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MAGICAL REALISM

AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Strategizing Belonging

KIM ANDERSON SASSER

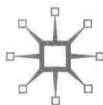
Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism

Strategizing Belonging

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Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism

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1

Magical Realism's Constructive Capacity

*Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/
genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.*

Benedict Anderson¹

Since literary magical realism exploded out of Latin America and into international critical attention in the mid-twentieth century, the limbs of its narrative genealogy have continued to be sketched in both lower and higher than the branch bearing the immense impact of *el boom*. Perhaps the most often cited figure from magical realism's pre-Latin American and pre-literary phase is Franz Roh, who deployed the term in 1925 to describe the German painting movement *Magischer realismus*, as critics such as Irene Guenther, Kenneth Reeds, Wendy Faris, and Lois Parkinson Zamora have discussed.² Guenther traces the term even earlier, in fact, plotting a point in the late eighteenth century when it was deployed by Novalis, the German Romantic philosopher (34).³ By the time the term migrated transatlantically to Latin America, magical realism had formally mutated at least three times already, becoming a fixed literary concept after being developed in Latin American literature.

Following the boom of the 1950s and 1960s, magical realism began to be recognized as a global literary phenomenon. Magical realism has now been written by authors from innumerable countries of origin and thus is not the sole property of Latin Americans, as Alejo Carpentier might have us believe. Erik Camayd-Freixas, who himself contends for the delimitation of a distinct Latin American magical realism, still concedes that the mode is "today's most compelling world fiction" (583). In addition to Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende, among other significant Latin American magical

realists, key contributions to the mode's corpus have since been recognized in the works of Jack Hodgins, Louise Erdrich, Robert Kroetsch, and Toni Morrison. Beyond the American continents, Wen-chin Ouyang points out: "[Magical realism] is in Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, Tibetan, and Turkish, to name but a few languages" ("Magical" 15).

One recent example of magical realism is Salman Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), analyzed in this study. Considering this novel in conjunction with the landmark 1949 publication of Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (*El reino de este mundo*), these two novels represent a significant development in magical realist authorship in the East and West Indies.⁴ Furthermore, they form two temporal poles between which there is a nearly 60-year time span, a figure that does not include texts preceding the Latin American boom.

Magical realism has traversed boundaries of many kinds: temporal, geographical, linguistic, and formal. Since its transformation from philosophy and painting to literature, a more recent trend has been the metamorphoses from literature to theater and film.⁵ Clearly, magical realism has proven extremely elastic, and it is just this adaptability that explains a significant aspect of its creative and critical persistence.

Yet, despite this rich history, literary magical realism has been underestimated. I am not here merely responding to skeptics of the mode by pointing to the stubborn endurance of the term, though that point is true. What I want to draw attention to addresses those within the magical realist fold, as it were: those who have engaged or are engaging with the literary form creatively and/or analytically. I mean to contend that magical realism has proven to be far more malleable than perhaps anyone deploying the term within very particular historical moments, locations, and political frameworks may have been able to foresee, crucial as these specific usages have been to the mode's development and genealogy. Frequently, the mode has been circumscribed within these particular historical usages, critics and authors wedding the form to secondary features such as thematics, cultural resources and deployments, and political concerns; yet, we are just beginning to see that magical realism (and here I am concerned with its literary narrative form) is flexible enough to structure diverse projects and even divergent, incompatible views. This is a benefit, I hasten to add, for it means that the mode is capable of transcending any specific historical exigency. Returning to Carpentier at this point, then, we may extend his argument about the "baroque" attributes of *lo real maravilloso* to magical realism in general: the

form's adaptability recommends it as a cyclically recurring spirit as opposed to a "historical style" frozen in time ("Baroque" 95).⁶

In making a distinction between formal characteristics and secondary features, I am participating in a long-standing critical argument, a "secular schism in Magical-Realist scholarship" that can be traced to Roh and Carpentier, as Camayd-Freixas describes (584). In their anthology, Zamora and Faris comment on the divergent views among two of the mode's founders: "Roh's emphasis is on aesthetic expression, Carpentier's on cultural and geographical identity," the latter being reflected in primitivist thematics such as Afro-Cuban voodoo ("Introduction" 7). Significantly, Camayd-Freixas observes, Zamora and Faris formulate magical realism as a conversation that should include both Roh and Carpentier, aesthetics and secondary features, as is implicit in their inclusion of both in their anthology and explicit in the view they espouse here: "Despite their different perspectives, Roh and Carpentier share the conviction that magical realism defines a revisionary position with respect to the generic practices of their times and media; each engages the concept to discuss what he considers an antidote to existing and exhausted forms of expression" (*Magical Realism* 7).⁷

While I agree that magical realism includes both aesthetic and secondary aspects, this is true only in a specific sense. A robust understanding of magical realism requires both a close-up view in which one perceives the numerous different applications (such as regional identity formation), including how these specific usages have adapted the mode, as well as a bird's-eye view, a panoramic perspective of the magical realist timeline in its entirety, including an understanding of why and how magical realism as a theoretical nexus has attracted myriad usages, a mapping I endeavor subsequently to achieve.

As examples of the mode continue to proliferate, the need to separate form from supplementary features employed during particular stages has again become compelling. The Roh/Carpentier debate, then, is not only prior but also current, and it impresses upon us today the necessity of working toward resolving it. This debate, I suggest, is at least one significant exigency giving rise to contemporary critics advocating expansions in our understanding of the mode, as I will describe in more detail later. For now, it is enough to note that this conversation indicates that the critical registers available to us for engaging with magical realism are too narrow, and, I will argue, this problem stems from a restricted, fixed view of the mode, one that has married secondary features to formal features.

Untangling these issues requires a new look at magical realism and some of its most basic presumptions. What are the implications of magical realism? What might it mean for a narrative to be written in this modality? How do we as readers and critics interpret its conspicuous magic? What is the potential range of narrative magic's functionality? This study re-poses and responds to these questions lying at the heart of magical realist hermeneutics with a view to re-evaluating limited critical paradigms.

The Authorial Circle and Latin American Magical Realism

While numerous critics have traced the genealogy of the term *magical realism* – an illuminating project – in what follows, I track vicissitudes in authorship, or changing perceptions of who qualifies as an authentic magical realist storyteller. By studying the barometer of authorship one is able, first, to isolate precise points when magical realism has been wed to secondary features and, second, to track alterations in treatments of those secondary features from one stage to the next. Sometimes when the authorial circle is widened, the broadening is justified by the new grouping's continuance of prior political and/or cultural agendas; at other times, those secondary features are abandoned when they are no longer perceived as mandatory ingredients, when the expansion necessitates their abandonment, or simply when the concerns of authors and critics and/or historical circumstances have changed. When this timeline is seen from a long view, it becomes evident that magical realism encompasses divergent incarnations and incompatible usages. The thread that unites these varied stages is the fantastic assumption that magic and realism might cohabitate in a single imaginative world, a foundational and formal feature.

It should be noted that by using authorship as a guiding rubric I do not always follow a temporal progression, but an expansion, or widening, of what begins as a very restricted group identity. Moreover, these are not completely isolated categories; they overlap at certain points so that some authors might be situated within more than one phase.

As mentioned, the term *magical realism* did not originate in Latin America. Prior to two key applications of it in the early twentieth century, Roh's painterly as well as Italian Massimo Bontempelli's artistic and literary, Guenther identifies Novalis's late eighteenth-century usage (34). She also mentions its application in early to mid-twentieth-century German literary criticism, as well as in the classification of numerous authors from Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium (59–60).

Günter Grass was employing this technique in 1959 against the tyranny of the Nazi regime in his novel *The Tin Drum* (*Die Blechtrommel*), as Faris shows ("Scheherazade's" 179). This is the same time at which the boom authors were writing. In fact, Grass's novel precedes García Márquez's seminal *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad*; 1967) by eight years. Nevertheless, it is in Latin America that the mode is first extensively developed as literature and gains wide recognition.⁸ One can look to this phase, then, to discover formative frameworks.

Magical realism evolves significantly in Latin America in the 1940s, following the prior translation of Roh into Spanish in José Ortega y Gasset's *Revista de Occidente* in 1927. According to Amaryll Chanady's timeline, by the mid-twentieth century magical realism has been appropriated from Roh and German painting now to refer explicitly to "a means of expressing the authentic American mentality" and an "autonomous literature" (*Magical* 17). As she describes it, magical realism is deployed at this time to "territorialize" – Chanady's term – Latin America and its exclusive, marvelous ontology ("Territorialization"). Carpentier, Asturias, and García Márquez are key figures advancing this position. In his Nobel Lecture, García Márquez territorializes Latin America when he contends that Latin Americans' "crucial problem" is "a lack of conventional means to render [their] lives believable," thereby coyly intimating that magical realism is the only literary form capable of expressing their "outsized reality" ("Solitude" 89).

A significant mechanism of territorialization involves the source from which narrative magic was frequently derived. Chanady explains that "the presence of the supernatural is often attributed to the primitive or 'magical' Indian mentality," or imported African mentality, it could be added (*Magical* 19).⁹ In Carpentier's short story "Journey to the Seed" ("*Viaje a la semilla*"), for example, after "*el negro viejo*," the old Afro-Cuban servant Melchor, causes time to reverse with the waving of his stick and a string of unintelligible words (a chant?), the narrative juxtaposes a superior, autochthonous connection to the natural world with the loss of this connection that stems from Catholicism and Western learning and legal practices (59).¹⁰

African and American Indian indigenous worldviews offered a pivotal political strategy through which Latin American intellectuals combated the hegemony of (neo)colonialists: they countered the latter's purported superiority and rationality through the antirationalist beliefs originating outside the so-called West, namely Central and South America.¹¹ From this early, crucial foundation, then, magic is deployed against Western reason. This is a determinative paradigm, one that recurs

throughout later engagements with the mode, even if the resource base for magic does not stem from indigenous beliefs.

Latin American magical realists were not completely original in their tactic. As Chanady shows ("Territorialization"), Carpentier, Asturias, and Julio Cortázar furthered the strategy begun by two other contemporaneous movements. One is antipositivism, a reaction to the rise of the US as a neocolonial force.¹² "The antipositivistic subversion of the neocolonial hierarchy" criticized and rejected reason in order to claim both "difference" and "superiority" from those who imposed rationalist models of thinking and being upon them. Their purpose in doing so was to undermine key premises on which Western claims of supremacy were grounded: "It is hardly surprising that Latin American intellectuals questioned the European rational canon. One of the criteria for the conceptual 'Calibanization' of the colonized was their supposed absence of reasoning faculties." She adds: "Claiming that a Latin American (or generally Hispanic) philosophy was different but equal to the Franco-German tradition, and even criticizing the claim to universality of European philosophical systems, became a means of questioning one of the main criteria of Western superiority" (133–6). The Surrealists had also been utilizing techniques such as automatic writing and eccentric juxtapositions in order to critique reason from within the empire, and this through the "valorization of non-European mentalities" of so-called primitive peoples (Chanady "Territorialization" 137–41). In the 1920s Asturias and Carpentier were both affiliated with French Surrealists while they were in Paris, though Carpentier later explicitly rejects the Surrealists' "manufactured mystery" for "the marvelous real" that "is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American" ("Baroque" 104).

While it is important to note that there are exceptions to the pairing of magic and Latin American indigenous resources, the view that this link is absolutely necessary becomes so pervasive that in 1985 Chanady must actually make a case for the inclusion of García Márquez and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the magical realist literary corpus because he looked for supernatural resources outside of the autochthonous, depicting magic that stemmed merely from "the author's imagination" ("Origins" 56). That Chanady had to propose an argument for García Márquez's magical realism seems today, 25 years later, bemusing because of the paramount position this novel has acquired in any magical realist canon. Nevertheless, it demonstrates an early point in magical realist theory wherein extratextual features, here indigenous resources, were viewed as nearly mandatory in the DNA of the

mode. Chanady acknowledges this issue in an earlier text: "The themes treated in magico-realist narrative are often a more important criterion than style or structure, and authors are frequently excluded from the category" when their narratives are not set "amongst the American natives" (*Magical* 19).

Camayd-Freixas comments on the persistence of this paradigm in contemporary Latin Americanist scholarship. His discussion, unlike Chanady's, aligns García Márquez's fantastical fiction with a primitive worldview, if one that stems from the purported general view of all Columbian villagers:

... the Latin American trend has been to reduce the scope of Magical Realism to a handful of authors and texts. While far from a consensus, most [Latin American] critics now lean towards an ethnological version of Magical Realism, with Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo, and Gabriel García Márquez being the authors most often cited. Here, Magical Realism issues from an alternative world view one might call "primitive" – whether it is that of voodoo practitioners, Guatemalan Indians, or villagers from the Mexican and Columbian hinterlands. The emphasis is anthropological and regional, but what lies behind this is the suggestion of a continental Latin American identity. (584)

This last sentence picks up on an additional significant characteristic of Latin American magical realism. The indigenous resources from which magic was derived were frequently utilized as a tool for the region's self-definition. The autochthonous was a means through which to recuperate a buried identity and culture, that which preceded the rupture of colonization. Chanady explains: "The Otherness of 'primitive mentality' ... is appropriated by Latin American magical realists in their narrative strategies of identity construction." In Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*, she offers as an example, "the marvelous is presented as one of the main characteristics of the Latin American continent" ("Territorialization" 138). This usage of the mode links it with the related function of regionalism and nation-building, a potential use of magical realism later harnessed by Nigerian-British author Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* (Chapter 4) and, in a more troubling way, by Italian Massimo Bontempelli in his fascist cultural work, as will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

As the mode began to be recognized and developed beyond this region, though, critics had to alter their hermeneutical frameworks

accordingly, paring down the perceived requirements from bulky, unnecessary characteristics. Magical realism's literary DNA could not be forced to encode narrative elements such as a Latin American environment and indigenous myth or the extrinsic criterion of Latin American authorship and identity construction once it was being successfully written by authors from Africa, India, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. At the same time, the use of magical realism as a strategy of resistance toward (neo)colonialists and other hegemonic forces could be (and was) transposed to those applications, as was the prominent role of indigenous worldviews as a fantastical resource.¹³

Magical Realism and Postcoloniality

Homi Bhabha might be used as the herald of the next phase, that in which the authorial circle of magical realist authorship is widened from Latin American writers to incorporate postcolonial writers in general, when he exuberantly proclaims in *Nation and Narration* (1990): "'Magical realism' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7). Just prior to Bhabha, Timothy Brennan suggests in 1989 that while magical realism is most closely associated with Latin Americans, the mode is "actually a more general and inevitable outcome of mature post-colonial fiction" (*Salman* xii). In fact, so closely allied with postcolonial literature does magical realism become at this point that, as Sara Upstone describes pithily, "in the last decade of the twentieth century it was easy to be convinced, at least in some critical quarters, that magical realism was postcolonial fiction" (153).

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin cite Jacques Stephen Alexis's 1956 essay "Of the Magical Realism of the Haitians" ("*Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens*") as the moment when magical realism first extended beyond (Hispanic) Latin America's geopolitical territory. As these editors also suggest, Alexis's description of magical realism weds postcolonial politics of resistance and self-definition to the autochthonous, and thereby continues the political deployment of magical realist aesthetics begun by preceding authors: "Mythic and magical traditions, Alexis argued, ... were the collective forms by which they gave expression to their identity and articulated their difference from the dominant colonial and racial oppressors" (*Key* 132–3). Alexis looks to Haitian traditions, especially those derived from African slaves, to define a unique national identity.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's discussion of Alexis is a component of their article on magical realism in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, a

fact that indicates the mode's having been circumscribed within a general postcolonial aesthetic. They explain that magical realism has come to refer to "the inclusion of any mythic or legendary material from local written or oral cultural traditions in contemporary narrative." According to the editors, these autochthonous resources are deployed for two ends: "The material so used is seen to interrogate the assumptions of Western, rational, linear narrative and to enclose it within an indigenous metatext, a body of textual forms that recuperate the pre-colonial culture" (Key 132).

As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin implicitly recognize, magical realism's overwhelming success at what Suzanne Baker calls a "postcolonial strategy" lies in its ability to be transposed from its Latin American development to divergent postcolonial contexts.¹⁴ In its formal intermixture of supernaturalism and realism, the resource for supernaturalism is provided by indigenous mythology, which is then opposed to hegemonic European frameworks, generic and otherwise. Ouyang has recently complained about this paradigm insofar as it constitutes the dominant critical hermeneutic: "Magic is [understood to be] derived from the 'supernatural' elements of 'local' or 'indigenous' myths, religions or cultures that speak directly to the imposition of Christianity in addition to post-Enlightenment empiricism on the 'natives' of South America" ("Magical" 16). The formulaic aspect of this understanding of magical realism's two codes suggests how what appeared, for a time, a politically and aesthetically compelling medium to reflect and reconstruct exploited and marginalized peoples could subsequently become fatigued and reductive.

While this phase might include postcolonial authors within the First and Second Worlds such as Toni Morrison (*Beloved* [1987]), Louise Erdrich (*Tracks* [1988]), and Thomas King (*Green Grass, Running Water* [1993]), the most salient group of postcolonial magical realist authors are those Brennan has memorably dubbed "Third-World Cosmopolitans." These are "literary celebrities from the Third World," writers born outside the metropolis, but who came in the later twentieth century to reside there and are associated with its values and aesthetic practices (*Salman* viii–ix). They belong to the recent historical moment in which the mass migrations "in[to] England ... from Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean, and in North America from Asia and Latin America" that occurred after World War II have reconfigured the demographics and cultural composition of "the imperial 'centers'" (*Salman* 6). This has contributed to the appearance of literatures written in English and marketed in English-speaking locales by authors of

non-English origins. While Brennan is not referring explicitly to magical realists in his discussion of these authors, this same group has grown up in close alliance with magical realism, Elleke Boehmer observes: "As things appear now, the proliferation of postcolonial migrant writing in English has become so closely linked to the runaway success of magic realism that the two developments appear almost inextricable" (*Colonial* 235). All four of the contemporaneous authors closely analyzed in this text – Nigerian-Londoner Okri, Indo-British-American Rushdie, Cuban-American Cristina García, and Nigerian-British Helen Oyeyemi – can be situated within this category.

Instead of simply transposing Latin American usages of magical realism into new geocultural contexts, the Third-World Cosmopolitan authors depart from several earlier features that seemed central to the mode. The most prominent author among Third-World Cosmopolitans, Rushdie has often employed magical realism toward a celebration of hybridity, whereby he undermines notions of any pure, fixed, and hallowed culture, and thereby diverges from the use of the mode for constructing a regional (Latin American) identity over against the West.

In addition to differing from previous magical realists, Third-World Cosmopolitans, in their advent, signaled a change in the terms of the decolonization struggle in general, Brennan explains. While for these authors' predecessors nation-building was a priority, the mass migrations of the 1950s and 1960s and the disheartening failures in decolonization with the reinstatement of oppressive new regimes "have in a sense muted the national question ... In that way [Third-World Cosmopolitans] deny the old pattern of need to create a national mythos in the country of origin" (*Salman* 50). A related, key point of distinction between this new generation and earlier decolonization writers is their attitude toward the West, which Third-World Cosmopolitans treat as both "foil and lure." They criticize the West, but at the same time depict it as the praiseworthy "receptacle of 'democracy'" (*Salman* 52).

As a result of their altered sociopolitical and historical contexts, the magical realists of this stage complicate the perception of magical realism as an intrinsically anti-Western aesthetic. Rather than utilizing the mode in any simple, outright rejection of the West, its empiricism and empire, the object of their interrogation may just as well include the political projects of their home countries. This stage's usage contrasts, as well, with the deployment of narrative magic to construct mythic cultural roots for the nations or regions of their birth, in short to construct nationalisms/regionalisms, a distinction between West Indian Carpentier and East Indian Rushdie. Examples include *Midnight's*