism became the preferred ethnographic mode because it directed "the burden of representation entirely onto the object under observation and away from the figure who is observing, measuring, and recording" (1991: 74).

However, even if realism purported to be merely a descriptive and aseptic instrument, it was loaded with an inherent normative and hegemonic function, what Edward Said qualifies as "the dogmatic mimesis of 'pure' representation" (1993: 276). In the realist narratives of the nineteenth century, the "real thing" was given to the reader

without any relativism: it claimed to be a mirror image of the real world outside the text, representing real men under their real circumstances. In this way, as Michael Wood concedes, "realism covers its own contingency" (2002: 13–14). Slemon stresses the same notion when he argues that realism can be seen as "a mode which attempts to pass off as 'natural' the signifying system within which the literary work is constructed, and thus to stabilize the dominant social values of a work's time and place" (1991: 74). While the realist depiction of experience tended to underline notions of order and harmony, the law and the status quo, its nonrealistic opposite—the fantastic, the carnivalesque, the grotesque, the superstitious, or the magical—presupposed a dangerous deviation, an escape from representation and mimesis that signaled other ideological unruliness, as Bakhtin amply theorized in his assessment of the European Renaissance. Nonrealist excess, a constant threat lurking behind colonial realities, defied textual containment and was therefore eschewed as superstition. All realist anomalies and inconsistencies represent illegitimate intrusions of fancy, for realist mimesis is more realistic in terms of how it distances itself from various modes of fantasy. Conversely, fantasy links directly with "falsism" in that it results from the illegitimate break of the rules of realism, a step beyond the Beautiful, Good, and True, necessarily allied with evil and wrong. In this sense, in the colonial world realism authorized exclusion, not only in aesthetics[7] but also in social and political terms, for it not only permitted but positively produced the theoretical basis for persecution, stigmatization, and subjection.

To many postcolonial writers, these elements within the realistic narrative mode account for its continuing imperialistic stain. Wendy B. Faris argues that "the fact that realism claims to give an accurate picture of the world, based in fidelity to empirical evidence," along with its status as a European import, has led writers in colonized societies to regard realism as "the language of the colonizer" (2002: 103). In this sense, for some postcolonial writers, adhering to the realist mode of writing also means holding on to the inherent colonial values inscribed in that mode, as well as a reinforcement of the hierarchies of the colonial system. Therefore, adopting nonrealistic narratives equals avoiding those colonialist values (cf. Suzanne Baker, 1993). Yet the road to decolonization may accept realistic narratives as a preliminary stage to be transcended. In his genealogical overview

of African writing, Kwame Anthony Appiah proposes that African fiction has gone through several stages to arrive at its present condition. A first step toward decolonization is signaled by what he labels "realist legitimations of nationalism" (1992: 150). A strategically necessary though transitional stage, this first phase leads to the "postrealist," postcolonial phase. In the second stage, African writing "rejects—indeed assaults—the conventions of realism" (150). The dialectics at work here equates former realism with assimilation or contamination, while anti- or postrealism marks the true rejection of "the Western imperium." This equation is no doubt premised on the fact that in the colonial world, the dominant—generally Western—writers initially projected their fallaciously objective perspective onto the foreign spaces of the colonized through the deployment of realistic narratives. Despite their presumed realism, these accounts generally failed to grasp the experience of the other in its full complexity, because either interest or perception was lacking.[8] The reports elaborated by these writers, whether in the form of travel narratives, anthropological essays, or narrative fiction, adamantly adhered to the tenets of realism. The principles of the Enlightenment, with rationality and the real as ultimate touchstones, were predominant both during the era of nineteenth-century colonialism and during the formation and evolution of the U.S. The enlightened principles of rationality, logic, and science were especially valid in the process of occupation of lands and peoples who were seen as possessed of a certain superstitious outlook. In this context, power over the others, as Bowers indicates (2004: 68), was the result of the power to define the world around those others and to represent it in a presumably universal, hegemonic, realistic narrative. It is not surprising, then, as many scholars have pointed out,[9] that the rise of realism also coincides—as *Robinson Crusoe* already prefigures—with the rise of colonial empires.

Yet assuming that merely adopting nonrealistic, carnivalesque, or magical narrative modes of writing can be, in itself, a liberating move is not fully devoid of dangers. Some critics (Carter 1992; Moss 2000) lament the limitations that the binary "realism/nonrealism" poses for postcolonial writers. The view of realism as complicit with imperialism, and therefore with "universalism, essentialism, positivism, individualism, modernity, historicism, and so on" (Carter 1992: 296), has the concomitant effect of branding all postcolonial

realist writing "not resistant enough." However, many recent postcolonial writers are interested in depicting the "actual" conditions and experiences of their communities by recurring to the realist mode. For these, reality itself is so pressing and demanding that any flights of fancy are utterly unjustified. Fiction, if it is to be politically and socially significant, must cater to the everyday experiences of the people. Of late, a new generation of Latin American writers is reacting against the constraints of magical realism in favor of a renovated look on Latin America's current reality, a reality that engages issues like globalization, migration, and virtual worlds. In 1996 one of these writers, Alberto Fuguet, a Chilean who lived in the U.S., joined fellow Chilean writer Sergio Gómez to edit an anthology of modern non-magical-realist Latin American writing. Rather than revering Macondo once again, the anthology updates García Márquez's mythical town, renaming it McOndo and using that name as the title for the anthology. This significant title is meant to point toward the deliberate move away from the mix of myth and history and politics that has been part of magical realism in Latin America. As the editors claim in the preface, "Aquí no hay realismo mágico, hay realismo virtual." As part of their "virtual realism," the eighteen authors included in the anthology, all under thirty-five, offer irreverent, aggressive, even scatological tales of modern urban life, against a background of sex, drugs, and pop music.

Effective Resistance or Commodified Primitivism?

In attempting to capture the reality of the unseen and the mysterious, Brenda Cooper argues that writers using magical realist motifs run the risk of providing "the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership" (1998: 32). While writers like Isabel Allende continue to claim that magical realist fiction can reflect the why's of history better than other writing modes can, a whole new generation of authors and critics hold conflicting views. Writers like Edmundo Pérez Soldán, Alberto Fuguet, and Reinaldo Arenas and scholars like Michael Taussig (1987), Michael Valdez Moses (2001), and Roberto González Echevarría (1990), among others, have voiced significantly different positions. In his story "I Am Not a Magic Realist," Fuguet discards contemporary Latin American writers who continue to model themselves on the Latin American "boom" writers.

These authors, in Fuguet's words, "have transformed fiction writing into the fairy-tale business, cranking out shamelessly folkloric novels that cater to the imaginations of politically correct readers—readers who, at present, aren't even aware of Latino cultural realism" (1997). In its tendency to represent legends, folklore, myths, and beliefs that clearly take the Western reader back to remote places and times, magical realist fiction may risk being labeled as narrative primitivism, claims Faris (2002: 103). For González Echevarría, the fact that magical realist writing is about myth, while failing to be mythical itself, testifies to its commodification of primitivism. Rather than magical literature, these texts are a form of what Echevarría terms "mock anthropology," dramatizing a nostalgia for magical worldviews long gone.[10] Directly linked with the issue of cultural commodification and the need to pander to Western aesthetic sensibilities are the issues of escapism and cultural anachronism. Michael Valdez Moses argues that just like the historical romance, magical realist writings "are compensatory sentimental fictions that allow, indeed encourage, their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away" (2001: 106). For Valdez Moses, magical realist texts are essentially premised on the inexorable triumph of modernity and on a view of the premodern as a "historical anachronism." The primitive world they represent for the reader becomes more palatable in that the narratives themselves represent that world as essentially vanished, gone, a victim of a modernity that is fictionally resisted but ultimately embraced. Seen in this light, magical realist literature offers no more than a "purely symbolic or token resistance to the inexorable triumph of modernity" (106). Along the same lines, V. S. Naipaul derides what he describes as

> [a] way currently in vogue of writing about degraded and corrupt countries ... the way of fantasy and extravagance. It dodges all the issues. It is safe ... empty, morally and intellectually; it makes writing ... an aspect of the corruption of the countries out of which it emerges. (Qtd. in Gorra, 144)

These critiques share a concern for the postcolonial authors' obsessive presentation of remote worlds, somehow distanced from the demands of their challenging present. Placing their stories in remote settings, both temporally and spatially, may seriously undermine their capacity to address relevant issues of the present, somehow contributing to the

stereotypical perception of colonial societies as frozen in time. However, even if some narratives are placed against a background of primitive atemporality, most magical realist texts do not remain stuck in the precolonial past or the timeless now; rather, they bring the magic element to bear on the present and even the foreseeable future. Magical realist texts frequently inhabit what we could term an "ambivalent temporality," that is, an alternative sense of time appearing, to use Foucault's terms, simultaneously "outside of history, as well as in it." For Foucault, the contestatory discourse of the vanquished, even if supported or read through atemporal mythical forms, serves to "awaken, beneath the form of institutions and legislations, the forgotten past of real struggles, of masked victories and defeats ... drawing support from the traditional mythical forms (the lost age of great ancestors, the imminence of new times and millennial revenge, the coming of a new kingdom that will wipe out the ancient defeats) ... darkly critical and intensely mythical" (1980: 17–18). Though it relies on mythical elements, for Foucault this ambivalent temporality is no mere escapism or nostalgia but an effective instrument of political resistance. Rather than an atemporal existence, magical realist fictions may replicate García Márquez's fabulous time where all the past belongs already to the future: that is, a fable time that contradicts the metaphysical ideas of progress, order, and rationality implicit in the literary form of realism. Through the overlapping of different temporalities, these texts put forward a "projective past" that speaks about the disjunctive present. And that dual time line is brought to bear upon very distinctive and modern spaces, hardly viewed as remote or escapist. Yamashita's Los Angeles, Cristina Garcia's New York, Rudolfo Anaya's Albuquerque, and Amy Tan's San Francisco are all realistic and modern settings. As a case in point, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* is set in present-day Los Angeles, with its traffic jams, its homeless, and its ever-present news reporters. The novel dramatizes the magical engrafting of Latin American experiences of historical deprivation onto the modern American city, effecting a simultaneous temporal and spatial *mestizaje*. The most magical character in the novel, Arcangel, represents here the coalescence of past and present in a sort of metonymical overlapping of temporal boundaries, or the constant actualization of the past in every present. Similarly, Vizenor's *Bearheart* is set in a future without gasoline, where a techno-industrial

society highly dependent on gas is forced to requisition the remaining energy resources of tribal lands and communities. Both these novels, and many others working more or less overtly in the magical realist mode, play with the presentation of what Bhabha terms "a perpetual generation of a past-present" (1994: 130). The preliminary deconstruction and ulterior reconstruction of an alternative view of reality represented by magical realist texts is thus based, following R. Walter, "upon a politicized poetics of memory" (1999: 75) that speaks to history and the present equally. The re-creation of specific mythical or legendary moments of the remote or atemporal past ultimately addresses the problems of the disjunctive realities of the present.

However, if we follow Moses, this hybridization of the past and the present, the modern and the traditional, the realistic and the fabulous is effected "*on the terms of and within the parameters established by global modernity*" (2001: 113; italics in the original). The magical, fantastic, religious, occult, and mythic elements are present, "but they are sublated" (2001: 112), raised up only to be canceled out under the supremacy of modernity. To a certain extent, those who make this critique resent the fact that a good number of magic realist works are written not by those who believe in the marvelous but by authors "who *would like to believe*" but are irremediably alienated from it. In Latin America as elsewhere, magical realist writers frequently don't share in the experiences of the lower social classes they write about; conversely, they have usually enjoyed numerous privileges that have irremediably estranged them from the universe they re-create in their fiction. This was most notably the case of, among others, Alejo Carpentier, who paved the road for *lo real maravilloso* while enjoying the luxury of his Parisian ivory tower. Postcolonial writers, as well as North American ethnic writers, do in most cases occupy privileged socioeconomic positions, mostly writing from reputed academic institutions to which their characters could never aspire. Yet their present positions in academia may not have completely blinded ethnic, marginal, and postcolonial authors to the real conditions of their originary communities. If we take ethnic and postcolonial writers at their word, the vast majority of them have experienced, even if vicariously and to significantly different degrees, the dislocations and fragmentations resulting from past colonial ventures or from various conditions of marginality in the present. The situation is significantly distinct for different writers, depending on

nationality, class, ethnicity, and gender, among other variables. Ethnic American writers, despite their generally privileged professional status, continue to perceive racial politics at work in American culture; and in contrast to some Latin American writers, they have never enjoyed the privileged sociopolitical position of the enlightened elite after the withdrawal of the colonial forces. As a significant example, Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, a professor at universities such as Princeton and SUNY, recurrently testifies to her early experiences of racial discrimination as a child, while most of her works represent different perceptions of such marginality. Similar experiences are related by Maxine Hong Kingston, among many other ethnic American authors.

The central issue, however, lies neither on the positionality of the writer nor on her authenticity as a spokesperson. As we proposed in chapter 1, the author's emphasis may be on fiction not as a world-reflecting instrument—a fallacy that writers such as Gerald Vizenor have tirelessly rejected—but as a world-creating vehicle. As Anne Hegerfeldt forcefully argues, "The use of a marginalized perspective to project a 'magical' world view is a literary technique, not a mimetic reproduction of an extratextual reality" (2002: 71). Recurrent critiques of magical realist writing stem from an unexplored belief in the ethnographic quality of ethnic literature, or the tendency to take novels as ethnographic artifacts. Dominant cultures have traditionally imposed limits on what the ethnic and postcolonial others can express in their literature, restricting them to the treatment of "their" peculiar cultures and expressing themselves in apparently authentic, pure, and primitive (unadorned and unsophisticated) ways. Whether we are dealing with auto-ethnographic writing, or with exo-ethnographic efforts, the result must always be realistic to be taken as authentic and valid. When a more deliberately playful and imaginative writing comes to the fore, there is a tendency to blame it on the influence of the literary experimentation of mainstream culture. This is what Vizenor, among many others, has recurrently confronted in his trickster writings, speaking openly against the representational and ethnographic impositions of mainstream culture on Native literature.

Whether the result of modernist nostalgia, commodified primitivism, or sophisticated literary storytelling, magical realism seems to inevitably be categorized either as romantic escapism pandering to Western middle-class audiences or as subversive

resistance voicing the demands of the others, whether U.S. ethnic or postcolonial communities. It may be perceived as a truthful instrument for representing the bleak life experiences of postcolonial and U.S. ethnic communities, or, contrarily, as a valid means of exoticizing and escaping such reality. It is undeniably related to both and, given its wide diversity, participates in both to differing degrees. The crucial question, however, lies in reading these texts as aesthetic artifacts and in focusing on the usually complex ways these novels textualize the world, on how the elements of magic dialogue and interact with the realistic presentation, not as anthropological reports but as fictional creations embedded in particular contexts. It is only this critical focus that can discriminate between texts that simply create romantic representations ready for massive marketing and consumption, and texts that significantly influence, dialogue with, and reshape the cultural realities from which they emerge.

Subversion and/or Transgression in Magical Realism: Static versus Rebellious Mimetics

Despite the contentions of Arenas, Fuguet, and Moses, among others, magical realism continues to be seen as a powerful oppositional instrument, "a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)" (D'haen 1995: 195; italics in the original). And this is especially noticeable in the way magical realist fictions emerged and continue to play a role in formerly colonized countries, whether in America, Africa, or Asia. Contemporary minorities in the former settler colonies just as often resort to magical realism, among other nonrealistic forms of writing, in their assaults against the hegemonic politics in the homeland. This is the case with Nigerian writer Ben Okri and with diverse U.S. ethnic writers, such as Native American writer Louise Erdrich, Chicano writer Ana Castillo, Asian American writer Karen Tei Yamashita, and African American writer Toni Morrison. Both postcolonial and ethnic American magical realist writers are concerned not only with "the incorporation of oral culture and indigenous myth into the dominant Western cultural form of the novel" (Bowers 2004: 48), but also with the subversive potential of this narrative mode. Novels such as Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, among many others, resort to magic realist

techniques to incorporate into the highly sophisticated discourse of the novel the mythic and folk narratives of their native cultures, and they do so in an openly resistant and antihegemonic move.

Overall, most discussions of the oppositional nature of magic realist writing focus on its dual nature as a literarily transgressive and ideologically subversive force. Magical realist texts deploy different strategies that seek to destabilize and question both the literary boundaries of realism, and the political status quo facilitated by that particular narrative mode. Generally, critics agree on the simultaneous presence of both qualities in most texts. Anne Hegerfeldt underlines the generically transgressive qualities of the mode, insofar as "the texts make use of metafictional strategies and the transgression of literary conventions in order to cast doubt on their own reliability and produce a certain hesitation in the implied reader" (2002: 65). Zamora and Faris note magical realism's subversive and transgressive elements: it "encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures" (1995: 6) and is "a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic" (5). Bowers, too, sees magical realism as both subversive—"it alternates the real and the magical using the same narrative voice" (2004: 67)—and transgressive: "it crosses the borders between the magic and the real to create a further category—the magical real" (67). And Roland Walter claims that in magic realist writing "[t]he literary transgression of the boundaries separating natural from supernatural categories of reality, truth from imagination, and the implicit attempt to re-create an autochthonous weltanschauung, undermine dominant Western discourses and rational paradigms" (1999: 65). These two qualities are inextricably related in most magical realist fictions. While Morrison's *Beloved* relies heavily on the tradition of the slave narrative, it openly transgresses its generic limits. The poetic introduction of the "unspeakable" radically surpasses the slave narrative's realistic constraints, a direct result of the effort to "tell it like it is." In a similar vein, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* invokes the long tradition of the autobiographical narrative, only to transgress each one of its conventional boundaries. Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* plays on historiography as a scientific discourse, only to finally break its rules through the incorporation of the ghosts of the imagination. Together with these formal and generic transgressions, and probably more relevantly, these

three works subvert the structures of power, domination, and control inscribed within the presumably realistic discourses they openly invoke, namely the narratives of slavery, autobiography, or historiography.

As in these three novels, the target of many magical realist works is the narrative, whether fictional, cultural, or historiographic, that proposes itself as the repository of ultimate and indubitable truths. A preliminary deconstruction of these premises is in order before a Native re-creation of experience can be undertaken. Magical realist texts are premised on the notion that "if the category of the real is not definite then all assumptions of truth are also at stake" (Bowers 68), therefore allowing for alternative discourses to partake in the re-creation of experience. In this sense, magical realist narratives explore and thrive on the artificiality of conventional representations, including the historiographic and ethnographic reports in which most ethnic lives had been captured from early colonial times. As R. Harvey Brown argues, "To reveal the practices by which representations become realistic is to disclose the ideology that is encoded in the modes of production of reality—those processes of human inscription that are collapsed into and held captive by a static mimesis that is the product of these very processes" (1995: 141). It is the "static mimesis," or the re-creation of ethnic life in a museum-like setting, with its pretensions of realism, historicism, and scientism, that magical realist texts seek to transgress, and they do so by superimposing onto a conventional narrative a dynamic, fluid, and occasionally magical view of ethnic or marginalized experiences. The escape from realist mimetics is effected through the incorporation of magical excess—the irreducible foreign element—into the discourse of realism. Since realism is based on the presumably objective mimesis, magical realism can be read as the textual representative of a corrupted, carnivalesque, or "superstitious" mimesis. Faris (2002: 113) appropriates Bhabha's notion of ambivalent mimicry to punctuate the "rebellious mimetics" (Aldama 2003: 28) of magical realism. Just as the attempt by the colonial power to produce "mimic men" only resulted in the production of contaminated mimicry, or hybridization, the postcolonial reproduction of the rules and laws of realism results in the hybrid, carnivalesque, antiauthoritarian mode of magical realism, a mode whose irreducible elements "estrange the basis of the authority of realism" (Faris 2002: 113). As Shakespeare's

Othello dramatizes, even if the other could aspire to almost central status in the West by virtue of its perfect mimicry of Western culture, nonetheless the excess of mimicry always lingered behind, ready to spring at any moment. In its intrinsic nature as "almost the same, but not quite," the other appears always ready to return to its essence, falling prey to sorcery, superstition, and false religious values. This ineradicable difference—that is, the alleged communion with the occult, the magic and unrealistic—was in turn used to ensure and legitimize the need for colonial domination. However, Bhabha does not see mimicry simply as a source of colonial authority; when appropriated by the colonized, mimicry can turn into mockery, underlining not only the difference on which authority rests but also the way in which the other disrupts the colonial discourse by doubling it. In its replication of realistic narratives, magical realist texts incorporate the magical and superstitious excess in an aestheticized rewriting. It is a common motif among magical realist texts to feature one central character, usually one whom the average reader can relate to, and then subvert that link of knowledge by making the character deal in occult and magical arts. However, rather than a direct representation of ethnic and postcolonial differences, or their presumably superstitious reverence and communion with the occult, the magical elements of postcolonial texts appear as consciously elaborated, even calling attention to their nature as literary artifice, distancing themselves from any mere "return of the repressed." Instead of reflecting "a difference that is almost the same, but not quite," the magical excess emerges as a joyful and sophisticated textual play, beyond the world of pure mimesis.

Together with the deconstruction of "the dogmatic mimesis," the recourse to magical realist narrative techniques may become an instrument for bringing to life and valorizing a reality inexorably silenced by the system of domination, or by the dire circumstances of modern marginalized life. Magical realist motifs not only help bring myth and lore into the otherwise modernist setting for these texts, but also serve to revalue the alternative, non-Western systems of thought, incorporating them as a "corrective or supplement to the dominant world view" (Hegerfeldt 2002: 63). Voices silenced in the historical past can achieve new presence through magical realist motifs, as in the case of Morrison's *Beloved*, and in Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*. Concomitantly, postcolonial magical realism exposes and

seeks to redress pervasive colonial hierarchies lingering into the present. As JanMohammed claims, the interaction between ordinary and extraordinary occurrences in a postcolonial novel is generally used to question colonial subjugation by retreating into a "fantasy world where problems can be solved by divine intervention" (qtd. Faris 2002: 106). The recourse to the magical or "angelic" intervention highlights the lack of agency by the colonized, and their lack of control over their destiny. If American realism was intent on exposing the mixed motives that moved characters, holding them morally responsible for their freely made choices, the inability to individually determine the course of one's life in colonized environments resulted in the presentation of external, spiritual, or otherwise unexamined forms of agency. In general, the magical elements evolve without any notion of where the causal agent for them is located. As the magical forces take center stage, the characters lose control of the situation, reminding the reader of the historical circumstances that have led to this loss. In this sense, magical realist texts may highlight the need to "reconfigure structures of autonomy and agency" (Faris 2002: 111) and to destabilize the imperial structures of power and control. Concomitantly, such narratives may incorporate a fictional, magical corrective to those same power structures. Characters may be endowed with varying forms of magical agency, both the result and magical redress of colonial subjugation. It is a constant in African American novels by women writers that the protagonist is empowered in her search for a renewed cultural identity by a supernatural event, or by the intervention of an older ancestral figure endowed with magical powers. This is the case in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Naylor's *Mama Day*, among many others. Along the same lines, Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* incorporates a magical archangel who is out to fight against the multinational capitalist hero SUPERNAFTA. King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, as we will see below, features four mythological elders on a quixotic quest to fix the world. Other novels incorporate verisimilar characters who only occasionally take recourse to magical powers, such as Fleur in Erdrich's *Tracks*, whose familiarity with the water monster Misshepeshu will help her set family scores straight. Equally extraordinary are Mama Day's powers in Naylor's eponymous novel. Mama Day knows herbal cures and can summon lightning with her walking stick—even if she describes her

magical interventions as "mother-wit disguised with hocus pocus" (97) and maintains that "she ain't never tried to get over nature" (262).

II. From Romance to Magical Realism: Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

Mama Day: How Postcolonial Is It?

Set on a small and isolated island, Naylor's *Mama Day* plays with oral storytelling, competing realities, and the nature of truth. From the very preface of the novel, the anonymous narrative voice anticipates that the truth about the little community of Willow Springs is difficult to discern, since everything depends on "which of us" tells the story. Mama Day, Cocoa, George, and the narrator, who speaks the communal voice of Willow Springs, all provide interweaving narratives on the memory of the little island.[11] This heteroglossia, which parallels Thomas King's narrative turn-taking in *Green Grass, Running Water*, replicates the African American tradition of storytelling. However, though the novel is distinctively African American in its characters, its expression, and its setting—a sea island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia—it is also an intertextual novel that incorporates numerous references both within and outside the African American literary tradition. Intertextual allusions to African American texts such Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, share the textual space with references to Shakespearean drama, specifically to *King Lear* and, most significantly for our purpose here, *The Tempest*.

It is in its rewriting of Shakespeare's *Tempest* that *Mama Day* dramatizes its own postcolonial textuality.[12] Like Shakespeare's last romance, the novel is set on an island—Willow Springs—linked to the mainland by a flimsy bridge. The story features a Miranda (Mama Day), a Sycorax figure (Sapphira), a staff, and a ledger, and ends with a storm of incredible proportions. Against the New Critical reading of *The Tempest* as an ideological argument for European colonialism, in Naylor's novel Willow Springs emerges as a postcolonial geography where the power structure is significantly rearticulated, turned upside down. While Shakespeare's Miranda is a submissive daughter to Prospero, Naylor empowers her Miranda (called Mama Day by the

islanders) with a strong voice and magical powers, just like Miranda's ancestor, Sapphira Wade, who wrested the island—and her own freedom—from her master, Bascombe Wade. Whereas, according to Wilson Knight's dated New Critical interpretation, Shakespeare's Prospero represents England's "colonizing, especially her will to raise savage peoples from superstition and blood-sacrifice, taboos and witchcraft, and the attendant fears and slaveries to a more enlightened existence" (1966: 255), Miranda's life story represents a stubborn refusal of such colonizing enterprises and the ideology behind them. It is Miranda who metaphorically drives the modern colonizers away from the island: when real estate developers offer to buy land on Willow Springs, Miranda replies with a firm "no," and, as the narrator concedes, "Mama Day say no, everybody say no" (6).

Dual Spatiality/Dual Temporality

In this sense, rather than a postcolonial space, *Mama Day*'s sea island of Willow Springs represents a precolonial geography, a practically uncharted space, beyond maps and lines. A tiny fictional enclave that coincides with the Gullah Islands off the coast of South Carolina, Willow Springs is a liminal site existing between realities: it sits between the lines of the U.S. and the beyond (Africa), between the borders of South Carolina and Georgia, between the lines of history and fiction, and finally between realism and fantasy. As is well known, in the antebellum days many slaves were imported from Africa to the sea islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, entering through the ports of Charleston and Savannah. The semitropical climate of the islands made them a perfect place for rice production, and using slave labor there ensured that the white population, more vulnerable to the tropical diseases carried by mosquitoes, could remain mostly absent from the place. In their state of utmost isolation these small communities thrived, virtually untouched by the mainland. African traditions, stories, and community life had strong presence on these islands and were preserved almost intact for generations after the Civil War. However, by the end of the twentieth century, many of these communities had disappeared as a result of tourism and commercialization. Naylor's novel thus straddles the border between imaginary and real worlds inasmuch as it re-

creates real communities, though mixed with large doses of legend, magic, and fantasy.

Willow Springs stands completely outside white parameters: it has kept its cultural and economic independence in the face of the most extreme circumstances, including "Malaria. Union soldiers. Sandy soil. Hurricanes" (4). Despite several attempts by white real estate developers to buy property on the island, it still remains beyond foreign economic intervention; its only connection with the mainland is a deliberately flimsy bridge periodically destroyed by storms and rebuilt "strong enough to last till the next big wind" (5). The geographical separation simply reinforces a more significant ideological difference: the island stands strong as a site of resistance against mainstream cultural domination. As Lamothe argues, Willow Springs's independence comes from the island inhabitants' "retention and transmission of African-derived traditions and values" (2005). This stubborn resistance permeates both popular knowledge, such as folklore, quilting, and medicinal practices, and more spiritual and magic beliefs, such as conjuring and myth. The whole reality of the island rests on its mythological origins in the maternal ancestor, Sapphira Wade, whose story parallels the African American legend of Igbo Landing. According to this story, in 1858 the American slave ship *The Wanderer* arrived in Igbo Landing, a small island off the coast of Charleston, with a cargo of slaves. As soon as the slaves saw what awaited them in the New World, they walked across the ocean back to Africa. Sapphira Wade, the founder of the clan, great-grandmother of Mama Day, is thought to have killed her slave owner and father of her seven children, Bascombe Wade, only to later disappear, probably walking across the ocean on a mythical return to Africa. If the maternal ancestor is permeated by myth, her actions had a fundamental material result: back in 1823, before her flight back to Africa, Sapphira Wade managed to make her master, Bascombe Wade, deed the island to his slaves, who have retained it since then. Different rituals have helped to keep the memory of the maternal ancestor and of that mythical year, 1823, alive for the community.

However, Willow Springs is not the site of magical memory, nor does Manhattan denote scientific forgetfulness. This facile equation is qualified variously in the novel. Manhattan itself is "a wondrous isle," with many hidden spaces that George can discover for Cocoa's eyes. It is not the cultural geography that represents difference as much as it

is the ability to listen, to discover the mysterious sounds of that geography.

Besides these spatial dualities, as the foundational story of Sapphira Wade makes clear, Willow Springs also participates in temporal ambivalence. It is both a site of memory and a place of contemporary cultural transformation, a space where "it's sorta easy to forget about time" (160) while simultaneously stressing and accepting that "time does march on" (111). The origin of the island, of the Day family, and of time itself are closely interconnected, inasmuch as Willow Springs comfortably sits astride transcendent myths and historical continuity.

Sapphira Wade's actions in 1823, "shifted down through the holes of time" (3), participate in the dual mythical and historical nature, conferring similar qualities to life and experience on the island. The chronological sequence initiated by the clear-cut beginning in the year 1823 is complicated by the simultaneous intervention of sacred time, as present in the myths of the beginning of the island community and of "the Days." The birth of the Day family is once again linked to the story of the legendary Sapphira Wade. This matriarch ceased to bear children after her seventh child, and she gave all of them the last name Day, since she, like God, "rested on the seventh day." The birth of the island community is encoded as both historical (the year 1823) and mythical (the seven days/"Days" of the creation), casting similarly mythical overtones to most of the events in the novel.

While firmly rooted in events dating back to 1823, the island is constantly reinventing itself, looking back in the effort to move forward. However, in the look back there is not so much archival interest as a quest for spiritual sustenance. The narrative displaces emphasis from the discovery of the truth about the ancestral past to its spiritual actualization in the present. Even the true meaning of the year 1823, the island's foundational moment, is never an issue for the islanders. The year looks different every time it is invoked; historical corruption fades under the weight of contemporary cultural significance. Numerous rituals the community engages in are radically contaminated by external influences, or by a failing cultural memory, as Mama Day acknowledges. Rituals like Candle Walk have gone through numerous changes, since "time does march on," as Miranda states, but "there is nothing to worry about." Though considerably altered, the ritual remains significant, even if it is historically

inaccurate. While the collective voice of Willow Springs recalls Candle Walk as a natural celebration that entailed the giving of gifts, Mama Day recollects the different versions of Candle Walk in her youth and in her father's and grandfather's stories.

> But that's where the recollections end—at least, in the front part of the mind. And even the youngsters who've begun complaining about having no Christmas instead of this "old 18 & 23 night" don't upset Miranda. It'll take generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. And more generations again to stop talking about the time "when there used to be some kind a 18 & 23 going-on near December twenty second." By then, she figures, it won't be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory. (111)

The ritual will continue to live as long as it has meaning. The modification of original rituals does not harm their significance in the present. "The front part of the mind" (111), the one that recollects in words, establishes different usable stories about the distant past. These can be competing stories, mostly of a fictive nature, but they are equally valid in that they allow for the ritual to survive and ensure the persistence of the spiritual work of the back part of the mind, that mythical "other place" that remains beyond the reach of words.

Time and timelessness are as essential on the island as in the textual world of the novel. The dual temporality on the island, which results from the combination of the mythic, symbolic, and static with the historic, continuous, and changing, is replicated by the textual incorporation of similar complexities in the narrative time sequence. Neither utopian nor dystopian, the narrative blends different temporalities, incorporating past and future as one more element within a multilayered present. If 1823 and Sapphira Wade's story represent the mythical past, Cocoa and George's developing relationship stands out in the novel's present. The story of George and Cocoa ends with George's death in 1985. According to logic, the novel is published three years later, in 1988. Yet this regular temporality is complicated by the setting of the novel's narrative present in 1999 (fourteen years after its actual publication date), projecting Cocoa's story into the future of the fictional world as well as of the real-life world. As the preface establishes, in the year 1999, Cocoa is married and lives in South Carolina, but still visits Willow Springs occasionally to converse with her first husband. One of those visits results in the two-hour conversation that is the novel itself. It is

only at the end of the novel that the reader discovers that Cocoa's first husband, George, has been dead all along. The text of the novel is thus the reconstruction of Cocoa's dialogue with her dead husband in the family graveyard in Willow Springs. Just as Sapphira Wade still "talks" to and spiritually nurtures the Willow Springs community centuries after her death, George continues to support and communicate with Cocoa years after his. In this way, past, present, and future are merged in a complex narrative that manages to maintain time and timelessness, the historical and the mythical, constantly interacting. Willow Springs is therefore defined by all these simultaneous temporalities, capable of functioning at the same time without canceling each other out.

From the Comfort Zone to the Contact Zone

The clash between different temporalities and distinctive cultural spaces is especially evident in George's experience in and of Willow Springs. Raised in Manhattan and successfully habituated to the city's demands, George has been socialized in one perspective, allowing him a reasonable degree of comfort. His emotional conflict on the island reveals the effects of modernization, historical rupture, and social fragmentation on contemporary African Americans. It is his voluntary dislocation, as he moves out of Manhattan and crosses "the Sound" to enter the little enclave of Willow Springs, that brings about discomfort, for the alternative space forces him to rethink his own identity. George, the liberal New Yorker, must make the difficult move of abandoning his modern weltanschauung and must face the need to accept unnatural events as compelling. For it is George's drama at the end of the novel that represents the central question in the narrative. Whether Sapphira Wade walked across the waters or whether unnatural occurrences haunt "the other place" are of lesser importance than George's dilemma: whether to cross the line of his comfort zone and venture into the contact zone, a space without maps and without linear time, a realm of magical realities that look like mere superstition to him but can serve to save Cocoa.

In his initial contact with Cocoa while in Manhattan, and especially during the course of his stay in Willow Springs, George is gradually forced to abandon the comfort of his big-city worldview and enter into contact with a wholly different world, a world where "time

is still" (161) and maps and order are absent. Crossing over into Willow Springs, "entering another world" (175), George feels that the parameters he used to chart reality are no longer valid. His anxiety is evident when he tries to find Willow Springs on the map and can't, no matter how many maps he consults. The charts and graphs valid for Manhattan fail to accommodate the reality of Willow Springs. Time also reveals its ungraspable nature. As George concedes at one point, before he even knows anything about his future dilemma, "The clocks and calendars we had designed were incredibly crude attempts to order our reality... All of those numbers were reassuring, but they were hardly real" (158).

At the same time, George is crossing over not only from an ordered world into an incomprehensible one that is "not going according to the script" (256), but also from a male order into a female one. The world of Willow Springs represents the prevalence of the female order, from Sapphira Wade's inaugural wresting of power from the male/master, to Miranda's lifelong maintenance of the tradition, and presumably into the future with Cocoa's continuation of the matriarchal line. George immediately identifies the surreal, irrational disorder of Willow Springs with the feminine, and he misses the days before women appeared in his life: "there was a time when I didn't have my whole world complicated with [women]. A wonderful time. Just dozens of boys. Clean fights. Straight talk. Order. You did what you were supposed to and left it at that. No tantrums. No nonsense. And your hard work was appreciated" (247).

George's faith in a male, stable, ordered, linear world dissolves under the presence of other layers of reality he intuits but, in his scientific approach, fails to fully comprehend. When the final storm hits hard in Willow Springs, while thinking of the power of his nuclear steam turbine, George begins to discover other sides of his experience of the real:

> When things were under control—and I had lived my life so that was usually the case—there was no need about having to deal with some presence that might be governing what was beyond my own abilities. I had no delusions of grandeur, wanting to stir up the world. I asked only to be left alone to seek happiness where I could find it, and since I sought it only within the limitations of my daily existence, I was normally a satisfied man... But the winds coming around the corner of that tiny house on that tiny island was God. (251–52)

In a rather controlled maneuver, George dimly perceives the presence of powers beyond human control, beyond that realm where he had strived to constrain his daily experience. However, habituated to dismissing alternative realities as a product of divine intervention, he puts it all down to the presence of God, therefore appeasing his anxiety and conciliating his scientific world and fantastic occurrences.

From Romance to Magical Realism

> *Mama Day* belongs not to the tradition of the realistic novel but to the tradition of the romance.
> —M. D. Kubitschek, "Toward a New Order"

In a significant rewriting of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Mama Day* presents George's move across "the Sound" and into the space of the other as a countercolonial move, for it is now the dominant self that has to negotiate and adapt to the requirements of a new environment and a new community. While the colonial encounter traditionally caused the colonial other to relinquish his views under the penetration of the metropolitan perspectives, *Mama Day* dramatizes a counterintuitive move. Rather than a Prospero figure determined to take control of the little island, George arrives in Willow Springs as a figure of dispossession. He is the orphaned son of a prostitute, and though successfully raised in the dominant values of good education, individualism, and reason, he lacks a sense of personal history and proves to be a victim of cultural amnesia. What the island witnesses is not so much the arrival of the imperialist Westerner as the return of the prodigal son. However, George himself reads his little colonial venture differently. For George, his incursion into Willow Springs bears the mark of the heroic quest of medieval romances, with Cocoa as the damsel in distress awaiting the hero's intervention. His mission is to redeem the island and rescue it from isolation and timelessness. George reads his island adventure in imitation of Milkman Dead, the hero in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Like *Mama Day*, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* deals with a cultural orphan's recovery of identity through a ritualized return to the sites of memory. However, the two narratives integrate the quest for history and for the past in significantly different ways. As Kubitschek states, "*Mama Day* shifts from *Song of Solomon*'s emphasis on recovering the details of the past to using past-derived rituals, not in their original forms or meanings,

as a response to and construction of present experience." While Morrison's novel reads as Milkman's archaeological quest for the true meaning of his personal and communal history, *Mama Day* encourages a similar quest only to abandon it near the end, and finally to transcend it. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman returns to the rural South to discover, through the elusive code of a children's song, the missing pieces in his family history. By the end of the novel, Milkman acquires a complete and coherent notion of his personal and communal identity, thanks to the discovery of ancestral history. *Mama Day* initially encourages an archeological reading inasmuch as the whole community in Willow Springs is still unable to fully reconstruct the true story of Sapphira Wade (an ancestral figure who, like Solomon Dead, presumably flew back to Africa). However, the view of history as ancestral archaeology is gradually replaced by a more fluid understanding of history as an endless reconstruction of the past, where less emphasis is placed on its foundational or primordial moments and more on its adaptability to the needs of the present. The beginning of the novel hints at this fluidity of the past and its actualization in the present community: "Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" (3). As Kubitschek (1994) argues, the reader is made to anticipate a resolution á la *Song of Solomon* when close to the end of the novel Mama Day discovers an old ledger that tells of "a negress" sold to Bascombe Wade. However, the ledger is hardly legible and only signals the beginning of other mysteries (the very name of Sapphira, unfamiliar even to her descendants, is truncated; only "Sa" is readable, so the character remains shrouded in mystery). The written record of history reveals inadequate in the construction of the present. True knowledge requires higher modes of perception and a more committed attention to the "sounds" of the environment.

The quest of the hero is not of an archeological nature, not a return to the fountains of communal memory, but rather requires the relinquishing of significant parts of the self. After the storm, George faces the need to seek standard medical help for Ophelia, while constrained by his inability to swim. Such impediments make him confront the need to accept Mama Day's spiritual medicine, as Mama Day herself asks from him: "You see, she done bound up more than

her flesh up with you. And since she's suffering from something more than the flesh, I can't do a thing without you" (294).

When he tries to speed up the building of the bridge, severely damaged by the thunderstorm, he perceives it as only a technical problem; he completely fails to identify all the other meanings the bridge holds for the people of Willow Springs. Reflecting on George's final resolution to work hard in reconstructing the bridge—a symbol of his refusal to hear the "sounds" of the island—Miranda clearly understands the inherent duality within his resolution: "There are two ways anybody can go when they come to certain roads in life ain't about a right way or a wrong way—just two ways. And here we getting down to my way or yours" (295). As if fulfilling George's expectations, Miranda sends him on a quest to save Cocoa, who is seriously ill. To his bewilderment, the nature of the mission falls completely outside the traditional romantic and heroic quest George is familiar with through movies and classic romances. As part of the quest Miranda asks George to go to the chicken's nest, armed simply with a book and her cane, and to "come straight back here with whatever you find" (295). Obviously the ritual is to be taken to have metaphorical significance rather than a literal meaning. Miranda is asking George to surrender his masculine, intensely individualistic, heroic, empirical self and cross over into Willow Springs's cultural values. The entire quest is filtered through Willow Springs symbolism, starting with the hen itself, associated throughout the novel with the feminine principle. Acting as a modern Captain Delano, George fails to comprehend the foreign cultural code; rather, he projects his Western views and myths over a space to which they are not adapted. He therefore fails to understand and comply with the demands of that new cultural space. In his frustration, George finally enacts, as Susan Meisenhelder suggests, "the archetypal white drama of male oppression" (1993). In George's hands, Miranda's walking stick metamorphoses into a "phallic instrument of violence" that he uses to carry out a rather pathetic act of male heroism, killing most of the hens, and also killing the possibility of truly abandoning his individualist Western self and entering the communal world of Willow Springs. In the end George proves unable to blend the "real" and "supernatural," past and present, individual and other, as Miranda requires. Failing to hear and be attuned to the sounds around him, George chooses to play a pathetic Prospero, unsuccessfully attempting

to master nature, whether it is the chicken coop, "the Sound," or the whole community of Willow Springs.

Prospero, Miranda, and the Supernatural

Finally, *Mama Day* hinges on the use of the supernatural and its integration as an essential layer of an expanded view of nature and experience. Responding to Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Mama Day* pits Miranda's conjuring practices against Prospero's magic. In a postcolonial vein, Mama Day—also known as Miranda, a significant reference to Prospero's daughter—critically reworks the Prospero paradigm with regard to magical spells: whereas Prospero's magic can be read as one more instrument in a colonial machinery designed to subjugate and exploit others—and their natural resources—Miranda's magic is fundamentally healing, caring, destructive of evil. These two different attitudes on the part of Prospero and Miranda can be metaphorically extrapolated to the different attitudes of the colonizers and the colonized in the colonial encounter. Refracting the characteristic attitude of metropolitan powers, Prospero uses his magic to control and impose blind obedience, even through the use of crude sorts of physical punishment. His magic serves not only to subdue the forces of nature but also to discipline the colonial subjects and suppress any rebellious resistance. Prospero's authority becomes instrumental in the imposition of a preexistent and foreign social order, an order coming from outside the social and geographic environment where it is applied (cf. Kubitschek). In contrast, Miranda's magical skills do not result in the imposition of power and authority. As the narrator concedes, "she ain't never tried to get over nature" (262); rather, Miranda obtains spiritual power from the environment and the people and uses her magic within the social order, without doing major violence to it, for the purpose of effecting minor adjustments.

The only exception to this pattern is Ruby, a vindictive practitioner of hoodoo whose pathological jealousy has led her to conjure Ophelia into a life-threatening illness. In response, Mama Day facilitates a double lightning strike on Ruby's house, an incredibly improbable occurrence from a scientific perspective, as George reflects (after all, George is an engineer with an acute lack of intuition and imagination). Yet whereas Prospero conjures his storm as an

instrument for revenge, Miranda's storm is fundamentally protective: Cocoa, the last remaining Day, must be saved, for she is destined to continue a long tradition.

The figure of Miranda not only revises the Shakespearean colonial paradigm, but also signifies upon the African American tradition of black magic, voodoo, and conjuring. After all, Miranda is the last of a line of conjurers that started with the legendary mother, Sapphira Wade, the ur-conjurer. A direct descendant of Sapphira, Miranda is a character of mythic proportions, a matriarchal figure who mediates between the legendary and the material, past and present. Her magical skills are a result of both her lineage and her almost timeless experience of Willow Springs: "When you think about it, to show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a toe inching over into the one approaching is about as close to eternity anybody can come" (6–7). As an experienced conjurer, Miranda knows about roots and herbal medicines; she can command natural forces with a single motion of her walking stick and can also anticipate the coming of storms and natural disasters. However, she distances herself from the mysterious dealings with the powers of darkness traditionally associated with conjurers. In American ethnography, conjuring was always connected with sorcery, witchcraft, even necromancy (Tucker 1994: 177). In contrast to the Christian belief in divinely ordained miracles, conjuring is an occultist practice, linked to the malicious tradition of voodoo and black magic. Yet this dark side of African American religious beliefs is not without its justification, for according to Heron and Bacon (1895, qtd. Tucker 176), the African American slave's position of ignorance and submission forced him to resort to conjure doctors as "agents of vengeance" who could invoke "secret and supernatural powers to redress his wrongs" (360, Tucker 176). However, there is nothing occult or mysterious about Miranda's conjuring practices. She is mostly a root doctor, with a superb knowledge of herbal medicine and competence in Western medical practices as well. In an effort to demystify the character and her healing skills, Naylor places two complementary characters on both sides of Miranda's conjuring: Dr. Smithfield, who performs Western medicine and highly respects Miranda's practices; and Dr. Buzzard, a hoodoo doctor who, with his outlandish charms and odd concoctions, represents superstition and downright deception. While Mama Day accepts Dr. Smithfield and

even sometimes seeks his advice, she readily dismisses Dr. Buzzard as a fraud. She tells George, "You know what he gives folks when they got an ache in their left side? Moonshine and honey. And for an ache in their right side? Honey and moonshine" (196). Miranda, on the other hand, reveals the true nature of her own practices at every turn. Even the magical site and source of her healing abilities, "the other place"—initially a mysterious space—is to Mama Day simply "an old house" (139) where she and her sisters were born, a space full of presences and memories, but devoid of dark or menacing forces.

Mama Day's mysterious powers are, in the end, more natural than otherwise, since they come from her acute knowledge of and sensitivity to her environment, to nature. Her magic lies in her ability "to get under, around, and beside nature to give it a slight push" (262). If Prospero tries to impose an external order on nature and the social environment, Miranda plays with a given social order and a given nature and simply tries to bend it. And nature responds readily to her, of its own accord, reacting to the least motion of her cane: "a wave over a patch of zinnias and the scarlet petals take flight ... Winged marigolds follow them into the air ... morning glories start to sing" (152). Miranda's knowledge of natural medicine is also the result of her communion with nature, and her sensitive perception of "differences in leaves of trees, barks of trees, roots" (207) that she uses for many purposes. It is this knowledge, which also largely results from her age and psychological insight, that allows her to increase the potential that people already possess, without drastically manipulating them or their nature. As the narrator concedes, "She wasn't changing the natural course of nothing, she couldn't if she tried. Just using what's there" (139). After Bernice almost dies as a result of self-prescribed fertility pills, Miranda lures her into believing in the magical powers of pumpkin seeds: "Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (96). In this sense, Miranda is exposing the true magic behind her medical abilities, calling them a blending of "a little dose of mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus" (97). However, Mama Day facilitates processes already existent through her capacity as a mediator: she mediates between humans and nature, between past and present, between "this" place and "the other place," between Manhattan and Willow Springs (Wall 2000: 1451). Miranda is never the black magic woman playing

a dark and contrary version of Shakespeare's Prospero. Miranda's conjuring is related not to the imposition of power over natural forces but to an acute attention to the noises of nature, blending with the environment instead of exerting control over it.

The Magic of Semiotic Spaces: "The Sound" and "the Other Place"

> Come on, he said, we got us a bridge to build.
> —Dr. Buzzard to George in Naylor, *Mama Day*

It is the tempest at the end of the novel that dramatizes the dual spatiality of the narrative, in physical as well as cultural and linguistic terms. As the tempest ruins part of the bridge that connects Willow Springs to the mainland, it simultaneously reveals a spatial break, represented by "the Sound," the stretch of water below the bridge. Spaces and sounds are thus significantly linked at the climax of the novel. "The Sound" not only geographically separates island and mainland but also reveals a profound cultural gap, connected to the in/capacity to hear and be sensitive to the natural sounds of the place. From the novel's very prologue, the reader is made aware of the crucial need to pay special attentions to the many voices of Willow Springs, as the collective voice commands the reader to "really listen" (10).

Reema's boy's story at the beginning of the narrative adequately captures the importance of listening to the sounds of Willow Springs rather than projecting foreign words onto it. Reema's boy represents the prodigal son, the islander who got a college education on the mainland and returned from "one of those fancy colleges, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map" (7). But Reema's boy didn't know how to listen. Armed with his academic tools from beyond "the Sound," Reema's boy transforms the Willow Springs community into a collection of "unique speech patterns" worthy of "cultural preservation." In his ethnographic approach to the island's experience, he reads all signs as an "inversion of hostile social and political parameters" to reach the oversimplified conclusion that in Willow Springs people "kept on calling things ass-backwards" (8) since they "had no choice but to look at everything upside down" (8). He fully misinterprets the reality of his home community, to the extent

that he comes up with a completely outlandish explanation of the island's foundational expression "18 & 23": "18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map" (7). Reema's boy's story emphasizes the mainland's incapacity to "really listen" to the noises and echoes of Willow Springs. He was more interested in naming, in giving words to things, instead on letting those things speak for themselves.

In contrast to Reema's boy, and to George later on, Miranda's special ability to communicate with the animate and inanimate on the island is memorable. When she was only five years of age, Miranda already exhibited supernatural skills of perception, as when she anticipated that her baby sister, Peace, was going to drown in the well. Her apparently magical skills come, on many occasions, from her capacity to read and decipher the sounds and signs of the island, a skill that links Miranda back to the ancestral African tradition known as divination. The African tradition of divination, of learning to read the signs of nature, usually rests in intermediary figures, like the trickster and the conjurer. These generally double-sided characters act as mediators between this world and the other, between men and gods, and between the rational and the intuitive. The magic and enigmatic qualities behind these reading abilities arise from the fact that messages do not come encoded in words. Esu Elegbara, the trickster par excellence, reads the texts of the gods and translates them for the mortals. Conjurers usually rely on oral lore, passed from one generation to the next in a coded, unwritten form, which they use to interpret the otherwise cryptic messages written on natural elements. Miranda is one such conjurer, especially sensitive to the signs of nature. From her early age, as a "spirit in the woods" (79), she senses that "there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see" (36). She can listen "under the wind" and hear "the humming-humming of some lost and ancient song" (118).

However, yet again, the narrator demystifies this hearing capacity. It comes only as the direct result of much attention to and respect for the environment and the people on the island. It is when Miranda is alone in the quiet woods, or in the isolated "other place," that she acquires a higher mode of perception; it is also there that she can hear the whole history of Willow Springs come to her. "The other place" becomes not only a peculiar site of memory where time and

space cohere in one spot, but also a magic realist space that "erases the boundaries between the supernormal and the normal" (Hayes 2004: 671). "The other place" reads as the quintessential multilayered magical space, where many different temporalities coexist. Even though built with the intention of fulfilling the patriarchal ambitions of Bascombe Wade, "the other place" becomes a source of resistance, inhabited initially by Sapphira Wade, and later used exclusively by women, most notably by Miranda. Males are absent from the place, even (like George) fearful of it. As the place where unnameable things happen, "the other place" refracts the novel itself, which is a quiet story insomuch as "ain't nobody really talking," "the only voice is your own" (10). In this sense, "the other place" figures as a "site of resistance to the patriarchal *logos*" (Hayes 2004: 673). In Kristevan terms, this place becomes a semiotic space, a preverbal space where natural sounds acquire new meaning insomuch as they escape the patriarchal order. The sounds are then transformed into elusive words appropriate to the occasion. It is like the sound of the wind at the end of David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, or as the end of Morrison's *Sula*—the scene in which Nel perceives the long-dead Sula's spirit in the wind. Similarly, in the last scene of *Mama Day*, Miranda "looks over at the yellow bungalow [where her sister Abigail had lived]. No need to cross that road anymore, so she turns her face up into the warm air—You there, Sister?—to listen for the rustling of the trees" (312).

While most of the community is based on a belief system beyond the reach of words (with Sapphira Wade as protagonist of that veiled story), both George and Reema's boy display an anthropological perspective that tries to translate and capture everything, even (in Reema's boy's case) the whole community experience, into words. However, the community is a world of sounds (like the stretch of water itself), not of fully formed and stable words. Even George himself at one point senses that "words here operated on a different plane through a whole morass of history and circumstances that I was not privy to" (256). Even the name of the first inhabitant of the place, Sapphira Wade, is unknown to everyone in the community, since "she don't live in that part of our memory we can use to form words" (4). It was in "the other place" that Sapphira Wade—deemed to be the object of Bascombe Wade's desires—rejected the patriarchal order and assumed her own subjectivity, allegedly killing her own master. It is

also there that Miranda performs her magic rituals, beyond the reaches of the male order. And it is also there that Miranda discovers Bascombe Wade's plantation ledger. However, the written words on the seriously damaged ledger fail to give Miranda that "other" name she is looking for, the "name of the mother." It is only in her dreams that "she finally meets Sapphira" (280).

Knowing that George must dispose of his rationalist frame of mind if he is to help save Cocoa, Miranda lures him to "the other place" in the hope that he will leave his individualist self behind and engage in a communal rescue mission. George's timid approach to the place requires his full surrendering to the principles of the female order, as dictated by Miranda. However, George's education and beliefs trap him within a scientific and individualistic ethos (he "had a very rational mind," 124) and prevent him from responding to Mama Day's conjuring practices and to her call for help. Even if, in his hope of saving Cocoa, George goes along with Miranda's petition to go and fetch the fiercest hen in the henhouse, later he refuses to follow Miranda's "mumbo-jumbo" (295) and "convoluted reasoning" (266). Rather than responding to the communal "sounds" of the island, George decides to "hold on to what [is] real" (291) and resumes his individualistic quest to save his loved one. His incomplete submission to the unscientific, preverbal nature of the quest he is required to undertake results in his own death, reminiscent of Bascombe Wade's earlier death. "The other place" figures, then, as a preverbal, nonrationalist space—a space where listening to the sounds of nature and humans takes precedence over the Prospero-like attitude of imposing on or taking control of nature. Miranda's final magical or conjuring faculties are thus the direct result of her blending smoothly with the environment and responding to its sounds, rather than commanding it with the discourses of power and domination. The interaction between place and the discourses of domination, and the generation of intermediary, magical spaces, also figures prominently in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, though the author approaches this topic from a more semiotic perspective. If Mama Day's peculiar abilities rest on her special capacity to simply listen, King's magical characters read as inveterate storytellers, their powers lying on their re-creation of the world in stories.

III. Interstitial Spatiality in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

The "Other Place" of Enunciation

> *I am an Indian*; and while I have learned much from civilization, for which I am grateful, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice. I am for development and progress along social and spiritual lines, rather than those of commerce, nationalism, or material efficiency. Nevertheless, so long as I live, *I am an American*.
>
> —Charles Alexander Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*

As we mentioned above, in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois introduced his theory of the duality of perception as pervasive in African American culture. This notion, which he called "double consciousness," highlights the uneasy cohabitation of two contradictory cultural identities in the mind of the African American individual. A few decades later, Frantz Fanon would expand on Du Bois's notion, filtering it through psychoanalytical theories to make it encompass the wider postcolonial world. Changing Du Bois's terminology only slightly, Fanon would talk about a "dual consciousness" in his view of the postcolonial individual struggling between cultural systems. In literature writing, this ineradicable duality at the heart of the ethnic and postcolonial consciousness results in what Jose David Saldívar terms "double-voiced writing" (1991a). Both in postcolonial literature and in U.S. ethnic literatures, one often finds the representation of two antithetical worlds, with the hero trapped between the two, as Charles Alexander Eastman's quote above makes explicit. Such was the case with the "passing novels" written by African American authors during the Harlem Renaissance, or with Native American novels of the 1930s and 1960s, such as Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, among many others. While the representation of the Western world tends to emphasize its materiality and presence, the native worlds are usually represented as inexorably vanishing, dwindling under the overwhelming advance of modernity and progress. It is the fate of the ethnic hero—like Omishto in Linda Hogan's *Power*, trapped "halfway between the modern world

and the ancient one" (1998: 23)—to walk the abyss between the two worlds.

Magic realist narratives may help break the binarism of this closed dialectic through the incorporation of a supplementary world, an interstitial space where two alternative realities can be imagined freely interacting. The limited colonial perspective of dominant and dominated, realistic and superstitious, is surpassed through the opening up of a formal and ideological space where Euro-American rationality coexists with nonrealistic discourses without ever achieving authority or closure. The presence and role of this interstitial space—a result of seeing with a "third eye"—is especially visible in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. As an author, King himself embodies the liminal nature of the interstitial space. Born and raised in California, of part Native American descent, King later assumed Canadian citizenship. His novels, mostly set in the Blackfoot reservation of North Dakota, represent the blurring of national boundaries, for the author easily blends the Canadian and North American in himself. Straddling Canada and the United States, the Blackfoot reservation recalls a history of foreign intervention and questions the very existence of geographical, political, and social frontiers. King's narrative fleshes out these uneasy combinations in a fictional form that, not surprisingly, transgresses generic boundaries and comically subverts some of the foundational stories of Western culture.

This meaningful setting is particularly relevant in King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. The complex and playful narrative reads as a collage, masterfully combining containment and excess, the realistic and the carnivalesque, the serious and the comic, the visible and the invisible, the sacred and the profane. The many voices that articulate the narrative polyphony of the novel put together two basic stories, one mythical, one "realistic." The "realistic" story re-creates the lives of Lionel and his Blackfoot friends and family as they journey to the Blackfoot reservation in Canada to participate in the annual Sun Dance. This consciously realistic story narrates the daily adventures of Lionel's uncle Eli, Lionel's girlfriend Alberta, and a lawyer named Charlie Looking Bear. All of them live off the reservation and use the Sun Dance as the occasion for a return to their origins. In turn, the most openly mythical fragments of the novel re-create a multiplicity of stories, both Christian and Native, about the

creation and transformation of the world. Various improvised narrators agree on the basic mythical belief that "in the beginning was the water"—a beginning equally valid for Judeo-Christian and Native American traditions. The stories that develop from there represent different versions of the creation and focus on many different passages in the creation process, as they are rendered in diverse voices. Sacred figures from the biblical story of the creation of the world share narrative space with characters taken from a variety of Native American creation stories.

Situated firmly between the two worlds, King presents an interstitial space inhabited by six magical characters who constantly interact with both worlds. This liminal narrative space tells the adventures of trickster Coyote and of the narrative "I"—who speaks as one more of the characters—and of four old Indians who have left a Florida hospital to save Lionel and, quixotically, to "fix the world." With the aid of Coyote, the four Indians—who go by the names of Robinson Crusoe, Hawk Eye, Ishmael, and the Lone Ranger—retell several competing stories of the creation and transformation of the world. These four old Indians, however, are not realistic characters but avatars of the Native American mythical characters First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman. Like trickster Coyote, the four old Indians straddle the border between the "ancient sacred and the contemporary popular or technological" (Cox 2000: 220). Embedded in mythical time, they believe that history is fixable, that it is not a linear form but a renewing and fluid curve that can be reshaped by stories. The four old Indians assume that historical, literary, and cultural texts are world-creating rather than world-reflecting or mimetic, hence their interest in retelling the stories of the past as a way to manipulate the "realistic" story of the present. Gradually, the constant shifts of these characters from the different narrative levels becomes more open. To the jesting Coyote, the narrative "I" responds by expressing his conscious responsibility to both levels: "'But maybe they'll give us a ride,' says Coyote. 'No time for that,' I says. 'We've got to get back to the other story'" (261). This move back and forth between realistic and mythic times and stories end not so much in the representation of two radically separate planes as in the perception of both, simultaneously coexisting and interacting. Though from a Western perspective this blending of levels involves an ontological break, this is a common literary device in Native

American storytelling. As Paula Gunn Allen states, Native stories often textualize the interaction between the mythic and the mortal as part of the everyday:

> [I]n all stories from the oral tradition, some of the details are from the world we know while other details refer to the supernatural or nonphysical universe. Many times the stories weave back and forth between the everyday and the supernatural without explanation. (1991: 5)

King's novel locates itself in the intermediary space inhabited by mythical characters, liminal tricksters who act in both worlds. As in Naylor's *Mama Day*, this "other place" is, perhaps fundamentally, a semiotic site, a space where signs float and wander. The presence of the narrative "I," speaking in the third-person singular as simply one more character, appears to testify to the semiotic nature of that interstitial space, thus distancing the text from anthropological interests. King's complex narrative continually plays with the intentional dislocation of the story and its teller. In linguistic terms, King inhabits and explores the interstices between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the proposition. As Homi Bhabha cryptically explains, each act of enunciation generates "a disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (*énoncé*) and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgment of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space" (1994: 36). Bhabha also theorizes the "enunciative split," or the struggle between "a stable system of reference" and "the shifting, strategically displaced time of the articulation of a historical politics of negotiation" (1994: 35). In King's novel, this struggle is dramatized in the confrontation between stable, canonical texts and their iteration, translation, and actualization in a radically different context. The magical intervention in the narrative comes through its displacement of the traditional texts of Western culture and their normative description of reality, and the subsequent incorporation of alternative narrative voices and spaces. In the process of being enunciated, "recited," and "re-sited," these texts lose their originary or foundational status; they lose their realistic effect and call attention to their own fictionality.

If *Mama Day* resituated Shakespeare's *Tempest* and brought it to bear on African American experiences, King's text displaces well-

known stories and characters from both Christian and Native historical, literary, and religious traditions to make them inhabit alternative enunciatory spaces. Numerous and utterly diverse stories appear in culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations; they play off one another, and no particular privilege is given to any of them—unless it is a provisional, rather comical privilege. In the absence of an authoritative, solidly grounded speaking position, the stories are left to interact and commingle freely in the contingent voices of unstable narrators. Just as levels of narrative ceaselessly contaminate one another, stories continuously modify each other (Smith 1998). The discourses of the West, of religion, culture, and literature, are decentered, for King invokes many stories assumed to be closed and fixed, then relocates them into the alternative narrative spaces: Christian origin stories—from both the Old and New Testaments—American national myths, canonical literary texts like Melville's *Moby Dick*, and popular culture products such as John Wayne films, are all detached from their traditional locations and made to float as signifiers in a dynamic and unstable space. Out of the free interplay of stories comes an effective polyphony that recurrently fails to achieve stability or closure. The "interstitial space" between these stories emerges as a contingent speaking position, never steadily occupied by any one character. It is always a provisional place, one granted on a temporary basis. No one truly dominates the narrative voice in *Green Grass*—not the actual narrator, or any of the four Indian elders during their individual narratives, or the "I" who speaks in the third-person singular. Their narratives are constantly mediated and crossed by intervening voices, disputing the authority of the different narrators in a postmodern replay of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This play with the narrator's position and with her authority over the text not only pervades King's novel but has also become a central trope in postcolonial writing. Revealing the position of the speaking subject, rather than dodging the issue, represents a deliberate move. If colonial ideologies cast their presumably realistic views of the colonized in apparently objective, scientific, authorless discourses, postcolonial texts seek to reinstate the speaking position as central to the decolonizing enterprise. For as R. Harvey Brown argues, "To reveal the practices by which representations become realistic is to disclose the ideology that is encoded in the modes of production of reality—those processes of

human inscription that are collapsed into and held captive by a static mimesis that is the product of these very processes" (1995: 141).

Magical Interventions

The mythical and semiotic characters who inhabit the intermediary space in *Green Grass* openly question the search for foundations, for beginnings and endings, for unity and authority, both in culture and society and in narrative terms. And they do so by occupying alternative and dynamic semiotic spaces where those foundationalist notions are put under erasure. King brings both Christian and Native ancestral narratives, myths, symbols, and memories to the consciousness of their own iterability and change. The presumably sacred lessons of the past are relativized as they enter the interstitial space opened up by the text. The novel distantiates them by "repeating" these stories, makes them uncanny by displacing and re-placing them in a number of culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations.

Seeking to demystify textual authority by repositioning the enunciation and highlighting textual processes, King focuses on the Bible as the utmost representative of the male authoritative text and the erasure of the locus of enunciation. Like history, the Bible pushes forward its authority by erasing the positionality of the enunciator, therefore appearing as complete in itself. In contrast, King playfully invokes the question of who speaks the Bible. He brings the biblical stories back within the process of narration and inserts them into a performative Native American narrative context. Adam, Jesus, and Noah, among many other figures, are displaced from their biblical settings and made to occupy spaces over which they have no control. This move is particularly subversive in that it was the Bible that figured as a central instrument in the American reading of the Native other.[13] King's initial dislocation of the Bible is only a preliminary step for the representation of a new way of experiencing Native reality. In contrast to the biblical story—closed, authoritative, male, and linear—King's text proposes an alternative narrative space that both celebrates and performs practice and process. This interstitial space is inherently "rhizomatic," per Deleuze and Guattari's definition: "In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the

rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without organizing and memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states" (Deleuze and Guattari 1992: 21). While ostensibly in search of the "right" story of origins emerging from its appropriate locus of enunciation, the novel articulates an open—narrative—space, not striated, without a central authority and a clear sense of direction. King refuses to give narrative authority to either the Native American tradition or the Christian tradition, and in the same way, the novel's narratorial authority is neither rigidly male nor openly female. Most biblical characters (God, Young Man Walking on Water, Noah, etc.) appear detached from their biblical contexts, while they constantly attempt to achieve power over their narrative worlds by assuming power over the narration itself. "And just so we keep things straight, ... this is my world and this is my garden" (72), says God. Along the same lines, and in the unruly presence of Changing Woman, Noah makes reference to the rules in order to exert his male authority over the voyage: "I am a Christian man. This is a Christian journey. And if you can't follow our Christian rules, then you're not wanted on the voyage" (163). Young Man Walking on Water also invokes the rules of the holy book to control the behavior of Old Woman: "The first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me" (388). Despite his efforts, the very story he tells contradicts his own authority. It is Old Woman who finally helps him and manages to calm the waters. The invocations of these rules appear pathetic in that the authority of the speakers to name and control the world is not readily assumed by the rest of the characters and by the reader; they are disembodied signifiers whose authority is contingent upon the narratives they tell. In an astute retelling of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, King subverts the traditional Eurocentric trope of the colonizer authoritatively "naming" the reality of the other. If correct naming is the precondition for truthful (read realistic) representation, then Adam, who is here appropriately renamed Ahdamn, dramatizes his own failure:

> Ahdamn is busy. He is naming everything.
> You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.
> Nope, says that Elk. Try again.
> You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.

> We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear.
> You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree.
> You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree. (41)

The status accorded to Adam in Genesis openly recalls similar roles by the colonizers. Ahdamn's deeply misguided sense of his own grandeur, and his inability to comprehend the universe of the other, reflect hegemonic colonial strategies. Both the biblical and the colonial stories appear to be marred from their inception.

Just as the Bible is revised and relocated, the cinematic genre of the Western is equally decentered. Given the importance of Westerns in the incorporation of Native Americans into the national consciousness, King's literary and comic manipulation of the classic John Wayne Western is particularly relevant. As Vizenor has variously complained, Native American life has been trapped in static images represented in the media, of which the Western is no doubt paramount. The image of the stoic Native American, as well as that of the vanishing American among many others, has flooded the American perception of the Native, to the extent that these images have taken on a life of their own. It is on this cinematic reality—which reads close to historiographical reality—that the four old Indians effect their magical intervention. Several characters watch a Western movie, and as John Wayne and Richard Widmark, protagonists of the film, are surrounded by Indians, the American cavalry that comes to the rescue in the original version of the movie is wiped out through the magical intervention of the four old Indians. "There at full charge, hundreds of soldiers in bright blue uniforms with gold buttons and sashes and stripes, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, came over the last rise. And disappeared" (357). As "rewriters of history" (Schroeder 2004: 85), the four old Indians manipulate the movie scene, itself a distanced reflection of the real, to highlight its fictional status. However, the scene equally underlines the all-too-real effect a deliberately fictional discourse can have on the characters. As Charlie views the "revised" version of the movie, his father, who used to play the role of the Indian loser in Westerns, suddenly assumes a role Charlie can be proud of: "his eyes flashed as he watched his father flow through the soldiers like a flood. 'Get 'em, Dad,' he hissed" (358). This magical manipulation has the real effect of providing Charlie with a father, a culture, and a history to celebrate (cf. Schroeder 2004: 85).

If the four old Indians inhabit the magical interstices of the novel, so does Coyote. And his magical intrusions have equally material effects on the lives of the people. Alberta's pregnancy is the result of Coyote's intervention (reminiscent of the Immaculate Conception). However, though Alberta is never sure how it could have happened, she gets intimations that it might have been Coyote, and rather than feeling shocked or alarmed she takes those hunches in a matter-of-fact way. "They kept asking me who did it, as if I really knew... So I finally told them that it was probably Coyote" (258). Other Coyote interventions are permeated with deliberately subversive intentions, as exemplified in his breaking down the dam. The building of a dam on a Blackfoot reservation in the small town of Blossom, Alberta, is a significant symbol for the imperialistic oppression of Native land rights and cultures. The anxieties Eli has expressed regarding cracks in the basin of the dam and rumors of the earth slipping beneath its surface are cast aside, as are any questions "about possible fault lines" running underneath the construction site. Eli's heroic resistance to the operation of the dam is nonetheless pervaded by his clear belief that, in the end, his mother's log cabin, located in the heart of the proposed spillway, would be washed out, "log by log" (287). Coyote believes that any possible victory for Eli's cause requires the destruction of the dam. Consequently, Coyote dances, producing an earthquake that slams three cars into the Dam:

> Beneath the power and the motion there was a more ominous sound of things giving way, of things falling apart. Sifton felt it first, a sudden shifting, a sideways turning, a flexing, the snapping crack of concrete and steel, and in that instant the water rose out of the lake like a mountain, sucking the cars under and pitching them high in the air, sending them at the dam in an awful rush. And the dam gave way, and the water and the cars tumbled over the edge of the world ... (454)

Coyote's intervention supplements the Native lack of power and control over the big capitalist corporations and liberates native lands from foreign contention.

Semiotic Interventions

Despite Coyote's and the four elders' magical intrusion in the realistic events of the novel, the most drastic interventions in *Green Grass,*

Running Water are generally of a semiotic nature. The quixotic "fixing of the world" by Coyote and the elders is paralleled by the comical deconstruction and rearticulation of grand narratives, both Western and Native. If the Judeo-Christian story of the creation of the world is imaginatively transformed and deauthorized, so are the Native creation myths. As in the Native tradition of oral storytelling, the stories have no grounding beyond the occasion of the telling. They are not true in relation to some far-fetched or transcendental reality to which they must remain loyal. As Sharon Bailey asserts, "The end is not the content of the story but the telling itself" (1999; see also Linton 1999: 224). This accounts for the fact that the creation story is told over and over in the novel, in the voices of different narrators, and it never comes out right. At one point Lone Ranger is trying to start his narrative of origins when he is challenged by the other elders:

> "Wait a minute," said Robinson Crusoe.
> "Yes?"
> "That's the wrong story," said Ishmael. "That story comes later."
> "But it's my turn," said the Lone Ranger.
> "But you have to get it right," said Hawkeye.
> "And," said Robinson Crusoe, "you can't tell it all by yourself."
> "Yes," said Ishmael. "Remember what happened last time?"
> "Everybody makes mistakes," said the Lone Ranger.
> "Best not to make them with stories." (11)

Despite the four elders' declared intention to get the story right, the implication here, as everywhere else in the novel, is that each version of the story is as right, or as real, as it will ever get, since the value of the story lies not so much in its content as in the telling. Though at the risk of never reaching the truth, the repeated telling of the story in different locations and narrated by different voices always achieves its final goal of getting it right every time it is told. Rather than its adherence to a particular view of reality—its mimetic or world-reflecting quality—it is the concrete enunciation of the story, the location and purposes of the telling, that assure the relevance of the story to the immediate circumstances. The final words by "I," now simply one more of the characters in the novel, sum up the impression most of the characters have internalized by the end of the novel: "'There are no truths, Coyote,' I says. 'Only stories'" (432).

As King's novel proposes, the deconstruction of dominant discourses goes hand in hand with the exposition of their situatedness

and the construction of new and oppositional loci of enunciation. In King's novel, the presumably realistic language of empire, whether political, religious, or cultural, is both engaged and displaced. While lecturing before her class, Alberta Frank notices that "Henry Dawes was sound asleep at the back of the room, his head wrapped up in his arms. Mary Rowlandson and Elaine Goodale were bent over, their heads locked together. Hannah Duston and John Collier had moved their desks together again, and were virtually in each other's laps" (16). Here relevant writers and politicians who were historically responsible for objectifying Native American life—Henry Dawes, Mary Rowlandson, Elaine Goodale, and John Collier—are decentered and rewritten as pathetic students, such that their traditionally authoritative discourses are thoroughly undermined. The language game of empire is played here under different conditions and uttered from different locations in such a way that all pretensions of objectivity or universality are lost.[14] The central speaking subject has metaphorically gone beyond itself and its own safe boundaries. It has become, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the word (1983), a nomad, forced to inhabit a world of becoming and heterogeneity, dialogue and interconnectedness. King's novel places itself alongside the recent tendency to reconfigure cultural geographies in terms of the creation of alternative loci of enunciation. As the geopolitical borders are crossed and metaphorically (though not physically) redrawn in the constant moves of contemporary transnational migrations, new loci of enunciation are imagined and constructed to allow for new voices to enter the dialogues of modern world.

Obviously, *Green Grass, Running Water* does not strive to replace the Western religious perspective with a Native mythical or magical one. That, as Michael Valdez Moses reminds us, would read as a modernist escape into a dreamlike universe. What the novel can and does do is provide the reader with the belief that all worldviews, even if they appear absolute and universal (whether they be biblical, mythological, or rational-scientific) are necessarily provisional, contingent, and constructed. The aseptic voice of the narrator, readily assuming the disruption of the realistic narrative through the introduction of magical elements, underlines the fact that the fiction itself is not laying special claims to the magical elements it incorporates. Rather, the novel exposes a whole variety of ways of relating with the environment and making sense of it. *Green Grass,*

Running Water variously invokes and plays with the magic and the real, not to give preference to any of them but to destabilize the primacy claims of both. Against the presumed superiority of the authoritative discourses in their representation of the world, King's novel opposes the ever-changing discourses of Native culture. Static mimesis transforms into narrativity as a world-creating instrument. However, the new world created in the stories is always contingent, provisional, never aspiring to full presence or fixity.

IV. Magical Realism as Supernatural Agency

Both *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Mama Day* present the disenfranchised in their attempts to redress previous wrongs by resorting to supernatural forms of agency, as in the case of the four elders and the character of Mama Day. As a way of confronting a difficult, oppressive reality, like that of black American slaves and oppressed Native Americans, the two novels represent these groups resorting to stories that supernaturally transform their grim circumstances and allow them a form of agency that would otherwise be denied.

Both novels portray a series of magic-informed characters as inhabitants of a liminal world situated between "two more or less distant realities." The two alternative realities are tightly juxtaposed in the textual world, and the characters cross over at will. The spiritual world of Mama Day transcends into the material, traversing what others see as rigid lines of demarcation. By placing her material in a semi-mythological universe, Naylor endows her characters with a capacity for agency that they traumatically lacked in the more empirical world of slavery. The very departure of Sapphira Wade in her flight back to Africa, a story rooted in African American folklore, captures not only the slaves' dreams of a mythical return to the homeland but also, more importantly, their desire for resistance and agency. In a similar vein, the four elders' chivalric redressing of the wrongs done to Native Americans equally represent a significant intervention in the form of supernatural agency, calling attention both to a long history of oppression and to the grim reality of Native American communities at present. Both novels, then, open up magical realist spaces where the ethnic others can become agents of their

destiny. In both cases, this liberating, self-creating function comes as a form of semiotic empowerment. As responses to the nondialogic quality of the language of empire, the two novels represent different avenues to access a dynamic and fluid sort of communication, either by magical realist powers of listening to and responding to nature, as in *Mama Day*, or by magical interventions into the objectifying discourses of the West, as in *Green Grass, Running Water*. In both cases, the sites of enunciation are decentered and relocated. Both texts represent different cases of the ethnic others' search for forms of agency through the use of magical powers in the struggle over the access to signification.

Endnotes

1. Surprisingly enough, in his early years as a writer, Gabriel García Márquez would speak of his own writings as surrealist. In "Remedios the Beauty Is Alive and Well," William Kennedy retells of how he interviewed García Márquez in Barcelona in 1972: "When he and I talked, we didn't mention magical realism; only his use of surrealism. 'In Mexico,' he said, 'surrealism runs through the streets. Surrealism comes from the reality of Latin America'" (56).
2. It originated there, according to some scholars, not only with the pictorial expressionist school, but even before that, with the tradition of the romance.
3. Using very similar terms, Brenda Cooper refers to the African author's blending of postcolonial and First World perspectives in magical realist texts as "seeing with a third eye" (1998: 1)
4. José Martí's "Our America" reads as a clear declaration of pride in what he terms the "half-breed" America.
5. However, Carpentier's categorizing of certain elements as marvelous presupposes a cultural dislocation that betrays a Eurocentric perspective, inasmuch as the marvelous can be seen as such only from an outsider's perspective (Hegerfeldt 2005: 23ff.). To those who see the world "that way," it could hardly seem marvelous. Even if magic is on *this* side, González Echevarría argues, "we have to see it from the other side to see it as magic" (1977: 128). Whatever Carpentier's claims to the organic fusion of magic with the everyday reality of Latin America, his own outsider's projection of it betrays the existence of unintegrated tensions, clashing temporalities, and dysfunctional blendings still at work in postcolonial cultures.
6. The trinity can be located at the source of numerous modern philosophical developments, like Habermas's three validity claims (subjective truthfulness of "I," cultural justness of "we," and objective truth of "its"), or the three major domains of Kant's three critiques: science or "its" (*Critique of Pure Reason*), morals or "we" (*Critique of Practical Reason*), and art and self-expression of the "I" (*Critique of Judgment*)

7. Even in literary narrative, the departure from realism is also regularly discredited, as Kathryn Hume indicates: "Thanks to the Greek philosophers, Christianity, and the Enlightenment, we have no vocabulary for analyzing literary departures from reality. Myth, fable, fancy, fantasy, image, symbol, and metaphor—all the inherited terms—have specialized and sometimes negative connotations when applied to serious literature" (Hume 1984: 147).
8. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reads as a powerful exploration and refutation of the cultural bias in presumably ethnographic representations of the colonial other.
9. As Wendy Faris states, "That realism has been an European, or first world, export, in conjunction with its mimetic program, its claim to fashioning an accurate portrait of the world, has in some instances tended to ally it with imperialism—Spanish, English, French, Russian, U.S.—endowing it with an implicitly authoritarian aura for writers in colonial situations" (1995: 180).
10. Magical realist discourse, argues González Echevarría, is nostalgically anthropological insomuch as it deals with the presence of magic, but it fails to be magical discourse. González Echevarría discards this kind of writing as "mock anthropology," which clearly contrasts with, for example, Vizenor's view of native writing as a confutation of white anthropological perspectives and analyses of native culture.
11. The presence of a narrative voice whose identity is collective rather than individual is a central motif of many magical realist texts. Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* is a paradigmatic case.
12. For a good comparative reading of *Mama Day* and *The Tempest*, see Storhoff 1995.
13. The Puritan typology, for once, insisted that the meaning of real events was always prefigured in the Bible. The biblical projection on the natives cast a shadow over native experience with long-lasting consequences. For the Puritans, native reality was prefigured in the Bible, and to interpret it one simply needed the appropriate reading skills.
14. The very title of the novel effects a preliminary reciting of the language of empire. King's title refers to a phrase commonly used in old U.S. treaties, where the government promised native people rights to their land, "as long as the grass is green and the water runs."

5
From Identity to Alter-entity: Trans-selving the Self in Magical Realist Narratives

> Redescribing a world is the necessary first step toward changing it.
>
> —Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

> Hubo un tiempo en que yo pensaba mucho en los axolotl. Iba a verlos al acuario del Jardin des Plantes y me quedaba horas mirándolos, observando su inmovilidad, sus oscuros movimientos. Ahora soy un axolotl.
>
> —Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl"

Cortázar's narrator does become an axolotl. He becomes the very creature he is observing. Having described the intriguing axolotl/ajolote in the painstaking way of a natural scientist, Cortázar patiently leads us to believe in the plausibility of this exchange of beings: a human becomes an axolotl and vice versa. From the very outset, the narrator concedes that despite the obvious distance between the two, there is a certain imperceptible umbilical cord bonding him to the creatures inside the aquarium: "desde un primer momento comprendí que estábamos vinculados, que algo infinitamente perdido y distante seguía sin embargo uniéndonos" (1984: 420) ("after the first minute I knew that we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together"—all translations from http://www.idst.vt.edu/modernworld/d/axolotl.html). And it is the face-to-face encounter that deepens into this inscrutable bond between the narrator and the—significantly amphibious—animal: "Y entonces descubrí sus ojos, su cara" (1984: 420) ("And then I discovered its eyes, its face"). The narration soon shifts to an account, in the first-person plural form, of the reasons why we (the axolotl species) do not like moving: "A veces una pata se movía apenas. O veía los diminutos

dedos posándose con suavidad en el musgo. Es que no nos gusta movernos mucho... El tiempo se siente menos si nos estamos quietos" (421) ("Once in a while a foot would barely move, I saw the diminutive toes poise mildly on the moss. It's that we don't enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped we barely move in any direction and we're hitting one of the others with our tail or our head -- difficulties arise, fights, tiredness… The time feels like it's less if we stay quietly.")

The narrator seems to hear the axolotls' humanity,[1] trapped in a nonhuman body, calling for help through their hypnotic eyes: "Sálvanos, sálvanos" (421) ("Save us, save us"). He answers their call by whispering comforting words and gradually sympathizing, feeling their pain as his own. His compassion arises out of guilt. He feels as if he owes them this, and even more than this: "Los axolotl eran como testigos de algo, y a veces como horribles jueces. Me sentía innoble ante ellos; había una pureza tan espantosa en esos ojos transparentes" (422). ("The axolotls were like witnesses of something, and at times like horrible judges. I felt ignoble in front of them; there was such a terrifying purity in those transparent eyes.") Thus, the creatures threaten to devour him with their eyes, in a "golden cannibalism" that renders both sides human.

The bond between the axolotl and the human narrator grows by the day, until one morning he feels the silent pain of the axolotls even more intensely:

> Sufrían, cada fibra de mi cuerpo alcanzaba ese sufrimiento amordazado, esa tortura rígida en el fondo del agua... No era posible que una expresión tan terrible que alcanzaba a vencer la inexpresividad forzada de sus rostros de piedra, no portara un mensaje de dolor, la prueba de esa condena eternal, de ese infierno líquido que padecían. Inútilmente quería probarme que mi propia sensibilidad proyectaba en los axolotl una conciencia inexistente. Ellos y yo sabíamos. Por eso no hubo nada de extraño en lo que ocurrió. Mi cara estaba pegada al vidrio del acuario, mis ojos trataban una vez más de penetrar el misterio de esos ojos de oro sin iris y sin pupila. Veía de muy cerca la cara de un axolotl inmóvil junto al vidrio. Sin transición, sin sorpresa, vi mi cara contra el vidrio... Entonces mi cara se apartó y yo comprendí. (422) ("They were suffering, every fiber of my body reached toward that stifled pain, that stiff torment at the bottom of the tank. Not possible that such a terrible expression which was attaining the overthrow of that forced blankness on their stone faces should carry any message other than one of pain, proof of that eternal sentence, of that liquid hell they were undergoing. Hopelessly, I wanted to prove to myself that my own sensibility

> was projecting a nonexistent consciousness upon the axolotl. They and I knew. So there was nothing strange in what happened. My face was pressed against the glass of the aquarium, my eyes were attempting once more to penetrate the mystery of those eyes of gold without iris, without pupil. I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass. No transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass … Then my face drew back and I understood.")

The reader has just witnessed the exchange of bodies and minds between two entities: the human narrator now finds that he is an axolotl, imprisoned in an aquarium. However, he is not the only creature that is aware of this reality. The other eight axolotls also know of their common plight and silently communicate their understanding:

> El horror venía ... de creerme prisionero en un cuerpo de axolotl, ... condenado a moverme lúcidamente entre criaturas insensibles. Pero aquello cesó cuando ... vi a un axolotl junto a mí que me miraba, y supe que también él sabía, sin comunicación posible pero tan claramente. O yo estaba también en él, o todos nosotros pensábamos como un hombre, incapaces de expresión, limitados al resplandor dorado de nuestros ojos que miraban la cara del hombre pegada al acuario. (423) ("The horror began -- I learned in the same moment of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, buried alive in an axobtl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures. But that stopped when … I saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me, and understood that he knew also, no communication possible, but very clearly. Or I was also in him, or all of us were thinking humanlike, incapable of expression, limited to the golden splendor of our eyes looking at the face of the man pressed against the aquarium")

The curious gaze of the visitor soon declines into perfunctory, less frequent attention, until the visits stop altogether. The communication, which has gradually eroded, eventually ceases: "Ahora soy definitivamente un axolotl, y si pienso como un hombre es sólo porque todo axolotl piensa como un hombre dentro de su imagen de piedra rosa. Me parece que todo esto alcancé a comunicarle algo en los primeros días, cuando yo era todavía él" (423) ("I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance. I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he.")

In what has become a classic of magical realism, Cortázar deals with nothing short of substitution. What the reader witnesses is a transmutation of "selves" between the human subject-narrator and the observed object, the axolotl. In this peculiar exchange we can not only find an excellent example of the transgressions of "the real" so common in magical realist narratives, but also perceive the echoes of the subject-object dialectics and the issue of identity that many philosophers have contended with. What this chapter is concerned with is the different conceptions of identity emblazoned in magical realist narratives, and for these purposes, it is one specific philosophical approach, that of Emmanuel Levinas, that proves to be most amenable, both because it can be illuminating and because it can also prove challenging. It is precisely substitution that constitutes the central tenet not only of Levinas's understanding of identity, but also of his theoretical approach to ethics. Inscribing reality in an alternative way, magical realism provides a chimera-like metaphor, almost an embodiment of Levinasian substitution. If, as Rushdie maintains, "redescribing a world is the necessary first step toward changing it," magical realist texts enact a fundamental shift in our understanding of self, away from identity and toward alter-entity.

I. Un-selving the Self: A Levinasian Reading of Self in Magical Realist Texts

Itself an oxymoron, magical realism fosters the juxtaposition of contradictory pairings, only to deconstruct their apparently unsolvable antitheses. In this way, traditional antinomies are resolved and ontological orders are constantly crossed and transgressed, among them: the dichotomy "abstract (infinite) versus concrete (limited)," and its related couplings "spiritual versus material," "animate versus inanimate," and "life versus death," and the Western antithetical dualism "reality versus fantasy," or "truth versus fiction," which crumbles from the very moment that the real and the unreal become interchangeable and/or indistinguishable. Also, at the temporal level, the invisible frontiers of (and between) space and time are crossed over: temporality and atemporality shake hands, and the present appears deeply linked to—if not confused with—the past and the

future. And last but not least, the antinomies "subject versus object" and "I versus the other" are problematized.

The last transgression—that of the frontiers of self, or "I versus the other"—proves to be most provocative. Anyone familiar with magical realist fiction will at once detect that these texts abound in dislocated selves in various stages of fragmentation, dissolution, and change. Indeed, as Wendy Faris explains in *Ordinary Enchantments,* magical realist narrative successfully "disturbs received ideas about ... identity" (2004: 7). "Excursions" into/out of human/nonhuman realms constitute a common occurrence in magical realism, as Cortázar's axolotl story proves. Metamorphoses into/out of animals are probably the most frequent and popular, from Kafka's eponymous classic to the bear-human metamorphosis in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart.* Furthermore, characters can linger in a half-human, half-non-human state, such as "the Japanese and his ball" in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*.

On the other hand, multiple and fluid identities seem to thrive in magical realist texts: different selves can merge into a single one, or else one self splits into multiple selves—for instance, the different ghosts and avatars of reincarnation in Alvin Lu's *The Hell Screens*, or Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*.[2] There are also instances of "interpersonal exchanges" that do not explicitly mention reincarnation. The "swapping" incidents in Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl," Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale*, or Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, to name just three (very different) examples, do not resort to reincarnation, but nonetheless prove as effective and disconcerting as the magical depiction of multiple avatars of the same self.

In magical realism the borders of the self become highly porous. Either there is a proliferation of selves within one single identity, or else readers witness an individual becoming "the other" she was looking at. In Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl," as described above, the liquid/glass frontier between the two selves becomes a "magical spatial mirror" (Faris 1995: 177) in which one sees the other who is oneself. Therefore, in the universe of magic realism, identity, as understood in traditional, realist ontologies, is questioned and transformed. Realist identity, with its emphasis on fixity and sameness, is unhinged in these texts, which drift toward a rather different concept, that of alter-entity, through a transmutation of

selves that may or may not fit in the Levinasian approach to identity formation and ethics.

However, Levinas's "alter-entity" is only one among the multifarious ways in which identity has been approached throughout history. As anticipated above, from the antiquity until the debunking of liberal humanism in the twentieth century, identity has been regarded as a stable, coherent unit, an entity identical to itself. Even after the advent of poststructuralism, "identity politics" and identitarian theory continued to hold on to the safe anchor of a "real" identity. Indeed, both feminism and postcolonial/ethnic criticism needed an anchoring reference of this sort for their very visibility and political agency. Identitarian narratives actually became the cornerstone of such cultural and sociopolitical movements as the diverse nationalisms of the nineteenth, twentieth, and even twenty-first centuries. If, as poststructuralist theorists claim, there is no such thing as a coherent self—if, instead, what we take to be our "identities" are but provisional, fragmented constructions, at best "a series of copies without a true original" (Potolsky 2006: 116), always already linguistically mediated and, like meaning, always already deferred—then there is no longer a justifiable, solid-enough anchor for identity politics.

In the last decades, some poststructuralist critics in such traditionally identity-based critical schools as feminist, ethnic, and postcolonial studies, aware of essentialism's pitfalls,[3] have argued for a middle-ground position that takes into account the radical dismantling of certainties, including that of a coherent, unified self, while maintaining the necessary political agency that tends to gather around a given "essence." Such a position, described by Gayatri Spivak as the "strategic use of essentialism,"[4] is still theoretically problematic yet can and does prove effective in terms of praxis. In a different vein, but to a similar effect, Satya Mohanty's "postpositivist realist" approach attempts to rescue the much-deprecated concept of cultural identity so that it can both inform sophisticated theorization and allow for social and political action.[5] In her search for "a genuine multiculturalism, a nonrelativist, nonliberal understanding of cultural difference and its ethical claims on us" (1993: 43), Mohanty engages in a philosophical exploration of the links between experience and identity, countering postmodernist skepticism—especially its suspicions of "experiential foundationalism"—and ultimately arguing

in favor of a return to a realist epistemology, albeit not naively positivist but "post-positivist." Thus, identity would arguably be grounded in personal and collective experiences, not "because of their self-evident authenticity but rather [because they] provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities" (Mohanty 1993: 45). Much like Spivak's "strategic essentialism," Mohanty's realist understanding of experience and identity manages to keep both sides of the bargain, demonstrating that "identities can be both constructed (socially, linguistically, theoretically, etc.) and 'real' at the same time" (1993: 69).

In this embattled context, it could be argued that the Levinasian position remains neutral, in that his approach to identity is neither positivist-realist nor purely constructivist. Indeed, it does away with the very possibility of the existence of an identity and argues instead for some other entity that, for lack of a better word, we shall term "alter-entity."[6] As Levinas reminds us in "Substitution" (1968),[7] the conflation of subjectivity and consciousness has prevailed in philosophical approaches to identity (1989: 93). And indeed, as the good Husserlian phenomenologist he originally was,[8] Levinas starts from the premise that the consciousness of the self precedes, predates, and preexists the external. "Perception," therefore, constitutes "the primordial act of being" (1989: 71), and knowing is nothing but the "turning of being back upon itself" (1989: 96). Consequently, the "external," the world, what is not-I, what lies outside of the I—understood here as consciousness—is nothing, does not exist if not seen, perceived, taken in, by this all-powerful consciousness. As Levinas claims in "Ethics as First Philosophy," knowledge turns out to be nothing but "re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain other to it" (77), inasmuch as the "labour of thought" always manages to conflate "same" and "other," "identical" and "nonidentical," and eventually "wins out over the otherness of things and men" (78). In such a closed system, whenever the self "goes out of itself" it encounters nothing but what its consciousness (that is, its very self) endows with existence. In such a self-sufficient system, the ego feels imprisoned, "like a sound that would resound in its own echo," "twisted over itself in its skin, too tight in its skin" (1989: 92, 93). In such a claustrophobic system, the fresh air of otherness is needed in order to breathe and live an actual life. Consequently, the only way out of this vicious circle turns out to be the self's

confrontation with something or someone lying outside its grasp.[9] If every apparent sign of alterity is easily subsumed into the same and thus erased as other, one has to find something or someone so absolutely other that, in its presence, one is left powerless—something or someone that is in itself alterity. Levinas posits at least two ways out of this impasse: death and the (face of the) other.

The contemporary Mexican "día de los muertos" and similar echoes of the medieval cultural topos of death as "the leveler," including the famous "danzas de la muerte," all point in the same direction, reminding us of our limits, our finite nature. Death is the only thing human beings cannot grasp, control, and know. Death is indeed the first other that lies outside the control of our all-absorbing awareness. As Levinas puts it, the phenomenon of death proves "insurmountable, inexorable and fundamentally incomprehensible" to our mind (1989: 78). Already in his early *Time and the Other*, the Jewish philosopher explains how death—and, concomitantly, the suffering and pain presaging death—signifies the unfathomable alterity of mystery: "an unknown that is impossible to translate into terms of light—that is, that is refractory to the intimacy of the self with the ego to which all our experiences return" (40). In death the self finally comes into contact with otherness, finally encounters something that "does not come from itself" (1989: 40). Thus, death opens a way out of the self-centered, all-absorbing understanding of subjectivity.

However, it is the face of the other ("le visage d'Autrui") that first reminds one of mortality itself. In explaining this, Levinas puts forward his pivotal theory about identity/alterity: the self constitutes itself in respons(e)ibility to the other:

> in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business. It is as if that invisible death, ignored by the Other, whom already it concerns by the nakedness of its face, were already "regarding" me prior to confronting me, and becoming the death that stares me in the face. The other man's death calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become the accomplice of the death to which the Other, who cannot see it, is exposed; and as if, even before vowing myself to him, I had to answer for this death of the Other, and to accompany the Other in his mortal solitude. The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question. (1989: 83)

The epiphanic encounter with this very concrete "face" of alterity leads the philosopher to reconsider identity in terms of answerability and responsibility for the other. That is, prior to my very existence, before any sort of free-choice commitment can intervene, I, myself, am responsible for the other: "Whether he regards me or not, he 'regards' me" (1989: 86). In "Substitution" and in *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas moves a step forward and builds his philosophical theory about this "mauvaise conscience," a guilty feeling that prompts self-justification and instills solidarity (being-for-the-other) in our very being, and does so—echoing the psalms Levinas knew so well—before the beginning of time: "in the 'prehistory' of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (1989: 107).[10]

Levinas posits a relational understanding of identity that is highly indebted to the theological theories of Martin Buber. In "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" Levinas explains this approach to identity as follows: "The relation is the very essence of the I: whenever the I truly affirms itself, its affirmation is inconceivable without the presence of the Thou" (64). He adds a caveat against the easy reification of the "I-Thou relation," which cannot be mistaken for the concept or "idea of otherness." "To have an idea of something is appropriate to the I-It relation," while the "I-Thou relation" consists instead "in confronting a being external to oneself, i.e., one which is radically other, and in recognizing it as such" (64).

For Levinas, then, identity is relation, including relation with another that summons me, accuses me, and renders me responsible for the others, as happens in Cortázar's "Axolotl." The narrator's sympathy for the confined creatures responds to the feeling of guilt inspired by the at once imploring and accusing eyes of the axolotls. Responsibility for the other can in the end be understood as the willingness to lay down one's life for the other, in substitution for the other, as the narrator ultimately does in Cortázar's story. When one lives (and dies) for the other, one becomes a "hostage," as it were, of/for the other: "For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage" (1989: 101). Substitution is not willful and voluntary, but passive; it is nonetheless a unique phenomenon in that you are irreplaceable: "No one can substitute himself for me, who," paradoxically, at the same time, "substitutes myself for all" (1989: 115).

It can be gathered, from the explanation above, that the act of substitution comes to serve as the other way out of "self-sameness." If death constituted an "event over which the subject is not master" (1989: 40) and thus opened the self to the nonself, the encounter with the other liberates the self through substitution: "Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity" (1989: 114). Indeed, the centrality of *l'Autrui* in Levinas's thought supersedes the indubitable importance of death and mortality in his philosophy. The confrontations of the human subject with both, as seen above, provide the only "escape routes" whereby the self can avoid the endless repetition of itself: that is, confronting death and/or the other allows us to escape the aforementioned "self-sameness." It can be further argued that although both death and "the other" prove instrumental in eluding the pervasive and suffocating control of the self, there is a relevant qualitative difference between them. It may be claimed that the realization of mortality can—and does—happen at any given time in life; yet if focusing on one's own death, this escape from the self's all-powerful control, this desired "out-of-controlness" occurs when one's self has (apparently) ceased to be aware of itself, then it happens after one's cessation of consciousness, after the death of the *cogito*. On the other hand, the engagement with *l'Autrui* bears a different mark. Levinas notes how "the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it" (1989: 45). In this case, then, the aforementioned feeling of "out-of-controlness" does not only occur during life; rather, it is there before the beginning of time. As Levinas reminds us, it precedes our own birth. Therefore, the relationship with the other, because of this precedence in time and because it carries in itself the very realization of mortality, remains more visible and, indeed, becomes the central tenet in Levinas's philosophical approach to identity. If, as has been argued so far, the encounter with *l'Autrui*/the other can be considered the axis of Levinas's philosophy, it is now time to ponder whether his radical deconstruction of identity is apt for the transformative literary mode of magical realism.

The interest in the literal "human exchanges" that readers encounter in magical realist narratives lies in their very uniqueness as concrete embodiments of the central Levinasian concept of

substitution. These magical realist texts allow us to make the chimera tangible, the fundamental Levinasian paradox of alterity in identity: "How," indeed, "can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?" (1989: 44). Levinas had further argued that (intellectually) understanding the other was not enough, since "knowing" presupposes control and thus fails to preserve the other's alterity: "If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power" (1989: 41). But one may also wonder whether the transliteration of an abstract idea into flesh—that is, the literal "substitution" found in some magical realist texts—can escape the pervasive and invasive power of the *cogito* and remain immune to its power dynamics.

By the same token, it should not be forgotten that substitution is also a passive phenomenon: you are rendered "hostage" of the other not out of your own volition, but as an unasked-for responsibility. Substitution just happens. Yet substitution may not be an act; it may actually be, as Levinas puts it, on "the hither side of the act-passivity alternative" (1989: 107). But what if substitution were liable to incarnation in fiction? What if Sophie, Akiko, Olivia, or Kwan were "embodied substitutions," walking hostages of other selves? Something resembling this non-act of substitution can be witnessed, to varying degrees, in the three magical realist novels analyzed in the following sections: Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997).

II. Erdrich's *Tracks*: Substitution or Possession?

Louise Erdrich's novel is a good starting point, as it constitutes a litmus test for the viability of the substitution trope in the other two books. With *Love Medicine* (1984), Erdrich started a literary career that would soon turn her into one of the most prominent voices among Native American writers. Most of her work to date, including *Tracks* (1988), focuses on the life of midwestern Native and white communities. In her sometimes tragic, sometimes comic depiction of life in these communities, Erdrich has often resorted to magical realist techniques, from the initial inclusion of trickster-like Nanapush in *Love Medicine*, where, as Karla Sanders maintains, he escapes any

attempt to be enclosed or fixed, "magical free spirit" that he is (142). Erdrich herself has tried to dodge the common critical attempt to "enclose" her within the label *magical realism*, which she contends is misapplied in her case, since what we understand to be "magical" and incredible in our worldview is perfectly possible in her community (Cox 159).

Also falling under the magical realist rubric, *Tracks* can be considered a "borderline case" among the novels we deal with here in that it does offer a glimpse at Levinasian substitution, but, on more careful inspection, it more precisely signifies a momentary "possession"—albeit highly significant—of one person's body by another person's mind. Pauline, the narrator of this particular chapter in the novel,[11] is an orphan who, after dwelling in different locations, starts living with the Morrisseys: widow Bernadette, her brother Napoleon, and her two daughters. She helps Bernadette with her work, both at the farm and by the side of the sickbed/deathbed.[12] Pauline is also jealous of Fleur, the Native American woman living at the margins—both literal and metaphorical—of the village. Pauline feels attracted to Eli, Fleur's handsome young husband, but he openly rejects her "amorous" advances:

> And it was there, while Fleur and Lulu were inside the house fetching flour, ... I put out my hand and let it glide against him. My knuckles grazed an inch of his skin. Then he caught my palm in his. For a moment I thought, with wild certainty, that he would hold my fingers to his lips. But he looked at my hand with curiosity, no intent, and then, like a fish too small to keep, he threw it back.
>
> So I both turned from him and desired him, in hate. (77)

The rejection or, rather, plain indifference shown by Eli only intensifies Pauline's craving for him, so she soon devises some other way of satisfying her sexual desire, while at the same time humiliating both Eli and the Morrisseys. It so happens that just around that time Pauline becomes aware of the changes in Sophie, Bernadette's elder daughter. Pauline not only lives with the Morrisseys; she also shares a big bed with Bernadette's daughters. One night she notices that, at fourteen, Sophie's "brand new body" is no longer that of a child, but of a young woman: "Sophie nested close... I lay awake for a long while that night, watching her sleep. She was a pretty girl, with brown hair and eyes... Her lips were almost too full and too red" (77–78).

Realizing the potential of the child's charming beauty, Pauline concocts a scheme. She has the Morrisseys hire Eli as a helping hand at the farm, then she sews a tight blue dress for Sophie and observes Eli's reaction to the pretty girl: "Sophie was out front, drinking from the windmill trough. She leaned over the water, sucking it like a heifer. The calico clung down her back where she sweat. Her waist was neat and her neck, burnt red where I'd pinned up her hair, was slender as a reed. Eli watched her. When she turned, ... he came forward. He asked if he could have a drink" (80).

The flirting goes on, and Pauline soon thinks of a way to make the two of them meet when no one is around. During a short break, Sophie and Eli sit down to share some bread and butter, while Pauline hides and watches them: "And then, as I crouched in the cove of leaves, I turned my thoughts on the girl and *entered her* and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself. I stood her in the broken straws and she stepped over Eli, one leg on either side of his chest. Standing there, she slowly hiked her skirt" (83; emphasis added). Pauline is not simply a *voyeuse.* The satisfaction of her desire for Eli is not just indirectly "borrowed," but literally so. Pauline actually borrows Sophie's body and feels through it, as the interplay of personal and possessive pronouns suggests: "He [Eli] moved his hands up her [Sophie's] thighs, beneath the tucked billow of her skirt. She shivered and I [Pauline] dug my fingers through the tough claws of sumac, through the wood-sod, clutched bark, shrank backward into her pleasure" (83). The sexual dance that Eli and Sophie/Pauline engage in moves then to the lake. Pauline still seems in control of the whole situation, which becomes even more obvious at the end of the seduction scene, where Eli and Sophie become Pauline's "puppets":

> He pulled her hips against him, her skirt floating like a flower. Sophie shuddered, her eyes rolled to the whites. She screamed God's name and blood showed at her lip. Then she laughed.
>
> And I, lost in wild brush, also laughed as they began to rock and move. They went on and they went on. They were not allowed to stop. They could drown, still moving, breathe water in exhaustion. I drove Eli to the peak and then took his relief away and made him start again. I don't know how long, how many hours... I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits.
>
> I let them stop eventually ... (84; emphasis added)

Pauline has fulfilled her revenge on Eli, Fleur, and the Morrisseys, while gratifying her sexual desire. However, as the last quotation shows us, what is performed in this seduction scene is merely a temporary willful possession. This "bodily haunting" will not happen again, and both Sophie and Pauline will continue to live their own lives as their own selves, with the child only partially aware of what has actually happened. More than "bewitching"—which is likely to be Sophie's closest guess—what we have witnessed is the actual invasion of another self's corporality in order to assuage one's own needs and desires. To put it simply, Sophie's body is used, but we may entertain doubts as to whether her psyche is annulled during the sexual act. Yet what we know for sure is that Pauline's mind does inhabit Sophie's body for a period of time, that she manages to feel with Sophie's body and control her movements. This, however, does not entirely deplete Sophie of her (own) self, not even when having sex with Eli. She is conscious enough to realize who is behind the seduction, as evidenced by this passage: when Pauline tells Bernadette about Sophie's compliance in the act and the widow is about to beat her daughter, Sophie reacts and blames Pauline: "she looked at me [Pauline], her brown eyes clear across her mother's shoulder. 'It's you should ask for mercy,' she said, 'death's bony whore'" (86).

This episode in *Tracks* remains difficult to categorize. Using someone else's body comes close to, but fails to be, substitution, not only because of the temporary nature of the "bodily haunting" on this particular occasion, but, more importantly, because this experience of possession differs very little from plain hypnosis. Hypnosis, the stealing of someone else's will, differs from Levinas's conception of substitution, where "I am 'in myself' through the others. The psyche is the other in the same, without alienating the same" (1989: 102). Furthermore, in *Tracks* the two people involved in the seduction scene, Sophie and Pauline, remain who they are, with only a fleeting point of connection and substitution, which, nevertheless, works only in one direction. The scene evokes not substitution but what Martin Buber had termed *Einfühlung*, a situation "where the subject puts itself completely in the other's place, thus forgetting itself" (1989: 68). Ultimately the episode fails to pass the test of reciprocal accountability that underlies Levinasian substitution. Although this and other "possession" scenes abound in magical realist texts, they do not actually alter the conception of self in the radical way that Levinas

put forward in his work. It is precisely because this episode in *Tracks* approximates but eventually falls short of the trope of substitution that it usefully heralds other magical realist works, such as Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*, that more accurately fit Levinasian substitution and the alter-entity it summons.

III. Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*: From Reincarnation to Substitution

As anticipated, the particular phenomenon of "body haunting" that can be found in Amy Tan's novel is of an altogether different nature. Even though Tan had flirted with magical realism in some of the stories comprising her debut book, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), it is in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) that the writer wholeheartedly plunges into the field and produces a fine example of the genre. Although the novel starts off in the realist mode, soon the episodic reference to the dream world of the past starts intruding into the present, and finally real world and dream world merge in a typically magical realist mode.

Tan's novel focuses on human relationships, specifically, on the relationship with the other, to the literal point of substitution à la Levinas. Throughout the novel Tan explores the bonds and ruptures between two half-sisters, Olivia and Kwan, and also between the present and the past.[13] Kwan is a middle-aged Chinese American woman who had migrated to America when she was young, while her half-sister, Olivia, is a woman in her thirties, successful as a professional photographer but not so lucky in her personal life.[14] Lybbi-ah, as Kwan calls her, is "half-Chinese," or, using the old-fashioned term, a "Eurasian": she has a "white" mother and a first-generation Chinese American father. Olivia is also the adult narrator of the "realist" sections in the novel, while the paragraphs dealing with the historical past are narrated by Kwan.

When Olivia is only six years old, she discovers she has a half-sister back in China. Olivia's mother learns about the existence of this girl, Kwan, when her husband is about to die. Although she is nonplussed, she ends up fulfilling the deathbed promise she has made to her husband and finally manages to bring eighteen-year-old Kwan to America. The presence of her older sister becomes a torture for

Olivia, who just wants to lead a "normal" American life. On the one hand, little Olivia feels deeply ashamed of Kwan's "foreignness" and apparent stupidity: some kids "once pinned down my arms and peed on me, laughing and shouting, 'Olivia's sister is a retard.' They sat on me until I started crying, hating Kwan, hating myself" (44). On the other hand, Olivia fears that she will be not only displaced by this new daughter, but entirely re-placed. This threat of literal substitution crops up the very moment Kwan's name is mentioned in Olivia's house: "the other girl [...] was coming soon to take my place. I was scared of Kwan before I ever met her" (5). It is only later that Olivia learns, to her deep relief, that "Kwan would be *in addition* to [her], not *instead of*" her (7; emphasis in the original).

Kwan is special not only in that she has been brought up in a very different country, language, and culture, but, above all, in that she seems to possess some magical powers. As soon as Kwan arrives in America, she gives ample evidence of these extrasensorial powers. We are told that she cherishes a direct connection with the realm of the dead, which she calls the world of Yin. She reaches this other reality by means of the "hundred secret senses" that, according to her, all human beings have (102). To her younger sister's dismay, Kwan often holds conversations with invisible spirits. She also believes in reincarnation, so Olivia frequently listens to her sister's recollection of their respective previous lives, stories of avatars such as that of Miss Banner, or a Hakka maid.[15] Even after spending some time at a mental hospital, where her younger sister's "betrayal" has sent her, Kwan persists in her vision of ghosts and her memories of previous avatars.

During her childhood, Olivia is confused and tends to perceive the world through Kwan's Yin eyes. As she grows up, she resists her older sister's magical or sapiential weltschauung until she is able to come up with "logical explanations" for what had been wrapped up in magic during her childhood.[16] However, during their visit to Kwan's home village, Changmian, this process is reversed: Olivia's essentially rationalistic worldview gradually erodes, and she starts to question many of her Western beliefs. For one thing, she becomes aware that the visit to the village has brought back her memories of Kwan's magical stories, for Changmian is "the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams" (205). In addition, the landscape, fauna, and flora of the new country seem to speak to her and mock her Western smugness: "The owl swings his head and stares at me, as if to

say, Wise up, gringa, this is China, your American ideas don't work here" (199). After a few hours in Changmian, Olivia even seems eager to comply with a ghost's—Big Ma's—wish for a photo, so eager that Simon starts to entertain doubts as to whether she has become "unhinged" (230).

It is at this time and place that Olivia's "cozy" rationalistic worldview will come undone. As "the threads of logic between sentences keep disintegrating," she starts having trouble distinguishing "true and false, yin and yang" (246). Step by step, Olivia drifts toward an integrated (magical realist) approach to life, eventually removing any unnecessary barrier between her past avatar and her present self: "And being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed" (205). It is also at this point that we realize how Olivia's "childhood training" in Kwan's worldview has actually shaped her more that she can consciously acknowledge.[17] During her brief stay in Changmian, Olivia stops regarding Kwan's stories about Miss Banner and her Hakka friend as wild, magical tales of adventure and instead gradually accepts them as possible. She even intuits "[t]hat Miss Banner, General Cape, and One-half Johnson [a]re real people" (320). An even more important step will be taken when Olivia realizes that those stories are actual memories of a previous avatar: "Yes, Kwan, of course I remember. I was Miss Banner" (321; cf. 317, 324–25). She has reached a point where she can smoothly embrace the concept of reincarnation.

The phenomenon of reincarnation is, of course, pervasive in, but not exclusive to, Asia. It constitutes a central tenet in Hinduism and Buddhism, both indigenous to and common throughout the continent.[18] Reincarnation can also be related to the traditional conception of the Chinese self as less "individualistic" than the Cartesian Western self.[19] Tan is aware of this and knowingly exploits this reading of Chinese culture, even though "old superstitions" may seem at odds with the official discourse of Communist China. The gains to be secured largely outweigh the risks: the exotic halo of traditional beliefs and superstitions hovers over the novel—especially its "Chinese (sub)plot"—and enhances the effect of magic that the author is consciously conjuring up. Similarly, Sheng-mei Ma criticizes Tan's use of reincarnation: it is her contention that the writer's "emplotment of karma at times betrays the casual attitude verging on unwitting mockery that New Agers take toward other traditions" (33).

Furthermore, at the very "heart of Tan's arrogance in the cosmic reshuffling of history and religion," Ma claims, lies her "affinity to the New Age movement" (33). After all, one might ironically wonder, following Kingston's celebrated question in *The Woman Warrior*, "[W]hat is Chinese tradition and what is *feng shui*?"[20]

It is in China, as described above, that the seed of the belief in those "other lives, other selves" (28), which Kwan had sown during Olivia's childhood, eventually blooms. Nonetheless, at this point Olivia is only aware that she herself has lived a previous life as Miss Banner. She understands Kwan's flashbacks of a forgotten past and believes that she is/was indeed another person. However, what she has no inkling of yet is the fact that Kwan is her own "substitute."[21] As Kwan reminds us, Chinese tradition fosters this sense of loyalty and responsibility for the others: "In China ... you always responsible for someone else, no matter what. You get run over, this my fault, you my little sister. Now you understand?" (199). Indeed, as Sheng-mei Ma critically argues, it is only thanks to the main characters' Chinese "roots" that they are able "to access the magical realm *à la New Age*, to be reborn as whole and wholesome human beings" (30).

However, it is not just the Chinese system of allegiances that underlies the bond between the two sisters in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Kwan does feel responsible for Olivia; in Levinasian terms, she has become her willing hostage. Conversely, Olivia is also Kwan's "prisoner" in that her older sister's unselfish, unconditional love requires some priceless reward that renders her hostage: Kwan "turns all my [Olivia's] betrayals into love that needs to be repaid. [...] But even if I cut off both my hands, it'd be no use. As Kwan has already said, she'll never release me" (26). Yet Tan's narration goes even further, to the point of materializing—rendering corporeal—the trope of Levinasian substitution: Kwan "literally" owes her life to Olivia.[22] For Levinas, human *mauvaise conscience* starts with our misgivings regarding the stealing of someone else's place and existence: "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" (1989: 105; 85). Kwan's relentless devotion to her sister, her particular *mauvaise conscience*, originates in an actual "debt of blood." The text renders that usurpation literal. Kwan has indeed taken someone else's place. As the novel progresses, we learn that, when still a child, Kwan (skinny Pancake) had exchanged her body and self

with another girl who could not speak (plump Buncake Lili). She had been forced to "borrow" dumb Buncake's body in order to survive a sudden flood (252–57):

> Ma and Du Yun took us out of the water, we both were pale and still, wrapped in weeds, two soggy cocoons with no breath bursting through. They dug the mud out of our nostrils and mouths, they pulled the weeds out of our hair. My thin body was broken to pieces, her sturdy one was not. [...] They dressed us in farewell clothes. [...] They put us in these poor little coffins, then sat down and cried.
>
> [...] On the third morning, a big wind came and blew the clouds away. The sun rose, and Du Yun and Big Ma opened the coffins to see our faces one last time.
>
> I felt fingers brushing my cheek. I opened my eyes and saw Du Yun's face, her mouth stretched big with joy. "Alive!" she cried. [...]
>
> "I want to get up." That's what I first said. Big Ma jumped back. Du Yun dropped my hands. I heard them howl: "How can this be! It can't be!"
>
> [...] I saw Big Ma running to the other coffin. She flung open the lid. I saw myself. My poor broken body! And then my head whirled, my body fell, and I saw nothing more until evening came. (252–53)

Fearing that the "resurrected" girl is a ghost, Big Ma and Du Yun are not convinced Pancake-Buncake (Kwan) is harmless until she relieves herself: "A ghost can't piss" is their final verdict (254). Yet they take little Kwan to an old ghost-talker, who correctly concludes that Kwan is being haunted by the ghost of another girl. At this point, Kwan (Pancake-Buncake) sees her own reflection in a mirror and mistakes it for the girl who is plaguing her: "That's when I saw her. Buncake, staring at me from a window across the room. I pointed to her and shouted, 'Look! There she is!' And when I saw her pointing back at me, her puckered mouth saying my words, I realized I was looking at my own reflection" (255).[23] After hearing the story, Olivia starts seeing Kwan in a different light, and she seems to her as ungraspable as a "hologram": "locked beneath the shiny surface is the three-dimensional image of a girl who drowned" (258).

But there is more to this story. Olivia's existence is predicated upon this incident of corporeal exchange and substitution. Pancake, the girl who had died in the flood, clearly prefigures Olivia,[24] and the ghost-talker's words prove prophetic: "The girl who lived in this body before doesn't want to come back. And the girl who lives in it now can't leave until she finds her" (255). In one of her dream visits to the World of Yin, Kwan sees the real Buncake, who reminds her of

Kwan's promise to wait and announces that she will be born in seven years' time—that is, as Olivia:

> In this dream, I went to the World of Yin. I saw so many things. Flocks of birds, some arriving, some leaving. Buncake soaring with her mother and father. All the singing frogs I had ever eaten, now with their skin coats back on. I knew I was dead, and I was anxious to see my mother. But before I could find her, I saw someone running to me, anger and worry all over her face.
>
> "You must go back," she cried. "In seven years, I'll be born. It's all arranged. You promised to wait. Did you forget?" [...]
>
> I flew back to the mortal world. I tried to return to my body. I pushed and shoved. But it was broken, my poor thin corpse. And then the rain stopped. The sun was coming out. Du Yun and Big Ma were opening the coffin lids. Hurry, hurry, what should I do?
>
> So tell me, Libby-ah, did I do wrong? I had no choice. How else could I keep my promise to you? (257)

Kwan's recurring "stories about switching places with the dead" that annoy Olivia so much (275) are just some of the cogs of a larger mechanism, a intricate system of swaps and exchanges where we can glimpse Levinas's concept of substitution, which does not entail alienation from oneself but implosion into an alter-entity:

> This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution of me for the others? It is, however, not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. (1989: 104)

Thus, in the Buncake-Pancake transmutation described above, we witness an em-bodied instance of Levinasian substitution: "reciprocity is directly experienced" (1989: 67) without the dangerous alienation that was perceived in Erdrich's novel. If, in Lacanian terms, individuation and "selfhood," understood as the passing from the Imaginary into the realm of the Symbolic, are achieved only through the nonidentification of self and other in the mirror stage, in Levinasian terms it is just the opposite: selfhood—and the ethical responsibility it entails—is attained only after we accept that self-other connection again, as Kwan and Olivia do at different stages in the novel. Indeed, the episodes of substitution in *The Hundred Secret*

Senses constitute the ultimate trope for human reciprocal accountability. We live, like Kwan, in/for the other.

IV. Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*: Substitution as Survival

If Tan's novel successfully literalizes the concept of substitution by having the two half-sisters living for each other, Nora Okja Keller makes a necessity of Levinasian substitution. While *The Hundred Secret Senses* hinted at practicality as the specific origin of the substituting exchange between Buncake and Pancake, in *Comfort Woman* it is sheer survival that is at stake. Levinasian substitution is not only the very regime that comfort women live in at the military camps; substitution becomes the trope and the reality that allow the Akikos to go on living.

Although born in Korea, Keller was brought up in the United States and is thus often placed within the Asian American tradition, like U.S.-born Amy Tan. Although it attracted less popular attention than Tan's novels, Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997) is an equally haunting book that received the American Book Award in 1998. Like Toni Morrison with *Beloved*, Keller felt compelled to resort to magical realism in order to convey the tragic events of human brutality and sexual exploitation that underlie the lives fictionalized in *Comfort Woman*. The alternation of voices noticeable in Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* reappears in Keller's novel in the form of Beccah's and Akiko's personal narratives. This double voicing foretells the alter-entity to come.

Set in Hawaii, the mainland U.S., and Korea, this mother-daughter story hides within its folds the narratives of Beccah's and Akiko's bildungsromans (Akiko's childhood memories, an impressive narrative of the Japanese occupation of Korea, and the story of her subsequent immigration and adaptation to American life). Korean American Beccah, Akiko's daughter, tells us about her difficult relationship with her mother, who not only earns her living as a ghost-talker or medium with the dead, but also brags that she has killed her husband (12), a (white) American father whom Beccah can barely remember. Akiko's shamanistic gifts first plague young Beccah, who does not understand her mother's "crazyness" (her spasms, dancing,

and chanting) and must learn to take care of herself due to Akiko's utter negligence. However, it soon turns out that Akiko's fits are a blessing in disguise. Auntie Reno, her Chinese American employer, fortuitously finds Akiko in the middle of one of her uninvited trances, and when Akiko speaks Reno's deceased mother's reproachful words, she sees Akiko for what she really is: "'Your maddah might be one crazy lady,' she said, holding up her hand when she thought I would protest, 'but she got dab gift [...], dab gift of talking to the dead, of walking true worlds and seeing things one regulah person like you or me don't even know about'" (9). Reno soon realizes the "economic potential" behind Akiko's fits and becomes her "manager" (9–10).

Of all the "unselving" or, rather, "trans-selving" experiences Akiko goes through, one becomes particularly poignant and bears the highest significance for her adult life. This is her encounter with a "yongsom ghost" during her stay at a Japanese military camp, working as a "comfort woman." Orphaned and sold into slavery by her own sister, Akiko starts working for the Japanese military forces that have occupied Korea. Since she is still a child, her chores at the Japanese "recreation camp" consist in tending to the Korean women kept at the camps as sex slaves for the soldiers. The person serving in each stall is not important, but easily replaceable by some other sexual slave. As young Akiko will soon discover, each comfort woman is indeed a substitute woman, another impersonal cog in the sexual machine, ironically foreshadowing the genuine act of Levinasian substitution that the protagonist will soon go through.

When Akiko first sees the women in the camp, she stops feeling alone: "Around women all my life, I felt almost like I was coming home when I first realized there were women at the camps, maybe a dozen. I didn't see them right away; they were kept in their stalls, behind mat curtains, most of the days and throughout the night" (19). These women are treated like commodities or animals[25] and given just a few names for the sake of convenience: when one of them is killed or dies, she is soon replaced by a namesake substitute. Thus, the girl gets to know Hanako 38, Miyoko 52, Kimi-ko 3, and Akiko 40. The child provides the comfort women with the little material and emotional solace they can afford. She becomes their go-between and ingeniously breaks through the isolation and the sheet of silence that the soldiers have dropped on the women:

> As their girl, I was able to move from one stall to the next, even from one section of the camp to another, if I was asked. And because of this luxury, the women used me to pass messages. I would sing to the women as I braided their hair or walked by their compartments to check their pots. When I hummed certain sections, the women knew to take those unsung words for their message. In this way, we could keep up with each other, find out who was sick, who was new, who had the most men the night before, who was going to crack. (20)

Only one of the internees, Induk[26]—here rechristened as Akiko 40—once dares to speak out and denounce the inhumanity of the Japanese soldiers: "In Korean and in Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister" (20). The other women at the military camp think she is insane in provoking the soldiers' anger, but the child thinks differently and admires her courage. Induk goes on with her tirade throughout the night and is eventually taken to the forest just before sunrise, so that the other women "couldn't hear her anymore" (20). The next day the women find her "skewered from the vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting. A lesson, they told the rest of us, warning us into silence [...]. That was my first night as the new Akiko" (20–21).

The new Akiko, Akiko 41, takes on Induk's stall and inherits her clothes, so big they "made the soldiers laugh. The new P won't be wearing them much anyway, they jeered. Fresh poji" (21). The new Akiko, Akiko 41, has not started menstruating yet, but she will bleed that day. The new Akiko, Akiko 41, will be sold "to the highest bidder" and start "servicing" all the soldiers in camp. In this crude scene, effectively narrated in a telegraphic way, we are told of the most crucial "trans-selving" in the novel: "That is how I know Induk didn't go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn't Induk. It was Akiko 41; it was me" (21).

Whereas the child, before becoming Akiko 41, before becoming a comfort woman herself, pitied the others and felt responsible for them, the new Akiko has brought the trope of responsible substitution to its culmination: she has "the-other-in-one's-skin," and literal embodiment is the most common way of signifying "alterity in the same without alienation" (1989: 104). In the universe of Levinasian

substitution, the metaphor of the skin as a prison-house trapping oneself within sameness finds its counterpart in the complementary image of one's shedding one skin or breaking through it in order to reach and go under someone else's:

> The subject is [...] without a foundation, reduced to itself, and thus without condition. In its own skin. Not at rest under a form, but tight in its skin, encumbered and as it were stuffed with itself, suffocating under itself, insufficiently open, forced to detach itself from itself, to breathe more deeply, all the way, forced to dispossess itself to the point of losing itself. Does this loss have as its term the void, the zero point and the peace of cemeteries, as though the subjectivity of a subject meant nothing? Or do the being encumbered with oneself and the suffering of constriction in one's skin, better than metaphors, follow the exact trope of an alteration of essence, which inverts, or would invert, into a recurrence in which the expulsion of self outside of itself is its substitution for the other? (1989: 100)[27]

Akiko 41 embodies the "expulsion of self outside of itself" through "its substitution for the other" that Levinas speaks of. When Beccah yells to her mother Akiko, "You're not yourself" (12), she is both saying the truth and falling into the trap of alienation, for even though Akiko 41 is, in substitution terms, Akiko 40, she manages to remain herself at the same time. She lives for and through Akiko 40/Induk, but retains her own personal memories, her own self. Thus, the Levinasian paradox is played out to perfection in Keller's novel.

Later in the chapter, another episode reinforces the bond between the two Akikos. Again, the proximity or presence of death acts as a catalyst for the instance of substitution.[28] After some time serving as a prostitute, Akiko 41 gets pregnant, and the camp doctor performs an abortion by inserting a stick into her vagina, recalling the impaling of the other Akiko. Despite the profuse bleeding, however, Akiko 41 does not die, but manages to escape from the camp: "He did not bother tying me down, securing me for the night. Maybe he thought I was too sick to run. Maybe he thought I wouldn't want to. Maybe he knew I had died and that ropes and guards couldn't keep me anyway" (23). When hiding in the woods, Akiko intuits that she is bleeding to death, yet she also feels she is not utterly alone. Akiko 41 has apparently given up hope and "discarded [her] empty body" (36) when she sees, through her closed eyes, the presence of Induk.[29] At this point Induk's image merges with that of young Akiko's mother in that

both—albeit in different ways—are "comfort" women: "It was as if without their earthly bodies, the boundaries between them melted, blending their features, merging their spirits. [...] She stroked my head, combing out the tangles with her fingers just as I did for her when she was alive" (36). It is thanks to Induk's advice and ministrations that Akiko not only manages to escape death, but arrives at the missionary school, her temporary haven.

Later in life, once Akiko has married the American missionary and emigrated to the United States, Induk will become identified with a guardian spirit who hovers above Akiko's household. This, however, is a spirit that sometimes gets angry and attempts to temporarily "possess" Akiko:

> One night, as I was on my knees for the last prayer of the day, chanting her name in my head and my heart until her name ran together, seamless in its repetition, I fell to the ground. My body turned to lead, so heavy that I could not lift a finger or a toe, much less an arm or a leg. And then it was as if I liquefied; I lost the edges of myself and began to soak into the floorboards. Waves surged through my arms and legs, rushing toward the center of my body, where I knew they would dash and explode out the top of my head. I became afraid, knowing that I would feel naked and vulnerable without my body.
>
> The fear grew until it pressed against my chest, until I felt I would drown under the weight of it, until it began to take shape and I saw it was Induk straddling me, holding me down to the earth. (95)[30]

Akiko feels both happy for the desired return of Induk's spirit and angry at Induk's having neglected her for so many years. Yet it is Induk who feels betrayed by Akiko: "I still could not ask her why she had abandoned me. I was too happy to see her. I tried to tell her this, but she began choking me. Induk was the one to ask my question. Why did you leave me to putrefy in the open air, as food for the wild animals just as if I were an animal myself?" (95–96). Ironically, Akiko's gasping excuses include her fear of becoming Induk herself, which she partially does through substitution. Induk waves away Akiko's defensive words and starts wailing. However, in venting her anger and grief, Induk is at the same time pumping air into Akiko's suffocating lungs. Once more, beneath the rage, sorrow, and pain, we distinguish compassion and responsibility for the other:

> See me, she said as she stood up. See me as I am now.
>
> I looked and saw: hair tangled through and around maggoty eye sockets and nostrils. Gnawed arms ripped from the body but still dangling from the hands to the skewering pole. Ribs broken and sucked clean of marrow. Flapping strips of skin stuck to sections of the backbone.
>
> I forced myself to look, to linger over the details of her body. I found her beautiful, for she had come back to me.
>
> I grabbed her hand, and my fingers slipped into bloated flesh. I kissed it and offered her my own hands, my eyes, my skin.
>
> She offered me salvation. (96)

Akiko 41 and Induk are not univocally concerned with their own selves. The two women become mutual hostages; their responsibility is reciprocal. In the final moment of unselving (Akiko's near-death), it is Induk (Akiko 40) who feels responsibility for the other (Akiko 41). Induk will lead Akiko (41) toward safety and look after her, while Akiko will eventually take upon herself the duty of performing the proper death rites for Induk: "*I offer you this one small gesture each year, worth more than the guilt money the Japanese now offer to silence me: a bit of rice burned in your memories, and your names called over and over again, a feast of crumbs for the starving*" (194; cf. 38, 54; italics in original).[31]

To the rhetorical questions that Levinas poses in "Substitution"—"Why does the other concern me? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother's keeper?" (107)—these women would answer with the acceptance of responsibility for the other. In fact, as Levinas himself explains, the questions above "have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself" (1989: 107), and this is no longer the case with Akiko and Induk. The two women have learned "that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, [does] concern me" (1989: 107). Not only do Induk and Akiko deeply concern each other; they have also been rendered reciprocal hostages, a phenomenon that opens them up to the basic truth of human solidarity:

> It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple "After you, sir." The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity. Every accusation and persecution, as all interpersonal praise, recompense, and punishment, presupposes the subjectivity of the ego, substitution, the possibility of

> putting oneself in the place of the other, which refers to the transference from the "by the other" into a "for the other." (1989: 107)

In the end, Beccah will enter into this communion of substitution. In her mother's final words, we learn that Beccah is also a "hostage" of these other women. She feels responsible for them, hostage of the other. Akiko has attempted to "release" her daughter, but in the end the same bond that was established between her and Induk is perpetuated in her daughter, "so that [they] will carry each other always" (197). Ties, bonds, and links allow for Levinasian substitution and the accountability for the other that underlies his conception of alter-entity. As down-to-earth Auntie Reno puts it, "Dis world ain't nothin' but strings" (207), and Beccah's bildungsroman ends with this deep but simple realization: "I held my fingers under the slow fall of ash [Akiko's ashes], sifting, letting it coat my hand. I touched my fingers to my lips. 'Your body in mine,' I told my mother, 'so you will always be with me'" (212).

V. From Identity to Alter-entity

As we have already seen, fragmenting, superseding, splitting, and reunifying selves proliferate in magical realist narratives. Once we discard a restrictive view of mimesis and allow for the coexistence of the magic and the real in the same discursive universe, we are ready to accept not only a fluid conception of selves, but also the very paradox of alterity within identity. This new subject becomes a genuine *sub-jectum*, that is, "under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything" (1989: 105). We have finally escaped from the imprisoning sameness of identity to the ethical nature of alter-entity.

Still, the apparently abstract underpinnings of the alter-entity perspective should not tempt us to ignore the factual evidence that the human self does not exist in a vacuum, neither in the tangible world nor in the real-fictive world of magical realism. We have "tall selves" and "short selves," "fat selves" and "skinny selves," "mischievous selves" and "innocent selves," and so on and so forth. There are, of course, sociopolitical issues at stake: magical realist texts are not immune to the human/social class-gender-race triad. Akiko's substitution in *Comfort Woman* is painfully and significantly gendered, and it indicts male violence as much as Japanese

ethnocentrism. In *The Hundred Secret Senses* the bond between Kwan and Olivia exposes the porosity and permeability of "racial" frontiers, while secondarily launching a critique of the violence of war. Magical realism seems to be especially useful for authors who need to convey their liminal and/or traumatic experiences. This statement served as the foundation of some critics' justification for the apparent scarcity of practitioners of magic realism in English. David Lodge attributes such a dearth to the absence of especially traumatic historical events among contemporary Anglo-American writers. Nevertheless, at least two main groups dismantle this hypothesis, as Lodge himself acknowledges: ethnic minorities, women, and, we would add, the gay/lesbian community. Many of these writers find in typically magical realist strategies the right narrative tools to un-fix and problematize the gender construct. So-called "ethnic" writers indulge in magical realism in order to portray syncretic cultures, as Rushdie maintains,[32] and generally explore the friction and interlocking of different "racial"/ethnic communities. Therefore, it remains imperative to explore the various ways in which the gender, class, and race inflections, still crucial in either a realist or a constructivist understanding of identity, shape or even distort the conception of alter-entity proposed throughout this chapter.

The noticeably magical realist dramatization of Levinasian substitution in *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *Comfort Woman* successfully illustrates the workings of alterity within identity; and not only that, it also fleshes out the responsibility for the other that inheres in substitution. In both novels, the characters' identity is in actual fact an alter-entity. It is through their bonding with the other and their living in/for the other that they become their own selves. The paradox of alterity in identity is thus possible in this magical realist world, where skins do not establish the limits of the "I"—where one can jump out of one's own constraining shell. Thus, in magical realist texts the face-to-face encounter with the other, the experience of alterity that renders the self ethical, acquires a privileged visibility. In both Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Keller's *Comfort Woman* substitution is more than a metaphor; it becomes real, it is physically embodied in the protagonists, who henceforth proclaim the responsibility for the other that their radical alter-identity demands from them. Akiko, Induk, Kwan, Olivia: all of them are human hostages, that is, both human and hostages of humanity itself. It

remains a challenge to explore and discover instances where gender, class, and race are both inscribed and crossed over as an effect of the trans-selving that originates in Levinasian substitution.

Endnotes

1. According to Aztec mythology, the god Xólotl, once anthropomorphic, suffered several metamorphoses and eventually became an axolotl/ajolote. In its description of pre-Columbian civilizations, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains that for the Aztecs, "[p]resent humanity was created by Quetzalcóatl," the Feathered Serpent, who, "with the help of his twin, Xólotl, the dog-headed god, succeeding in reviving the bones of the old dead by sprinkling them with their own blood."
2. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offers yet another alternative: a proliferation of voices in one person's head.
3. Note Gayatri Spivak's outright denunciation of the fundamentalist side of essentialism in "Acting Bits/Identity Talk": "All over the world today identity politics is big news ... and almost everywhere bad news" (774).
4. After coining and using the term in her *In Other Worlds*, Spivak also questioned its validity (see Danius and Jonsson's interview in *boundary 2*, p. 35).
5. Following Mohanty, Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García, in their eponymous book, argue for "reclaiming identity" as a valuable tool, despite the disrepute it has fallen into in the last few decades.
6. In some aspects, Levinasian alter-entity is reminiscent of the poststructuralist Freudian-Lacanian approach to identity as inherently relational, since the process of identification and identity formation that poststructuralist psychoanalysis posits, as Mathew Potolsky puts it, "installs an uncanny trace of otherness at the heart of identity" (2006: 122). As will be discussed later, not only the philosophical premises but also the effects of the two theories are ultimately quite different.
7. This article constitutes the seed of his celebrated *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, originally published in 1974 and later translated as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981).
8. See, for instance, his first essays and books, especially "The Phenomenological Theory of Being," in *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménology de Husserl* (1930).
9. As Levinas reminds us, "*Auffassen* (understanding) is also, and always has been, a *Fassen* (gripping)" ("Ethics," 76).
10. We find the emphasis on the a priori condition of substitution elsewhere in Levinas's essay. He insists that when we talk of substitution, we are not talking of metonymic (contiguous) or metaphorical (analogical) representation, but of "an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment" ("Substitution," 90).
11. Those readers familiar with the book will remember that only half the chapters in the novel are narrated by Pauline; the others use the voice of Fleur's surrogate father, Nanapush.

12. Bernadette visits her sick and agonizing neighbours to bring them company and consolation. Pauline takes up this same task with a very different attitude.
13. *The Hundred Secret Senses* also offers an original approach to the motif of what Sau-ling Wong terms the "racial shadow." The presence of the doppelgänger motif comes as a surprise: at the beginning we fail to see any connections or similarities between the sisters, although the book will gradually show the opposite. For an analysis of the "ethnic doppelgänger" in Tan's novel from two different perspectives, see Simal 2003 and 2007.
14. In college Olivia meets Simon, who, despite his relentless obsession with an old girlfriend who has tragically died in an accident, falls in love with Olivia and eventually marries her. However, the marriage is not successful, and Olivia and Simon eventually separate. As expected from her (over)helpful nature, Kwan will attempt to facilitate their reconciliation via a trip to China (see pp. 25, 130, 152, 167).
15. Kwan remembers her former avatar, a Hakka maid who herself feels the Ghost Bandit Maiden inside (31, 79).
16. And also what had seemed unexplainable even later, in her adult years. One such example is the way the strange noises in the house she and Simon share are finally ascribed to their blind neighbor's illicit activities. As an illustration of her childhood mysteries, one should note the episode when a feather boa is stolen by Lili, the ghost girl, an event that adult Olivia also tries to exorcize by looking for reasonable, rational explanations (50–51).
17. Although, as a child, Olivia had striven not to believe Kwan's worldview, full of ghosts who talked to them (49), and though in college she had apparently seemed able to dodge Kwan's influence, Olivia realizes that Kwan's "magical indoctrination" has been successful after all: even in college "it was already too late. She [Kwan] had planted her imagination into mine. Her ghosts refused to be evicted from my dreams" (28).
18. Sheng-mei Ma insightfully points out the contradiction of a Christian Hakka's absolute reliance on a deeply Buddhist belief (33). Reincarnation can also pose problems for Levinasian theory, as intimated in the following quotation: "The recurrence in the subject is thus neither freedom of possession of self by self in reflection, nor the freedom of play where I take myself for this or that, traversing avatars under the carnival masks of history. It is a matter of an exigency coming from the other" ("Substitution," 114).
19. Some sinologists would argue that this is the case. In "An Exploration of the Chinese Literary Self," Robert Hegel contends that the traditional conception of self regards the individual as divisible and simultaneous (15).
20. The original, as most readers will be aware, reads, "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?"
21. The notion of the "expanded being" becomes instrumental at this point. In dealing with the image of the doppelgänger, Keppler reads it as a means to attain an "expanded rather than contracted being" (208, qtd. in Wong 112). For an illuminating analysis of the different theories of the double, including Keller's, see Sau-ling Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature.*
22. Another instance of substitution is the switching of Lao Lu and Pastor Amen (331). Even more significant is the identification of Du Yun with Lili, her dead

daughter, and her subsequent assumption of a different name and identity: Du Lili (246; cf. p. 256).

23. Here the Lacanian mirror stage is turned on its head and endowed with a totally different meaning, signifying in this case not the discovery of the limits of one's own body/self, but the (re)connection of one-self with literal otherness.
24. However, Olivia wonders whether Kwan is her real sister or just her own spirit inhabiting a stranger's body: "Did a terrible trauma in childhood cause her to believe she had switched bodies with someone else? Even if we aren't genetically related, isn't she still my sister?" (258).
25. The racist justification (voiced through the camp doctor) for this treatment is clearly reminiscent of Nazi theories: "He spoke of evolutionary differences between the races, biological quirks that made the women of one race so pure and the women of another so promiscuous. Base, really, *almost like animals*, he said. Rats, too, will keep doing it until they die, refusing food or water as long as they have a supply of willing partners" (22; emphasis added). Note not only the racism inherent in this apparently "scientific" justification, but also the obvious anthropocentric approach that equates animalization with degradation.
26. The main spirits haunting Akiko's household are Saja the Death Messenger, later identified as "Death's Demon Soldier" (195), and Induk the Birth Grandmother, "the spirit assigned to protect and nurture the children of the world" (49).
27. Metaphorical references to skin are common in Keller's novel. For example, Akiko feels constrained by her own (limiting) skin: "I lie straining against my skin, feeling its heaviness covering me like a blanket thick as sleep" (143; cf. 156, 159).
28. As in Tan's novel, the fact that it is death that literally links the two selves indicates the strong influence of the beliefs of incarnation in both books. However, as mentioned above, Levinasian substitution is larger than the strict cycle of reincarnation. Reincarnation only "claims alterity" at the moment of death, and what we become depends of our actions during our own lifetime. Responsibility for the other (as put forward by Levinas), however, includes this and much more, since it precedes our birth and is present throughout our life.
29. The two Akikos can actually become a "we" without renouncing their own individual "I"s: "Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us?" (38); "Induk says my body is weakest after birth, but also at its most flexible. *Our* bones are as soft and changeable as those of the fetus *we* carried for nine months" (37; emphasis added). Compare *Einfühlung* and *Umfassung* (1989: 67–68).
30. A parallel description of Induk's "possession" of Akiko's body can be found later in the novel, but this time the scene bears the mark of a metaphorical seduction (144–46). Induk enters Akiko's body with the latter's acquiescence and eagerness: "I open myself to her" (145).
31. A ritual that Akiko will bequeath to her daughter: "Beccah-chan, lead the parade of the dead. [...] Clear the air with the ringing of your bell, bathe us with your song. When I can no longer perform the chesa for the spirits, we will look to you to feed us" (196).
32. Borrowing Naipaul's notion of the "half-made society," Rushdie contends that the magic(al) realist mode thrives in those "half-made societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions

and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called 'North'" (301–2). In contrast, in the industrial and postindustrial "North," "centuries of wealth and power," have had an impoverishing, anaesthetizing effect, placing "thick layers over the surface of what's really going on" (301–2).

6
Of a Magical Nature: The Environmental Unconscious

> Writing is not the obvious way to change the world, but it certainly changes the way we see it.
>
> —Alison Croggon, "The Literature of Apocalypse"

> Yet the environmental unconscious is also to be seen as potential: as a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it.
>
> —Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*

In the highly mediatized, "globalized" world of the twenty-first century, we can no longer ignore the interrelatedness of human conflicts, politics, economies, wars, and natural disasters within and across the frontiers of nation-states. The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed the final awakening to the intertwined nature of human actions and nonhuman phenomena. For instance, 2007 was the year when Al Gore's documentary film *Inconvenient Truth* appeared; when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Gore and R. K. Pachauri; when the still-insufficient but highly necessary measures to be implemented in order to prevent (further) climate change resulted from the UN-sponsored Bali conference. If it had not dawned on us before, after decades of environmental and green activism, these last years have turned out to be a watershed: it has indeed become more and more difficult to resist global, widespread environmental awareness. No one can ignore it any longer: what we human beings do has (usually dire) consequences for the natural environment and the earth as a whole.

Slowly but—we hope—inexorably, human attitudes around the world are shifting from a supercilious feeling of ownership *of* "nature"

toward a widespread belief in human responsibility *for* "nature," hopefully leading toward an attitude of human partnership *with(in)* "nature." This "environmentality" seeps into all human cultural forms in the shape of what Lawrence Buell terms the "Environmental Unconscious" (2001: 18–27). Given that the "where of existence precedes the what of social practice," Buell argues that this "environmental unconscious is more deeply embedded" in a text than Jameson's "political unconscious" (2005: 44). The present chapter constitutes an attempt to "unearth" the ways in which "environmentality gets encoded and expressed" (2005: 44) in magical realist literature by U.S. "ethnic" writers.

Undeniably, there exist relationships, at times symbiotic, at times synergistic, but usually predatory, between human beings and the world we live in. Instances of both "friendly" and (mostly) "rapacious" relationships between people and nature abound in magical realist fiction written by ethnic authors.[1] Environmentality is also "encoded" in magical realism through both literal and metaphorical renditions of the frictions between the capitalist notion of progress and the survival of the earth as we know it, the spiritual wasteland resulting from the literal wasteland, human greed as the originator of devastation, and other environmental issues. Among the plethora of texts that could help exemplify the fruitful coexistence of magical realism and ecocriticism, only two—very different—illustrations have been chosen: *Ceremony* (1977), the seminal novel written by Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), the debut novel written by Japanese American Karen Tei Yamashita. Whereas, in general terms, Silko's conspicuous ecocritical approach answers to traditional paradigms even as it raises the issue of the "war ecosystem," Yamashita's novel goes beyond the conventional ecological reading not only by questioning the boundaries between natural and non-natural, but also by inflecting the text with a critique of a globalized "logic of late capitalism," addressing issues like displacement, eco-injustice, and the exploitation of natural resources, as well as of ethnic communities and human beings.

I. Magical Realism and Environmental Criticism

Corresponding to the growing interest in and the mounting urgency of addressing the environmental issues outlined above, literary criticism has witnessed the emergence and gradual growth of the subfield of ecocriticism, defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, in her introduction to the groundbreaking *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), as simply "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xix). While recognizing the widespread use of nature-based "ecocriticism" as an umbrella term for disparate trends within the critical movement, in his more recent work Lawrence Buell has opted for the less common label *environmental criticism*. He contends that this term better reflects the recent tendency to broaden the notion of "environment" in order to include not only (as used to be the case) the more or less unspoiled nature and wilderness, but also urban settings and degraded natural landscapes, a shift matched by an accompanying effort, slow but steady, to incorporate a global, transnational perspective to the traditional local one (Buell 2005). Therefore, more and more ecocritical research covers not only literary studies of nature writing and analyses of literature dealing with the natural environment, but also explorations of the construction of the nature-culture divide, the urban environment, and so on. In other words, there has been a significant increase in critical work that applies ecocritical tools to texts not apparently about nature in the traditional sense of the word.

Having briefly outlined the central object of ecocriticism, we must now ascertain how magical realism and environmental criticism have come to terms with each other, if at all. A quick survey reveals that on some—but not many—occasions, magical realist texts have been explored from an ecocritical perspective. Conversely, critics who specialize in magical realism have occasionally ventured to analyze some novels where nature—traditionally understood—is paramount, or at least where place and "dwelling" seem determinant. However, little (if any) research has been devoted to exploring the precise interconnections between ecocritical writings and magical realist motifs. And no one to date has added the ethnic inflection to the aforementioned alliance of magical realism and environmental criticism. It is this particular task that this chapter explores, starting with a theoretical discussion and going on to illustrate its thesis with

the analysis of two specific novels simultaneously inflected with ecocritical and magical realist nuances.

One of the trademarks of ecocentrism—a potent movement within ecocritical studies—has been the distrust of poststructuralist fiction and literary theory, together with a conscious effort to reinstate realism "as the dominant mode for the revaluation of nature" (Rosendale xvi). Not only ecocentrists but also first-wave, traditional ecocritics devoted what Buell considered to be excessive attention to both "texts and genres that seemed to provide dense, accurate representations of actual natural environments" (2005: 40) and concomitantly neglected literature that did not fit into that pattern. Indeed, both early and more recent practitioners of ecocriticism have tended to valorize nonfiction over fiction (Murphy 2000), centering on what they deemed to be "'realistic' modes of representation" of the environment, whether pristine nature or urban landscapes, and focusing primarily on "questions of factical accuracy" regarding that representation (Buell 2005: 31). In other words, ecocritics have rarely stepped out of the traditional mimetic mode and its accompanying (prestructuralist) referential ontology. In fact, the ecocritics' general preference for anchoring literature and literary analysis in "solid reality" can actually be read as a conscious reaction to the poststructuralist suspicion of the very referential value of language.

In the last few decades, as Laurence Coupe cogently argues, it is the fear of falling prey to "the referential fallacy" that has kept literary criticism away from a necessary attention to the "tangible" earth, to the point that stating "that there is 'no such thing as nature' has become almost obligatory within literary and cultural studies" (2). As a result, claiming the relevance of the extratextual world has become tantamount to critical blasphemy in poststructuralist literary theory. However, Coupe is quick to add that for ecocritics today, it is still as crucial and necessary to "avoid reducing complex linguistic performance to the level of merely pointing at things" as to pay attention to "non-textual existence" (2). After the advent of the poststructuralist revolution, naive realism no longer seems a valid position for ecocritics. As with the identity issues discussed in chapter 5, some middle ground needs to be found between what Levin aptly describes as the two rival camps in contemporary ecocriticism: positivist realism or social constructionism. The virtue would lie in striking a compromise position that, while not minimizing the

stubborn existence of the extratextual environment, remains aware and cognizant of the fact that it has (always already) been linguistically mediated.

The opening chapter explored how the question of mimesis continues to be a vexed issue and opted for a latitudinarian approach to mimesis that does away with the widespread equation of mimesis simply with sameness, of mimetic art as mere copy of the "outside world." From this perspective, from the possibility of a "world-creating" mimesis in contradistinction to a "world-reflecting" mimesis, as described in chapter 1, it becomes easier to understand Buell's words in defense of the mimetic model: "those who decry ecocriticism's retrogression to a pretheoretical trust in art's capacity to mirror the factical world tend to work from a reductive model of mimesis, which [...] posits refraction but most definitely *not* 'sameness,' and from a cartoon version of ecocritical neorealists as hard-hat positivists" (2005: 32). Far from true, argues Buell. Neither Burroughs, nor Williams, nor Hogan, to name just a few of the main critics and writers in the ecocritical movement, falls into the referential trap: they are far from positing "anything like a one-to-one correspondence between text and world," although they do rely on the existence of some external, referential reality (2005: 32). From an ecocritical perspective, therefore, the main predicament accosting literary texts that do not comfortably fit into the traditional "world-reflecting" mimetic mode has been that of being either derisively dealt with or altogether ignored: the lack of interest in other than "dense representations of environmental facticity" among ecocritics may result in a failure to critically valorize non- and anti-realistic genres that may actually be environmentally engaged. Nonrealistic modes such as magical realism have much to offer to practitioners of environmental criticism, insomuch as its extended realism can help to question and deconstruct assumed, normative conventions such as "human versus nonhuman," "nature versus culture" (in much the same way that the gender and race divides are often placed *sous rature* in magical realist texts). Magical realist narratives can also facilitate the perception of less visible connections between material practices (late capitalism, globalization, social injustice), spiritual/ethical concerns (lack of ecocritical awareness and/or activism), and the slow but relentless destruction of the earth/environment. And ideally, these narratives could also aid in positing imaginative ways of contending

with the factual world outside the world of fiction (should we accept a referential, realist standpoint).

Crumbling Boundaries in the Biotic Community

In dealing with the potential assets we have ascribed to the magical realist mode, we should first attempt to answer the simple question of what (if anything) remains distinctive of the treatment of human-environment dialectics in texts steeped in magical realism. At first sight, the distinguishing feature of magical realism as a literary mode is the fluidity of realms (e.g., human/nonhuman) inscribed therein. This is most notably perceptible in the recurring instances where animal and natural elements such as mountains, lakes, or rivers are literally endowed with human and animate characteristics, respectively, or vice versa. The results of this fluidity are also visible in the pervasive presence of examples of metamorphoses of human beings into animals or other (in)animate beings. Indeed, as sketched out in previous chapters, the frontiers commonly traversed and transgressed by magical realism include those between human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, and life/death. Many of the texts imbibed in magical realism bear the stamp of the "interaction (intercourse) between the sensate and the non-sensate, the animate and the inanimate," leading to "an interpenetration of orders" (Erickson 434). No text in the realist tradition can fully participate in this freedom in contemplating and reflecting the extratextual world.

It could be argued that this boundary-breaking is not exclusive to magical realism. Katherine Hayles, for one, claims that antirealist postmodernism, like magical realism, makes it possible for us to learn "that what has always been thought of as the essential, unvarying components of human experience are not natural facts of life but social constructions" (qtd. in Wallace 2000: 137). It can likewise be proposed that the blurring of frontiers between human, animal, and inanimate realms is often found in fantastic genres such as folk tales, science fiction, the fable, and the bestiary. However, whereas the texts within these specific traditions eschew any allegiance to realism and instead resort to fantasy or to allegory by building an external, parallel, or alternative world to the tangible one we live in, magical realism grounds the text in a familiar reality that will later be defamiliarized in various ways. In allegorical and fantastic genres,

there is no claim to realism, or, for that matter, to reality, in contrast with magical realism, which successfully intertwines realism with incredible, apparently nonreal elements.

The conjunction of a realist cocoon and the suppleness inherent in magical realist texts facilitates a questioning of deeply rooted assumptions that could hardly be achieved from a world-reflecting mimetic platform. Although magical realism remains rooted in realism, it disrupts the usual realist conventions by having human beings fly like birds, birds talk like human beings, and stones or dead people breathe. The flexibility and elasticity of magical realism allow for the possibility of adopting the perspective of, say, mountains, oak trees, or tigers, without dismissing altogether the possibility of human agency in the very real world. As Jeanne Delbaere-Garant elegantly puts it in her analysis of several Canadian novels that partake of magical realism, in these texts "[t]he interpenetration of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal; the landscape is no longer passive but active—invading, trapping, dragging away" (232). And not only the landscape, but also the living creatures that inhabit it (Silko's *Ceremony*), and even inanimate objects such as mysterious balls (Yamashita's *Through the Arc*), become active and articulate. Seeing the natural environment from a different perspective, that of bears, forests, lakes, and rocks, can be possible only within a mode that eludes the traditional realistic corset and allows for imaginative leaps into the realm of what has not been scientifically sanctioned: the latitude of magical realism, a world-creating type of mimesis.

In rendering literal—not just metaphorical—the intermingling of organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman realms, magical realism proves highly amenable to the ecocentric and biocentric agendas. In his pioneering ecocentric approach, dating back to 1949 (the year *A Sand County Almanac* was published), Aldo Leopold endows both humankind and "otherkind" with equal inalienable rights. Operating from the premise that any ethical theory is community-based, Leopold proposes both a new community, the more comprehensive "biotic community," and an accordingly new ethic, the "land ethic," which "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). This new "land-community" demotes humans from their position as overseers, masters, or "conquerors" to a role as "plain member or citizen" of such a biotic community (204).[2] Although there were historical

antecedents that argued for the inclusive nature of nature (cf. Williams, "Ideas" 289ff.), Leopold's ecocentric notion of the biotic community and his proposal of a land ethic have proved quite influential and have found in magical realist strategies an apt literalization.

In doing away with hierarchies for different life-forms—something unthinkable for previous inclusive ontologies, such as the Christianized medieval metaphysics—and in its insistence on the interconnectedness of all the elements of the biotic community, ecocentrism ties in with the organicist model underlying the Gaia hypothesis, a scientific theory first put forward by James Lovelock in 1972. Lovelock contends that the planet as a whole works as an organism, with each element (birds, human beings, plants, volcanoes ...) inextricably linked to and interrelated with the others, the same way that all the parts of a single body (the lungs, heart, and other organs) are mutually interdependent. Yet however resilient this complex organism seems to be, the planet is not absolutely immune to what Lovelock terms the "human plague" (153–71). The main premise underlying the Gaia hypothesis, that of the profound interrelatedness of all the elements comprising not only a specific ecosystem but, most importantly, the largest of all ecosystems, the earth, recurs in what is known as deep ecology, a radical ecocentric movement.

Ecocentrists, therefore, claim that our planet is a net of interconnections that knows no boundaries between sentient and nonsentient beings, humans and nonhumans, since we are all "biozens"[3] in the same interdependent community. Such an intimate bond between humankind and otherkind, as previously suggested, is best seen in texts that depart from traditional, mimetic realism. The pressing need for a reintegration of human beings in/back to "nature," one of the main beliefs of deep ecology, will find a convenient vehicle not only in much indigenous folklore (and New Age reinterpretations of such folk tradition), but also in magical realist fiction such as Silko's *Ceremony* or James Welch's *Fools Crow*. In his analysis of Welch's novel, Greg Garrard points at the "profound interdependence" between human beings and other living forms—most notably animals—that the text displays, an interdependence that "is reflected in the magical realist conventions of the narrative: it is written conventionally, told by an omniscient, third-person narrator with a linear timescale and believable, rounded characters, yet animal

helpers and other spirit beings such as So-at-sa-ki (Feather Woman) mingle with them as part of everyday reality" (122). Magical realist texts such as this provide the sort of "thought-experiments and language-experiments" that Jonathan Bate deems essential in order to "imagine a return to 'nature,' a reintegration of the human and the Other"; although Bate is conscious that the project of reintegration that deep ecologists pursue "will never be realized upon the earth," he contends that "our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination" (37–38). Magical realism proffers experiments with language and with thought that can both sustain ecocentric projects and denounce their dystopian possibilities.

Summing up, many magical realist texts, such as Silko's *Ceremony*, explicitly or implicitly insist on the interrelatedness of all the elements comprising the natural environment and can be used to endorse the aforementioned ecocentric premise. However, some magical realist texts step beyond the sanctioned quasi-mystical connection among the "inhabitants of nature" (animals, plants, human beings ...) in order to incorporate the (apparently) non-natural. Here is where a reading of Yamashita's *Through the Arc* comes in handy, since it calls into question the fixed boundaries of the natural and the artificial, nature versus machine, as we shall shortly see

Environmental Utopias and Dystopias

Magical realism not only renders it easy to visualize or materialize the sometimes barely tangible attachment between humankind and "otherkind," and the spiritual awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings; it also allows certain authorial and narrative latitude to proffer as-of-today scientifically impossible scenarios either of a utopian solution or of an apocalyptic, catastrophic nature. Magical realist texts, like other postmodern texts, often present the readers with ambiguous endings that waver between apocalypse and redemption, destruction and survival, dystopia and utopia. A few examples may suffice: Patrick Süskind's *The Perfume*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, or the two novels under scrutiny here, Silko's *Ceremony* and Yamashita's *Through the Arc*. In both Silko's novel and Yamashita's, only the fact that

apparently impossible or at least incredible phenomena take place makes the ending possible and acceptable within the logic of the text.

Much like the computerized fiction that simulates the effects of climate change in the near or distant future, nonrealist textual fiction (such as science fiction and magical realism) conjures up images of a rebellious nature taking the shape of a literal and metaphorical wasteland, the invasion of hungry bacteria, the presence of mutable, mutant, amphibian human beings, or the "unnatural" rain of blood, petals, and feathers. And together with a heightened perception of the multiple risks faced by an insufficiently ecoconscious humankind, including the increasingly visible "toxic discourse," magical realism also proposes imagined and/or imaginative solutions for the imagined problems. Despite the spiritual and physical degradation present throughout Silko's novel, the narrative also lets us glimpse a quasi-pastoral image of harmony between human beings and other living creatures, an ecocentric utopia of human and nonhuman biozens not only coexisting but also helping each other. On the other hand, Yamashita proposes a complex resolution for her magical realist novel, an ending that combines Edenic and apocalyptic visions.

As can be gleaned from the examples above, by far the most common trope in the environmentalist canon is the apocalyptic idiom. At the same time that Tayo's quest in *Ceremony* acquires tragic and universal dimensions, it becomes more and more immersed in a deeply apocalyptic language. As for Yamashita's novel, the Matacão dream spelled out in *Through the Arc* can be read as either comic or tragic apocalypse, or even as some depoliticized pseudo-Edenic vision. In *Arguing the Apocalypse* (1994), Stephen O'Leary traces the distinction between comic and tragic types of apocalypse. If the tragic mode "conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage" and "its plot moves inexorably," the comic pattern "conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility" (68; qtd. in Garrard 87). In our discussion of Silko's and Yamashita's novels we will try to ascertain which of these two apocalyptic idioms is more appropriate in each case.

"Everything Is Connected"

Magical realist narratives harbor a political potential in that they heighten the perception of usually obscured, or even indiscernible, links between phenomena of a different nature (socioeconomic, psychological, and environmental) that turn out to be problematically interrelated. If, echoing Silko's phrase in *Ceremony*, magical realism knows "no boundaries," no frontiers between human and nonhuman realms, the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, it also ignores preconceptions that lead us to pigeonhole human actions and (non)human consequences. As will later be described, in Silko's novel the Japanese voices converge and blend with Native American (Laguna) voices, the spider's words with the (human?) narrator. Much in the same vein, Yamashita offers a story where the transnational corporations become entangled with and mutually dependent on Native Brazilian knowledge (featherology), "mutant" Japanese Brazilian expertise, and the joint venture of urban pigeons and human beings. They also know no boundaries.

Revealing and denouncing the aforementioned connections between material practices (the exploitation inherent in late capitalism, globalization, social injustice), the pervasive psychological/spiritual problems of contemporary postmodern life, and the mounting degradation of our planet would seem to be alien to magical realism, a mode that has often and derogatorily been described as "escapist" literature and is still associated with depoliticized entertainment. However, the impact that novels such as *Ceremony* and *Through the Arc* can have on readers should not be underestimated. Though these texts make for fine reading and entertainment, as is expected of good fiction, they are not easily dismissed as escapist—as is sadly the case with some other magical realist narratives. These texts, like Tayo in *Ceremony*, are not silly or insane; rather, they enable "transitions" and connections to be made across space and time (cf. Silko 246, Slowik 114), a deeply magical realist trait that allows Tayo and, by extension, readers to become aware of what is usually hidden or inconspicuous. When the materiality of things connives with certain pernicious structures and institutions in obfuscating our view of reality, when conventions and sanctioned behavior have been naturalized, it is usually a purportedly nonrealistic mode that proves instrumental in disclosing alternative

views, in unearthing what has been consciously buried, in defamiliarizing what has become too familiar. We may not see the bridges, but we certainly cross from one riverbank to the opposite side. Magical realist texts may disclose those bridges, which are transparent but not crystal clear.

The Ethnic Inflection

It is now necessary to delve into the relevance of the "ethnic inflection" perceivable in these novels. The ethnic writers whose work is analyzed in this chapter write, as minorities have historically done, from the margins. Such a marginal position both pushes them to experiment with different narrative strategies, in this case magical realism, and at the same time allows them to have enough knowledge of Prospero's book to be able to use the master's tools as well as their own devices. "Ethnic" American authors have traditionally written from (at least) two different cultural positions, following at times contradictory cultural mandates and exhibiting contrasting worldviews. The "ontological orientations" espoused by outsiders to the mainstream can be said to "mediate dualisms [...] and thus stand in unique critical positions vis-à-vis our dominant conceptual frameworks" (Slicer 1998: 53).

On the other hand, the writers' flirting with nonmimetic modes that have long served mainstream culture and society says much not only about their respective (Native American/Asian American) traditions, but also about how such collective (and individual) experiences have merged with mainstream culture and shaped their own artistic language: neither this or that, but a different thing altogether. This is most notable in Silko's case. The writer herself has proved critical regarding Western mimetic traditions and has often resorted to Native ontology and epistemology in order to explain her artistic choice: "Ancient Pueblos took the modest view that the thing itself (the landscape) could not be improved upon. The ancients did not presume to tamper with what had already been created. Thus *realism*, as we now recognize it in painting and sculpture, did not catch the imaginations of Pueblo people until recently" (Silko 1996: 266). Thus, merely effecting a realistic, "faithful" reproduction of "the thing itself" is not sufficient.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the knowledge of a culture and ontology other than the sanctioned Western ones opens up new artistic possibilities for ethnic writers. However, this would dangerously suggest a narrow essentialist understanding of "ethnic" literature. This caveat is partially canceled out by the realization that the everyday experience of ecosocial injustice—experiential and not "inherited"—also helps shape Silko's and Yamashita's works. These writers have had firsthand knowledge of the skewed distribution of environmental risks, as well as a heightened sense of capitalist exploitation of human beings and specific communities. The "color bar," racial segregation, and racism in general resurfaces here as environmental and social injustice. In Silko's *Ceremony* the very existence of Native American reservations, together with the nuclear tests associated with Pueblo lands, speak of environmental racism. In Yamashita's novels, it is the class-poverty factor, with a clear "ethnic inflection," that emerges as an effective denunciation of human and environment exploitation, either in the Third World countries (*Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*) or, as seen in chapter 3, in the "Fourth World" within industrialized countries (*Tropic of Orange*). What follows will try to dig up and unearth the environmental unconscious in Silko's and Yamashita's magical realist texts.

II. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*: Building a Poetics of Eco-Responsibility

The environmental unconscious in Silko's *Ceremony* comes so often to the surface of the narrative that it can be said to be more conscious than unconscious. Silko's novel epitomizes the search for an ecocentric worldview where people may recover their place as an integral part of the environment. The interrelatedness of all the entities and beings that inhabit the planet seems to derive, in the case of Silko's work, from her Native American roots.[4] In *Ceremony* Silko adopts a markedly essentialist position when she describes the traditional Pueblo cosmology as "inclusive": "The impulse was to leave nothing out" (1996: 268). From ancient times, Buell reminds us, Laguna-Pueblo people have always imagined "the world as a place-centered continuum of human and nonhuman beings subsisting" and coexisting as in a spiderweb (2005: 286). This spiritual awareness of

the interconnectedness of all beings is not only one more element in Silko's novel, but becomes central both as a narrative strategy and as a necessary tool to advance the plot. In fact, Tayo's very recovery hinges as much on the realization of this environmental embeddedness as the discovery that "everything is connected" in global terms as well. The same can be said of the narrative strategy chosen by Silko—which combines the prose narration with the intermittent but recurring presence of the poem-fable where the animals speak and act on behalf of human beings—and of the narrative voice used in the novel—which can be read as belonging to a super-human, global conscience akin to Mother Earth, or, as some critics have maintained, Spiderwoman herself. Finally, magical realism allows both the coming together of apparently separate realms that actually conform a single "war ecosystem," and the emergence of an ecocentric understanding of life.

Toward the Biotic Community: Emplacement and Symbiosis

In order to heal himself, Tayo has to heal the whole planet. He has to unlearn the lessons derived both from sanctioned Western psychology, which emphasizes the need for individuation, and from American social mores, with its conspicuous penchant for individualism. The narrative itself corroborates that bond between the individual and the communal-synecdochic self (Krupat). Storytelling and legends oozing with syncretism punctuate the prose narration. Rather than interludes or interpolations, the poetic excerpts and folk tales are choral commentaries, just as the poem opening the novel functions both as a framing device and as a chorus-like invocation to the audience. This communal aspect is not only present as a textual strategy, but becomes essential in the plot itself, since communality and solidarity (of both the human community and the biotic community) constitutes the very means of redemption for Tayo and the whole planet: "He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us.' But he had known the answer all along [...] His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (Silko 125–26).

As can be gleaned from the quotation above, the malaise and the means of salvation affect and involve as much the human beings across the planet as the environment as a whole. Silko's emphasis on the need of a harmonious coexistence among people(s) is coupled by a similar insistence on the interrelatedness of things human and nonhuman, which the boundary-breaking magical realism not only allows but fosters. In fact, it can be argued that *Ceremony* is predicated not so much on the human community as traditionally understood, but on the biotic community, since we belong to the land we came from (255). Although it takes Tayo a year-long ceremonial-initiation process, when he thinks of Trinity Site he eventually sees that "everything is connected"; he arrives at the conclusion that there is a point of confluence where humankind and otherkind, animate and inanimate elements of the environment converge (246). Like a spiderweb, our planet is not only "fragile," in the words of old Ku'oosh, but also interconnected in a complex, convoluted manner (35–38). And we are at the same time mere threads in such an intricate netting and the very spiders in charge of fixing and (re)weaving such connections.

Furthermore, our environmental embeddedness occurs despite ourselves. Either we presume we are above nature and possess it, in a stupidly arrogant move: "They only fool themselves when they think [Mount Taylor] is theirs. The deeds and papers don't mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountains" (128). Or else, we deny our very existence *within* nature: "*only humans resisted what they saw outside themselves*. Animals did not resist. But they persisted, because they became part of the wind" (27; emphasis added).

As discussed above, magical realism proves a helpful tool for human beings to be able to see "outside ourselves." According to Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, the first dichotomy ecocritics need to question is "the notion of absolute difference and the binary construct of inside and outside" (Gaard and Murphy 1998: 5). Just as magical realism contributes to blur such boundaries between inside and outside, human and "nature," ecological studies reinforce the dismantling of such categories. In fact, the discipline of ecology does not study the natural environment as something "external" that "we enter—some big outside that we go to" (Gaard and Murphy 1998: 5). Instead, ecology investigates the relationship between the outside and the inside, starting from the premise that there are two different

approaches to an entity: one that emphasizes its/her/his intrinsic value, and another that reifies all entities by focusing on their usefulness to us. As Gaard and Murphy put it, there are "things-in-themselves and things-for-us" (6; cf. Murphy 1997: 8). It is in this very distinction that ecofeminism finds its bedrock, since the very ontological value demanded for women as traditionally "othered" beings can equally be claimed for nonhuman entities as well (Gaard and Murphy 1998: 6).

In *Ceremony*, then, human beings and other biozens are accorded the same status; in addition, the destinies of humankind and otherkind are inextricably linked. Human blood is literally tinged by the color of the earth and the other way around: "The food water was the color of the earth, of their skin, of the blood, his blood dried brown in the bandages" (28). Indeed, "the fate of the earth is made to hang on Tayo's fate" (Buell 2005: 289). In other words, the future of our planet hinges on us: our very actions make us heroes/martyrs or villains/failures, much like Tayo himself, who wavers between the two extremes throughout the novel. Whereas at one point he feels he has been fooled by Betonie's "old-time superstition" (194), later, when cornered by the two armed patrolmen, Tayo has an epiphanic vision of his connectedness with the land, which "pull[s] him back, close to the earth": "He knew if he left his skull unguarded, if he let himself sleep, it would happen: the resistance would leak out and take with it all barriers, all boundaries: he would seep into the earth and rest with the center, where the voice of the silence was familiar and the density of the dark earth loved him" (201–2). This first (soon frustrated) attempt at reintegration with nature is for Tayo "a returning rather than a separation": "lying above the center that pulled him down closer felt more familiar to him than any embrace he could remember; and he was sinking into the elemental arms of mountain silence" (201; cf. 255). In a typically magical realist way, this metaphorical embrace is echoed in the other, physical embrace with the mysterious woman. As an apt embodiment of the earth, the woman both welcomes Tayo and gives him freedom to find his path on his own.

A careful reading of Silko's 1986 essay "Landscape, History, and Pueblo Imagination" will attest to the vast relevance that "dwelling," understood as living-in (verb) and "place" (noun),[5] has for Silko: "As offspring of the Mother Earth, the ancient Pueblo people could not conceive of themselves without a specific landscape" (269). As James

Tarter puts it, what the writer understands for the "community of the land is not an abstract concept (as it is, for example, in Leopold's concept of the land), nor is it simply conceived of as a backdrop for human or other action"; rather, it is "a particular place, the land in and around Laguna, with detailed relationships between actors in the community within a specific bioregion that has its own unique geophysical features" (99–100). In other words, for Silko community entails place, and, conversely, a (certain) geography produces a (certain) people. In *Ceremony* Silko chooses to emplace or "environ" Tayo even despite himself. The ethnic and land displacement that had driven Tayo to the verge of self-destruction are eventually superseded by ethnic and land emplacement by means of a new, hybridized ceremony. The very few moments when Tayo finds some peace and solace in his first tortured months as a war veteran coincide with instances of symbolic reconnection with the earth: "In a world of crickets and wind and cottonwood trees he was almost alive again; he was visible. The green waves of dead faces and the screams of the dying that had echoed in his head were buried. The sickness had receded into a shadow behind him, something he saw only out of the corners of his eyes, over his shoulder" (104). Although he constantly relapses into nightmarish anguish and personal degradation (shared with his drinking buddies), the eco-ceremony, which Betonie has initiated and Ts'eh has helped to further, gains pace and culminates in a final test which Tayo seems to pass. The need for communal emplacement that recurs throughout the novel acquires environmental connotations when embodied by the communion between Tayo and Ts'eh/Earth: "Together they made a place" (233; cf. 225). This is the ultimate incarnation of the biotic community: people and the environment reciprocally making each other's existence possible.

Yet from an ecocritical point of view, the general tone of the novel is not so much pastoral as apocalyptic. Until the very end the reader cannot fathom whether Tayo will be strong enough not to play into the hands of "the destroyers," not to fall prey to "witchery." The land-people relationship that readers perceive throughout *Ceremony* is far from harmonious. Save for a few exceptions, predatory and parasitic relationships between human beings and the environment figure more prominently in the novel than symbiotic interactions. In *Ceremony*, the biotic community is constantly being betrayed by human beings: instances of people contributing to the destruction of

nature abound. People abuse the other biozens once and again, instead of caring for and trying to save them. As shall later be discussed, the connivance and interconnections between the phenomenon of war, the military industry, and anthropogenic pollution become conspicuous by the end of the novel. Since magical realism allows for such latitude, even human despair—in Tayo's case induced by the sheer cruelty of war—can have a physical, environmental counterpart. Tayo's hatred actually wills a drought into existence: in the jungle, during the war, Tayo had cursed the rain and the words had literally become true. Such is the power of ritualized magic; after six years without rain, the land in the Laguna reservation becomes barren: "He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud [...] He wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun pressing across wide and empty horizons. [...] So he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying" (12, 14).

The fragility of the environmental balance requires a responsibility from human beings as part and parcel of the biotic community. If it takes "only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web" (38), it also takes only one person to heal the wounded earth. Tayo, as hero-savior, nevertheless, stands for his Native American community and for humankind as a whole both in terms of accountability and in terms of redemptive agency. We cannot forget that the story-poem, which provides choral glossing and a larger, mythological counterpart to the main storytelling, ascribes communal responsibility and places collective blame on those humans who ignored the due respect that we should accord to the natural environment, on those people who, dazed by the new magic—read modern progress and postmodern simulacra—"neglected the mother corn altar" (48). In moving away from "nature," in (unsuccessfully) trying to uproot ourselves from the biotic community in which we are inescapably embedded, we are courting disaster:

> Then they grow away from the earth
> then they grow away from the sun
> then they grow away from the plants and animals.
> They see no life
> When they look
> They see only objects

[...]
The deer and bear are objects
They see no life.

They fear
They fear the world.
They destroy what they fear. (135)

The prose narrative tells a less "poetic" story of how the Laguna-Pueblo land had been fenced "to keep Indians and Mexicans out," how it had been "taken"—both "stolen" and "raped"—until no one could prevent the new white owners "from coming to destroy the animals and the land" and disrupting "the balance of the world" for who knows how long (188, 186). In sum, it tells the story of how human beings see other biozens only as "objects"—as "things-for-us," not "things-in-themselves," in Murphy and Gaard's terminology.

Despite human ingratitude and disregard for the environment, however, "nature," in its most idealized form, does try to save people, according to *Ceremony*. Although there are numerous examples of animals sacrificing themselves for humankind, the long poem-story of Hummingbird and Fly may best illustrate nonhumans' concern for humans. Like other animal figures in the novel, both the fly and the hummingbird in the poem function as alter egos of the novel's other "hero," Tayo, with the qualitative difference that Hummingbird and, later, Fly, embark on their adventure of their own accord, not because they were encouraged by medicine men and mysterious women, as Tayo was. It is not only in the poem but also in the prose narrative itself that we encounter the hummingbird in this redemptive role: "as long as the hummingbird had not abandoned the land, somewhere there were still flowers, and they could all go on" (96). Once more, the magical realist mode makes it acceptable for the bird to have as much agency as human beings, without merely reducing it to an ethno-exotic note.

Animal counterparts abound for human beings in general and Native Americans in particular, both in the fable-like poem that is gradually braided into the novel, and in the "main" narrative. People are metaphorically rendered as deer (50–51), tomcats (56), cattle (31, 78, 80), dogs (92), spiders (94–95), bears (129, 130–33, 194), coyotes (140), and mountain lions (202). The half-breed, speckled cattle prove particularly resonant with symbolism: since at the beginning, when Tayo is still lost and disoriented, they too are "lost" and "scattered"

(31); they recurrently illustrate Tayo's mixed-blood condition (80, 187–89, 212); and, like Tayo, the cattle eventually learn how to settle "into the place" (225). Tayo's marginal status as Native American is likened to that of "greasers" and, according to the patrolmen, even lower than that of mountain lions, which at least are worth the effort to hunt down (202).

But more often than not, animalization is a valuable method for illustrating the closeness between human beings and animals. Some creatures are indeed described as half-human, half-animal: Spider Woman (94–95), the werewolf that appears in the poem (247), and the bear child, who echoes Tayo's own painful "transitions" (130–33). Or else animals metonymically stand for nature as a whole and voice their concern for the biotic community, as is the case of Hummingbird and Fly (71, 82, 105, 113, etc.) or the self-sacrificing deer (50–51; cf. 196). When Rocky is about to gut a deer they have recently hunted, Tayo feels respect and compassion:

> he looked at the eyes again; he took off his jacket and covered the deer's head... The sun was down, and the twilight chill sucked the last of the deer's life away—the eyes were dull and sunken; it was gone. [...] They went to the deer and lifted the jacket. They knelt down and took pinches of cornmeal from Josiah's leather pouch. They sprinkled the cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise, the deer would be offended, and they would not come to die for them the following year. (50–51)

However, only at the end of the ceremony/*Ceremony*, when Tayo becomes aware of the eternal stars dwarfing human existence, does he take on a different, loving attitude toward the other members of the biotic community: "He would go back there now, where she had shown him the plant. He would gather the seed for her and plant them *with great care* in places near sandy hills. The rainwater would seep down gently and the delicate membranes would not be crushed or broken before the emergence of *tiny fingers*, roots, and leaves pressing out in all directions. The plants would grow there like the story, strong and translucent as the stars" (254; emphasis added). The narrative voice lets us glimpse Tayo's change of attitude not only in his very will to behave differently, but also in how his perception, in this case of a seemingly insignificant shoot, bestows as much respect and love on otherkind as on humankind: the little budding plant starts growing "fingers" as if it were a human fetus. This graphic personification

reveals the deep transformation that has taken place in Tayo's worldview and system of values.

Unraveling the "War Ecosystem"

As we saw in the first section of this chapter, magical realism not only "connives" with ecocritical analysis in order to probe and dismantle received views of the planet and human interaction with it, but also concurs with environmentalism in its common disclosure of the interconnectedness of all ecosystems, including what can be termed the "war ecosystem." It seems accurate to maintain that Silko's *Ceremony* is an exposé of such an insidious ecosystem, one of the few that need to be eradicated.

Strictly speaking, "war" is a multifaceted phenomenon rather than an organism, an (eco)system with different economic, political, and ideological elements, all accruing to the "war machine." In what can be understood as the war ecosystem, then, ecocriticism coalesces with critical explorations of war discourse. War is indeed the ultimate attack on the planet, on the biotic community that includes sentient and nonsentient beings alike. The iniquity of war wreaks havoc among human populations and entire ecosystems in a direct way, by killing, maiming, and destroying everything it touches. However, the war ecosystem has at least other two aspects that are central, albeit less conspicuous: on the one hand, the spiritual/psychological damage inflicted on both victims and perpetrators; and, on the other, the insidious collusion of the war machine with global capitalism and environmental crisis.

The consequences of the war ecosystem are far-reaching in literal and figurative terms. The weblike interconnectedness of Gaia's biotic community is present in the insidious ramifications of the war ecosystem. Even if "war zones" (Hozic) seem to be remote and war appears to affect other communities, other lands, one cannot avoid the simple realization that, above all, there is just one (human/biotic) community and one land, the earth. Not only do we human beings have to dispel the fallacy of "distant violence"; we should also critique the hypocrisy and privilege involved in our (vain) attempts to conveniently restrict the war zones to an "elsewhere" (Dean 2007: 532). The "war machine" that allows the very existence of conflict "elsewhere" is constituted by multifarious elements of a global scope:

transnational corporations, especially the borderless military industry (with its "collateral," subsidiary industries such as mining and steel factories), international institutions, transnational transportation systems, global media, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

In *Ceremony*, violence is the big "lie," and the nameless "destroyers" are the agents of war. They are "those who knew how to stir the ingredients together"; the resulting combination of "white thievery and injustice" would prove fatal, fueling "the anger and hatred that would finally destroy the world: the starving against the fat, the colored against the white. The destroyers had only to set it into motion, and sit back to count the casualties" (191). War and the pain it inflicts, war and the human death it brings, are explicitly connected with the environmental crisis and destruction in Silko's novel. In the poem-story chronicling the salvation of Mother Earth by the joint collaboration of different biozens, one can hear the echoes of the war whose memory is plaguing Tayo:

> The wind will blow them across the ocean
> thousands of them in giant boats
> swarming like larva
> out of a crushed ant hill
> [...]
> They will fear the people
> They kill what they fear. (135–36)

In the main narrative, when Tayo is still at the veterans' hospital, he has a conversation with the "new doctor" about his other self, the invisible one. Tayo tries to explain what this other, disembodied self is doing and feeling: "He cries because they are dead and everything is dying" (16). Suddenly Rocky's death, and with it all the dead soldiers, are literally linked with the dying earth. With no rain the whole biotic community will perish, as the soldiers already have. Violence and war, metabolized in Tayo's hatred and despair, have caused the drought. However, it is still-deranged Tayo, confined to a veterans' hospital, who seems to be aware of this connection. At first sight his words seem mere insane ramblings. It is only later that a typical magical realist epiphany makes Tayo conscious of how deeply interrelated all these phenomena—war, injustice, death, rampant

capitalism, environmental crisis—are. They are just as closely intertwined as the biozens of the planet:

> There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things ... (246; cf. 126)

It is no coincidence that the porosity of the boundaries that had been erected to divide what used to be watertight realms—indeed, the very crumbling of those barriers, once they become too porous—constitutes a fundamental tenet of magical realism. Tayo's epiphanic vision takes place just after he has thought of Trinity Site, where atomic tests had been carried out, which leads him to remember the "laboratories where the bomb had been created," "deep in the Jemez Mountains" that had been taken from the Cochiti Pueblo (245–46). Thus, once more, dispossession, nuclear pollution (here wedded to environmental racism), and war converge. The veiled, cryptic reference to "the witchery of dead ash and *mushroomed* bullets" (201, emphasis added) now becomes clear. The destinies of humans apparently too far away, at the *safe* remove of "distant violence"—the Pueblo Natives and the Japanese victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—prove to be inextricably linked: "human beings were [...] united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter" (246). The echoes of such "distant violence" resound in the Pueblo landscape, which harbors uranium, the mineral *planted* in the bombs that killed Japanese people by the hundreds of thousands. The crisscrossing patterns become clear now; the different lines converge and the ceremony has been completed: "He cried the relief he felt at seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (246).

As anticipated above, in the critique of the war ecosystem that Silko delineates in her novel, both the victims and the apparent evildoers are trapped in the big lie of violence and war: "The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what were doing to each other" (191). In *Ceremony* there is a surprising sense of compassion for those hate-filled people who actually commit the "crime," be it Tayo's drinking buddies, with their violent resentment, or "the white men," who created the exploitative system but are nonetheless equally manipulated. The war machine that white people have set into motion feeds on itself and seems to have a life of its own, no longer under their control: "the lies devoured white hearts, and for more than two hundred years white people had worked to fill their emptiness; they tried to glut the hollowness with patriotic wars and with great technology and the wealth it brought. And always they had been fooling themselves, and they knew it" (Silko 191). Understandably, this spiritual "hollowness," this existential angst, is also found among the "victims," most notably Tayo, who seems to be deranged and, paradoxically, only achieves wholeness and sanity precisely when the rest of the world considers him insane.

Ecoapocalypse or Utopian Vision?

Apocalypticism and magic were inextricably linked even before the Christian Book of Revelation, a bond that resurfaces in magical realist fiction. Seminal magical realist texts such as *Cien años de soledad*, *Midnight's Children*, or *Das Parfum* proffer an apocalyptic approach that, as seen above, is also typical of environmental criticism and literature. Such coincidence speaks of certain common grounds between magical realism and ecocriticism analyzed in previous sections. If magical realism can sustain either an extremely positive (utopian) or a radically negative (dystopian, apocalyptic) alternative reality, both utopian/apocalyptic visions can become instrumental in fiction with an explicit or implicit environmental agenda. Silko's *Ceremony* seems to waver between these two poles. Tayo's final healing ceremony has often been described as "apocalyptic" and global, linking apparently unrelated phenomena in an ominous ceremony. But what vision of nature does Silko's novel proffer—apocalyptic or pastoral? The novel seems to have a happy (if complex)

ending. Despite all the pain and confusion, despite the fear of losing everything, Tayo wakes up to the comforting realization that "nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing" (219). The biotic community was more resilient than it originally seemed. At the same time, and as is customary in apocalyptic texts, the natural environment acquires an imposing, almost divine import. At the end of *Ceremony*, nature is portrayed as all-powerful and eternal as the stars (254), but it is also depicted as generous and benevolent. At this point the human/nature divide is still in place: "The snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it. They logged the trees, they killed the deer, bear, and mountain lions, they built their fences high; but the mountain was far greater than any or all of these things" (219). A benign "nature," synecdochically represented by the mountain in the following excerpt, had overcome the lies and defeated the destroyers: "The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones" (219). It is this last sentence that dramatically alters the traditional picture of a divinized "nature," separate from human beings. The text, finally and unambiguously, upholds people's intrinsic belonging to the natural sphere. The human being is just one more member of the biotic community. The particular brand of mimesis encountered in magical realism, the world-creating mimesis, has facilitated the inscription of such a drift. The new world intimated in Silko's novel is deeply magicorrealist, arising from the conjunction of recognizable reality and a radically new perspective with features not commonly accepted in realist narrative, such as the voice and the protagonism of the nonhuman. This conjunction has finally enabled the change of attitude and the enlargement of our ethics, in order to include nonhuman and even nonsentient biozens, much as Leopold had suggested in his "land ethic."

The discussion above conveniently heralds a last question: what type of mode does *Ceremony* embrace—pastoral happy ending or apocalyptic cataclysm? As Buell cogently argues, Silko's book "brings world crisis to an almost utopian closure" inasmuch as the ending proves much "too idyllic" (289–90). And, indeed, the pastoral tone saturates some of the last sections of the novel, for instance one of the key final paragraphs lauding the resilience and permanence of

the mountain/nature: "nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained" (220). The resolution of the novel is preceded by an epiphanic evocation of unspoiled nature that Buell considers "a macrocosmic sequel to the microcosmic rock—a glorious melodrama of human and cultural redemption as a state of ecological grace" (*Environmental* 289). In sum, whereas the ominous, apocalyptic mode permeates most of the novel, an apparently incongruous bucolic tone seems to prevail at the end.

Is the apocalyptic mode in *Ceremony* tragic or comic? Both possibilities exist in magical realist texts; however, the comic type of apocalypse figures more prominently in magical realist fiction, with the variegated nature of its characters, not usually inscribed in a Manichean dialectic, and with its frequent cyclical approach to time, opening up the likelihood of a regeneration, of a second chance. By contrast, on all accounts, Silko couches the narrative in dialectic terms bordering on the Manichean: evil destroyers against an innocent "nature." It is guilt, then, not error; and what is required is salvation, not merely emendation. Although Tayo sports ambiguous characteristics that would make him, as the main character of the novel, closer to comedy than to tragedy, the "good versus evil" schema, together with the overall ominous atmosphere (with little if any "comic relief"), render the novel highly "tragic," despite too neat a happy ending. Following O'Leary's taxonomy of tragic and comic apocalypse, then, we could conclude that *Ceremony* can be considered an example of tragic ecoapocalypse truncated by a utopian ending.

Ceremony has occasionally been lambasted for the silence it keeps as regards the nuclear hazards and pollution that affected the setting of the novel. Garrard is critical of *Ceremony*'s apocalypticism because it "reduc[es] social, national, and ecological conflicts to a dualistic spiritual confrontation of "witchery" and "ceremony," or "natives" and "destroyers," thus "forfeit[ing] the subtle discrimination needed to respond to environmental justice issues in favor of a one-off drama that can only issue in disaster or utopia" (129). However, for critics such as Tarter, it is just the opposite, since Silko's novel has provided a first step toward an increasing concern for environmental justice issues by her insightful "depiction of a triangular relationship [...] between place, multiethnicity, and environmental justice" (108). Moreover, as Buell explains, Silko makes good use not only of the fact that, historically, "uranium was mined on Laguna land," but also

"that the Laguna [...] are an extensively hybridized people," a coincidence that "allow[s] her to develop a fiction of Tayo's cure both as an intensely particularized story of a reservation land's retribalization and as a case study of a sickness of global scope" (*Environmental* 286). Only when Tayo comes to the epiphanic realization that the personal and the political and that the local and the global interpenetrate each other does he start on his path toward recovery. That confluence of the global and the local, as seen above, owes much to Silko's choice of magical realist strategies, which allow her to bridge distances in time and space that surpass the constricted conventions of the realist novel. This (global-local) shift, already intuited in Silko's seminal novel, acquires a more vigorous import in Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest.*

III. From Local to Planetary Ecology: Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

Globalization and the Logic of Late Capitalism

When first approaching Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* the reader is surprised by its numerous, diverse, and international cast of characters: an Amazonian peasant (Mané), a young boy from the North (Chico Paco) who specializes in pilgrimages and becomes an evangelical radio preacher,[6] an urban Brazilian couple (Batista and Tania Aparecida) who breed pigeons for a living, an American businessman with three arms (J. B. Tweep), a fittingly complementary woman scientist with a "trio" of breasts (Michelle), and Kazumasa Ishimaru, a Japanese man who has recently migrated to Brazil and has brought with him a rotating miniature planet, a ball that constantly whirls just inches away from his forehead. This ball, invariably attached to Kazumasa since childhood, surprisingly assumes the narrative voice and tells us the convoluted story of how the paths of these multifarious characters crisscross and converge in the central metaphor of the novel, the Matacão. The Matacão plateau, which emerges in the middle of the Brazilian rain forest, is "neither rock nor desert [...] but an enormous impenetrable field of some unknown solid substance stretching for millions of acres in all directions" (16). In the end, the Matacão turns out to be nothing

but the eruption of nonbiodegradable waste from industrialized countries, that is, a combination of natural and artificial phenomena.

Even though all of the plot lines recurrently converge in just one location, the peculiar plastic plateau, the complex combination of the local and global that the Matacão signifies only reinforces the global nature of dwelling conjured up in the novel.[7] *Through the Arc* confirms the widespread intuition that globalization is taking place or, as most people argue, has already occurred. Our sense of place has accordingly been altered, allowing for what Massey describes as the emergence of "platial identities," which are built and developed "through their interaction with other places rather than by counterposition to them" (qtd. in Buell 2005: 92). The ICT revolution, along with the improvement of the means of transport all around the world, has shrunk the world in practical terms. This "shrinking of the planet," to use Buell's term (68), is literalized in the "magical" ball that interpellates us in its role of narrator.

As Ursula Heise cogently argues in "Local Rock and Global Plastic" (2004), not only is the hovering ball a replica of the globe we live in, but the novel itself is also very much about the interdependence between the global and the local and, more specifically, the obvious "connections between ecological and cultural globalism" (127). In "Magic Capitalism and Melodramatic Imagination" (2004), Shu-ching Chen similarly addresses the issues of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in *Through the Arc*, as well as analyzing the novel's treatment of Asian ethnicity. For Heise, Yamashita's text best illustrates the concepts of disembedding and deterritorialization as put forward by Anthony Giddens and John Tomlinson, respectively. The fact that the Matacão plateau turns out to be the result of the combination of human interaction with the biotic community all around the world, even though its emergence is restricted to (apparently) a single locale, constitutes, in Heise's words, "a striking trope for the kind of deterritorialization John Tomlinson analyzes, the penetration of the local by the global that leads to the loosening of ties between culture and geography" (135). Although the Matacão may be the most obvious trope of such deterritorialized globalization in the novel, globalizing patterns show as much in small details as in larger phenomena: in Mané's shirt, which incongruously greets us with an "Aloha" (23), or his "foreign university T-shirts" (80); in "minor" migrations, most notably the exodus from the

countryside to the big cities (24); and, last but not least, in the TV that rallies people from disparate cultures and geographies around an all-powerful globalizing agent: media (23–24).

As was the case in Silko's *Ceremony*, in *Through the Arc* it is once more the inclusive nature of magical realism, visible from the start in the incredible ball-narrator of the story, that makes possible the intimation that everything is interrelated. The complicity between received, commonly accepted perceptions of realities and interconnected, pernicious human constructions is dismantled by the world-creating mimetic approach exhibited by magical realism, which allows such interconnections to be fully disclosed. Silko's web metaphor reappears here as a grid; however, in Yamashita's novel the convergence of threads/lines does not have to wait until the protagonist experiments an epiphany, but is anticipated by the all-seeing narrator early in the novel: "These things I knew with simple clairvoyance. I also knew that strange events far to our north and deep in the Amazon Basin, events as insignificant as those in a tiny north-eastern coastal town wedged tightly between multicolored dunes, and events as prestigious as those of the great economic capital of the world, New York, would each cast forth an invisible line, shall I say, leading us to a place they would all call the Matacão" (15). *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* not only follows a plethora of characters from countries as far apart as Japan, Brazil, and the U.S. and shows us how their apparently different lives are intricately interwoven; it also explores the interrelationship between commodification, corporate capitalism, and the destruction of the environment. As Murphy cogently puts it in his 1997 article, Yamashita's novel can indeed be read as a "cautionary tale about the destruction of not just one specific community but ... virtually any community by multinational capitalism's ubiquitous commodification of objects, peoples, practices, and beliefs" (8).

The version of globalization as stifling inevitability that usually hits the news is most noticeable in the pervasive presence of transnational corporations. Such corporations are the negative side of a globalization that has often been "blamed for unifying too rapidly and without negotiation" (Latour 2007: 313). In *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* it is "GGG Enterprises" that embodies the power of global money. Yamashita's novel addresses not only Jameson's "logic of late capitalism" but also, echoing Newman, the "logic of the

capitalist ecosocial order." The stark contrast between extreme poverty and luxurious wealth is explicitly described in *Through the Arc*. Yamashita does not recoil from showing the less palatable side of unbridled capitalism—the impoverished communities that develop in large metropolitan areas, such as São Paulo's favelas (42, cf. 58). The favelas depicted in the novel resemble a waste dump, the very accumulation of Western waste and excess that has been metaphorized in the Matacão.[8] Most inhabitants of these miniature tin cities only aspire to be lucky enough to win the lottery: there seems to be no other way out. Or else they lead lives of resigned drudgery, momentarily escaping their misery through the imaginary landscapes offered by soap operas.

Consumerist capitalism is nothing but the institutionalization of human greed in its individual and collective versions. Instances of such excessive acquisitiveness recur throughout the novel, whose plot has been described as "a parodistic boom-and-bust, rape-of-the-Amazon" story (Buell 2005: 59). However, the only character immune to the feeling of avarice, Kazumasa (45, 59–62), is the object of covetous interest and outright exploitation (109). Once in Brazil, Kazumasa is the recipient of an unusual gift: as Batista's cryptic message had prophesied, this Japanese man attached to the mysterious ball luckily wins every lottery game he engages in. All of a sudden everybody wants to befriend the instant millionaire in the hope of obtaining one of the favors he generously bestows. As time goes by, the old gift (his attachment to the peculiar ball) is rediscovered by greedy J. B. Tweep, who correctly guesses that the magnetic attraction the ball feels toward the Matacão plastic can be highly instrumental in his discovery of new deposits of the miracle plastic: "Kazumasa and I, alone, were the key to this incredible source of wealth" (144). Thus, Kazumasa and his ball are virtually kidnapped, first confined to the GGG headquarters and later secretly taken to strategic sites in order to prospect deposits of Matacão (131ff., 148ff.). Kazumasa is thus commodified and reduced to his valuable ball; he actually comes to resemble a ball as he is "passed" from hand to hand (145).

As anticipated, the embodiment of the global "free-market" economy in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is GGG Enterprises. The company epitomizes corporate capitalism in its blind scrambling for wealth and profit. The question of financial profit is masked under the suitably benign issue of "viability" (53). At the same time, GGG is

the transnational phenomenon par excellence. The company confirms the dictum that money has no frontiers: even though GGG is initially located in the U.S., it follows "Japanese corporate business sense" (53) and expands out into Brazil.

When introduced to the company headquarters in New York, we benefit first from the narrator's panoramic view, and later from J. B. Tweep's particular perception. From the former, we learn of internal conspiracies that finally dislodge the founders of GGG Enterprises from the very company they have created (21), and we gather that some "union trouble" is afoot (19). From Tweep's "trialectic" viewpoint, we learn to approach GGG as a product of a Kafkaesque imagination: cloned offices, cloned secretaries, absurd reshuffling, nonsensical protocols, endless filing, constant promotions and demotions that mean absolutely nothing (28–32, 53).[9] The "magical" trialectics Tweep invents (56, 159) is partly a send-up of critical and philosophical jargon (e.g., its play with the term *dialectics*) and partly an elliptical critique of global capitalism. Through the "tertiary" motif (75), we often learn of capitalist greed: Tweep's "grabbing" third arm, a corporation "coincidentally" called G-G-G soon teeming with threesome teams, the obsession with "trialectic efficiency" (75), a preference for Third World countries (apparently easy to prey on)—even the triplets named Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité, who prove to represent an ironic comment on the very antinomic principles underlying transnational corporate capitalism. In addition, Tweep's harmless kleptomaniac tendencies speak of the not-so-harmless greed of GGG, which "legally" exploits natural resources—which should be read here as universal resources—under the guise of "scientific nonprofit research" (113). There is no limit to the greed of Tweep, the human embodiment of GGG and the larger web of global capitalism. Although, as Kazumasa rightly ponders, "Matacão plastic was a finite resource" and the Brazilian deposits had all been identified, this does not stop Tweep from looking for it elsewhere: "J.B. had plans to send us to Greenland, central Australia and Antarctica, not to mention every pocket of virgin tropical forest within 20 degrees latitude of the equator" (149). It becomes rather conspicuous that global corporate capitalism and the (attendant) environmental crisis are inextricably interrelated.

As in Vizenor's *Bearheart*, in *Through the Arc* the narrator clearly exposes the connivance of governments and transnational

corporations, and their profound responsibility for the ecological crisis, by denouncing a long list of environmental outrages: deforestation (16) and the engineered sterility of the soil (17); the endangering of birds and other species through overexploitation or direct annihilation (156, 202), highly disruptive or polluting projects such as "the largest dam in the world," the nuclear plant "that never worked," or the "great factory in the dense tropical forest for the purpose of churning everything into tons of useful paper" (76); "acres of flooded forest"; "great government hydroelectric dam projects"; "great forest fires" (144–45); and the highly toxic runoff from GGG's manipulation of the Matacão (160).[10] Even when GGG's strategies are misleadingly described as "pure" (112), we know that its corporate tentacles grasp any possible outlet for people's initiatives, which becomes evident in its monopoly over the Matacão plastic and its multiple applications (112ff., 149). Likewise, the powerful company knowingly lies about the toxicity of the runoff from the Matacão mining process, declaring that it has no impact whatsoever upon the environment (160).

The almost invisible Matacão runoffs and the DDT-bombing mirror environment-blind industrial and agro-business procedures and constitute an excellent example of the "dematerialization of pollution" (Garrard 12) attendant in toxic discourse.[11] If we read "Matacão-plastification" as the menacing toxic element that seeps into every single aspect of the characters' lives, Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* can be interpreted along the lines of toxic discourse. Poison-bombing both the Matacão and the surrounding "still-mysterious forest" not only results in the annihilation of birds, as intended, but also proves invisibly dangerous to the entire biotic community, including human beings: "Not only birds died, but every sort of small animal, livestock, insects and even small children who had run out to greet the planes unknowingly. [...] Millions of birds of every color and species [...] filled the skies, pressing the upward altitudes for the pure air, but the lethal cloud spread odiously with *sinister invisibility*" (202; emphasis added). The toxic penetration proves even more insidious in the form of the plastic food popularized during the Matacão plastic rage, once the plastic starts to deteriorate and vanish: "There was no telling what might happen to people who had, on a daily basis, eaten Matacão plastic hamburgers and French fries" (207). Both the intangible danger of the pesticides and the

subtly pervasive presence of Matacão plastic contribute to the narrative of toxic discourse, which, as Garrard persuasively observes, corresponds to the contemporary perception of "a 'world risk society' of impalpable, ubiquitous material threats" (12).

At no point does the narrator of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* let the reader forget that this toxification/plastification of life is brought about by the mechanics of corporate capitalism. Corporations, as disembodied agents of rampant capitalism, seem to think not as human beings but as plastic. And this is still the case when corporations are embodied, as is GGG in J. B. Tweep. The three-armed businessman is eventually depersonalized and likened to the very Matacão plastic he grows obsessed with. "Ever since Chicolándia," muses his worried wife, "I think he is convinced that everything can be more easily reproduced in Matacão plastic. What can I say? *It is like talking to the Matacão itself*!" (200; emphasis added).

If the logic of late, multinational capitalism is intimately connected with the environmental crisis, it also provokes a crisis among human beings, both as an exploitative system and as an alienating tool. The deeper their engagement in capitalist investments, transnational business, international notoriety, and global media success, the more distancing and separation there is between friends, lovers, family: Kazumasa and Lourdes (149), Tania and Batista (138, 171–75, 199), Mané and his family (121, 150–51, 184–85), and Gilberto and Chico Paco. Indeed, some of these characters are plagued by a very postmodern global disease—the obsession with work and/or mobility: a "wanderlust" in the case of Tania Aparecida (174), hyperactivity in the case of Gilberto (168–69), or workaholic stress in the case of Mané (120–21). Last but not least, whole cultures are either lost or irreversibly changed by the effects of global capitalism, as Mané's "three different lives" confirm.

What Is Natural about Nature?

When specifying the concrete ways in which magical realism combines with environmental criticism, it must be pointed out that this bizarre alchemy contributed to the problematization of the dichotomy "nature versus culture." It is true that this antinomy has lately been questioned by ecocritics themselves and that over the last decades, the

concept of "the environment" has been broadened as regards both the contextual setting and the very nature of "nature," so to speak. Current ecocriticism focuses not only on more or less rural or wild settings (the traditional notion of nature), but also on the construction of the urban environment, either isolated from or in comparison with nonurban contexts. The very separation and difference of what is "natural" and what is "man-made" (cultural/artificial) has been called into question. Both sets of new connotations for the postmodern understanding of the environment (natural/nonnatural and context-related) can be illustrated with reference to Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, although the issue that is most prominent in the novel is the question of what encompasses "nature." Indeed, it seems accurate to argue that in this book Yamashita is using not "the green language of the new nature," as Williams would put it ("Green" 58), but the greenspeak of postmodern "nature," whereby the "natural" and the human-made become at times indistinguishable, or, to use Molly Wallace's words, nature has become "denatured." This blurring is made explicit first and foremost in the novel's double trope of the ball and Matacão.[12]

The double metaphor of the plastic ball/Matacão intriguingly addresses the boundaries between the organic nature and the inorganic plastic.[13] Ambiguously described as the "stage for life and death" (102) and as a dull mirror of human beings (144), the Matacão, an enormous expanse of white plastic that suddenly surfaces in the middle of the Amazonian rain forest, provides both spiritual and material sustenance for many people, while simultaneously precipitating a seemingly apocalyptic denouement. As befits the symbol's centrality in the novel, the Matacão is the main concern of the book's central chapter—"The Matacão," chapter 16. This chapter marks the end of the rise and development of the characters' lives and fortunes, and the beginning of their fall. The chapter also gathers the many theories about the origin and composition of the Matacão plateau that have been put forward, some of which echo previous hints and glimpses into its real nature. While it is finally established that the Matacão is made of a strange type of plastic with magnetic properties, its origin remains a mystery until an explanation is given in the very last chapters of the novel. It is only then that readers are told that the mysterious substance making up the Matacão is anthropogenic. The bizarre plateau is, to quote Robert Wess, an "ecological poetic

license" (108), the upshot of the accumulation of nonbiodegradable waste in/from industrialized countries, the so-called First World, which, like many other negative consequences of globalization, comes to light in a Third World country. And the ball-narrator becomes the first and foremost embodiment of Matacão plastic.

From the beginning, the ball-narrator of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* is ambiguous enough to either signify the terrestrial globe, a "tiny impudent *planet*" (5), or else prefigure the plastic expanse of Matacão, the first sign of pervasive plastification. Therefore, the relationship that develops between Kazumasa and his ball can be read differently based on whether the little ball is understood as an embodiment of the earth or as mere plastic. If the little ball is construed as a metaphor for the planet, Kazumasa's growing fondness of and friendship with the ball would be an apt argument in favor of our deeper involvement in planetary, environmental issues. The intimate attachment, the closeness between Kazumasa and the ball can be interpreted as a call for a new relationship between human beings and the earth as a whole. But the ball, usually treated as a friend (5), is also considered a pet (5, 24). This entails the usual ambivalent connotations that accrue to such a word: an animal to accompany his owner, but never on equal footing with her; or, conversely, a denaturalized animal, pampered and tame, not really an animal anymore. Yet we know that the ball is much more than that: not only is it more "enlightened" than Kazumasa and human beings in general, but it is also "clairvoyant," as the omniscient narrator of the novel. As befits a small globe, its vision is all-encompassing, planetary. We gain from such a panoramic view, which at the same time lays bare the many links and converging points of global but apparently disconnected phenomena (28, 15), another trait associated with the political agency of magical realism.

The combination of Kazumasa and the little orbiting ball also constitutes a reversed version of the biotic community, of the Gaia hypothesis, where the planet is Lilliputian (but still powerful, and apparently resilient) and the human being, in comparison, enormous, Gulliverian. Yamashita's little globe (but not Kazumasa's) would therefore conform to Lovelock's theory. However, in the organicist metaphor of Gaia, the earth may survive without human beings, whereas for the ball it is just the opposite. Though initially depressed, Kazumasa goes on living after the ball's demise. The very

disintegration of the tiny globe resonates with a warning of what we may be doing to the larger globe, the planet where we live. In addition, it replaces the environmental awareness signified by the orbiting ball by human attachment. One should remember at this point that the ball first interferes between the mother-son bond (4–5) and constantly delays Kazumasa's relationship with Lourdes. When Lourdes and Kazumasa are finally reunited, the ball's slow deterioration begins (205). However, this reading proves problematic in that it suggests that caring for the earth and caring for other human beings is incompatible.

As an apt embodiment of our planet, the ball not only has its own orbit, but also proves highly resilient (or seems to at the beginning). Additionally, the small globe seems to have a benign influence. Like the earth, the ball provides Kazumasa with the means to earn a living; it also helps save human lives (first in the form of would-be victims of train accidents) and makes Kazumasa wealthy (which makes many people happy, though not Kazumasa). And it does so with no demand for compensation whatsoever (5). However, as mentioned above, we soon learn that the planetary ball also brings loneliness to Kazumasa, and because of its value (like the earth's minerals and diamonds) and human greed, it finally wreaks havoc and death (170). It is no coincidence that part 4, "Loss of Innocence," begins with a chapter devoted to the ball (105). It is no coincidence either that the apocalyptic series of events that threaten the integrity of the earth end with the ball's gradual disintegration (205–6).

If, on the other hand, the ball is construed as a mere object made of a strange type of plastic, later discovered to be Matacão plastic, the focus would shift instead to the interaction between living creatures and the inorganic elements. In Yamashita's novel this would entail the exploration of the intricate cross-fertilization of the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic. The fact that critics can delve into "the hidden interdependencies between areas of life usually seen as opposites: nature and artifice, pastoral and urban, leisure and work, fantasy and reality" (Kerridge 2000: 242) constitutes an unquestionable asset of environmental criticism, an advantage shared, as seen above, by the magical realist mode. In exploring those "hidden interdependencies," it can be argued that like the relation existing between living things and machines, "the relationship between organism and [plastic] has been a border war" (Haraway 2007: 316),

and the tactics involved in border wars necessarily entail a constant shifting and destabilization of such borders, such as the one we witness in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest.*

The connection between the plastic ball and the Matacão is first intimated in chapter 17, which significantly marks not only the first encounter between the two but also the beginning of the "loss of innocence": "here, near the Matacão, [...] both J.B. and Kazumasa realized my undeniable attraction to the large slab" (105).[14] The plastic connection confirmed by the magnetic attraction between the plastic Matacão and Kazumasa's satellite has led some critics to think of the ball as a mere nonliving appendix to a living creature, which would automatically turn Kazumasa into a "cyborg" (Buell 59). The ball-cum-person known as Kazumasa does indeed partake of the paradoxical organic/nonorganic nature of "cyborgs" and the factual/fictional characteristics invoked by Haraway in "A Cyborg Manifesto." Yet Kazumasa can hardly be considered a cyborg, for the ball is not so much an integral part of his body (the ball considers herself/itself a different consciousness altogether) as a *different* organism attached to the man's body. In an accurate reading of this strange couple, the ball would be merely a part, as it were, of Kazumasa's own micro-ecosystem (containing not only the ball but also, as in the case of all mortals, other living creatures such as bacteria and, occasionally, viruses). Although inextricably attached to Kazumasa, the ball remains different from him, a separate entity, with a "spirit" (3) and consciousness of its own (24).

Although partly anticipated by the junkyard-in-the-jungle episode analyzed elsewhere, it is the emergence of the Matacão that most clearly and effectively turns the wilderness of the Amazonian rain forest into a "cyborg ecosystem" where organic and inorganic realms meet. As both Wallace and Heise cogently argue, the very origin of the Matacão deteriorates the boundaries between what is natural and artificial, between the local and the global. Indeed, as can be expected of boundary-breaking magical realist texts, Yamashita's novel successfully bridges the nature/culture divide by proffering an "ecosystemic vision of nature and culture which provides a model for and a critique of hybridity" (Wallace 2000: 149). The creation of the Matacão itself combines anthropogenic and natural forces, since it originates in human excess (the disposal of the escalating nonbiodegradable waste accumulated in industrialized countries) but

necessitates the earth's agency in condensing, pushing, and transporting these "liquid deposits of the molten mass ... through underground veins to virgin areas" (202) such as the Amazonian rain forest. Therefore, the Matacão, like almost every other aspect of what is considered "nature," according to Williams, is both natural and anthropogenic.

Despite its apparent resilience, the Matacão plastic is eventually swallowed by and integrated into "nature," enacting the symbolic "return" that the title of the final section hints at. When some bacteria attack the seemingly indestructible material, the whole plastic empire collapses. The first sign appears in the narrator ball itself, which slowly deteroriates, is gradually eaten from the inside out, and finally crumbles into dust. The disintegration that follows is widespread, literal, and metaphorical. The "plastic paradise [is] now horribly disfigured, shot full of tiny ominous holes, the mechanical entrails of everything exposed beneath the once-healthy plastic flesh" (206–7). The global economic system, embodied here in the "stock market," plummets down "as the invisible bacteria gnawed away, leaving everything with a grotesquely denuded, decapitated, even leprous appearance" (207). If the artificial and the natural had become momentarily confused, now the paradoxical combinations of "mechanical entrails" and "plastic flesh" cannot leave anyone indifferent. The oxymoronic phrases can be taken at face value, thus further developing the theme of the complicated relationship between the animate and the inanimate, the "natural" and the "(hu)man-made," or else they can acquire an ironic import, subtly denouncing the ease with which human beings naturalize what is artificial. In this second interpretation, the resilience of living organisms—in this case, plastic-eating bacteria—would therefore become the necessary counterweight that resituates Non-Nature and Nature, the Machine and the Garden, in their respective separate realms.

Ecoapocalypse of Edenic Utopia?

The ending of Yamashita's novel wavers between its apparently initial impetus toward apocalypticism and the second-chance hopeful optimism of the very last chapter. *Through the Arc* has actually been read as an "eco-parable" (Wallace), an "eco-apocalypse" (Buell), or

else as some depoliticized pseudo-Edenic vision (Heise), which makes a case for a careful reassessment of the novel.

The second half of *Through the Arc*, as mentioned above, seems to prepare the reader for the final catastrophe by more or less oblique textual hints, and by the not-so-subtle titles of the book divisions. The last section of the novel, part 6, "Return," starts with an ominous portrait of "the darker side of the feather" (180), which is easily extrapolated to signify the darker side of the Matacão and all the phenomena and businesses that accrue to it, from the Chicolándia project to the Djapan pigeon business. The different horses associated with the biblical apocalyptic vision are all present in these last chapters of the novel: the plague (in the form of bird-carried typhus), death (either because of suicidal flight or as casualties from the epidemic), and, figuratively, famine and war, the "unholy war" in the form of a battle against "typhoid death" (184) and the poison-bombing of birds by the air force (201–2). Globalization is here as well, not only in the economic miracles but also in the spread of disease and their transformation into world pandemics, even when the inhabitants of wealthy countries still try to protect themselves with an illusory cloak of First World privilege: "*Epidemics, plagues, drought, famine, terrorism, war*—all things that happened to other people, poor people in the Third World who cavorted with communism and the like" (184; emphasis added).

The "cloud of doom" that hovers "over the Matacão" (183), the "dismal atmosphere of gloom" (189) that one can almost touch, makes the apocalyptic reading all the more pressing. The Matacão has been a source of wealth and apparent progress, but in the end it also proves to be the source of death and disease. It is when the maelstrom is visible that the apocalypse is explicitly mentioned: "some people had begun to feel that they typhus epidemic was heralding the inevitable apocalypse, that the Matacão was the center of God's storm" (187).[15] Worse than the actual suffering caused by the epidemic is the widespread feeling of fear among people all over the world. Just as fear was instrumental for the success of "witchery" in the universe of Silko's novel, in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* it is this "insidious dread" that is at the root of "human degradation" (188). With the Carnival celebrations in Chicolándia, Chico Paco wants to dispel those overwhelming feelings of guilt and fear, "to turn the ugly presentation of suffering," self-flagellating pilgrims dragging their

bodies over the Matacão "into the new dance of hope" (190). This attempt at an Edenic reinvention through the unorthodox means of Carnivalesque exaltation of life and joy proves as fake as the "paradise of plastic delights" (190), which soon crumbles into dust. Conveniently, then, Carnival Day becomes Judgment Day, and at this very moment many of the central characters once more converge in the pivotal axis of the Matacão, either joining the celebration or taking part in an exchange of kidnapped/ransomed victims.

However, after all the death and destruction, the last chapter, "The Tropical Tilt," manages to interweave mourning and Edenic images in four consecutive vignettes: the funeral procession of Chico Paco; the reunion of Batista and Tania; the pastoral bliss of Lourdes, Kazumasa, and their children; and the final send-off of the ball-narrator. How to interpret, then, Yamashita's ambiguously open ending? Buell explains the bacterium that put an end to the Matacão cornucopia as the offshoot of humans' dangerous interference with the natural environment: the "mysterious bacterium" may be but "one of the profuse mutant life-forms that eco-disruption has generated" (*Future* 60). Is it nature's revenge on human beings? A manifesto of natural resilience? An apocalypse transformed into a new Eden with a new Adam (Kazumasa) and Eve (Lourdes) who start anew? Or, as Heise contends, a less-than-comfortable reminder of things to come, among them the continuing deforestation and pillage of natural resources, mostly in the Amazonian basin?

Although by the end of the book the "plastic paradise" has become "horribly disfigured" (206), it is apparently superseded by two "love triumphant" scenes (210–11), one of them set in a context highly reminiscent of the garden of Eden: Kazumasa-Adam, Lourdes-Eve, and their children bask in their happiness, surrounded by "tropical fruit trees and vines" on a luscious farm or plantation that they have made "their land" (211).[16] For Heise, the end of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* harks back to the "pastoral cliché" of "bucolic bliss," proffering "a sociocultural solution to a problem [...] earlier articulated in ecological terms. [...] Ecological deterritorialization is contained by cultural reterritorialization" (138, 139). However, it can convincingly be argued that the image closing the book is not that of domestic/pastoral bliss, but the description of the slow recovery of the rain forest, with the added caveat that it has been permanently altered: "The old forest has returned once again,

secreting its digestive juices, slowly breaking everything into edible absorbent components, pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same. But it will never be the same again" (212).

But while the end of the novel intimates the triumph of the natural world or the return of nature, then, something has clearly been lost in the interval. The bleak scenes of what is described as a funeral procession winding its way across Brazil (209–10) confirm that, in Heise's words, "the despoliation of nature seems to continue unabated even after the end of the Matacão culture" (137). Yet the critic still maintains that the novel ends on a pastoral or idyllic note. Instead, it seems more accurate to claim that placing those effective depictions of the continuous menace to the environment—in this case the rich Amazonian forest—at the end of the novel, juxtaposed with the Edenic images that favor the interpretation of the resilience of nature, has the immediate effect of renewing readers' unease.[17] It is because of this permanent threat that readers cannot merely dwell in the apparent happy ending of the intercultural family born at the end of the novel, but instead feel the need to further question the ways in which we interact and interfere with nature on a global scale. Indeed, as Murphy rightly suggests, the questions that close the book directly address readers and make them complicit with what has happened before (9). *Through the Arc* presents the reader with "cautionary metareflections on the potential hubris" of human beings and their attempts at "reinventing the world on one's own terms," thanks to the fact that in magical realism, as in science fiction, "artistic licence in principle knows no limit. You are free to invent any world you can imagine" (Buell 2005: 60).

Through her novel Yamashita sounds the alarm of the very real "postmodern danger of global environmental destruction" (Rody 2000: 629), but she does so in a playful way. Rather than interpreting Yamashita's book as a tragic ecoapocalypse or as a truncated apocalypse with an Edenic deus-ex-machina resolution, we can read *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* as a comic apocalypse. Even if, as is the case in tragedies, its plot involves death and purgation (although here the guilt is somehow blurred and diffused), the novel asks to be read as "comic," since, at least for several characters (among them the pivotal Kazumasa), it allows for "second chances" once the mistake has been recognized and accepted. Even we as readers get a "second

chance" (Wallace 2000: 151). Yamashita's novel seems to follow the tragic pattern in its conception of time, which becomes "predetermined and epochal, always careering toward some final, catastrophic conclusion" in the tragic mode. Yet the last pages of the novel are "open-ended and episodic," as is typical of "comic time" (Garrard 2004: 87); therefore, Yamashita's book leans more toward the comic than to the tragic form of apocalypse. Indeed, as Buell insightfully remarks, *Through the Arc* "inverts traditional speculative fiction [science fiction] approaches, which lean toward intense and morally earnest we-must-try-to-save-the-world drama based on techno-gimmickry," for as the novel demonstrates, "it's also important to laugh at the craziness of so-called civilization" (Buell 2005: 60).

Magical Ecocritical Reading

As the analysis of Yamashita's and Silko's novels reveals, rather than escapist texts that evade the pressing demands of a significantly endangered environment, magical realist narratives can offer a particularly meaningful terrain for ecocritical exploration. Through its "supplemental" nature, the magical realist mode manages "to bypass the limitations of the realistic text, evading its failures through the incorporation of imagination" (Simpkins 149). First, its aversion to boundaries accounts for the frequent transgression and problematization of ontological frontiers, not least among them the "sentient/nonsentient," "natural/artificial" dichotomies. In *Ceremony* Tayo's movement from alienation to integration within the land argues for the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman in a world where plants can grow fingers. In her own turn Yamashita, by incorporating a pivotal narrating ball-cum-person in *Through the Arc*, also effectively joins nonorganic otherkind with organic humankind, as she does in the Matacão phenomenon and in the junkyard ecosystem. Second, magical realist motifs help to further an ecocritical and environmental justice agenda thanks to their supplementary nature, which offers both utopian and dystopian images of human interaction with the world, from the magical ceremony enacted to destroy the witchery in Silko's novel, to the mirage of the plastic paradise and its catastrophic undoing in Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. Finally, magical realist narratives help to further an ecocritical and environmental

justice agenda by rendering visible the connivance of certain institutions and material practices, most notably the "war ecosystem" depicted in *Ceremony* and the pervasive presence of "trialectic," transnational capitalism in Yamashita's novel, in both cases suffused in a miasma of spiritual and ecological depletion. Both Silko and Yamashita productively grapple with a fictional-factical world of a "magical nature."

Endnotes

1. What we traditionally mean by "nature" has been called into question by "canonical" ecocritics such as Raymond Williams, Lawrence Buell, and Leo Marx (Marx, "Pandering" 30; Buell, "Green Disputes" 43; Williams, "Ideas" 284–86), and more recent approaches, where the emphasis on the overlapping and interpenetration of nature and culture is noticeable (Arnold et al., Heise, Levin, etc.). In this chapter, we will be using the term *nature* in its conventional meaning of what lies outside the human being, what is not human-made. As is already obvious to any perceptive reader, in arguing for our inclusion in the very concept of nature, we will be dispensing with the frontier between the "outside" natural environment and "inside" humankind. Equally problematic are the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, which will be discussed later on.
2. For a critique of the ecocentric model, see Garrard 72–74 and Buell *Future* 98–108. For further developments of Leopold's "land ethic," see Sueellen Campbell's "The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet" (1996).
3. Our own coinage to refer to any entity, human or nonhuman, constituting the biotic community.
4. Silko's *Ceremony* has indeed been interpreted as an exercise in "ecological ethnopoetics" (Buell, 2005: 286), focusing as it does on "ethnospaces" (Appadurai 224), while extrapolating the effects that these "ethno-landscapes" have on Tayo to the entire biotic community.
5. Place would signify lived-in humanized space. See Yi-Fu Tuan's classic distinction between space and place in his eponymous book. For a discussion of the different implications of "dwelling," see Garrard 108–35.
6. Commonly described as a saint (163), a "walking angel" (85; cf. 51, 163). The *topos* of the flying (wo)man is recurrent in magical realism. Here, apart from widespread angelical perception of Chico Paco and the suicidal "feather worshippers" (155, 180–81), we find two invalid boys who actually "fly." Rubens had done so when miraculously surviving his fall, whereas hyperactive Gilberto, always engaged in a peculiar "dance with danger" (189) ever since he recovered his mobility, has always longed to fly: "I can't walk, [...] But I will fly!" (84). And at the end of the novel he does (189, 196–97). He paradoxically becomes an "angel" in Chico Paco's last vision (196).
7. From an essentialist perspective, we can also connect this to the anthropological, place-determined vision of magical realism as espoused by Carpentier's "realismo

maravilloso," the exotic Brazilian jungle/society triggering Yamashita's chosen narrative mode.

8. In present-day Portuguese, the word *matacão* can mean "1. calhau para arremesso; pedregulho. 2. pedaço grande; naco. 3. barba em forma de suíças grandes. 4. fragmento de rocha, mais ou menos arredondado, com diâmetro superior a 25,6 centímetros" (*Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa da Porto Editora*). That is, it usually refers to a large rock or boulder. The connection is self-explanatory. In Spanish and Galaico-portugués, *matacán/matacão* could also refer to "obra voladiza en lo alto de un muro, de una torre o de una puerta fortificada, con parapeto y con suelo aspillerado, para observar y hostilizar al enemigo" (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*), an architectural element that not only served as a defensive vantage point but also constituted the place through which residual solids and liquids would be discharged. The semantic link is equally conspicuous in this case, since Yamashita's Matacao is both the locus and the result of waste dumping. We are highly indebted and grateful to Prof. Djelal Kadir for having pointed out the word's architectural meaning, and its possible connotations, during the 2007 IASA Conference, held in Lisbon.
9. The cloning that pervades both the organization and the very staff of the GGG headquarters (cf. the cloned red-haired workers on pp. 29, 76, 110) bespeaks of the homogenizing, alienating effects of late capitalism. The emphasis on copying and Tweep's shy personality is also highly reminiscent of Melville's Bartleby. At the same time, the different material the office clips are made of (plastic-covered, stainless-steel, silver-plated, pure silver and gold) function as hierarchical markers, much like military stripes.
10. The disasters persist even when the Matacão dream has vanished into thin air: Chico Paco's funeral procession at the end of the book, fittingly retracing the pilgrim's steps, describes how "the mourners passed hydroelectric plants, where large dams had flooded and displaced entire towns [...], mining projects tirelessly exhausting the treasures of iron, manganese and bauxite," etc. (209–10).
11. See Buell's eponymous article.
12. And in the particular echo of Leo Marx's "machine in the garden," revamped as the "junkyard in the jungle," that is, the ecosystem born around a metal cemetery. For a detailed analysis of the "junkyard in the jungle," see Simal, forthcoming.
13. Strictly speaking, plastic is indeed organic, since it comes from crude oil, also organic, that is, "containing carbon." However, we will be using the distinction organic-inorganic not in the scientific sense encountered in chemistry, but in the same way we use it when we talk about segregating waste products, or even when we want to connote living (organic) and nonliving (inorganic) entities.
14. The frontiers between the sentient and the nonsentient, human and nonhuman are once more undermined when Kazumasa thinks of the ball's feelings: "He felt crushed at the suggestion that I had a family of my own that, having been attached to Kazumasa, I had been denied all these years. Kazumasa suddenly felt guilty. Of course, I should be allowed to join other material of may own kind. It was only just" (106). The boundaries have long been crumbling to dust.
15. For Wess, the first apocalyptic interpretation, clearly "cosmocentric," soon becomes geocentric," that is, not dependent on divine wrath but "confined to the Earth and the interactions between nature and culture that it contains" (109–10).
16. There are actually two Edenic reenactments: when the Djapans get reunited, with

guitar playing, children playing, and the return of Tania Aparecida (210–11), and when we see Kazumasa's new family, including Lourdes, her two children, and the new baby (211).

17. It also bespeaks of the resilience of biozens, in this case, children, who adapt to the new pit that used to be the Matacão plateau and use it as a football field. Approaching the novel by way of the Gaia hypothesis would argue for the extraordinary resilience shown by the environment. It is possible to trace in the novel echoes of the Gaia view of the planet as an organism: the forest, when cut open, shows its "veins" (80); the earth itself has "underground veins" (202); it shows wounds, like "the festering gash of a highway" (209). And it is another living thing, the bacteria, that finally eat away the anthropogenic plastic that had insidiously seeped into the earth. For a reading of the novel as an allegory of the natural cycle of the rainforest, see Isihara.

7
A Negative Sense of Reality

> Nor does modern art merely want to duplicate the facade of reality. On the contrary, true modern art makes an uncompromising reprint of reality while at the same time avoiding being contaminated by it. Kafka's power as a writer, for example, is due to this negative sense of reality.
>
> —Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

> Negative Dialectics ... could be called an anti-system. With logically consistent means, it attempts to put, in place of the principle of unity and of the hegemony of the supra-ordinated concept, that which would be outside of the bane of such unity.
>
> —Theodor W. Adorno, prologue to *Negative Dialectics*

Despite the tendency to focus critical attention on the magical elements in a given work, or to extricate and contrast the "magical realistic" and the empirically "real"—thereby abiding by the Aristotelian law of the excluded middle and eliminating the significant borderland between binary opposites—magical realist fiction tenaciously retains its intrinsic ambivalence, holding on to realist narrative modes in the representation of the unrealistic. Though refusing to fully assume dominant empirical views of reality, magical realist texts fail to offer easy escapes into a fantasy world: they present neither a complete break with the tenets of realism nor an open continuity with them. The magical component in magical realist fiction becomes, as Faris contends, "a grain of sand in the oyster of realism" (2004: 8–9). Insomuch as it obstinately incorporates realism while questioning or directly negating the very assumptions that sustain realist narratives, magical realism can be understood as a form

of "negative realism." Taking our cue from Adorno's notion of negative dialectics, we could subsume magical realism not as a direct rejection of the realist mode but, rather, as a "negative realism" that is beyond the boundaries of traditional realism yet close enough to engage with, question, and redefine its premises. Just as Adorno's "negative dialectics" was a methodology that provided a critique of and corrective for the universalizing tendencies of Enlightenment reason, negative realism can be read as a response to the authoritarian logic of Western realism, a way of looking at the dominant mechanism of realism from a reverse angle. Though apparently far-fetched, the appropriation of the discourse of dialectics in our discussion of magical realism is sensible insomuch as the opposition between realism and nonrealism, the real and the fantastic, has always been a dialectical one. More than representing distinctive, fixed, and ineradicably divergent ways in their description of the world, realism and fantasy are tied in an inextricable dyad: one occupies the spaces vacated by the other, and as one changes, so does the other, to the point that they may end up exchanging positions over time or depending on their cultural contexts. However, the defining element of Adorno's negative dialectics and of magical realist fiction is not so much their displacement of the dominant orders as their attempt to work simultaneously within and without the totalizing systems in whose shadows they linger.

Adorno's use of negative dialectics demanded "the effort to go beyond the concept, by means of the concept" (1990: 27), or the critique of reason by reason, of instrumental reason by a more inclusive type of reason. In this sense, the negative aspect of Adorno's theory points at a process of immanent, self-reflexive critique of the genre within which the critique itself is situated, or, as Adorno himself put it in his discussion of subjectivity, a process using "the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity" (1990: xx). Reason is thus used against its own instrumentalization. For Adorno, a critique of the Enlightenment does not mean a complete renunciation of the secular and emancipatory thrust of the project; rather, it entails what Christopher Norris terms a "scrupulous care to conserve the critical resources of enlightened reason even while denouncing its perversion into forms of inhuman (unreflective) means-end rationality" (1994: 101). Likewise, magical realism seeks to retain realism while projecting it against itself. Just as negative

dialectics places itself at that moment of tension between the concept and nonconceptuality, negative realism also occupies and explores the gap between realistic representation and magical excess, making the two representational ends meet without aiming for any mediation, resolution, or closure.

Adorno's dialectics refused to accept the "conceptual mediation" proposed by Hegel's dialectics, through which the difference or opposition of two terms was overcome by a higher concept that reduced such opposition to universal sameness. Adorno critically referred to this mediation as "identity thinking."[1] The loss of the particular through the forced synthesis of the manifold and its reduction to sameness in the process of universalization was not acceptable to Adorno. His concept of negative dialectics overcame these shortcomings by positing a negative form of dialectics that refused resolution, therefore refusing the universalizing tendency. Far from trying to resolve the opposition, Adorno's dialectics keeps the oppositionality between the respective terms of the contradiction. Adorno termed his dialectic "negative" because it "highlight[s] unavoidable tensions between polar opposites... The dialectic is negative in the sense that it refuses to affirm any underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites" (Zuidervaart 1991: 49).

In summarizing the concept of negative dialectics, J. M. Bernstein (2004: 37) argues that what makes Adorno's theory negative "is that it nowhere claims or even attempts to state the truth of an indigent item; rather it is riveted to the moment in which the object appears as 'more' than what its covering concept has claimed it is" (37). Negative dialectics is based on testing every social construction—including, for example, realist narrativity—by negative scrutiny in order to check whether these constructions are ontologically grounded or whether they are simply the result of particular ideologies. Adorno himself said, "[I]t is not ideology in itself which is untrue, but rather its pretension to correspond to reality" (1955: 27). We could similarly posit that it is not so much realism which is untrue as realism's pretension to correspond to reality. The apparent order of the real is only the order that has been imposed upon the world by instrumental reason or by literary realism. Rationalized reason substitutes part for whole through abstraction, by wresting the universal concept from its material moment. This totality is structured according to the demands of logic, especially the law of

the excluded middle, which indicates that everything must be either true or false, real or unreal. No indeterminacy or heterogeneity can be tolerated in the realistic totality. The emergence of difference immediately triggers the call for homogeneity, as Adorno indicates: "What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of consciousness obliges it to strive for unity" (1990: 5). Hence the need for a deliberate resistance to "the overweening demand of bowing to everything immediate," for, as Adorno proposes, "to think is, already in itself and above all particular content, negation, resistance against what is imposed on it" (1990: 30). A direct result of enlightenment and reason, realism is also instrumental and normative, and its structure is based equally on the demands of logic and the law of the excluded middle. Instrumental realism separates truth from falsehood and fantasy, the real from the unreal, constructing a positive, existing identity between the word and the thing and proposing direct access to immediate truth. However, for Adorno, dialectics needs to shy away from the demands of presence and unity and opt for negative approaches to the real.

Since, for Adorno, reality is a constant assault on freedom, then only as an illusion is it possible to reassert the freedom lost in the reification process. Artistic illusion can provide a form of negative knowledge. This knowledge, Norris argues, attempts to redeem those moments of artistic truth which correspond to "nothing real in our present, distorted, and indigent condition, but which nonetheless possess a power of revealing what truth might be if things were otherwise" (1988: 149). Hence, literature, as negative epistemology, is ideally placed to provide a critique of certain instrumental uses of literature, and of literary uses of language. It can be both creative in its approach to, and critical of, the use or misuse of realism and language as offering transcendental significations of identity as sameness and presence. In engaging and transcending realist narrativity, deliberately addressing issues of identity, subjectivity, representation, agency, and ecology, among others, "negative realist" fictions can offer a cultural critique of such notions from within the boundaries of realism.

This cultural critique is not without its political relevance. Adorno's philosophy asserts that under capitalism, the world tends more and more to take on the characteristics of an integrated totality, hence dialectics must be negative to avoid the risk of succumbing to totalitarian thought. In his views, the "instrumental reason" derived

from the Enlightenment resulted in authoritative forms of knowledge. As one of these, the knowledge of reality, based exclusively on objectively verifiable facts, fundamentally undermined alternative modes of representing reality. His philosophical notion of instrumental reason can translate to literary discourse in the form of "instrumental realism," insomuch as both discourses—realism and rationalism—appear as normative and universalizing, separating true and empirical experience of the world from false and imaginary views. We can postulate the propensity of realism to become an integrated, closed, or "total" system, subsuming all of nature within a single representational framework. For Adorno, the totalitarian danger stems from identity-logical thinking, "a thinking that identifies, that equalizes everything unequal. Thoughtless rationality is blinded to the point of madness by the sight of whatsoever will elude its rule" (1990: 172). The thinking that identifies is based on the notion that each particular element of experience and reality can be transformed into a concept and that it can then be hypostatized, that is, divorced from the particularity which it attempts to capture. This way, the particular loses its particularity and becomes an instantiation of a universal concept. The totalitarian thrust of realism is predicated upon the slow but steady erasure of the difference between word and world, sign and thing, unity and difference, particularity and totality, representation and the represented. As Adorno and Horkheimer have it, the separation of "sign and image is irremediable," and should they ever become "hypostasized" then "each of the two isolated principles tends toward the destruction of truth" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 18). The hypostasization of language and thing, of word and world is one of the untruths that sustains realist literary language, and it is also one of the areas that magical realist texts interrogate most rigorously. Yet the magical realist contestation of the totalitarian thrust of realism might fall prey to similar traps. If for magical realism the realist, mimetic effort is monological, defective, always already fraud in itself, its magical realistic negation would equal the negation of a negation, therefore ending in affirmation. However—and this is at the core of Adorno's dialectics—we must resist "the equation of the negation of a negation with positivity" (1990: 161). The magical realist negation of the covering concepts of realism does not in itself conjure up an alternative presence to be reified; it does not end in final

unity and identity and does not offer the illusion of finalized knowledge.

For Adorno, any insight into the reality of experience must know it as other, therefore breaking away from the totalizing thrust. To know always implies to know as other, with the help of the disruptive power of the imagination: "Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be with its right and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without vulgarity or violence entirely from fleeting contact with its objects—this is the task of thought" (1974: 274). And this is, significantly enough, also the role of art. For Adorno, the function of art is "the summoning to appearance of an essence that is otherwise hidden in empirical reality" (1984: 154). In this sense, art is instrumental in presenting "the struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world." True art goes against the unity of the traditional work of art and the unity of the bourgeois subject. "Art is true to the extent to which it is discordant and antagonistic in its language and in its whole essence" (1984: 241), argues Adorno. Art opposes "traditional unities" through "discordance" and the "non-integrable" (Harding 1997: 30). Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence, by making dissimilar realities comparable through the use of abstraction and of the concept. By reinscribing the dissimilar, art functions as a negative dialectic that opposes equivalence and brings back the particular. This could be seen as the central role of negative realism, for it rejects mimetic totality, opting for the imaginary and fragmentary gaze at what is excluded by the totalization. It focuses on the mysterious side of reality, on perspectives that are conceptually excluded from view due to the imposition of a realistic framework.

The emergence of the unreal signifies a breach in that totality or unity. The unreal element testifies to unexplored antagonisms in reality: something slips past the unifying net, claiming its distance from the realistic concept that was supposed to grasp it. The dissonant element becomes nonidentical with its realistic concept. This way, the negativity is displaced from the unreal element back onto the concept of realistic representation itself. The unreal element plays the role of "contradiction" in Adorno's understanding of negative dialectics. In his view, contradiction occurs because there is an antagonism between the rationalized social system and the particular subjects and objects

within it. Thus, when contradiction emerges, it points to the claim of the particular, the nonidentical, against its social identification. This is the role of the unreal. It doesn't empty out the reality of the particular experience; rather, it shows the inadequacy of the form in which that particular experience is systematized or rationalized in realistic portrayals. In this sense, negative realism of the kind presented in ethnic writing purports not to be totalizing. It does not aim at absolute knowledge of reality, or the absolute idea, mythical or otherwise. It does not so much promise a wealth of real experience as point to the relativity of the experiences captured in the realist representation. Rather than the gratification of witnessing the illusion of realism, negative realism interrogates the very possibility of one single and unified realistic representation. Magical realism is negative because it exposes realism as a closed system. It is precisely the closed nature of realism that calls for the birth of negative realism, both as an unwanted child and as a rebellious offspring.

Adorno's negative scrutiny is accomplished through his focus on individual encounters between the particular and the dominant, apparently neutral, discourses and epistemologies. Negative realism also strives to distance itself from the realistic framework through which we perceive reality. The unreal is, in this light, a call for the disidentification of experience, for the return to the particular, the nonidentical. In place of mimetic totality, negative realism opts for the imaginary and fragmentary gaze. The unreal element incorporates an excess that testifies to the necessary insufficiency of the covering concept, the realistic concept. The unreal, then, projects "the thing's own identity against its identifications" (1990: 161). There is "more" to experience than what its realistic "covering concept" determines, more than what the system dictates, and this hidden "excess" must be artistically excavated. This may be achieved through "works of art which renounce all schematas, which are individuated to the utmost degree, whose analysis rediscovers moments of the generality in the extremity of their individuation" (1990: 164). Genuine experience, then, is made possible by that which exceeds the grasp of thought and sensibility. Magical realism posits that genuine experience of the world rests on the escape from empiricism and the incorporation of a nonrealistic excess. Adorno does not call this excess the "thing in itself"; rather, he calls it "the nonidentical" (*das Nichtidentische*). The magical realist negation of "the real thing" resituates things and

experiences and honors them in their nonidentity, in their difference from what a restricted realism declares them to be. As Adorno said in what could stand as the motto of philosophical anarchism, "Only what does not fit into this world is true" (1984: 59).

Endnotes

1. Adorno wrote that "dialectics seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself" (1990: 149).

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Index

Authors

Jesús Benito Sánchez currently teaches American literature at the University of Valladolid, Spain. His research centers mostly on so-called Ethnic American Literatures, a field he approaches through a comparative, intercultural focus. Such comparative approach is visible in publications he has coauthored and/or coedited with Ana Mª Manzanas, such as *Intercultural Mediations* (2003), *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (2002) and *Narratives of Resistance* (1999), among others.

Ana Mª Manzanas is Associate professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Salamanca, Spain. Her publications include *Intercultural Mediations: Mimesis and Hybridity in American Literatures* (LIT Verlag 2003), with Jesús Benito, and editions of essays such as *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (Rodopi 2002), *The Dynamics of the Threshold: Essays on Liminal Negotiations* (The Gateway Press 2006), and *Border Transits: Literature and Culture across the Line* (Rodopi 2007). With Jesús Benito she is general editor of the Rodopi Series "Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literature."

Begoña Simal teaches at the English Department of the University of A Coruña, Spain. She has written extensively on ethnic literature, particularly on Asian American writers. She has published several books, among them *Identidad étnica y género en la narrativa de escritoras chinoamericanas* (2000), and *Transnational, National and Personal Voices: Asian American and Asian Diasporic Women Writers* (2004), co-edited with Prof. Marino. Her articles have appeared in European and American books and journals such as *Hitting Critical Mass*, *Amerasia Journal* or *MELUS*. She just published a translation of Kingson's *The Woman Warrior* into Spanish.