The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism

Wendy B. Faris
The University of Texas at Arlington

It may not be too much to say that magical realism constitutes the most important trend in international contemporary fiction. Its widespread distribution, particularly among novelists like Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and Ben Okri, among others, who have made the world at large their homeland, suggests that it constitutes a discourse for a kind of international literary diaspora, a fictional cosmopolitanism of wide application. However, that very phenomenon also carries its attendant problems. The status of magical realism, its widespread popularity, and the critical use of the term are the subject of debate because at the same time that it is acknowledged by some as a significant decolonizing style, permitting new voices and traditions to be heard within the mainstream, it is denigrated by others as a commodifying kind of primitivism that, like the Orientalism analyzed by Edward Said and his successors, relegates colonies and their traditions to the role of cute, exotic psychological fantasies—visions of the colonizer's ever more distant, desirable, and/or despised self projected onto colonized others. In this essay, then, I will be investigating such issues in cultural politics as they have been raised with respect to magical realism.

Because I wish to explore the cultural work with which magical realism as a genre is engaged, I have not been concerned with attempting to discriminate too minutely between individual texts with the aim of estab-

lishing criteria for inclusion in a canon, and excluding from the discussion texts that do not entirely fit those criteria. If in doubt, include it, has been my motto. Most essential among my criteria for inclusion in the mode of magical realism is the existence of an "irreducible element" that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism, with its heavy reliance on sensory data, together with a preponderance of realistic event, character, and description that conform to the conventions of literary realism. In other words, magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic in which the former predominates. This is not to say that there are not meaningful and illuminating distinctions to be made between different strains of magical realism, such as those that Jeanne Delbaere-Garant examines under the rubrics of psychic, mythic, and grotesque realism. Nor that there are not certain novels, such as García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Okri's *The Famished Road*, that seem, by general consensus, to be at the heart of the genre, and others that are more marginal. Even here, however, there is, not surprisingly, much disagreement. Novels that I have assumed are central have been disqualified by others: Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*. Beyond that, there are novels that clearly seem to exist on the fringes of the genre: these include D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*, and the recent *Pig Tales* by Marie Darrieussecq. In their different ways, their magic is more circumscribed, more predictable, and more central to their texts than is common in works that I would consider as central examples of magical realism. But I include them in the conversation because it seems to me that they conform to the basic requirement of a preponderance of realism that includes irreducible elements of significant magic within it. In his seminal article on "Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," Stephen Slemon provides the basis for considering why magical realism has been such a central element of postcolonial literatures. He proposes that "in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground

rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other,' a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences." That type of "sustained opposition" between "two opposing discursive systems … forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation" (409-10). That suspension between two discursive systems resembles the colonial subject's suspension between two—or more—cultural systems, and hence serves to reflect the postcolonial situation especially well. It has therefore served a decolonizing role, one in which new voices have emerged, an alternative to European realism. Guyanan writer Wilson Harris's statement that "conquest is a kind of running amok—a berserk and cannibal realism" (148) indirectly expresses an association between realism and colonialism that also suggests why the magical realist modification of realism has constituted an enabling strategy for writers in the postcolonial world. For whatever a realist text may say, the fact that realism purports to give an accurate picture of the world, based in fidelity to empirical evidence, and that it is a European import, have led to its being experienced by writers in colonized societies like Harris's as the language of the colonizer. From this perspective, to adopt magical realism, with its irreducible elements that question that dominant discourse, constitutes a kind of liberating poetics. I am speaking here not of theme but of mode. There are plenty of instances of thematic decolonizing moves of all kinds in magical realist fiction, but such moves are also present in much postcolonial literature that is not magical realism. Thus we are concerned here less with what happens in these texts than with the fact that magical realism includes both realistic and fantastical elements and with how that strategy is meaningful in the context of recent literary and cultural history.

Because magical realism often gives voice in the thematic domain to indigenous or ancient myths, legends, and cultural practices, and in the domain of narrative technique to the literary traditions that express them with the use of non-realistic events and images, it can be seen as a kind of narrative primitivism. And, as I have just suggested above, the fact that it

is most often written in the language of the colonizer, and, what's more, in the mode of realism that is a European import to most of the world, means that it is subject to critiques of primitivism as aesthetic colonization, reification of indigenous and local cultures in the interests of the continuing superiority of the Eurocentric primitivizer. This attitude is expressed by various commentators. Michael Taussig critiques magical realism with the complaint that "too often the wonder that sustains" the stories of Carpentier, José Arguedas, Miguel Angel Asturias, or García Márquez "is represented in accord with a long-standing tradition of folklore, the exotic, and *indigenismo* that in oscillating between the cute and the romantic is little more than the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy life." Like the Western idea of shamanism, the magical images in magical realism, when they are taken from or related to indigenous culture, represent a "curious synergism" characterized by a "division of labor into those who rule and those who supply them with magic." For Taussig, Carpentier succumbed in part to the mystique of "the fantastic presence of the Indian and the Negro" (201), "the very fantasia through which class domination permeates the political unconscious" (217). In building "a one-way bridge with oral literature," Latin American magical realism "finds it hard to evade the heavy-handedness Carpentier reacted against in European surrealism" (167). Roberto González Echevarría maintains that "the anthropological discourse in regional novels that nostalgically seek to recover a traditional past remains fragmented myth criticism rather than genuinely mythic" (159). According to him, in these "regional novels the language of the narrator is about magic, but it is not magical." Such novelistic discourse can constitute only "mock anthropology that unmasks the conventionality of ethnography, its being a willful imposition on the material studied as an act of appropriation." He maintains that the solution to this problem is to write magical realist novels that imitate sacred texts. More recently, in comparing magical realism with the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Michael Valdez Moses classifies it as a nostalgic kind of primitivism: "both the historical romance and the magical realist novel 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" (106). In a similar spirit, the recent anthology of contemporary Latin American fiction, *McOndo*, comes with a real-life frame tale by editors Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gomez, recounting the experiences of two young Latin American writers in the U.S. whose stories were apparently rejected by the editor of a journal for lacking magical realist qualities, and which therefore implicitly protests against the commercial imposition of magical realism on a new generation of Spanish American writers. Fuguet and Gomez seem to favor pop over folk, claiming that "we don't ignore the exoticism and the cultural diversity of the culture and customs of our countries, but it is not possible to accept reductionist essentialisms, and to think that everyone here wears a sombrero and lives in trees" (14). They cite the introduction to another anthology of short stories by the Chilean poet Oscar Hahn as indicative of the commodifying impulse of the international literary marketplace that wants to continue to buy and enjoy magical realism from Spanish American writers:

> When in 1492 Christopher Columbus disembarked on American soil he was received with great excitement and veneration by the islanders, who believed him to be a celestial messenger. After having celebrated the rites of possession in the name of God and of the Spanish crown, he proceeded to ingratiate himself with the indigenous inhabitants by distributing colored glass for their pleasure and astonishment. Nearly five hundred years later, the descendents of those remote Americans decided to pay back the kindness of the Admiral and distributed to the international [reading] public other bits of colored glass for their pleasure and enjoyment: magical realism. In other words, the kind of story that transforms prodigies and marvels into ordinary events and which puts levitation and toothbrushes, afterlife journeys and outings to the country on the same level. (Fuguet and Gomez 26)

By contrast to what they see as a commodified magical realism, Fuguet and Gomez assert that if people fly in the stories in *McOndo* it's because they take planes or drugs. The implication is that, for this generation of

writers, magical flights like those in earlier magical realist texts (such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Kingdom of This World*, García Márquez's story "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings," or Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*) are no longer relevant for the fiction they wish to write or the reality they wish to portray.

But other opinions enlist the narrative strategies of magical realism as a decolonizing poetics. In his discussion of the transculturation process in Latin American narrative, Angel Rama cites the example of García Márquez, who he believes solves the problem of joining historical realities and fantastic perspectives by recourse to oral and popular narrative structures (44-45). Even more specific is Abdul R. JanMohamed's discussion of African fiction, which registers a similar process in the fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya whereby the interaction between ordinary and extraordinary realms or realistic and magical occurrences is used to question colonial subjugation. According to JanMohamed, "the ideological function of these novels as acts is to avoid the pain of colonial subjugation by retreating into a mythic universe, into a fantasy world where problems can be solved by divine intervention. But Ngugi's recourse to divine knowledge, which tends to insulate his messiahs from human reality, is contradicted by the historical origins of the Gikuyu dilemma, which demands concrete and political and historical knowledge" (274). That contradiction, embodied in the inclusion of magical elements within realism, means that the novels "bring to consciousness the confusion of the colonized man who has no control over his destiny" and necessarily question the political system which has engendered that confusion and lack of control. In a 1982 review of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Rushdie states that "El realismo magical [sic], magical realism, at least as practiced by Márquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new" (301). Rushdie wrote these words near the beginning of the period of his magical realist masterpieces, *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). His formulation of "impossibly old" combined with "appallingly new" aptly encapsulates both the themes and

styles of magical realism: literally dead people—who are "impossibly old"—or buried beliefs may be revived to question "appallingly new" realities of contemporary life. Think, for example, of Melquíades in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who dies and then returns to chronicle Macondo's history, including the horrific massacre of workers by the banana company, a thinly disguised fictionalization of an actual incident in the United Fruit company's history; Lisa's pains that enter her life in the world as premonitions of the wounds that will eventually kill her at Babi Yar in *The White Hotel*; Beloved who returns from the dead to engage her relatives in a rememory of the aftermath of slavery; or the merging of ancient Aztec sacrifice with death in a modern hospital in Julio Cortázar's "The Night Face Up."

There are additional testimonies to the efficacy of magical realist narrative in portraying heretofore hidden or silenced voices, even if they do not specifically address the issues of decolonization and history. According to Isabel Allende, "magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history. All these forces find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism.... It is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality" (54). Much earlier, Jacques Stephen Alexis (Haitian author of the novel *The Musical Trees*) maintained that "the myth, the marvelous can, if they are understood in a materialist sense, become powerful leavenings for a realistic art and literature, for the transformation of the world" (3). Making an eloquent case for the association of magical realism and primitivism in the case of Latin America, Erik Camayd-Freixas believes that magical realism might serve as an alternative to the still competing claims of nativist and imported mythologies—including, most recently, postmodernism—in Latin America's continuing search for its cultural identity (298-300).

So where does that leave us in the analysis of magical realism and the critical use of the term? Once again Slemon has formulated the issue clearly:

> The critical use of the concept of magic realism can ... signify resis-

> tance to monumental theories of literary practice—a way of suggesting there is something going on in certain forms of literary writing, and in the modalities of cultural experience that underlie those forms, that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with them. At the same time, of course, the concept of magic realism itself threatens to become a monumentalizing category for literary practice and to offer to centralizing genre systems a single locus upon which the massive problem of *difference* in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass. (408-09)

I would like to argue that to recognize and discuss the global presence of magical realism can serve not to homogenize its different manifestations and the cultural differences they often represent but to more fully explicate its role in postcolonial literary history. In any case, the facts themselves may refute accusations of commodifying primitivism. Recognizable forms of magical realism continue to proliferate from locations both "central" and "peripheral": Paris, for instance, where in Darrieusecq's novel *Pig Tales* a woman slowly takes on more and more porcine characteristics in the midst of her job as a cosmetics salesperson; or the Hispanic culture of the U.S. Southwest, where in Ana Castillo's novel *So Far from God* crows sit on a telephone wire puffing cigarettes and dead children reappear. And, more importantly, they often address contemporary problems of sexual or cultural colonization, so that the retreat to a nostalgic past is made impossible for the reader. In any case, the dynamics of this controversy seem to be at the heart of magical realism and its critical analysis. Both Carlos Fuentes and Toni Morrison have disavowed association with the term. According to Fuentes,

> "Gabriel García Márquez's *The General in his Labyrinth* managed to close, with a historical scar, the wounds emanating from so-called 'magical realism,' which, invented by Alejo Carpentier, had been applied indiscriminately as a label to too many Hispanic American novelists, although truly it became the personal stamp of only one: Gabriel García Márquez. The first surprising thing in starting to read *The*

> *General in his Labyrinth* is precisely the lack of elements associated with 'magical realism.' García Márquez's narrative, this time, is directly and historically localized" (Fuentes *Váliente* 24).

Morrison has called magical realism "just another evasive label," "another one of those words that covered up what was going on," "a convenient way [for literary historians and literary critics] to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers." Morrison speaks in the past tense about her original attitude to magical realism, so perhaps that attitude has been changing. Her treatment of the term in this instance is ambiguous. Shortly after the publication of *Beloved* in 1987, she ended the interview in which she made these statements by saying, "I have become indifferent, I suppose, to the phrase 'magical realism'" (Davis 149).

However, it seems to me that concurrently with disavowing the term, Morrison and Fuentes are using magical realism effectively to re-imagine history, to re-envision the past by bringing it forward—magically—in ways that align them with other magical realist writers. Beloved's appearance in Sethe's life as a mysterious young woman who magically walks out of the water and takes over the house at 124 Bluestone Road is an irreducible element that emerges from the reality and history that exists there. She questions Sethe's very being as a mother and, ultimately, her survival, so overwhelming is the ordeal of dealing with the past, confronting it, coming to terms with it, and not just repressing it, "beating it back." By the end, Sethe and Beloved have managed to reforge some kind of connection, and Beloved leaves, but the confrontation nearly kills Sethe. As Beloved gets bigger, for example, "Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead" (242). Shortly, "Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved. Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (251). And after Beloved is gone, Sethe retires to her bed with "no plans. No plans at all" (272) so that Paul D "shouts at her, 'Don't you die on me!'" (271). The past nearly overwhelms the present. And the strength of the confrontation that has to take place in order for the characters to deal with the enormity and extraordinary nature of that past, the aftermath of slavery, is underscored

by the magic in the text, an extraordinary resource that extends beyond the ordinary resources of realism.

Just as Morrison uses the magical appearance of Beloved to enact this confrontation with history, so Fuentes creates the magical scene that erupts in the middle of a realistically described Parisian autumn afternoon at the end of *Distant Relations* in a similar way, in this case not to highlight the issues of slavery and its aftermath but to force the old world of Europe to feel the presence of the new world concretely and vividly. Here what could be seen as the center of the center of European culture, the French Automobile Club on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, is taken over by a tropical rainforest. I cite at some length to illustrate the way in which the narrator, who turns out to be Fuentes himself, orchestrates this recolonization:

> I walk through the bar to the swimming pool. The pool itself is obscured in a tangle of lush plants, ivy-covered trees with fragrant bark, climbing vines curling from the green mosaic pillars up to the great dome of iron and glass blinded by matter foliage. There is an overpowering aroma of venomous, ravenous flowers. Gunpowder trees: I had forgotten them, and now the scent reminds me that their bark was used to make the munitions of the Indies.
> I make my way down a few steps toward the pool concealed behind the profuse greenery. I seem to be dislodging nests of tiny hummingbirds. I startle parrots into flight, and suddenly find myself face to face with a monkey whose visage is an exact replica of my own. He mirrors my movements, and then scampers off through the branches. I tread on the moulting body of a huge snake swollen with the mass of its own eggs. My feet sink into the moist earth, the yellow mud of the edge of the swimming pool of the Automobile Club de France. Suddenly there is no sound but the chatter of howler monkeys deep in the jungle. (224)

This jungle scene reconfigures the relations of colonizers and colonized. The mention of the "munitions of the Indies" confirms the sociopolitical resonances of the otherwise purely sensual description; the specific re-

calling of the august name of the Automobile Club de France only serves to remind us of its powerlessness in the face of this takeover. The howler monkeys' chatter is the only language left; the empire screams back. That the narrator's face is exactly mirrored in that of a howler monkey both confirms his identification with this takeover and on reflection also ironically distances him from it, for if we look on his text as part of that scream, it is hardly a primal scream, but rather a very civilized discourse, reversing the cliché that might identify new world man with new world monkey. Moreover, to confirm the literate Latin American's place in French culture, the entire novel is populated by the texts of French poets who were either born or grew up in the New World, exposing the hybrid nature of French symbolism. Here, as in *Beloved*, the resources of magical realism, its combination of history and magic, induce in the reader a remembrance of things past that is not primarily nostalgic.

In addition to its disruption of realism and reimagining of history, perhaps another reason why magical realism has played an active role in literary decolonization is that many of its texts reconfigure structures of autonomy and agency, moves that destabilize established structures of power and control. Individuals merge or identities are questioned in other ways, and mysterious events require us to question who or what has caused them. This aspect of magical realism aligns it with modernism and postmodernism, of course, which also conflate individual identities, but it uses the additional resource of irreducible elements of magic to underline those conflations. With respect to autonomy, in both the cases of *Beloved* and *Distant Relations*, people and places are, as we have seen, occupied by or merged with other beings or places. Similarly, in Fuentes' *Aura*, Consuelo and Aura appear at the same time and execute the same actions, suggesting a mysterious connection between them, before they are finally merged in one body at the end of the text, as Felipe is also merged with General Llorente, Consuelo's dead husband: "You stroke Aura's long black hair. You grasp that fragile woman by the shoulders . . . a ray of moonlight . . . falls on Aura's eroded face . . . the ray of moonlight shows you . . . Señora Consuelo, limp, spent, tiny, ancient, trembling because you touch her. You love her, you too have come back . . . You plunge your face, your open eyes, into Consuelo's silver-white hair" (143-45). In

similar fashion, the Buendías (famously) repeat the names and even some of the characteristics of José Arcadio and Aureliano throughout *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; the narrator in Cortázar's "Axolotl" exchanges places with the amphibian on the other side of the aquarium wall; Saleem's head is filled with the voices of "midnight's children," making him "so-many too-many persons," because "the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head" (Rushdie *Midnight's* 552, 200), and reimagining what it means to be an Indian after independence. Investigating the way in which Rushdie deconstructs dualities, including the boundaries between contrasting personalities (a feature of magical realism in general and of Rushdie's texts in particular, and to which the magic in them often contributes), M. Keith Booker signals Rushdie's erosion of the boundaries between self and other, questioning ideas regarding individual identity. According to Booker, Saleem Sinai used as a canine tracking unit in *Midnight's Children* (and, I would add, his contemporary reincarnation of the narrating elephant God with the large nose, Ganesh) is one of the metamorphoses in Rushdie's texts that "profoundly question the view of the self as a stable, self-contained entity.... The ability of the self to be transformed into something that was formerly alien to itself interrogates the boundary between self and other, challenging the validity of even that fundamental duality" (980, 995). With regard to agency, magical elements question that as well. What force causes Beloved to reappear or the pool to be taken over by a jungle, Remedios the Beauty to rise skyward as her aunt is hanging out the sheets in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to allow Parvati to make Saleem invisible in a basket in *Midnight's Children*, or to cause Lisa to experience the pains of her brutal death before it happens in *The White Hotel*? We really cannot say.

Homi Bhabha's ideas about the inevitability of hybridity within colonial forms of discourse provide an additional suggestion as to why, despite its problematic primitivizing tendencies, magical realism has served as an effective decolonizing strategy. As I understand it, one of Bhabha's points about colonial discourses is that what he calls colonial mimicry, or the attempt of colonial subjects to ape (pun intended) the discourses of the colonizer, is always an exercise in hybridity since it is always necessar-

ily incomplete. Because realism is based in mimesis (which perhaps might be called textual mimicry), magical realism, with its enchanting, disturbing, but insistent quotients of magic within realistic discourse—necessarily the discourse of the colonizer, since in recent times realistic fiction was a European import—is a textual embodiment of the incomplete mimicry that characterizes colonial discourses of all kinds. Its hybrid nature undermines the dominant authority of realism, its power to represent postcolonial society, and, by extension, perhaps, the metropolitan centers where it originated. According to Bhabha, "if the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs," one that allows colonial power to be turned on its head, as it were, and seen as making possible a desirable and enabling hybridity rather than establishing a unitary structure of authority. "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (112-14). The irreducible elements in the hybrid mode of magical realism estrange the basis of the authority of realism, making way for new forms of discourse that reflect alternative ways of being to emerge. It is that destabilizing of realism, which has a longstanding power of representation in the west, that has made magical realism an enabling discourse for the postcolonial world.

Thus it seems possible that magical realism represents a particular kind of narrative, not aimed entirely toward mimesis, and yet not inextricably tied to a nostalgic primitivism. It can be and often has been aligned with "primitive" or indigenous culture or the marvels of American nature, but not necessarily so. That is certainly the case with the man who exchanges place with the axolotl in Cortázar's story "Axolotl," with the yellow butterflies that accompany Mauricio Babilonia to his assignations with Meme Buendía and beyond in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the mysterious transformations attributed to the houngan Mackandal in *The Kingdom of This World*, the voices of dead souls embodied in the rural Mexican village of Comala in Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*, or the mysterious

beings Azaro encounters in the forest in *The Famished Road*. But there are also many other types of non-primitivist magic, many of them specifically inspired by modernity and its inventions. The flying carpets that arrive in Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are on the one hand the result of the "primitive" credulity of its inhabitants, but on the other they are also the result of sophisticated intertextual magic, incorporating the *Thousand and One Nights* into this text. In García Márquez's story "Light is Like Water," the source of the magic is technonatural, as it were: the children turn on the light switch and the light behaves like water, so that they and their classmates sail boats on it when their parents are out at another kind of modern marvel of virtual reality, a motion picture. The model for the voices in Saleem's head in *Midnight's Children*—as we are repeatedly reminded— is not a primitive belief but a radio: "By sunrise, I had discovered that the voices could be controlled—I was a radio receiver, and could turn the volume down or up; I could select individual voices; I could even, by an effort of will, switch off my newly-discovered inner ear . . . by morning, I was thinking, 'Man, this is better than All-India Radio, man; better than Radio Ceylon!'" (193). And the ensemble of voices are called the Midnight Children's Conference, its multivocal nature acting as a specific critique of the Congress Party's univocal domination of politics in India since independence. The image used to describe the main magical element in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, his twice normal growth rate, is from video technology: "somebody somewhere has been holding down the button marked 'FF'" (143). Similarly, the movie *Ghost* employs a computer ghost who uses a keyboard to type the message that finally undoes his murderer. Grenouille's magic in *Perfume*, which enables him to achieve ever more incredible perfuming feats, is somewhere between talent and craft, not a natural wonder or a primitive belief. And the porcine transformation of the protagonist in *Pig Tales*, while achieving a certain regression to a primitive state, is primarily motivated by her need to feel comfortable with the animalistic nature her society has assigned her as a woman who caters with her body to men.

The combination of the technological, the intertextual, the crafty, and the natural in magical realist magic means that the cultural function

of the mode as it has developed is not, or certainly is no longer, only to allow its readers to indulge in nostalgic return to a vanished past, offering a "purely symbolic or token resistance to the inexorable triumph of modernity," as Valdez Moses maintains, although it certainly does often satisfy that fantasy. For one thing, in addition to the non-primitive sources of magic in many of these texts, in many instances magic engendered by pre-enlightenment belief systems is often specifically juxtaposed with brutal contemporary realities, as if to caution against just such a romantic primitivism. In *So Far from God*, for example, we are told, "after Fe died, she did not resurrect as La Loca did at age three. She also did not return ectoplasmically like her tenacious earth-bound sister Esperanza. Very shortly after that first prognosis, Fe just died," from "the other cancer she had undoubtedly gotten from her chemical joyride at Acme International, which was eating her insides like acid and which no amount of Rolaids would have ever helped" (186). In *The Famished Road*, Azaro's fantastical experiences in the forest or, as in this case, in his own body, merge seamlessly into the events of political terror in the village: "One night I managed to lift myself out through the roof. I went up at breathtaking speed and stars fell from me . . . I rose and fell and went in all directions, spinning through incredible peaks and vortexes . . . I was beginning to learn how to control my motion that night when something happened and a great flash, which was like a sudden noise, exploded all through me . . . I burst out screaming. And when I regained myself I heard . . . someone banging relentlessly on the door . . . [It] was the photographer . . . blood dripping down his forehead, past his eyes, and soaking his yellow shirt" (188-89). Arguing for the subversive nature of the questioning of established dualisms in Rushdie's writing, Booker relates the erosion of individual identities in Rushdie's work, as I do, to his desire for greater pluralism in society, and he applies this idea specifically to Islamic religion: "Rushdie's fiction, viewed narrowly within the Western tradition, is innovative and provocative, but does not appear to be especially radical or subversive. But, viewed from the Islamic perspective of Iran or Pakistan, the deconstruction of dualities and concomitant questioning of authority inherent in Rushdie's fiction are so powerfully subversive that Khomeini has declared that Rushdie must die" (995). Thus I think that in contrast

to the cultural exploitation Taussig describes as the ruling-class appropriation of the fantasy life of common people, magical "irreducible" elements in magical realism are not always only the magic supplied by the indigenous poor to the rich European tradition of realism, but they have modified realism to such an extent that it is no longer what it was, and the mode is used advantageously by writers on both sides of various cultural divides, often with political agendas and cultural critiques. But I also realize that that is perhaps too utopian a view of the situation.

These are potent fictions, which imagine alternative possibilities and can therefore be seen as narrative models for listening to different voices in society, but we cannot claim too much for them, as Saleem's commentary suggests in positing four kinds of relationships of the individual to history, one of them magical and three not magical: the "active-literal," by which he means "all actions of mine which directly—*literally*—affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events"; the "passive-metaphorical," in which are included "all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected me metaphorically"; the "passive-literal," which includes "all moments at which national events had a direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family"; and the "active-metaphorical," which encompasses "those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history" (*Midnight's* 286). The claim that he caused an invasion to take place by moving a pepper pot on a family dinner table, or that his shouting of a particular slogan during a demonstration touched off a riot, belongs in the first grouping of an "active-literal" relation to historical events. But they are not frequent, and even more importantly, their probable inaccuracy satirizes his claims to fame. As he says, he would have liked the reimagining of history that the magical "MCC," the "Midnight's Children's Conference" in his head, envisions as an alternative to the Congress Party to become an "active-literal" event. In the end, though, as he laments, "'passive-metaphorical,' 'passive-literal,' 'active-metaphorical': the Midnight's Children's Conference was all three; but it never became what I most wanted it to be; we never operated in the first, most significant of the 'modes of connection.' The 'active-literal' passed us by." In similar fash-

ion, magical realism will certainly not change the world, but the popularity and widespread diffusion of its modification of realism represents a significant shift in both formal and cultural domains.

Notes

[1] In claiming this role for magical realism and in studying it in a global context, I agree with Gandhi in her assessment of the ultimately positive value of a cosmopolitan viewpoint. She maintains that "despite its limitations, especially the danger of a utopian celebration of hybridity camouflaging severe socio-economic disparities, the risk of investing the post-colonial literary text with Romantic revolutionary powers, and the prescribing of hybridity for postcolonial culture, the postnational promise of a genuine cosmopolitanism remains seriously appealing" (160-63).

[2] In addition to the works that I discuss here, part of the impetus for my consideration of the cultural politics of magical realism comes from the very intelligent review and critique by de la Campa of the volume that I edited with Lois Zamora. For an excellent discussion of these complex issues as embodied in Cortázar's story "Axolotl," see Kauffmann, according to whom "what is remarkable about the story … is the way it both sets up a Eurocentric allegory about encountering the Other, and yet seems to invite an ironic deconstruction of that allegory" (148-49). His reading of "Axolotl" thus "suggests how difficult it remains to separate the urge to know cultural others from our deeper need to reinvent them—to explore, through fiction, our imaginary relations (affective, libidinal, or ideological) with those others" (150).

[3] I owe the useful term "irreducible element" to Young and Hallaman. For a complete discussion of the defining elements in magical realism, see my "Scheherazade's Children."

[4] In fairness to this interesting article, I should note that Valdez Moses explains, "my objections are thus not to the commercial appeal of the magical realist novel, or to its role in the process of globalization, but rather to what I regard as a widespread critical misapprehension of this literary form. In short, I am not objecting to the magical realist novel, but to a certain increasingly influential way of interpreting it" (119).

[5] Valdez Moses stresses the way in which contemporary international magical realism "is both an effect and a vehicle for globalization" (105). Although he does not cite it, the impetus behind this collection supports his point.

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