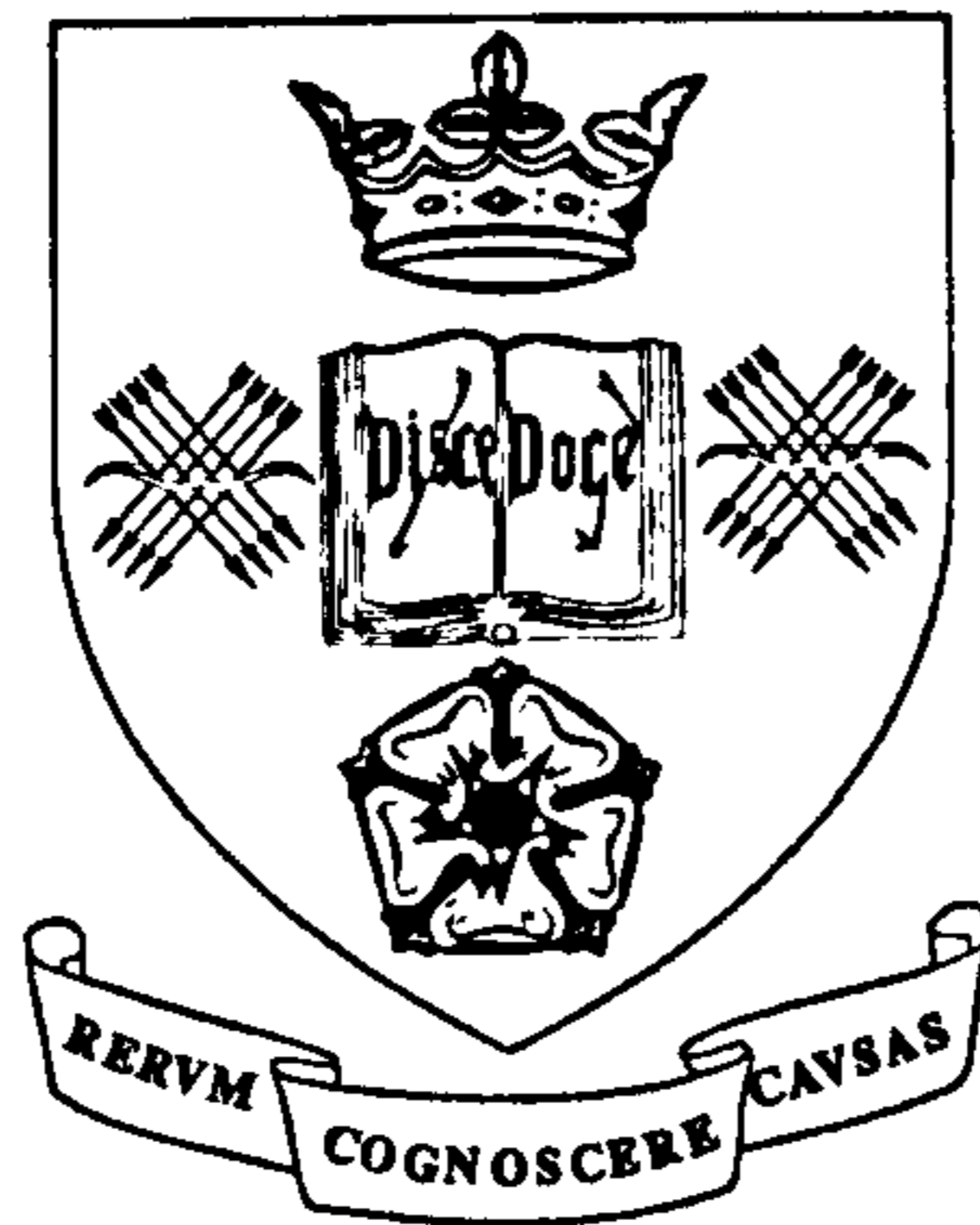


# **Magic Realism in Contemporary American Women's Fiction**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to illustrate the importance of magic realism in American women's fiction in the late twentieth century. The term magic realism, which has traditionally been associated with Latin American men's writing, has been known by different, and often contradictory, definitions. It may be argued that, properly defined, it can be a valid term to describe a number of characteristics common to a corpus of work, and can be considered as an aesthetic category different from others such as Surrealism or Fantastic literature, with which it has often been compared. Furthermore, magic realism has viability as a contemporary international mode and is particularly suitable to women writers from minority ethnic groups. The present study intends to draw relevant comparative analyses of uses of magic realism that show various formal and thematic interactions between separate literary traditions.

The introduction offers an overview of the different conceptions and applications of the term since its origins within the area of painting, and suggests a working definition that can be effective for intensive textual analysis of several novels. In order to offer a new approach which can enable us to move away the paradigm of magic realism from Latin America towards a more multicultural framework, the focus will be on three geographical-cultural areas: African American, Native American and Chicano/Mexican writing.

The implementation of magic realist strategies in African American writing will be examined in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), with a particular emphasis on the significance of African mythical background and the experience of dispossession and transference of culture. Magic realist elements in the novels *Tracks* (1988) by Louise Erdrich and *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko will be studied in the context of Native American oral tradition and cosmologies. The practice of magic realism on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border will be explored in the novels *So Far from God* (1993), by the Chicana Ana Castillo, and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), by the Mexican Laura Esquivel. A description of the borderland culture in the American Southwest, as well as comparisons between North and Latin American uses of magic realism will be provided. Finally, some connections amongst the discussed literary traditions and further lines of research will be suggested.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Víctor and Sofía,  
who taught me that the dream is the truth,  
and to my grandmother María, always in my thoughts.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>Introduction: Towards a Definition of Magic Realism .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>African American Writing and Magic Realism.....</b>	<b>26</b>
2.1	What is True and What a Product of Our Imagination?: Toni Morrison's <i>Song of Solomon</i> (1977) .....	31
2.2	There is More to Be Known Beyond What the Eyes Can See: Gloria Naylor's <i>Mama Day</i> (1988).....	64
<b>III.</b>	<b>Magic Realism in Native American Writing.....</b>	<b>102</b>
3.1	Suspended Between Worlds: Louise Erdrich's <i>Tracks</i> (1988).....	108
3.2	Weaving a Magical Web: Leslie Marmon Silko's <i>Ceremony</i> (1977) .....	139
<b>IV.</b>	<b>On Both Sides of the Border: Magic Realism in Chicano and Mexican Literature. The Children of La Malinche.....</b>	<b>171</b>
4.1	Building Bridges: Ana Castillo's <i>So Far from God</i> (1993).....	178
4.2	Magical Cooking: Laura Esquivel's <i>Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate</i> (1989).....	212
<b>V.</b>	<b>Suggested Connections and Conclusions.....</b>	<b>244</b>
	<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>253</b>

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

### **TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MAGIC REALISM**

The term magic realism has been known by different, and often contradictory, definitions ever since it was first applied to painting in Europe in the 1920s. The lack of critical consensus about the precise boundaries of magic realism and the indiscriminate use of the term to refer to almost any work which departs from the canons of realism, have resulted in confusion. The terminological and conceptual disagreements became obvious in the XVI International Conference of Iberoamerican Literature held in Michigan in 1973, where some critics advocated the abandonment of a term which, in Emir Rodríguez Monegal's words, is a 'formula which does not work. That is: instead of stimulating critical dialogue, it paralyses it; instead of allowing communication, it interrupts it; instead of throwing light on the work, it makes it obscure'.<sup>1</sup>

However, in spite of conceptual problems, magic realism continues to have a special appeal for critics. Currently, it is widely used not only in fiction, but also in poetry, painting and particularly in cinema.<sup>2</sup> It can be argued that, properly defined, magic realism can be a valid term to describe a number of thematic, formal and structural characteristics common to a corpus of work, and can be considered as an aesthetic category different from others such as Surrealism or Fantastic Literature, with which it has often been confused. By analysing the various uses of the term magic realism, this introduction will attempt to provide a consistent definition essential to building an effective framework.

The first to use the expression magic realism was the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925. Roh applied this term to a group of painters working in Germany in the 1920s who rejected Expressionism and advocated a return to the representation of reality from a new perspective: through a sharp focus on ordinary objects, the painter uncovers the mystery hidden in them, making them appear more real. Roh emphasises the realistic character of the New Art; instead of transcending reality as

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<sup>1</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Realismo mágico versus literatura fantástica: un diálogo de sordos', in *Otros mundos, Otros fuegos: Fantasía y realismo mágico en Iberoamérica*, ed. by Donald A. Yates (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1975), pp. 25-37 (p. 27). My own translation.

Expressionism did, it attempts to grasp reality with a particularly spiritual intensity. Roh's description of the way in which the painter Schrimpf approaches landscapes is highly illustrative:

[He] insists that the landscape has rigorously to be a *real* landscape, which can be taken for an existing one. He wants it to be "real", so that it strikes us as something ordinary and familiar, but, however, he intends it to be a magical world, that is ... that even the smallest weed can *refer* to the spirit.<sup>3</sup>

According to Roh then magic realism is not a mixture of reality and fantasy, but a way to uncover the mystery hidden in everyday reality.<sup>4</sup>

The Spanish writer and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset had Roh's book partly translated into Spanish in the 1927 June issue of his influential *Revista de Occidente*, and the term magic realism subsequently became widely used by literary critics in Latin America. There the concept of magic realism became connected with the myths and cultures of the indigenous populations and thus departed from the European notion which was more individualistic. The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier and the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias, who significantly had spent a long period of time in Paris during the flourishing of Surrealism and had actively participated in this movement, found in magic realism the perfect literary expression of Latin American traditions and contributed to the theorisation of this mode.

Carpentier introduced his concept of *lo real maravilloso*, the marvellous real, in the preface to his novel *El reino de este mundo/The Kingdom of this World* (1949), by which he referred to the real objects and events which make America so different from Europe and which he discovered after a trip to Haiti.<sup>5</sup> For Carpentier, the natural, historical and cultural prodigies which characterise the American continent are an endless source of real marvels; the whole history of America is a chronicle of

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of magic realism as an across-the-arts phenomenon, see Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See Franz Roh, 'Realismo mágico. Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente', *Revista de Occidente*, 16 (48) (June 1927), 274-301 (p. 290). My translation. Roh's original work is *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Roh's theories on painting, see Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic', in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. and intro. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 33-73; Marga Paz, 'El realismo mágico de Franz Roh', *Realismo Mágico. Franz Roh y la pintura europea 1917-1936* (Valencia: IVAM, 1997), pp. 13-25.

<sup>5</sup> See Preface in Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1984), pp. 13-19.



*lo real maravilloso*. The marvellous emerges from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), and the element of faith, of believing in the marvellous reality of America is essential: 'the sense of the marvellous presupposes a faith. Who does not believe in saints, cannot be cured by saints' "miracles".<sup>6</sup>

In this Preface, Carpentier expressed his disillusion with Surrealism. This movement arose in France shortly after the First World War, which had signalled the crisis of values in the Western World, as a reaction against the excessive emphasis on rationality demanded by Western traditions. In Surrealism, forms and imagery gave full play to the imagination, the dream world, and the subconscious. It was deeply influenced by the work of Freud, and in its simplest form, it was concerned with putting familiar objects in unfamiliar surroundings. The fundamental theme of Surrealist aesthetics was the search for 'le merveilleux', that marvellous world of revelation and dream where all the contradictions of the human being could be resolved. In this search, Surrealists made use of the poetics of dream, automatic writing, free association and total experimentation with language.<sup>7</sup>

For Carpentier, however, all this was nothing but 'the exhausting pretension to arouse the marvellous' which characterised European literatures at the beginning of the century and had nothing to do with the authentic marvellous reality he had just experienced in his visit to Haiti. In contrast to the Surrealists' 'le merveilleux', in which Carpentier only sees 'trucos de prestidigitación' (conjuring tricks), *lo real maravilloso* aims to represent a reality modified and transformed by myth and legend. William Spindler observes that Carpentier's concept is closer to the ideas of Jung, especially his concept of the collective unconscious, which relates to the fabrication of myth, rather than to Freudian psychoanalysis with its emphasis on the individual unconscious which attracted the Surrealists.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* implies two contrasting views of the world: one rational, modern, European; the other magical, traditional, mythic. This corresponds to the coexistence

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<sup>6</sup> Carpentier, Preface to *El reino...*, p. 15. My translation.

<sup>7</sup> For a description of French Surrealism and its influence in Latin America, see Gerald J. Langowski, *El surrealismo en la ficción Hispanoamericana* (Madrid: Gredos, 1982), pp. 15-22. It is interesting to note that Langowski rules out the term magic realism as a necessary critical term, since its characteristics are the same as Surrealism. Therefore, Langowski analyses writers such as Carpentier and Miguel Angel Asturias as Surrealists.

in Latin America of a modern rational mentality with the myths and beliefs of ethno-cultural groups such as Native and African Americans.

Miguel Angel Asturias also moved away from Surrealism in the 1940s towards ideas similar to Carpentier's. Asturias was fascinated by the traditions and myths of the indigenous population of Guatemala, particularly by the Mayas' conception of reality. In their narrative, there is no division between the reality of the senses and that of the imagination. According to Asturias:

Between the "real" and the "magic" there is a third category of reality. It consists of a fusion of the visible and the tangible, of hallucinations and fantasy. It is similar to what the Surrealists around Breton wished for, and it is what can be called "magic realism". This magic realism, of course, has a direct relation with the original mentality of the Indians. The Indian thinks in images; he sees things not so much as phenomena in themselves but as translated into other dimensions, dimensions in which reality disappears and dreams appear and are transformed into visible and concrete forms.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Asturias aims to produce in his writing a world view different from the Western one but equally valid. For instance, his novel *Hombres de maíz/Men of Maize* (1949) juxtaposes two world views without establishing a hierarchy between them, thus relativizing the dominant Western rational paradigm.

However, further complications arose when Professor Angel Flores delivered a lecture on 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' to the 1954 Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York, which was subsequently published as an article. Flores departed from Roh's original concept as he defined magical realism as 'the amalgamation of realism and fantasy' and traced the current back to European writers such as Marcel Proust and particularly Franz Kafka, with his 'difficult art of mingling his drab reality with the phantasmal world of his nightmares'.<sup>10</sup> According to Flores, realism and the magical had already made their appearance separately in Latin America: realism since the Colonial Period and the magical since the earliest writing (in the letters of Columbus, etc.). However, it was through the influence of Kafka on Jorge Luis Borges (who had translated Kafka's shorter fiction into Spanish) that magical realism as an amalgamation of realism and

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<sup>8</sup> William Spindler, 'Magic Realism: A Typology', *Forum For Modern Language Studies*, 29 (1) (January 1993), 75-85 (p. 76).

<sup>9</sup> M.A. Asturias, interviewed by Günter W. Lorenz, *Altas* (December 1967). Quoted in Robert G. Mead, 'Miguel Angel Asturias y su Premio Nobel en los Estados Unidos', *Cuadernos Americanos*, 159 (4) (July-August 1968), 215-227 (p. 225). My translation.

fantasy entered Latin America. Flores thus signalled 1935, the year of the appearance of Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia/A Universal History of Infamy*, as the point of departure of this new phase of Latin American literature of magical realism. Together with Borges, Flores listed Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, María Luisa Bombal and José Bianco among the practitioners of the genre, 'Meticulous craftsmen all, one finds in them the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal'.<sup>11</sup> Flores found in their narrative certain distinctive features: time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity, the plots are logically conceived, there is a repudiation of mawkish sentimentalism, and the unreal happens as part of reality: 'The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms'.<sup>12</sup>

Flores' article contributed to the popularisation of the term magic/al realism among critics, but it also contributed towards the indiscriminate use of the term and the confusion with a more playful, metafictional and experimental style typical of Borges and closer to Fantastic Literature. The terms magic/al realism, *lo real maravilloso* and Fantastic Literature soon became interchangeable. Furthermore, Flores did not even mention Franz Roh as the first user of the phrase magic realism, but seemed to adopt the term as his own invention: 'This trend I term "magical realism"'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1967, the Mexican critic Luis Leal came to clarify some of these inaccuracies. Leal showed his disagreement with Flores' definition of magic realism and with the list of authors he mentioned. He tried to return to Roh's original formula of making the ordinary seem supernatural. According to Leal, magic realism cannot be identified with Fantastic Literature, Surrealism or Psychological Literature. Above all, magic realism is an attitude towards reality: the writer faces reality and attempts to discover the mystery which exists in objects, in life, in human actions. This is what writers such as Arturo Uslar Pietri, Carpentier, Asturias or Rulfo do in

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<sup>10</sup> Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction', *Hispania*, 38 (1955), 187-192 (p. 189).

<sup>11</sup> Flores, 'Magic...', p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Flores, 'Magic...', p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> Flores, 'Magic...', p. 188.

their narrative. Magic realism does not derive, as Flores suggested, from Kafka's work and Borges cannot be counted among its practitioners. Magic realism is not Fantastic Literature since the main focus is not on the creation of imaginary beings or worlds, but on the existing relationship between man and his context: 'In magic realism the key events do not have a logical or psychological explanation. The magic realist writer does not aim to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) or modify it (as the Surrealists did), but to capture the mystery hidden in the objects'.<sup>14</sup>

Writer and critic Enrique Anderson Imbert also embraced Roh's original formula. As he explains in his essay 'El "realismo mágico" en la ficción Hispanoamericana', he was the first critic to associate Roh with the magic realism of a Latin American writer when he applied the term to a short story by Arturo Usler Pietri in 1956:

In 'La lluvia' we appreciate the originality of his 'magic realism', to use the term coined by the German critic Franz Roh in his study of one phase of contemporary art. Everyday objects appear enveloped in such a strange atmosphere that, although recognizable they shock us as if they were fantastic.<sup>15</sup>

Anderson Imbert rejects the presence of the supernatural (a distinctive feature of Fantastic Literature) in magic realism and emphasises the category of the *preternatural* in the sense of that which exceeds in some way what is normal, ordinary or explicable, without being felt as transcending the limits of the natural. Whereas a fantastic narrative discards the principles of logic and the laws of nature, in a magic realist narrative, events, although being real, give an illusion of unreality, 'the narrator, instead of presenting the magic as if it were real, presents the reality as if it were magic'.<sup>16</sup>

However, we cannot forget that if a term is borrowed from another medium of expression, painting in this case, it acquires different implications. Basing what is considered magic realism in Latin America on Roh's art theories can inevitably lead to confusion. Magic realism seems to be a literary mode rather than a specific, historically identifiable genre. It does not refer to a movement, since it lacks

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<sup>14</sup> Luis Leal, 'El realismo mágico en la literatura hispanoamericana', *Cuadernos Americanos*, 153 (4) (July-August 1967), 230-235 (p.234). My translation.

<sup>15</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, *El realismo mágico y otros ensayos* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1976), pp. 7-25 (p. 11). My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson Imbert, *El realismo mágico...*, p. 19. My translation.

coherence and historical and geographical limitations. Roberto González Echevarría considers that this term has been applied in three different moments in the discussion of art and literature during the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> The first moment corresponds to the European avant-garde, when Franz Roh coins the term in his book on painting and when the Surrealists proclaim the marvellous as an aesthetic category and even a way of life. The second moment belongs to Latin America in the 1940s and illustrates an attempt to preserve the avant-garde legacy from the socialist realism of the 1930s. It also represents a means of expressing the authentic American mentality and developing an autonomous literature. Around 1949, Arturo Uslar Pietri adopts Roh's formula in an essay on the Venezuelan short story,<sup>18</sup> and Carpentier adjusts the surrealist version in order to create *lo real maravilloso americano*. The third moment starts from Angel Flores' mentioned article and reaches its climax in the 1960s, when the literary criticism searches for the roots of the Latin American *Boom*.<sup>19</sup>

According to González Echevarría, there is no continuity between these three moments and, therefore, magic realism lacks the necessary cohesion to be considered as a literary or critical movement. He then analyses two aspects of magic realism: the phenomenological, which comes from Roh's book, and the ontological, or *lo real maravilloso*, which derives from Surrealism. The latter, he says, has become more successful in Latin America and is mainly represented by Carpentier. The practitioners of ontological magic realism consider the American continent to be marvellous in itself, and not merely as a result of an outsider's attitude. It is closely linked to the development of Ethnology during European Modernism, which tends to

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<sup>17</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, 'Isla a su Vuelo Fugitiva: Carpentier y el Realismo Mágico', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 40 (86) (Jan-March 1974), 9-63 (p. 19 ff.).

<sup>18</sup> Arturo Uslar Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948), p. 161. Uslar Pietri uses here the term magic realism to refer to 'the consideration of man as a mystery among the realist facts' but does not mention Roh. In a later essay, 'Realismo mágico' in *Godos, insurgentes y visionarios* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986), pp. 135-140, he acknowledges Roh's source, whose book on painting Uslar had read in the 1920s.

<sup>19</sup> The term *Boom* refers to the unprecedented world-wide recognition that the Latin American literature written in Spanish began to enjoy in the 1950s and that culminated in the 1960s, especially in the genre of the novel and thanks to numerous writers, such as Ernesto Sábato, Julio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Alejo Carpentier, Lezama Lima, Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez. For instance, in 1969, six out of ten best-sellers in France were Latin American novels. See Agustín del Saz, *Literatura Iberoamericana* (Barcelona: Editorial Juventud, 1978), pp. 190-94.

decentre European thought, history and aesthetics by describing for the first time in all detail the richness of primitive cultures, regarded up to then as barbarian.<sup>20</sup>

Carpentier was very influenced by Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918-22), which developed the theory that the New World was at a stage of faith in its cultural cycle prior to the stage of reflexivity, whereas Europe, having irremediably lost the mystery of creation, searched for universal laws and codes such as Surrealism (reflexivity as a manifestation of cultural decadence).<sup>21</sup> This assumption implied binary oppositions between incredulity and faith, between European civilisation, with its consciousness of historical heritage and ability to engage in self-analysis, and primitive culture with its spontaneity and lack of self-reflexivity. Following this idea, Carpentier declared that the marvellous was to be found exclusively in Latin America, a statement that, as Amaryll Chanady points out, is the result of a Eurocentric attitude that considered the New World as exotic and marvellous.<sup>22</sup>

From all this confusion and critical debate, it seems apparent that there are two different understandings of the term magic/al realism:

- the original one, the definition proposed by Roh and supported by Leal and Anderson Imbert, which refers to a kind of literary or artistic work that presents reality from an unusual perspective but without transcending the limits of the natural, that is, excluding the supernatural as a valid interpretation. A more playful, metafictional and experimental style would correspond to this usage.
- the most common usage in currency today, which is derived substantially from Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*, and which describes texts where two contrasting views of the world, one magical, one rational, are presented without any conflict, by using the beliefs and myths of ethno-cultural groups. The supernatural is presented as ordinary in a matter-of-fact way. This second usage relies heavily on superstition and primitive faith, and has its source in oral tradition, myths, legends and folklore.

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<sup>20</sup> González Echevarría, 'Isla a su Vuelo...', pp. 23-27.

<sup>21</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).

<sup>22</sup> Amaryll Chanady, 'The Origins and Development of Magic Realism in Latin American Fiction', in *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature*, ed. by Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986), pp. 49-60 (p. 50).

These two interpretations of magic realism seem to correspond to two different traditions, one pictorial and mainly European, the other literary and mainly Latin American. However, neither trend on its own seems to be sufficient to account for all the different examples of magic realist work. William Spindler's typology of magic realism throws a new light on the subject: he considers the two different conceptions outlined above as two sides of the same coin.<sup>23</sup> Spindler distinguishes between *metaphysical magic realism* and *anthropological magic realism* according to the different meanings that the word 'magic' holds, but always stressing the fact that there are many points of overlap between these types proposed and, furthermore, that works by the same author might fall into different categories.<sup>24</sup>

*Metaphysical magic realism* corresponds to Roh's ideas and the original definition of the term. 'Magic' is understood here in the sense of conjuring, producing surprising effects by the arrangement of natural objects by means of tricks, devices or optical illusion. The texts introduce a sense of *Verfremdung*, by which a familiar scene is described as if it were new and unknown. The result is often an uncanny atmosphere, although without dealing explicitly with the supernatural, as in some of Kafka's works (e.g. *The Trial*, *The Castle*) or Borges' stories (e.g. 'El Sur'/'The South', 'Tema del traidor y del héroe'/'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero').

In *anthropological magic realism*, the word 'magic' is taken in the anthropological sense of a process used to influence the course of events by bringing into operation secret principles of Nature. The narrator usually has 'two voices': sometimes events are depicted from a rational point of view (the realist element), and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the magical element). The author refers to the myths and cultural background of a social or ethnic group: the Black Haitian population in Carpentier; the Maya of Guatemala in the case of Asturias; small rural communities in Colombia in García Márquez. The existence of a magical consciousness in the characters is essential, since popular culture and magical beliefs are granted the same level of veracity as Western rationalism.

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<sup>23</sup> Spindler, 'Magic...', p. 79 ff.

Spindler even suggests the possibility of a third type of magic realism, *ontological magic realism*. Unlike the anthropological, the ontological sort does not refer to any particular cultural perspective. The supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way and no explanations are given for the unreal events in the text. However, there is no reference to the mythical imagination of pre-industrial communities. The word 'magic' refers to inexplicable or fantastic occurrences which contradict the laws of the natural world. But the narrator is not puzzled or sceptical of the supernatural, as in Fantastic Literature; on the contrary, s/he describes it as if it was a normal part of ordinary everyday life. Spindler mentions as examples of the ontological type Carpentier's 'Viaje a la semilla'/'Journey to the Seed' and some of Julio Cortázar's stories, such as 'Axolotl'.

At this point, it seems necessary to distinguish between the Fantastic and magic realism. For this purpose, Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the Fantastic as a literary genre could be highly useful.<sup>25</sup> Todorov states that the Fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character (this requirement is not essential to constitute the genre and may not be fulfilled). Third, the reader must adopt a certain aptitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as poetic interpretations, both of which destroy the Fantastic (i.e., the hesitation).

From all this, it can be concluded that the Fantastic 'lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion'.<sup>26</sup> At the story's end, the reader makes a decision: if he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, the work belongs to another genre, the uncanny; if, on the contrary, he decides that

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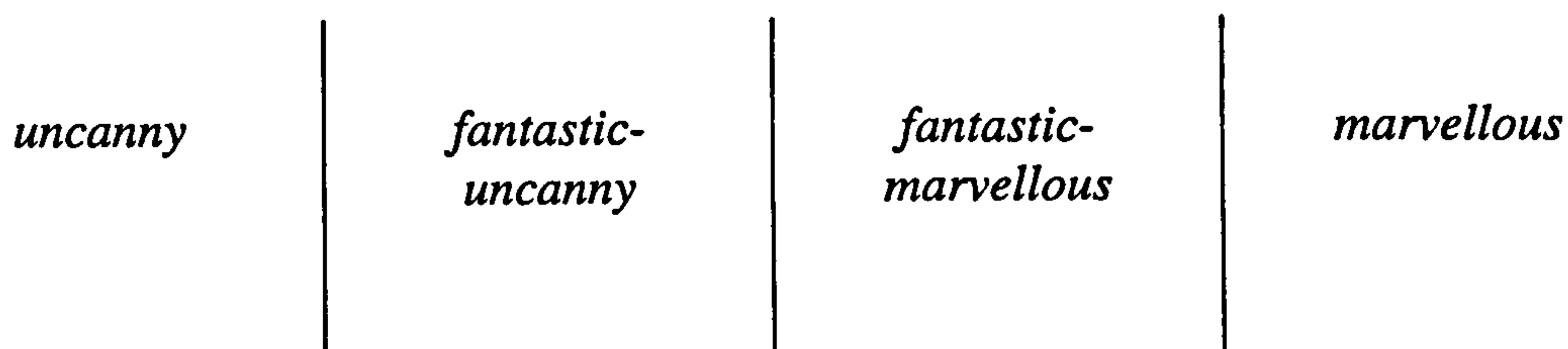
<sup>24</sup> I believe that Spindler's categorisation is more accurate and effective to establish a framework than Echevarría's (described on p. 8). Roughly, Echevarría's 'phenomenological' and 'ontological' magic realism correspond to Spindler's 'metaphysical' and 'anthropological' categories respectively. It should be noted, however, the impossibility of neatly compartmentalising such a wealth of literature.

<sup>25</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 33 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic...*, p. 41.



new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we are in the genre of the marvellous. Rather than considering the Fantastic as an autonomous genre, Todorov locates it on the frontier of these two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny, and proposes the following diagram which includes two further subdivisions:<sup>27</sup>



The Fantastic in its pure state is represented here by the median line separating the fantastic-uncanny from the fantastic-marvellous. In the sub-genre of the fantastic-uncanny (also called ‘the supernatural explained’), events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at its end. If the events are not supernatural but strange, horrific, incredible, we enter the pure uncanny (with the accent on the reader’s fear, not on his hesitation). If the supernatural has to be eventually accepted as such, we are in the fantastic-marvellous. If it is accepted as supernatural at once, we enter the pure marvellous (with the accent on wonder).

Following and developing Todorov’s schema, Neil Cornwell breaks down the category of the marvellous into three sub-divisions: *Fairy Story*, *Romance/Fantasy*, and *What If?*. In *Fairy Story*, the action takes place in what seems to be ‘our’ world, albeit in timeless or remote regions, but with multiple transformations (such as animal stories). In *Romance/Fantasy*, the work unfolds in a world patently not ours (a ‘faery’ world or an other-planetary science-fiction world). *What if?* includes works set in what seems to pass for ‘our’ world, but with a single (or at least small number of) element(s) of the manifestly impossible. Cornwell places magic realism in this category.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic...*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 34-41.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady advances further in the definition of magic realism and in its distinction from the Fantastic.<sup>29</sup> We have seen that for Todorov, the reader's hesitation between accepting an apparently supernatural event and finding a rational explanation constitutes a determining factor in the literary fantastic. However, Chanady believes that it is not a question of accepting the supernatural or not, but of interpreting the two codes of reality -the natural and the supernatural-present in the narrative. She then substitutes for the term hesitation, which is a reaction on the part of the reader to textual indications, a more satisfactory term, *antinomy*, which refers to the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text. The idea of contradictory codes co-existing within the text facilitates the distinction between the Fantastic and magic realism. Chanady proposes three main criteria to determine whether a text belongs to magic realism or not:

*1.- Presence of two different levels of reality: the natural and the supernatural.*

Magic realism is characterised by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an 'enlightened' and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality. The distinction from the Fantastic lies in the manner in which the irrational world view is perceived by the narrator: whereas in the Fantastic the supernatural is presented as problematic, in magic realism it is not presented as problematic but in a matter-of-fact way which does not disconcert the reader.

*2.- Antinomy: simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text.*

The Fantastic implies an unresolved antinomy: the emphasis is on conflicting world views which cannot be resolved according to the laws posited by the text itself. Contrary to this, magic realism entails a resolved antinomy since the rational and the irrational are not presented as antinomious by the narrator. They are both part of fictional reality. The supernatural appears as normal as the daily events of ordinary life.

*3.- Authorial reticence: absence of obvious judgements about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed in the text.*

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<sup>29</sup>Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York and London: Garland, 1985).

In the Fantastic, authorial reticence creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and disorientation and makes the mysterious more unacceptable. However, in magic realism, authorial reticence facilitates acceptance, since it integrates the supernatural into the code of the natural, which must redefine its borders.

Chanady also addresses a number of characteristics of magic realism that will be explored in more detail throughout this thesis, such as the roles of focaliser, implied author and implied reader, the reliability and subjectivity of the narrator, the reader's identification and the possible contradictions between the mode of representation and the represented world in magic realism.

Once the main conceptions and uses of the term magic realism have been analysed from its origins, and it has been distinguished from Fantastic literature, we can conclude that, employing Spindler's typology, anthropological magic realism is the most current and specific definition of magic realism and is strongly associated with Latin American fiction. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is probably the most representative and influential novel of anthropological magic realism. If we apply the characteristics of magic realism described by Chanady to the concept of anthropological magic realism, we could establish a valid framework with the following main features:

- Dialogic encounter of two cultures, reflected in the language of narration. There is a juxtaposition of a rational view of reality, based on a Western cosmology, and a magical view coming from ancient non-Western systems of belief and folklore. The narrative relies to a great extent on oral tradition, myths and legends of specific ethno-cultural groups.
- Simultaneous presence of two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, which constantly slip into each other. The text contains an indissoluble element of magic, something that cannot be explained rationally according to universal laws. It also contains detailed realistic descriptions which create a fictional world resembling the one we inhabit.
- The insertion of the supernatural is not problematised at all but presented in a matter-of-fact way as part of a coherent *Weltanschauung*. The author demands that the implied reader accept a world view that s/he would normally reject; therefore, the world view described by the narrator must have consistency and

verisimilitude within the fictitious world. The supernatural must be seen as such by the implied reader, who is not the real reader with his/her individual beliefs, but a fictitious construct based on the indications of the text.<sup>30</sup>

- Boundaries are explored and transgressed. The magic realist text exists at the intersection of two realms, the spiritual and the material. There are fluid boundaries between the world of the living and the dead, between animals and human beings, that force the reader to look beyond the limits of the empirically verifiable.
- Received ideas about time, space and identity are questioned. The tension between magic and realism is reflected in the conflict between Western and non-Western concepts of time and space. Notions of identity, especially in relation to race and gender, are explored and challenged.
- Socio-historical dimension and political effectiveness. Magic realist texts take an antibureaucratic position and use magic to subvert the established social order, proving as politically effective as any canonical realist fiction of protest.

The themes treated in magic realist narrative are also an important criterion and some authors are frequently excluded from the category because their texts are not rich in native Latin American content. Lucila-Inés Mena's view is quite common in criticism:

It is also noteworthy that those authors who are most commonly called magic-realists cultivate a range of themes which focus insistently on the American reality through its myths and primitive nature. We could therefore think that the use of the marvellous that this reality provides is *one of the factors* that leads us to consider Rulfo, Carpentier, Asturias and García Márquez as magic-realist writers, while we doubt about the magic-realist connection of Borges, Cortázar, Sábato and Fuentes.<sup>31</sup>

However, why should magic realism be a uniquely Latin American phenomenon? If this literary mode is characterised by the presentation of two world views, it could also be found in other places where more than one ethnic or racial group co-exist.

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<sup>30</sup> The concept of the implied reader as developed by Wolfgang Iser refers to the textual implications which instruct the real reader how to read. See his book *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> Lucila-Inés Mena, 'Hacia una formulación teórica del realismo mágico', *Bulletin Hispanique*, 77 (3-4) (July-Dec 1975), 395-403 (p. 403). My translation.

For instance, Valbuena Briones regards magic realism as 'a universal stream inherent to the human being'.<sup>32</sup>

Lori Chamberlain disputes the implication that magic realism originated in Latin America and was imported to the United States in translation, since there was already a tradition for magic realism starting with Hawthorne and the Gothic tales of Edgar Allan Poe – that is, with certain strands of American Romanticism.<sup>33</sup> In the United States, there is certainly a tradition for magic realism represented by the American romance-novel as defined by Richard Chase, according to whom 'The history of the American novel is not only the history of the rise of realism but also of the repeated rediscovery of the uses of romance.'<sup>34</sup> In the eighteenth century, the Gothic novel contributed important elements to the American romance-novel, such as the supernatural, images from the unconscious mind, ghosts, wild landscapes, and affirmed the value of intuition over reason. Both Hawthorne and Poe were highly influenced by the English Gothic and the German romantics of the nineteenth century such as E.T.A. Hoffmann.<sup>35</sup>

The European Romantic movement played a crucial role in the shaping of the American romance-novel. It wholly rebelled against the restraints of neoclassicism and advocated a love for the wild, strange and grotesque, and an idealisation of the primitive. In Hawthorne's work, we sense the romantic longing for past ideals, his nostalgia for the lost innocence of the New World, together with his desire for an ideal realm that the New World might yet become, a longing also present in contemporary magic realism. The contradictions found in Romanticism are similar to those of magic realism: its imaginative view of the world, informed by an idealist metaphysics and the unity of the world of nature with the world of the spirit, stands in conflict with an empiricist and rationalist epistemology. Hawthorne was deeply

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<sup>32</sup> A. Valbuena Briones, 'Una cala en el realismo mágico', *Cuadernos Americanos*, 166 (5) (Sept-Oct 1969), 233-241 (p. 236). My translation.

<sup>33</sup> Lori Chamberlain, 'Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing', in *Postmodern Fiction*, ed. by Larry McCaffery (London: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 5-21 (p. 9).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. xii. For a useful summary and discussion of romance theorists, including Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase, see Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986).

influenced by the transcendentalist view of the interpenetration of nature and divinity and also by the Puritan allegorical understanding of the visible world as an embodiment of God's invisible purpose. His romance *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) projects the real world of Puritan New England onto a metaphysical landscape. In a famous passage from its prologue, 'The Custom-House', Hawthorne describes the presence of mystery in the commonplace:

Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figure so distinctly,-making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility,- is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests. There is the little domestic scenery of the well-known apartment...all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect...now invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness, though still almost as vividly present as by daylight. Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become 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 might enter here without affrighting us.<sup>36</sup>

In the magic moonlight, real and common objects appear as strange and remote, and the supernatural is made to seem part of everyday life. This 'neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land' seems very close to the space of twentieth-century magic realism and its perception of everyday reality.

Northrop Frye's comments on the genre of romance in *Anatomy of Criticism* are pertinent to this discussion. Frye distinguishes three organisations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature: the undisplaced myth (two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable), the romantic tendency (the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience), and the tendency of realism. Romance is the area that lies between the two extremes of literary design, myth and naturalism, and that refers to the tendency 'to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism", to conventionalize content in an idealized direction'. Frye proposes Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* as an example: 'it is dominated by an interest that looks back to fictional romance and forward to the ironic mythical writers of the next century - to Kafka, for instance, or Cocteau. This interest is often

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of Hoffmann's influence on Hawthorne and Poe, see David Punter, *The Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London and New York: Longman, 1980), pp. 197-213.

<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1962), pp. 35-36.

called allegory'.<sup>37</sup> Magic realism would have a place then within Frye's second category.

Frye also finds in the romance Jung's concepts of libido, anima, and shadow, which implicitly links magic realism to romance and both to Jungian archetypes and allegory.<sup>38</sup> It is relevant to note Frye's appreciation of the political nature of romance: 'Certain elements of character are released in the romance which make it a more revolutionary form than the novel'.<sup>39</sup> Again, we notice a similarity between romance and magic realism, their political potential effected through a mythical connection to communal values and traditions, that is, to the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious.

There are, of course, differences between magic realism and romance, concerning mainly the narrative conventions of romance, drawn directly from eighteenth-century gothic fiction, and the more explicit political critique of magic realism as contrasted with the metaphysical categories of romance. But, as Lois Parkinson Zamora argues, we can talk about a shared project: the expansion and redefinition of our conceptions of subjectivity against the ideological limitations of Cartesian (and Freudian) consciousness, Hegelian historicism, and scientific rationalism.<sup>40</sup>

Parkinson Zamora points out that twentieth-century magic realism is not only a recent flowering of the romance tradition described by Frye, but also of other, and older, non-European and non-literary traditions.<sup>41</sup> Many contemporary American magic realist novels reject the Eurocentric conception of the American land as 'virgin': the New World is not new but old. Consequently, these novels incorporate belief systems that reflect Amerindian attitudes and ritual practices. Modern U.S. culture is the product of a pluralist model that moved indigenous cultures to the

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<sup>37</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 131-140 (pp. 137-8).

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of magic realism in relation to Jung's ideas, see Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1983), pp. 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 304-305.

<sup>40</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction', in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. and intro. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 497-550 (p. 519).

<sup>41</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism', p. 520.

margins, emphasising the idea that the historical memory of Americans is European, not American, an idea that many contemporary novels aim to deconstruct. Contemporary North American magic realism is a combination of traditional native literatures (Native and Mexican American, together with the literatures corresponding to displaced communities such as African and Asian American), the American romance-novel, and influences from Latin American magic realism.

The traditions of counterrealism in the United States and in Latin America seem somehow to differ. Contemporary Latin American magic realism does not rely on a relatively recent romantic flowering analogous to the nineteenth-century U.S. romance tradition we have just discussed nor on its Transcendentalist foundations. Latin American writers have to revert to more distant Spanish sources (Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) and to pre-Hispanic indigenous American mythologies. Latin American magic realism is itself a combination of autochthonic native traditions, Spanish influence from the fifteenth century onwards and the European Surrealism of the beginning of the twentieth century. However, both North and Latin American magic realist writers share the experience of being torn between past and future, between contradictory conceptions of subjectivity. Magic realism's essential commitment seems to be to universality rather than uniqueness. It engages specific cultural, racial and gender distinctions, as will be shown in this thesis, but also a kind of universal project free of stereotypes.

The mode of magic realism characterises a substantial body of contemporary narrative and contributes significantly to postmodernism. In its questioning of the limits of reality, magic realism deals with ontological questions characteristic of postmodernist fiction, as formulated by Brian McHale:

What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?<sup>42</sup>

Magic realism interrogates traditional rationalist definitions of the real and presents alternative models which include magic and the supernatural. It raises questions about the nature of the worlds we inhabit and problematises any notion of a single unified world view or reality. Theo L. D'haen argues that magic realist writing

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<sup>42</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 10.



appropriates the techniques of the central line and uses them, not 'realistically' (that is, duplicating the existing reality as perceived by the dominant discourse), but rather to create an alternative world correcting the so-called existing reality.<sup>43</sup> Whereas realism functions hegemonically, intending its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective and universal representation of natural and social realities, magic realism functions heterogeneously: its programme is not centralising but ex-centric, creating space for interactions and diversity. It makes use of magic as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions. Magic realism is, in Lori Chamberlain's words, 'writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism'.<sup>44</sup>

The magic realist mode is specially suitable to transgressing boundaries: it threatens to undermine the order of mimesis and the cultures which depend on that order. Marginalised voices are allowed to disclose larger worlds, full of greater possibilities than the ones depicted by realistic narratives. The demarcation between fact and fiction is overtly challenged. McHale confirms that magic realism is central to postmodernism when he claims that the hesitation in traditional fantastic writing between this world and the 'world next door' has been displaced to 'the confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of texts.'<sup>45</sup> Magic realist texts exhibit an ontological poetics that pluralises the real and problematises representation. They incorporate a number of characteristics and techniques, such as metafictional dimensions, uses of parody and pastiche, intertextuality, and self-reflexiveness, that situate them within postmodernism.<sup>46</sup>

Magic realism offers a multiplicity of codes that forces a re-visioning of history and motivates political action, urging the reader to create alternative models for reality. Due to these features, it proves to be a literary mode particularly useful to writers who belong to cultures which have been displaced from their land of origins and confined to the borders, that is, 'ex-centric' writers in Linda Hutcheon's sense:

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<sup>43</sup> Theo L. D'haen, 'Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Parkinson Zamora and Faris, pp. 191-208 (p. 195).

<sup>44</sup> Chamberlain, 'Magicking the Real', p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed discussion of magic realism as a component of postmodernism, see Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Parkinson Zamora and Faris, pp. 163-190.

The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the "marginal" and what I will be calling the "excentric" (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, as I have argued, to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community - another postmodern paradox.<sup>47</sup>

The notion of ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margins, has become an essential feature of magic realism as a strain of postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, the move to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralisation with its associated concerns of origin, oneness and monumentality.<sup>48</sup> The contesting of centralisation of culture through the valuing of the local and peripheral promotes multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality. In this way, previously silent groups defined by differences of race, gender, ethnicity or native status are inscribed into history.

Therefore, magic realism is also relevant to the discussion of postcolonial issues. As Suzanne Baker remarks, the term postcolonial is as problematic as magic realism, but broadly speaking, postcolonial writing encompasses a wide range of discursive practices which resist colonialism and colonial ideologies.<sup>49</sup> Magic realism carries an element of resistance toward the imperial centre that makes it most operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions. Postcolonial writers who wish to avoid the inscribed colonial values inherent in the realist mode may opt for the subversive possibilities of magic realism to challenge the restrictions of a circumscribed colonial space. Notions of identity and history are important to postcolonial writers, but perhaps the most dramatic effect of the colonisation process is that the colonised are forced to occupy two conflicting worlds or spaces. Magic realism also creates two fictional worlds which interact and interpenetrate. The reader is offered two systems of possibility, one that aligns with European rationality and another which is incompatible with a conventional Western world view. For Rawdon Wilson, the hybridity that characterises both magic realist

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<sup>47</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 58-61.

<sup>49</sup> Suzanne Baker, 'Binarisms and Duality: Magic Realism and Postcolonialism', *SPAN*, 36 (October 1993), 82-87 (p. 84).

and postcolonial modes of writing indicates strong possibilities for an interweaving of their agendas:

Magical realism can be enlisted in the analysis of postcolonial discourse as the mode of a conflicted consciousness, the cognitive map that discloses the antagonism between two views of culture, two views of history (European history being the routinization of the ordinary; aboriginal or primitive history, the celebration of the extraordinary), and two ideologies.<sup>50</sup>

In the context of postcolonial writing, magic realism highlights the inherent problems created by the imposition of a foreign European world view onto the local reality of the colonised. In a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place in the language of narration, creating two different kinds of fictional world which are incompatible and remain in a continuous dialectic with each other. According to the critic Stephen Slemon, this use of language has important consequences in the context of a comparative postcolonial literary criticism, since colonisation initiates a sort of double vision into colonial culture, a binary opposition within language.<sup>51</sup> The magic realist text can then be read as reflecting in its language of narration real conditions of speech and cognition within the social relations of a postcolonial culture. This dialectic between fictional worlds and within language leads us to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the novel as dialogical discourse.<sup>52</sup> In magic realist fiction, the two separate narrative modes never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy. Both narrative modes, magical and real, are held in suspension without one dominating the other. Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism also have connections with magic realism and can therefore be useful in the analysis of this literary mode.<sup>53</sup>

Contemporary practitioners of magic realism in the United States express their experience of displaced post-coloniality in hybrid narratives which depict a multiplicity of worlds. They are at the same time insiders and outsiders of American

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<sup>50</sup> Rawdon Wilson, 'The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism', in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 209-33 (p. 222).

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by L. Parkinson Zamora and W.B. Faris, pp. 407-426 (p. 411).

<sup>52</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas press, 1981), pp. 259-422.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of magic realism and Bakhtin's formulations, see David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press Kentucky, 1995).

culture and use magic realism as a subversive practice to resist dominant cultural structures. Lori Chamberlain locates the revival of magic realism in the last thirty years as part of the larger context of postmodernism and links it with the emergence of women and writers of colour:

That it is developing a currency in North American literary terminology may reflect both the increasingly fantastical quality of life in late capitalism -where people walk on the moon, go to drive-in churches, and have pet rocks- and the emergence of writing by those who have previously been largely excluded from conventional publishing outlets - women and writers of color, for example.<sup>54</sup>

Magic realism is invested with a political dimension and a subversive potential that make this mode increasingly useful to women writers and, particularly, women from ethnic minorities. They reflect their status as cultural outsiders and as women in narratives that examine questions of race, gender, identity and community. According to Lois Parkinson Zamora, the increasing awareness in the United States of cultural diversity has encouraged (and been encouraged by) writers who foreground multiple and co-existing cultural forms, and contemporary women writers often engage the cultural dynamics of this fact. Multiple cultural perspectives are inseparable from feminist perspectives, since in contemporary fiction by American women, gender overarches and underpins questions of culture, class, and history.<sup>55</sup>

There is certainly an emerging tradition of minority American women authors whose writing is characterised by the use of magic and supernatural events grounded in a specific social reality. In their attempt for self-configuration, women writers need radically different means of expression. Magic realism becomes a suitable literary mode to convey the contradictions and complexities of their lives, which realism cannot adequately contain. In their fiction, they meld together conventions of Western literary practice with narrative strategies particular to their ethnic traditions and incorporate materials from women's culture which have been dismissed as inappropriate by the rigid standards of realism. The incorporation of magic into narrative is subversive because it defies some of the conservative tendencies of realism. Through their use of magic realist techniques, they are able to challenge

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<sup>54</sup> Lori Chamberlain, 'Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing', in *Postmodern Fiction*, ed. by Larry McCaffery (London: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 5-21 (p. 9).

<sup>55</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Introduction: Moveable Boundaries – Public Definitions and Private Lives', in *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, ed. by L Parkinson Zamora (London and New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 1-10 (pp. 1-2).

received perceptions of reality, to unsettle our understanding of history, and offer possibilities for transforming untenable social realities.

The present thesis aims to illustrate the importance of magic realism as an aesthetic for contemporary women's fiction, particularly in the areas of African American, Native American, Chicano and Mexican narrative. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and Ana Castillo make use of their African, Indian or Hispanic heritage in order to present the dislocated reality of such groups in the United States. In common with contemporary Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel, these writers practise a kind of fiction rooted in oral tradition and characterised by the tension between realistic and magical elements that could be well described as anthropological magic realism.

Recent criticism on magic realism has broadened from Latin America to literatures of India, Nigeria, Canada and Japan; this literary mode certainly provides a vast corpus for research. The present study is by no means comprehensive but merely an approach to the uses of magic realism in specific ethnic literary traditions in North America. It should be noticed that a similar analysis can be applied for instance to contemporary Chinese American or Puerto Rican writing which also employs magic realist techniques to reflect cultural clashes in the United States. Furthermore, as Werner Sollors argues, it is difficult to assign a writer to an exclusive ethnic category due to the existing degree of cultural syncretism in today's America.<sup>56</sup> To be an 'American' writer is no longer defined by national borders but by cultural contact. Taking into account such syncretism and the fact that some of the writers selected for this thesis are multiethnic and multicultural, focus will be on three major cultural and literary areas in order to explore the practice of magic realism under different historical and geographical conditions.

African American authors write from a tradition of dislocation and trauma caused by slavery which places them in a unique position in American literature. Their use of magic realism is linked to their attempt to recover traditions and beliefs originated in the African continent. Native American writers express their displacement and marginalisation within their own land and try to retrieve systems of

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<sup>56</sup> Werner Sollors, 'Introduction', *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. by W. Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xv.

belief which have been systematically suppressed by mainstream American culture. Chicano and Mexican authors offer examples of magic realism from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Chicano writers explore their complex identity in a borderland space created by an artificial frontier that divides a cultural group with important ties to Hispanic traditions. Its connections with Mexican literature reveal a telling example of direct influence from Latin American magic realism.

This thesis will provide a brief overview of the various cultural and historical backgrounds in the belief that an understanding of the literary works requires a sound understanding of the history, culture and world view of the authors and their communities. The label magic realism will be used as a convenient critical term from a Western point of view, since I am aware that the term implies a more clear-cut opposition between magic and reality than exists within the texts themselves. For the author who creates magic realist novels, or even more, for the fictional characters who populate them, there might not be a distinction between reality and magic in a Western sense and, therefore, no need to label them as such. We must recognise the dangers inherent in the contradictions between the critical label or categorisation and the literary practice itself. Still, I regard magic realism as an important presence in contemporary world literature that requires critical attention; discussing a wide range of texts and traditions while acknowledging cultural divergences can be an effective way for establishing its viability as an international mode. It should also be noticed that magic realism is often used only sporadically in an author's oeuvre and, consequently, we should refrain from speaking of 'magic realist writers'.

The following chapters concentrate on selected novels which include elements and strategies that exemplify anthropological magic realism as has been defined in this introduction. They can be read as independent units, but gain in scope if considered within a comparative context. By presenting intensive textual analyses, this thesis intends to show various formal and thematic interactions between separate literary cultures that suggest the strength of magic realism in American women's fiction in the late twentieth century.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING**  
**AND MAGIC REALISM**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the metaphor 'double-consciousness' to describe the bicultural identity of black Americans. In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.<sup>1</sup>

Du Bois thus formulated the double consciousness that characterises African American experience, a double vision that is the product of the historical dialectic between black and white cultures. There is a constant tension between two impulses, one to join the mainstream Western society and the other to reject it and define the world entirely from a black perspective. Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor employ and reshape this double-voiced black cultural code in their fiction. They strive for a fusion, a merging of the binary opposites, of the spiritual and material worlds. Through complex narrative structures, they position their novels in relationship to other African American texts that explore means of merging antithetical selves. The mode of magic realism is appropriate to this strategy because it allows the coexistence of opposite world views.

This double-consciousness, although present in other ethnic groups in America, is highly distinctive of the African American trauma of dislocation and cultural transference. For the Africans transported to the New World as slaves, the double vision became a way of survival, of adapting to Western cultural systems while trying to preserve some of their African heritage. African Americans had to create a hybrid reality, one which could accommodate their own experience within mainstream America. Morrison and Naylor employ magic realist strategies in two

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 5.



novels that address the issue of slavery in different ways. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) focuses on a Northern black community in the 1960s which has been uprooted from the South and acculturated. The loss of cultural heritage has implied a near-erasure of the memory of the slavery past; only by travelling back to the South, facing that past and ultimately searching for cultural origins in the African continent, can the protagonist, and by extension the whole community, recover a tradition and build a future. Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) also sets in contrast an urban Northern city and a Southern rural community, but it is innovative in that such rural community is an island populated by descendants of a freed African slave, who have kept their original African culture and remained practically untouched by the Western American civilisation. Therefore, interesting comparative analyses can be established between the novels.

According to Michael Awkward, the African American woman's literary tradition implies a revision of earlier canonical texts as an act of authorial self-definition in a historically overwhelmingly male expressive tradition.<sup>2</sup> African American female writers provide refigurations of precursorial texts by black women (Zora Neale Hurston, for instance) and at the same time undertake revisionary adaptations of Western genres to reflect black cultural imperatives. In Morrison's and Naylor's novels, there is a deliberate effort to rework Western traditional genres and canonical texts with both a literary and ethnical subversive aim. From a literary point of view, they engage in a revisionary project of Western narratives that undermines dominant myths, deconstructs assumptions about African Americans, and foregrounds oral tradition and specific African American literary practices. At the same time, their presentation of alternative dimensions of reality conveys a prioritisation of ethnic specificity. In this context, the mode of magic realism, where multiple perspectives are possible, is particularly effective in creating hybrid texts and allowing a larger reality than the one implicit in Western realistic narratives.

For Bernard Bell, the Afro-American novel is not merely a branch of the Euro-American novel but also a development of the Afro-American oral tradition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences. Tradition, Revision, and the Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. xiii.

Bell explains the richness of the Afro-American novel within an anthropological context as it is derived from the sedimented indigenous roots of black American folklore and literary genres of the Western world. Oral and literary conventions structure the distinctive double-consciousness of its sociocultural content. Oral narratives are an important means of maintaining the continuity of traditional African cultures. Myths about the founders of an ethnic group or lineage, legends, folktales and other forms of verbal art transmit knowledge from one generation to another. In her article 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', Morrison states the main distinctive elements of African American writing:

There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance...To use, even formally, a chorus. The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead....the presence of an ancestor...And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

These four traits - oral quality, participation of the reader, the chorus and the presence of an ancestor - characterise *Song of Solomon* and *Mama Day* and will be closely examined in the following analysis. These features are highly relevant to the anthropological magic realist mode, with its emphasis on the process of storytelling, links with the community and cultural background, and interaction with the reader.

The bicultural tradition is therefore patent in the mixture of oral and literary styles, American and African themes and, most relevant to this discussion, in the coexistence of two codes of reality, which include the natural and the supernatural. In the aforementioned essay, Morrison mentions her struggle to create an identifiably black style in her writing, which was mostly successful in *Song of Solomon*:

because of the construction of the book and the tone in which I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had;

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<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Black Women Writers*, ed. by Mary Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1983), pp. 339-345 (pp. 341-3).

discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was “discredited.”<sup>5</sup>

This blend of the magic and the real corresponds perfectly to the concept of anthropological magic realism. Both Morrison and Naylor approach the marvellous through the everyday, placing it within their cultural context. Reality is solidly rooted in the world of African Americans, in black cultural traditions. And this world is not a fantastic one but rather one closely linked to cultural and communal traditions. *Song of Solomon* and *Mama Day* bring to the fore African myths and beliefs, conjuring and voodoo practices, folklore and storytelling, as a way of valorising ‘discredited knowledge’, that is, material unrecognised by dominant cultural practice.

Morrison and Naylor imbue their fiction with a political purpose in order to show the socio-historical contradictions experienced by colonised people. They create specifically female spaces from where they can confront their own cultural heritage together with their identity as women. Thus their writing, as the product of a female consciousness, extends the political resonance of black writing in general in order to foreground a particularly gendered response to ethnic specificity. They employ magic realist strategies to force a re-visioning of history and urge the reader to create alternative models of reality in which previously silenced groups recover their voices.

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<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’, pp. 342.

**2.1.**

**WHAT IS TRUE AND WHAT A PRODUCT OF OUR  
IMAGINATION?: TONI MORRISON'S  
*SONG OF SOLOMON* (1977)**

“I remember doing laundry for a man and his wife once, down in Virginia. The husband came into the kitchen one afternoon shivering and saying did I have any coffee made. I asked him what was it that had grabbed hold of him, he looked so bad. He said he couldn’t figure it out, but he felt like he was about to fall off a cliff. Standing right there on that yellow and white and red linoleum, as level as a flatiron. He was holding on to the door first, then the chair, trying his best not to fall down. I opened my mouth to tell him wasn’t no cliff in that kitchen. Then I remembered how it was being in those woods. I felt it all over again. So I told the man did he want me to hold on to him so he couldn’t fall. He looked at me with the most grateful look in the world. ‘Would you?’ he said. I walked around back of him and locked my fingers in front of his chest and held on to him... But soon’s I let go he fell dead-weight to the floor. Smashed his glasses and everything. Fell right on his face. And you know what? He went down so slow. I swear it took three minutes, three whole minutes to go from a standing upright position to when he smashed his face on the floor. I don’t know if the cliff was real or not, but it took him three minutes to fall down it.”<sup>1</sup>

This story told by Pilate to Guitar and Milkman in their first encounter contains the major characteristics of anthropological magic realism. The levels of reality and fantasy are blended without any problematisation. It represents a quotidian situation in an ordinary kitchen, described with realistic detail, with ‘yellow and white and red linoleum’. Pilate is also doing an ordinary activity, the laundry. However, something certainly out of the ordinary takes place: a man feels as if he is falling from a cliff. Pilate’s initial disbelief is quickly dispelled; she has been through an equally terrifying situation in the woods and does the most logical thing to do: she holds him to preventing him from falling. But his wife does not understand nor believe and the result is tragic: Pilate lets go and the man falls down and dies. Again, we are given all the realistic detail, he smashes his glasses, and what is more, the time stretches: it takes him three minutes to fall and hit the floor - the height of a cliff. Pilate does not know if the cliff was real or not, but without doubt, he falls from *it*, since it takes him three minutes to fall down *it*. It is interesting to note how whether or not the cliff was real does not make any difference. What is important is the intensity of the faith shared by Pilate and this man, which we as readers are expected to believe. And this is the main strategy of magic realist writing. Furthermore, this passage refers to a very specific location, Virginia, and in doing so, captures the essence of the Southern rural heritage, a major topic developed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Picador, 1989), pp. 41-42. All subsequent references will be to this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

novel. Through the skilful description of Pilate's language and vision, the combination of earthiness and spirituality characteristic of the black South is foregrounded.

In magic realist writing, the community accepts and confirms what is commonly regarded as lying outside the parameters of reality in the Western world. Likewise, the readers become absorbed by the cosmology of the community and participate in such belief. Darwin T. Turner comments on Toni Morrison: 'Above all, she commands the storyteller's skill to persuade a reader to suspend disbelief by discovering credibility in the magic of the tale.'<sup>2</sup> The question of faith becomes essential in the understanding of such a mode as magic realism. Readers have to leave behind their notions of what is logical or real according to Western parameters. At the same time, they enter a world which is not fantastic but, on the contrary, deeply rooted in the world of African Americans and black cultural traditions.

*Song of Solomon* represents the dialogic encounter of two cultures, African and Western, through the use of African myths and European legends and fairy tales. Morrison employs magic realist strategies in her insertion of Western myths within an African American framework with the aim of valorising a so far discredited knowledge. She combines the acceptance of the supernatural with a profound rootedness in the real world, producing a mixture of fairy tale and family chronicle very close to García Márquez's saga of the Buendías. Morrison bases her strategy on the beliefs of the black community and its way of viewing reality, thus claiming a particular cosmology that accommodates magic within the quotidian reality. This involves an ontological question: how do we name the world around us? Where lies the power to define reality and perception? What is true and what a product of our imagination?

The blending of two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, implies a transgression of boundaries: spiritual/material, life/death, animate/inanimate, subject/object, truth/fiction. It also implies a peculiar treatment of time and space, outside Western parameters. Morrison employs characteristics of black literature: a deliberate oral quality, based on storytelling; a chorus with a leading role; the

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<sup>2</sup> Darwin T. Turner, 'Theme, Characterization, and Style in the Works of Toni Morrison', in *Black Women Writers*, ed. by Mary Evans (London: Pluto Press: 1983), pp. 361-369 (p. 361).

presence of an ancestor; the participation of the reader. *Song of Solomon* acquires political dimensions by dealing with a number of social and historical topics, such as the loss of black culture as a result of the migration to the North, the clash between social classes, the emergence of black political activism, the role of black women, or the achievement of identity as a communal gesture. Strongly influenced by the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s, *Song of Solomon* offers a powerful combination of Afro-centric and feminist politics, which brings to the fore the political potential of magic realism.

## STRUCTURE AND GENRE

*Song of Solomon* is divided into two parts. The first part presents Milkman from his birth in 1931 up to the age of 31 in the urban environment of Michigan. The second part describes Milkman's journey into the rural South, to the towns of Danville and Shalimar. The static motifs of the first part are set in contrast with the dynamic treatment of the action in the second. Chiara Spallino interprets this structure as an interplay between two time-levels: family past and mythic past. The family past blocks the action and implies an annulment of time and a denial of future. Milkman (and his parents and sisters) are prisoners of time and materialism. The mythic past, hinted by Pilate, opens spaces and activates the development of the narration by pushing the protagonist towards the quest. According to Spallino, in the second part of the novel, the mythic past does absorb the family past.<sup>3</sup>

The novel observes the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* genre. We follow Milkman, the male protagonist, from his birth through his childhood to his maturity, in an archetypal process of separation, initiation, and return. As in the classical myths, the hero has a mysterious and near-miraculous birth (he is conceived with the help of a magic potion), an older figure is his guide during his journey, he has to solve a succession of riddles and undergo different rites of passage, and finally he receives a woman as a reward for his courage. Milkman pursues an elusive gold

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<sup>3</sup> Chiara Spallino, 'Song of Solomon: an Adventure in Structure', *Callaloo*, 8 (3) (1985), 510-524 (p. 511).

treasure until he discovers the more important goal of identity. He reaches this conclusion through his long and mythical journey, both physical (to the Southern community where his family lived) and figurative (from innocence and ignorance to awareness and knowledge).

The text recalls the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus and their desire to fly. There is a clear reference to *The Odyssey* in the figure of Circe. There are also direct and covert allusions to European fairy tales, such as Hansel and Gretel, Rumpelstiltskin, Goldilocks, the King of the Mountain and Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. Biblical imagery is strong: the title of the novel itself seems to allude to the biblical Song of Solomon - a highly erotic love poem- and the names of principal women are taken from the Bible: Pilate, Ruth, Rebecca, Hagar, First Corinthians, Magdalena.

What is the purpose of this deliberate amalgam of myths and traditions? Morrison has pointed out that she pretended to give 'the sense of a mixture of cosmologies'.<sup>4</sup> I am inclined to think that Morrison intends to question the validity of traditional Western myths as carriers/models of 'universal' values. They are clearly inadequate to describe the experience of an oppressed and marginalised minority. These myths and beliefs were imposed on the Africans dragged to America. However, they still kept their original myths and that is why the myth of the flying African, the slave who regained freedom by literally flying back to Africa, becomes the leitmotif of *Song of Solomon*. Morrison subverts the traditional myths by locating Solomon's flight at the forefront of her novel as a magical event which is part of the black community reality. In numerous interviews, Morrison insists in the veracity of the flying myth:

I also wanted to use black folklore, the magical and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. Once a woman asked me, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' I said, 'Yes. Do you believe in germs?' It's part of our heritage. That's why flying is the central metaphor in *Song* - the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody's dream'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas LeClair, 'The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison' (1981), in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 1994), pp. 119-128 (p. 126).

<sup>5</sup> Mel Watkins, 'Talk with Toni Morrison' (1977), in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. by Taylor-Guthrie, pp. 43-47 (p. 46).



It is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts.<sup>6</sup>

*Song of Solomon* is based upon the legend of Solomon, the main character's great-grandfather, an African slave who 'flew' back to Africa using his own power. The legend has been recorded as a folk song, 'Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone', sung by the children of Shalimar, a town which has kept the name of this mythical slave (however, phonetically modified). Morrison draws here on the many African American folktales about escaping flying slaves. The power of flying has always had connections with freedom.

The novel presents a circular structure characteristic of oral and mythical traditions: it begins with a man, Robert Smith, flying off a roof and ends with Milkman flying off Solomon's Leap. The first scene, centred on the events surrounding the protagonist's birth, is particularly relevant because it introduces all the thematic and symbolic elements developed throughout the novel (the flight motif, naming as a means to power, history, racial clash, song as part of oral tradition) and also the major magic realist narrative techniques. It introduces us immediately to the idea of a binary world of realism/fantasy. As Morrison herself points out, the opening declarative sentence 'The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock' (3) is a parody of the opening of an item in a small-town newspaper.<sup>7</sup> The novel, then, starts with the tone of an everyday event of minimal local interest; however, the action is certainly out of the ordinary: a man is going to fly off from a roof in what appears to be an announced suicide, since two days before, he had tacked a note on his door specifying the exact date (Wednesday the 18th February, 1931), time (3.00 p.m.) and place (Mercy), when he would fly with his 'own wings'. This first sentence also contains the key words of the novel: Life, Mutual, fly, Mercy. Furthermore, it conveys the sense of a paradoxical movement, from North Carolina (South) to Lake Superior (North), and a reference to the slave escape route.

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<sup>6</sup> LeClair, in *Conversations...*, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', in *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), pp. 201-230 (p. 224).

The next sentence after the announcement links the action to a true historical event: Lindbergh's flight four years earlier. And then we are given a superb description of the carnivalesque street scene in the purest magic realist mode. Realistic details of daily life provide the setting, 'Children were in school; men were at work; and most of the women were fastening their corsets and getting ready to go see what tails or entrails the butcher might be giving away' (3-4). The narrative introduces next a major theme in the novel: the power of names to define reality and perception. The street where the only coloured doctor in town lived, Mains Avenue, was called Doctor Street by the black population. The city legislators forbade such name in an absurd attempt to impose its official name. The reaction was to call it Not Doctor Street. Similarly, the charity hospital was called No Mercy Hospital because it did not accept coloured people. Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital are signals of subversiveness through language by oppressed groups, in this case, the black community, and provide an instance of competing notions of reality, of how we call the world around us.

Following the street scene, the emergence of Mr. Smith with his blue silk wings ready to leap from the hospital roof provokes a shock in a heavily pregnant woman, the Negro doctor's daughter, who drops her basket, spilling red velvet rose petals on the snow. The scene acquires a surrealistic pictorial quality through the use of colour. In Morrison's words, 'the composition of red, white and blue in the opening scene provides the national canvas/flag upon which the narrative works and against which the lives of these black people must be seen.'<sup>8</sup> There is also a marked contrast between the tragedy about to occur and the description of the scene as 'nice and gay' (5), almost circus-like, which seems characteristic of magic realist texts.

In the middle of this outrageous tableaux of the spectators collecting velvet petals while the man on the roof is about to jump, a woman suddenly bursts into a song. Her appearance is bizarre: she wears a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead and is wrapped up in an old quilt. We will later find out that she is Pilate, Milkman's aunt and spiritual guide. Her song, 'O Sugarman done fly away' contains the key to Milkman's search and also to the understanding of the novel.

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<sup>8</sup> Morrison, 'Unspeakable...', p. 225.

We also get some glimpse of white people, the hospital staff and their sense of superiority and contempt for the black. Through the character of a boy, Guitar, who will become Milkman's best friend and eventually his antagonist, we witness the racist attitude of the hospital nurses. The main characters and topics of the novel have been presented and, finally, the scene comes to an end: 'Mr. Smith had seen the rose petals, heard the music, and leaped on into the air' (9).

The whole situation precipitates Milkman's early birth, which makes history as he is the first coloured baby born inside Mercy Hospital. Mr. Smith's attempt to fly leaves a mark on Milkman and sets the objective of his search, 'when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier -that only birds and airplanes could fly- he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull' (9). Following the archetypal hero, Milkman's birth is thus surrounded by mystery. The book's opening scene anticipates the theme and strategies employed in the novel. Alongside the familiar and normal, it includes strange or abnormal (if not specifically supernatural) elements, which will be developed throughout the story to overtly include the magical.

## **TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES**

The main characteristic of magic realist writing, the coexistence of two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, becomes patent through the transgression of borders. The narrative constantly slips from one code to the other, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, life and death, material and spiritual. The opposition between animate and inanimate becomes neutralised as, for instance, in the mysterious large water mark on the mahogany table of Ruth's house: it seems to have a life of its own and functions as a mooring, a checkpoint to assure her that this was life and not a dream. Over the years, the water mark comes to epitomise Ruth's life:

Even in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she felt its presence. Oh, she talked endlessly to her daughters and her guests about how to get rid of it-...it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes. But it could also be still. Patient, restful, and still. (11-13)

There is a pronounced communication between the realm of the living and of the dead, which is not questioned by the characters or the narrator. Numerous ghosts occur in the story and illustrate this point. The town gossip, Freddie, explains to Milkman how his mother was killed by ghosts, by a 'woman turned into a white bull' (110). Milkman reacts with certain doubts to the truth of the existence of ghosts. However, as the story progresses, he ends up believing in such 'other' reality. That is mainly due to Pilate's contact with the ghost of her dead father. She has multiple encounters with him and seeks his help. It is interesting to note how these ghost figures are introduced in realistic detail, as something quotidian and natural. For instance, Pilate describes his father as wearing 'a white shirt, a blue collar, and a brown peaked cap. He wore no shoes (they were tied together and slung over his shoulder), probably because his feet hurt, since he rubbed his toes a lot as he sat near her bed or on the porch, or rested against the side of the still' (150). A supernatural apparition is presenting as wearing a shirt and a cap and in such a 'human' gesture as rubbing his toes. Moreover, Pilate expresses no surprise at seeing him thus. This magic realist strategy turns the supernatural into an earthly, daily event.

Consequently, Milkman accepts this other reality without any doubt, up to the point of exclaiming: 'Jesus! here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century, trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well?' (294). Pilate's lack of a navel is certainly the most daring of the supernatural features inserted within the natural level. It is a fact: Pilate has no navel, and the reader is never allowed to question it. The evidence is overwhelming: her brother Macon, witness of her birth, states so, as do all the communities where Pilate tries to live. The whole concept is audacious because it turns Pilate, the sensible and down-to-earth Pilate, into an otherworldly entity. Morrison has commented on this issue in various interviews:

The navel allowed me to introduce the fantastic early in the novel. It meant that Pilate could be 'inside and outside' at the same time. She was 'innocent wisdom'.<sup>9</sup>

It also had to come at the beginning of the book so the reader would know to expect anything of her. It had to be a thing that was very powerful in its absence but of no

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<sup>9</sup> Sandi Russell, 'It's OK to say OK' (1986), in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988), pp. 43-47 (p. 44).

consequence in its present. It couldn't be anything grotesque, but something to set her apart, to make her literally invent herself.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of the navel, the sign of primeval connection, gives Pilate the status of a Creation Goddess, the Great Mother: the origin, much in Eve's fashion. In fact, Macon, characterised by his materialistic and practical nature, describes Pilate's coming to this world as an act of birthing herself:

he was there and had seen the eyes of the midwife as his mother's legs collapsed. And heard as well her shouts when the baby, who they had believed was dead also, inched its way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her...Once the new baby's lifeline was cut, the cord stump shriveled, fell off, and left no trace of having ever existed. (28)

Nevertheless, the lack of navel implies a non-natural birth and alienates her: people do not want to be 'in the company of something God never made' (144). The community in *Song of Solomon* respects but also fears Pilate's powers; they know not to fool with anything that belongs to Pilate, 'who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga - all on account of the fact that she had no navel' (94). Her supernatural powers are contrasted to her simple daily life: a winemaker in a modest house where there is not even electricity or sheets in her bed. Pilate reinvents herself and her life; she chooses how to live her existence and that gives her the innocent wisdom mentioned by Morrison. Significantly, Pilate and her female household live in the outskirts of the city, on the borders. As a woman born without a navel, she is in some ways exempt from the rules which govern this world and inhabits a liminal territory. The community's mistrust of Pilate suggests a fracture between an earlier folk culture and a more modern agnosticism favoured by Western culture, a fracture that Morrison's magic realism tries to mend. The reader is enabled to negotiate between the two spheres with regard to Pilate, in a way that the community is not.

According to Joseph T. Skerrett, Pilate is feared because her personal power goes beyond the conventions of her gender.<sup>11</sup> She is a conjuror, who can concoct a successful love charm for Ruth to give to her husband Macon and conceive a child. Pilate is also a voodoo priest who can use black magic to threaten Macon when he is

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<sup>10</sup> Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (Harpenden: Oldcastle Books, 1983), p. 128.

trying to make his wife abort. She prepares a voodoo doll and puts it on Macon's chair:

A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between his legs and a round red circle painted on his belly. Macon knocked it out of the chair and with a yardstick pushed it into the bathroom, where he doused it with alcohol and burned it. It took nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides. But he must have remembered the round fire-red stomach, for he left Ruth alone after that. (132)

The narrator uses a matter-of-fact way to describe a black magic device and a supernatural event: highly inflammable materials like straw and cotton take an uncanny number of times to set off in fire. The direct style, without any hint of unreality, turns the scene into a perfectly ordinary one.

Pilate is the paradigmatic folk heroine, the trickster as hero, who can outwit men and assert her role of strong woman. The most significant magic realist device used to portray Pilate is possibly her protean ability to change in size. The first time Milkman sees Pilate, he is impressed by her height: 'She was as tall as his father, head and shoulders taller than himself' (38), and makes him feel tall too (50). After Milkman and Guitar steal Pilate's sack of bones, believing it is full of gold, Pilate goes to the commissary and puts up an Aunt Jemima act in order to take them out from jail. Her pitiful story about a lynched dead husband, whose bones she has to carry around for lack of money for a coffin, is accompanied by all the signs considered as characteristic of black mammas by white people back from the slavery times: her quotations from the Bible, her incorrect use of language ('funeral peoples'), her servile way of addressing the policemen 'Yassuh, boss. Yassuh, boss...' (205). But what most strikes Milkman is her change of appearance and voice, which symbolises her submissive attitude: 'She looked short. Short and pitiful' (205). Furthermore, she does not look different, she *is* different as if by magic:

Pilate *had* been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder -and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was. When she whined to the policeman, verifying Milkman's and Guitar's lie that they had ripped off the sack as a joke on an old lady, she had to look up at him... Even her eyes, those big sleepy old eyes were small as she went on. (206-7)

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., 'Recitation of the *Griot*: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 192-202 (p. 198).

When Pilate manages to get the boys out from prison, all of them get in Macon's car and another amazing change takes place as she is back to her old self: 'Pilate was tall again. The top of her head, wrapped in a silk rag, almost touched the roof of the car, as did theirs. And her own voice was back' (207).

Pilate is associated with food and represents the figure of motherly nurture in the folk tradition. She is always offering and eating oranges or peaches and she is frequently described in the activity of cooking or brewing wine. The first time Milkman and Guitar see Pilate, she is peeling a bright orange. Milkman is mesmerised by her action: 'he could have watched her all day: the fingers pulling thread veins from the orange sections, the berry-black lips that made her look as though she wore make-up, the earring ...' (38). Her conversation with the boys turns around the boiling of a perfect egg. The quotidian act of making a soft-boiled egg acquires magical dimensions as Pilate interweaves detailed cooking instructions with her storytelling, full of references to supernatural events such as the man falling from a cliff mentioned earlier, her dead father's apparitions or her daughter Reba's uncanny luck in winning contests. The procedure required to boil a perfect egg runs parallel to her preoccupation for transmitting her story, her past, to the children and make them understand the importance of language and oral tradition. Pilate thus performs the role of the griot within the African tradition.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the egg functions as a symbol for the rebirth that Milkman will eventually undergo.

Pilate is also connected with nature and particularly with trees. Her house smells of forest and fermenting fruit and she is constantly chewing pine needles. Even her name resembles a tree. Her father, who could not read, chose 'a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees' (18). In African mythology, trees often provide links between the living and spiritual worlds, and it is in that middle space where Pilate inhabits.

The merging of the spiritual and material worlds is also evident in the treatment of dreams. Morrison considers the spiritual forces as the reality, what informs your sensibility: 'I grew up in a house in which people talked about their

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<sup>12</sup> *Griot* (O.E.D.): A member of a class of travelling poets, musicians, and entertainers in North and West Africa, whose duties include the recitation of tribal and family histories; an oral folk-historian or village story-teller.

dreams with the same authority that they talked about what “really” happened.’<sup>13</sup> Dreams juxtapose realistic detail with magical resonances. The frontier between dream and reality is not defined at all, as when Milkman explains a dream he had about his mother to Guitar: ‘he began to describe to Guitar a dream he had had about his mother. He called it a dream because he didn’t want to tell him it had really happened, that he had really seen it’ (104). In that dream/reality (we are never further told if it did or did not ‘really’ take place), Ruth is suffocated by growing bloody red tulips in her garden, while she seems to enjoy it. Milkman does not help her; he stands passively looking at her. The scene has surrealistic resonances with the colour red and the gigantic tulips, and functions as a symbol of Milkman’s selfishness and irresponsibility towards his mother. It is also connected with a previous scene with the same dreamlike quality. After hitting his father, Milkman goes to the street to look for Guitar. There he realises that everybody is crammed on one side of the street, going in the direction he is coming from, while the other side is completely empty. He feels anxious about that and cannot understand it, but ‘Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all’ (78). Milkman definitely thinks that everybody, his parents, his sisters, his friends, are going in the wrong direction and not he. He has problems of distinguishing reality from waking dreams, as when he sees the white peacock. Only when Guitar sees the bird as well, does Milkman believe in its tangible reality. A white peacock poised on the roof of a used-car building in the middle of town seems to defy again the borders between fact and imagination. The bird becomes a recurrent image to symbolise vanity and the need for Milkman to get rid of his materialistic approach if he wants to find his true identity. Guitar explains its inability to fly: ‘Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down’ (179).

The transgression of boundaries characteristic of magic realism implies a constant slippage between the natural and the supernatural. An example of how such

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<sup>13</sup> Christina Davis, ‘An Interview with Toni Morrison’, 1986, in *Conversations...*, ed. by Taylor-Guthrie, pp. 223-233 (p. 226).



slippage is enacted through the creation of an eerie atmosphere occurs when Milkman and Guitar go at night to Pilate's house to steal her sack. The scene is set by means of magic realist techniques: an inexplicable spice-sweet smell invades the city on autumn nights, 'An odor like crystalized ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark tea clove floating in it' (184). There is no rational explanation for this smell, which is brought by the wind from the lake. It seems to be invested with magical powers and have a life of its own:

So the ginger sugar blew unnoticed through the streets, around the trees, over roofs, until, thinned out and weakened a little, it reached Southside. ... And there the ginger smell was sharp, sharp enough to distort dreams and make the sleeper believe the things he hungered for were right at hand. To the Southside residents who were awake on such nights, it gave all their thoughts and activity a quality of being both intimate and far away. (184-85)

The ginger smell is associated with the dead in African cultures. Bonnie Barthold notes that the conjunction of a sweet, spicy scent with the spirits of the dead is an aspect of black folk belief.<sup>14</sup> The ginger scent is the narrative signal that marks Milkman's presence in front of the dead. It figures prominently in *Song of Solomon*: it surrounds Circe and her house and envelops Pilate and Milkman in the last scene, just before they are shot down (335). There is a recurrent image pattern that associates sweetness with death. Guitar cannot eat candy because it brings him memories of his father's death. After his father was literally sliced into two in a mill accident, his mother bought candy for the children with the compensation money the white sawmill owner had given her. The peppermint stick becomes 'the bone-white and blood-red stick' (225) and is forever linked to death and black servility in Guitar's mind. Also, Pilate sings 'sugarman' instead of Solomon in several occasions preceding a death and, in Hagar's funeral, she sings to her as 'my sweet sugar lumpkin' (318).

As Milkman and Guitar wait to break into Pilate's house, time stretches: 'they stood for what seemed to them a very long time' (185). They enter through an open window and are surprised by a deep darkness. The moon then comes out and shines like a flashlight. The uncanny atmosphere created resembles that neutral territory described by Hawthorne in his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, '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 might enter here without affrighting us.’<sup>15</sup> The boys manage to get the sack down and then two unexplained events occur: someone sighs and there seems to be a man standing next to them:

there was a huge air sigh that each one believed was made by the other. Milkman handed his knife to Guitar, who closed it and tucked it in his back pocket. There was the deep sigh again and even a more piercing chill. ... Once Guitar had cleared the sill, he reached back to help Milkman over. The moonlight was playing tricks on him, for he thought he saw the figure of a man standing right behind his friend.’ (186)

The omniscient narrator has a position of superiority over the characters which is shared with the reader. *There is* a sigh (which they mistake for each other’s) and *there is* the figure of a man (the narrative makes it clear in other instances that the sack is always associated with the man in the cave). The characters themselves inhabit a magic realist space without being aware of it, while the narrator provides the reader with the certainty of the existence of such space. Like Pilate’s changing size and the crowds in the street scene just referred to, this is a place where the characters seem to accept the paranormal as normal, even though they do not understand it.

The first chapter of Part II is particularly telling in its magic realist structure. The first paragraphs introduce us into a fairy tale landscape, that of Hansel and Gretel and the house made of sweets. As Milkman approaches Circe’s house, the atmosphere is uncanny and nature takes on a menacing life:

Milkman ducked under the boughs of black walnut trees and walked straight towards the big crumbling house. He knew that an old woman had lived in it once, but he saw no signs of life there now. He was oblivious to the universe of wood life that did live there in layers of ivy grown so thick he could have sunk his arm in it up to the elbow. Life that crawled, life that slunk and crept and never closed its eyes. Life that burrowed and scurried, and life so still it was indistinguishable from the ivy stems on which it lay. Birth, life, and death - each took place on the hidden side of a leaf. From where he stood, the house looked as if it had been eaten by a galloping disease, the stores of which were dark and fluid. (219-220)

This frightening setting, that makes Milkman’s (and the reader’s) little hair at the nape shiver, is temporarily suspended. For the next ten pages, we go back to the reassuring urban space and the preparations for Milkman’s journey. We are told about his last conversation with Guitar before departing, about his flight, his first contact with the South, the Reverend Cooper and the people in Danville who

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<sup>14</sup> Bonnie J. Barthold, *Black Time. Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 176.

remember his father and grandfather and give him an invaluable picture of his past and his links. This detour of the narrative is important because it provides realistic details: facts, figures, dates, distances in miles, names of places. Reverend Cooper's account gives credibility to Pilate's and Macon's story; what seemed far-fetched takes on reality. For the first time, Milkman believes the story about caves, woods, earrings and wild turkeys, 'Here in the parsonage, sitting in a cane-bottomed chair near an upright piano and drinking homemade whiskey poured from a mayonnaise jar, it was real' (231), and starts his personal development. Also from Reverend Cooper, a reliable narrator, we get the information that Circe must be dead, since she was already a hundred when he was a boy. All these realistic facts establish the contrast with the next scene, in Circe's house, probably the most fantastic one in the novel.

The house belonged to the white family, the Butlers, who had murdered Macon's and Pilate's father. It was also the house where Circe worked as a maid and hid the children for some time after the assassination. Milkman enters the place, now in ruins, and after an initial suffocating animal smell, he notices a sweet spicy perfume, like ginger root (again, an indicative that he is in presence of the dead). He sees then a witch that attracts him upstairs and embraces him, but, although he has the feeling that it is a dream, he does not wake up. It is true. Surrounded by golden-eyed dogs, there is this impossibly old woman. Milkman debates between dream and reality:

Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead - as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (240)

What seems a supernatural apparition, does however have the attributes of a person, and one who was a midwife and a healer. Circe's conversation with Milkman follows a logic and she does not seem to be insane at all. She is merely taking revenge on the Butlers family by letting their house go to ruins. She also gives Milkman precise information about the name of his grandparents, their place of origin and accurate instructions to get to the cave.

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<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1962), p. 36.

The scene could be classified as belonging to the pure fantastic, according to Todorov's description.<sup>16</sup> That, however, implies that there is a reader's hesitation, since the Fantastic requires the reader (and often also a character) to decide whether or not the events described derive from 'reality' as it is commonly perceived. If the reader decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit a logical explanation, the work belongs to the genre of the uncanny; if s/he decides that new laws of nature are necessary to account for the phenomena, the text conforms to the genre of the marvellous. In Circe's case, the reader faces the improbable fact of a woman who is around one hundred and sixty years old. Does this have a logical explanation? Or is it left as an unexplained event? The narrative does not question Circe's reality: she does exist. If Milkman hesitates at the beginning, thinking that she might be a witch from his dreams, his doubts are soon dispelled. This is the woman who delivered and looked after Macon and Pilate: she gives reality to their past and the clue to finding their ancestors. We must then account for her age by considering new laws of nature and, in doing so, classifying this passage within the genre of the marvellous.

Chiara Spallino gives an alternative explanation by considering Circe a ghost.<sup>17</sup> According to Spallino, the balance of the narration wavers constantly between the two poles of the pure fantastic and of the mythic: in the episode of the encounter with Circe, the historical reference disappears and the reader is confronted with a perfect example of the pure fantastic. It seems reasonable to argue that Circe is dead, especially because she is associated with a ginger smell. If so, she is a ghost, an apparition or a living dead. This would offer another example of the reciprocity between the world of the living and the dead, blurring boundaries between material and spiritual. However, the historical reference does not disappear altogether. Circe has a reason to exist as a reminder of the slavery past (she was herself a slave of the ironically called Butlers family) and as the only agent of retaliatory action carried out against the white landowners. Furthermore, the narrative makes it obvious that Circe is expecting to die soon, since she is worried about being devoured by the dogs before someone finds her body. Therefore, the narrative still remains within a realistic frame and should be considered as magic realist rather than pure fantastic.

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<sup>16</sup> See Todorov's diagram in the Introduction, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Spallino, *Song of Solomon: An Adventure in Structure*, p. 519.

Magic realism forces the reader to create alternative models for reality, worlds which are larger and full of more possibilities than the quotidian world he or she inhabits.

## TIME AND SPACE

Milkman travels back in space and time, in search of his roots and his ancestors. Dialectical relationships are established between present and past, North and South. Milkman's trip from North to South represents a journey into the past and also a return to Africa. He abandons his individualistic and materialistic urban environment to become involved with the black community as the only way to find his identity. For Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, Milkman's linear journey from North to South is paralleled by a movement through increasingly smaller social circles that instead of suffocating him, lead him to transcend death in his final flight and to embrace the life of humanity.<sup>18</sup> Time and space fuse gradually together and acquire historical dimensions.

In the treatment of time, we find the characteristic magic realist combination of linear and circular time. The novel as a *Bildungsroman* requires a chronological structure which follows the protagonist from his birth to his achievement of maturity and possible death. However, the narrative continuously meanders with other sorts of time, eternal, circular, typical of fairy tales and legends. This is particularly noticeable in the second part of the novel, when Milkman enters the deep South and with it another sphere where time seems more fluid. Time also acquires materiality, as can be observed in Pilate's carrying her past with her in the form of stones and bones, or in the idea of the Seven Days and their expression 'Your Day has come'; depending on which day of the week a black person was killed, the corresponding man of the society is the one in charge to perpetrate a similar crime - Guitar is the Sunday man.

The novel starts with a precise date and time, 18th February 1931, at 3 p.m. Different historical references locate the action temporally, such as post-Depression or Second World War times. There are also seasonal allusions, like Christmas, and

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<sup>18</sup> Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, "'Life life life life': The Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*", in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. by Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988), pp. 125-133 (p.125).

the precise age of Milkman is constantly indicated. The linear time symbolised by calendars seems to be oppressive for characters. Porter has his room wall-papered with calendars. Milkman's sisters, Magdalena called Lena and First Corinthians, are imprisoned in time, condemned forever to make red velvet roses. Their father's materialistic conception of life implies that time is money. His grey and desolate house is set in contrast with Pilate's, always warm and full of music and where, significantly, there are no clocks, no set times for meals or sleeping, no order. It represents women's time in Kristeva's conception.<sup>19</sup> It also links Pilate with the mythical past of their African ancestors and with nature. Pilate's intimacy with nature underscores her spiritual development, metaphorically linking her to other dimensions of reality.

The Northern urban space, where the black community has lost its identity and adopted white standards of materialistic life (as represented by Macon) is set in contrast with the rural South, full of magic, where the black heritage is still kept through folk songs, traditions and a different attitude to life. In this deep South, Milkman discovers his ancestry and connection to Africa by means of a return to nature. As the symbolic white peacock, Milkman has to get rid of all the Northern burdens to gain access to this heritage and find his own identity. In a natural environment, characters become liberated from urban time. When Milkman is in the woods, in search of the cave with the gold, he loses his Northern clothes and his watch. With it he loses the Northern chronological sense of time and enters a timeless rural world, where women are 160 years old or where hunting practices link men to their past, to Mother Earth, and the circular rhythm of the female space.

However, Morrison does not idealise the South. She emphasises the hostility from the townsfolk in Shalimar who 'looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken' (266). Milkman's 'white' appearance, sign of his racial rootlessness, turns him into an easy prey for the primitive community in Shalimar. Milkman is ill-prepared for his encounter with this primeval world where the skills to measure self-worth involve physical dexterity and survival abilities. First, he must prove himself in the

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<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 187-213. For Kristeva, women's time is non-linear, cyclical and fluid, as opposed to men's linear concept of time.

traditional physical struggle with other men; through verbal abuse and fighting with his hands. Later, the older men of Shalimar test his maleness in a hunting trip.

The hunting scene is highly relevant in its treatment of time and space within a magic realist context, and signals the beginning of the change in Milkman's perception of reality. In the darkness, Milkman follows another hunter and becomes aware of his limitations of city man. In the woods, there is nothing to help him - not his money, car, suit or shoes. He loses the linear sense of time and space: it seems to him that he has been walking for hours and covering miles. Alone, unobstructed by things or by other people, he has a chance to have a sight of himself. For the first time, Milkman becomes aware of his place in society, of his responsibility. Things start to make sense here, where 'all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch - and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on' (277). Milkman realises that he has to turn back to nature, to the earth, if he wants to find his roots and know about human beings. The hunters and the dogs talk to each other. They represent that primeval world, before civilisation, when there was harmony in the universe, 'it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse' (278). Milkman's willingness to listen with his fingertips, to hear what the earth has to say, comes just in time to save his life from Guitar, who tries to strangle him with a wire. Because he has reached back toward a time when humans and animals shared communication, Milkman comprehends a mythic dimension of life. While Milkman begins to perceive time as circular and mythic, Guitar remains convinced of its linear and historic structure, and that definitely separates both friends. The hunting scene culminates with a moment of revelation as Milkman feels his communion with the earth:

he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there - on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (281)

Milkman has found the original, female space of nature and the earth and is now ready to achieve his goal. He has left behind the Western and urban education that hampered him and looks ahead to a future that opens onto Africa as the original

birthplace. The physical limp that he has suffered since childhood disappears by magic.

## **LANGUAGE/ORAL TRADITION:**

### **'TO BE BOTH PRINT AND ORAL LITERATURE'**

Morrison attempts to recreate in her texts the rich African American oral tradition. Through the manipulation of language and the use of storytelling, she provides her novels with a deliberate oral quality. The use of singing as a subversive practice to keep history alive, together with the elaborate processes of naming that seem characteristic of the African culture, contribute to the dominance of folk culture and the oral in the novel.

Storytelling is the primary folk process in Morrison's fictional world, as in most anthropological magic realist writing. According to Skerrett, Morrison's fiction, like Hurston's and Ellison's, relies heavily on images of folk processes of communication: Milkman's search for the meaning of his life is carried out through a set of interactions that increase in intensity - a verbal battle, a physical challenge, a hunt, a love affair- but what sets Milkman in motion is actually a story, his father's story about a lost treasure.<sup>20</sup> In *Song of Solomon*, there are multiple storytellers/informants (some more reliable and useful than others) and multiple stories. Milkman's parents function as biased informants who offer him their own different version of events. It will be the community, represented by the chorus, that will provide the jigsaw pieces for Milkman to reconstruct his past.

Morrison attempts to recover the African tradition of the griots, since there was an articulate literature before there was print. She has stated that 'her effort is to be *like* something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music'.<sup>21</sup> Both the motif of music and the musicality of language are crucial - the solution to Milkman's quest is found in the words and rhythms of a song. Not only do songs figure prominently in the text (the text *is* a song), but language itself recollects the

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<sup>20</sup> Skerrett, 'Recitation to the Griot...', p. 193.



rhythms and cadence of jazz. Singing has a great importance as a structural principle and a way of transmitting the past. Songs recall oral tradition and the role of the chorus. They imply an interactive process where listening (specifically, knowing how to listen properly) is essential. Milkman only recovers his family history when he learns through the traditional oral mode; when he has learnt how to listen, he can identify the contents of the children's song. Songs are unrecognised within hegemonic culture but inherent in black culture. By giving them so much importance, Morrison is underscoring that 'discredited knowledge' of black culture.

The novel begins and ends with a song: Pilate singing when Milkman is about to be born and Milkman singing when Pilate is dying. The song becomes a circular entity passed on from the ancestor to new generations. In other relevant moments of the novel, we hear Pilate and her daughter/granddaughter singing. Pilate, as the keeper of the blues tradition, unites generations and gives voice to the value of human connectedness. Her voice serves to blend the material and the spiritual, the natural and supernatural, and always arises in particularly poignant moments in the novel.

At the end of the first chapter, there is one of such moments, a scene in which all the characteristics of oral tradition come together, namely a chorus, a song, and a listener. On his way back from his office, Macon passes by his sister's house and, attracted by the sound of music, he looks inside through the window. Contrary to his cold and dry own home, Pilate's is vibrant with warmth and music. Pilate, Reba and Hagar are singing some melody that Pilate is leading. The effect is enchanting for Macon:

Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. Treading as lightly as he could, he crept up to the side window where the candlelight flickered lowest, and peeped in. Reba was cutting her toenails with a kitchen knife or a switchblade, her long neck bent almost to her knees. The girl, Hagar, was braiding her hair, while Pilate, whose face he could not see because her back was to the window, was stirring something in a pot. (29)

This magic scene takes Macon back in time and space to their happy childhood. The passage seems timeless, with a soft rhythm evoked by the fluid language, itself like music. The magic comes from the daily activities performed by the women while

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<sup>21</sup> Nellie McKay, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (4) (1983), 413-429 (p. 426).

they sing: cutting toenails, braiding hair or cooking. These actions have a rhythm of their own that captivates Macon and the reader:

As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They didn't move. They simply stopped singing and Reba went on paring her toenails, Hagar threaded and unthreaded her hair, and Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring. (30)

Macon listens to and watches, unseen, the rhythm of the feminine creativity, the repetitive movements of making and unmaking, that suggest a cyclical sense of time and also motionlessness.

Hagar's funeral is another poignant scene which foregrounds singing as a collective and significant practice. Whereas the previously analysed scene had a smooth and quiet rhythm, in the funeral, the language screams, shouts with Pilate's grief. Halfway through the service, Pilate enters and begins singing:

the door swung open and Pilate burst in, shouting "Mercy!" as though it were a command. A young man stood up and moved toward her. She flung out her right arm and almost knocked him down. "I want mercy!" she shouted ... The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out -the one word held so long it became a sentence- and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: "I hear you." The people turned around. Reba had entered and was singing too. (316-17)

The poignancy comes from the contrast between the two women's grieving voices and the high silence of the congregation, the chorus. The language is strong, full of fury and desperation. Pilate's pain is described by means of a striking simile that is embedded in sound and strength: 'Suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, "And she was *loved!*"' (319). The scene with the presence of the chorus, a song, and a dead person is a re-enactment of the opening scene of the book. The surrealistic imagery of colour and music link both scenes: if at Mercy hospital entrance it was red velvet petals spread on the snow, here it is the emerald glass and jungle-red wine spurted everywhere by a dropped bottle. Blood, death and song are again united.

Together with storytelling and music, another important aspect of oral tradition is the relevance of naming as a ritual in black people's lives. Names have power. Slaves were deprived of their African names and imposed the names of their white owners. With their name, their family and their tribe disappeared. Foreman

observes that in African American culture, naming is often a creative subversive practice in a country which has historically denied, manipulated, and mangled black names.<sup>22</sup> Reappropriation leads to agency, since, as Milkman discovers at the end of his quest, names bear witness. A socio-political dimension is added to the traditional quest in literature to find the true name as the key to personal power and freedom. Significantly, Circe opens up Milkman's way towards the real treasure by telling him the real names of his grandparents. Beneath their names and origins lay his connection to not only a personal heritage but to a deeper vein of black history and myth.

The discrepancy between name and reality, foregrounded right at the beginning of the novel, emphasises the power to name as the power to define perception. For African Americans, misnaming implied a danger of dissolution, of invisibility: Milkman's family name was literally Dead due to the drunkenness of the white officer who registered his grandfather. At the same time, the black community shows a remarkable wit to delude official efforts to un-name and dislocate it, as has already been mentioned. Pilate's father could not read or write and chose his daughter's name because it looked strong on the paper. According to Foreman, Pilate is also the symbol of aurality. She takes the only word her father ever wrote, her name which he copied from the Bible, puts it in her mother's snuffbox and strings it to her ear to give it meaning. Morrison inverts the black tradition of recording family names in the Bible. Pilate, instead, takes the word out of the Bible and puts it in her ear to symbolise her belief that the value of the word is in the hearing, in the telling, that the living tradition is an oral/aural one, rather than a written one.<sup>23</sup>

The ambiguous ending of *Song of Solomon* does also come out of oral tradition and has been the object of much discussion. Morrison remarks that the ambiguity is deliberate: you do not end a story in oral narratives, 'because it doesn't end, it's an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to

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<sup>22</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman, 'Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call', *Feminist Studies*, 18 (2) (Summer 1992), 369-88 (p. 374).

<sup>23</sup> Foreman, 'Past On Stories...', p. 372.

THINK.’<sup>24</sup> Morrison is searching for participatory reading. The reader has to work with the author in the construction of the book. The chorus is part of that participatory reading. Morrison uses the community/chorus as a guide to introduce the reader into a magical world, helping to make things believable. In the first part of the novel, such chorus role is performed by the community of the Northern town where the Dead family lives. Different characters act as storytellers and informants, such as Freddie. In the district of the Southside, men gather in a barbershop, where the owners, Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy narrate their stories to the youngest. Their conversations focus on the racial and social struggle between black and white people. They form part, together with Guitar, Porter and Empire State of the organisation The Seven Days, that aims to perpetrate against whites identical crimes to those committed against blacks.

In the South, Milkman discovers a different kind of community, one much more attached to its roots and past. He finds there too a number of informants, such as the Reverend Cooper, Circe and Susan Byrd, who remember Milkman’s father and grandfather and help him to reconstruct his past. For the first time, he feels part of a community. The chorus is also represented by the inhabitants of Shalimar, especially the men who take him hunting and the children who give him through their song the key to understand his ancestor’s gesture. The whole chorus has an essential role in Milkman’s search.

The final element of black literary style that Morrison includes in her fiction is the ancestor, one of the most interesting aspects of the continuum in black or African American art. Pilate and the ageless Circe (like Baby Suggs in *Beloved*) are the guides for Milkman and the reader through a personal and collective history. Circe is a remnant of slavery and also of Africa; Pilate *is* Africa. Both women are the keepers of racial memory, the tellers of tales, midwives, conjure women who embody the feminine principle and a different way of knowing and perceiving reality. Like the African Great Mother, they are both identified with nature. Significantly, they live always on the edge of cultures (as Baby Suggs does too), marginalised to

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<sup>24</sup> Christina Davis, ‘An Interview with Toni Morrison’ (1986), in *Conversations...*, ed. by Taylor-Guthrie, p. 232.

the wild zone.<sup>25</sup> Circe lives in the abandoned mansion of the Butlers, completely forgotten by the rest of the world. Pilate, a pariah in every community she joins due to her lack of navel, lives on the outskirts of town. These women represent the ancestor figures who conserve the oral tradition and nurture the protagonist but who, at the same time, are pushed out from communal history.

## SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

*Song of Solomon* deals with a number of socio-historical questions that reveal the political dimension of magic realism. Issues of race and gender are discussed, providing an Afrocentric feminist reading. Morrison has stated the need of the literary work to be political:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams - which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust.<sup>26</sup>

If Morrison intends to make an art both beautiful and unquestionably political, her commentaries on magic realism seem a bit misleading. In different interviews, Morrison has showed her mistrust concerning this term, as a convenient way for literary critics to skip what is the truth in the art of certain writers. For Morrison, magic realism can be a label used to cover up what is going on, a way of *not* talking about the politics, 'If you could apply the word "magical" then that *dilutes* the realism but it seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text.'<sup>27</sup> However, as we have maintained, magic realism does talk about politics; it does not dilute the realism, it enhances it. With its emphasis on the instinctual, irrational, and supernatural, magic realism is politicised in that it offers an alternative to the rational, commercialised and

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<sup>25</sup> I am drawing here on Elaine Showalter's concept of wild zone as a female space which is literally no-man's-land. See Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 9-35 (pp. 30-31).

<sup>26</sup> Morrison, 'Rootedness...', p. 344.

<sup>27</sup> Christina Davis, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison' (1986), in *Conversations...*, ed. by Taylor-Guthrie, p. 225.

commodified hegemonies of patriarchal society. It is not another evasive label but fits Morrison's requirement that all work must be political. The agenda of magic realist narratives is the same as the one set by Morrison in the novel under analysis.

*Song of Solomon* deals with social problems between classes, the rich and the poor, within the black community. Macon and his greedy materialism, represented by the keys to his properties and his big Packard, symbolise those black men that follow white ways of life and enrichment. Macon has lost his sympathy towards other poorer members of his community and become a ruthless landlord. It is implied that the massive migrations of the black population from the South to the North led to this sort of self-made man in the Western tradition of the American dream. The price paid was very high: the loss of black culture and all those spirituals and communal values still found in the South. Due to the migration to the North, social changes and the submission to a consumer society provoked a profound alienation of African Americans. The American dream, owning things, has replaced the memory of a black cultural heritage. The patriarchal, nuclear family represented by Macon shows the degeneration of Western values.

Patrick Bjork observes that Morrison's work reveals 'the desire to establish and maintain a black cultural heritage in the face of the homogenizing effects of late capitalism.'<sup>28</sup> For Macon Dead, late capitalism has replaced the rural, Southern past and he has therefore made it inaccessible to his children. Pilate's house functions then as an alternative world, a kind of social utopia.

The main problem contained in the novel is how to maintain an African American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations. *Song of Solomon* focuses on the sixties, when neighbourhoods are perceived from the outside and called ghettos, a time of urban political activism and general countercultural awareness. The fact that Milkman embarks on a quest for his past is symptomatic of the sixties community: the past is a riddle, a reality locked in the verses of a children's song whose meaning is no longer explicit because time has separated the words from their historical content.

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: the Search for Self and Place within the Community* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 91.

The racial clash is foregrounded by the emergence of black activist groups that use violence to combat violence. The Seven Days organisation serves as an example of what this kind of extreme organisation can lead to: the killing of the own blacks. Using Guitar as a mouthpiece, we are given all sorts of arguments to justify indiscriminate killing. The reader identifies with Milkman and his view of the danger such groups involve. Guitar embodies the displaced rural Southerner whose alienation, unlike Milkman's, originates in racial hatred. Guitar chooses to right social wrongs with acts of vengeance against the dominant culture. His ideology proves just as inadequate as Macon Dead's acculturated vision. In fact, in spite of his political fervour, he is motivated by one of the strongest capitalist symbols: gold. In that way, his similarities to Macon are made explicit.

The struggle between Milkman and Guitar as a representation of two different ways of understanding black history is given a central place in the text. A magic realist strategy is employed to symbolise the conflict between the former friends. After Milkman has been nearly strangled by Guitar during the hunt, he undergoes a kind of rebirth in his fusion with the earth and the community. The hero has passed his last trial and is invited to the ceremony of the skinning of the prey, a bobcat. The scene of the skinning of the bobcat follows magic realist devices in its counterpointing of two levels: the mythical, Milkman's success in his initiation into the community, and the historical, since the bobcat stands for the black man's condition. A dialogic relationship is established within the narrative, as the detailed process of skinning the animal is interspersed with Milkman's recollection of Guitar's words about his political motivations. The implication is that Milkman sees the condition of black people in the evisceration of the cat. As the hunters carefully slice open the animal, the recollections, presented in italics, are unmistakably political: *“Everybody wants a black man's life.”... “Not his dead life; I mean his living life.”... “It's the condition our condition is in.” ...“Fair is one more thing I've given up.” ...“It is about love. What else but love?”* (281-2). The narrative rhythm is nearly lyrical: the slow, precise movements of the evisceration are described with a fluid, poetical language which establishes a powerful contrast with the political contents of the remarks in italics: ‘The transparent underskin tore like gossamer under his fingers’, ‘Luther ... carved out the rectal tube with the deft motions of a man coring an apple’, ‘He dug under the rib cage to the diaphragm and

carefully cut around it until it was free' (282). The flesh cut out by the hunters symbolises the victims of racial violence.

Significantly, the whole process is a ceremony that reveals the hunters' respect for the victim. It is about love, Guitar keeps saying. The ritual ends with the old men letting Milkman have the heart of the bobcat. Readers are reminded of ancient hunting rites in which the hunters identified with their prey and internalised the animals' courage and bravery by eating their hearts. This highly symbolic scene ends with a reference to the motif of the peacock, which finally flies away: 'A peacock soared away and lit on the hood of a blue Buick' (283). Milkman has got rid of all the weight of his upbringing and can understand Guitar, his community and himself. The suspension of mythical and historical worlds enacted in this passage exemplifies thus the political potential of magic realism.

Another instance of black alienation caused by the unsuccessful aim to achieve white values, of female beauty in this case, is provided by Hagar. When Milkman abandons Hagar, she loses her mind and tries repeatedly to kill him. In her last attempt, when Milkman is sleeping in Guitar's room, Hagar is about to strike him with a knife, but she cannot do it. She becomes paralysed, with her arms strung up, and he leaves with a cruel commentary. Time gets frozen and Hagar stands in the same position for a long time. In a daring technique, only eight chapters and some 170 pages later does the narration continue with Hagar standing in the same position and finally dropping the knife. In the meantime, Milkman has gone South and, after numerous adventures and trials, found the key to his past and his identity. The last sentence of chapter 12, when Milkman has solved his family riddle, 'He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life' (303), and the beginning of chapter 13 with a paralysed and destroyed Hagar establish a poignant contrast between the fate of the man and that of the woman he left behind.

Guitar takes Hagar home and she stays speechless and with empty eyes for a long time, until Pilate shows her a compact mirror. When Hagar sees her own reflection, she blames her physical appearance as the reason why Milkman abandoned her. Hagar's desperate attempts to fulfil white ideals of beauty are depicted through the use of popular culture. She embarks on a shopping trip in which we are bombarded with lists of brand names of cosmetics, lingerie, clothes; all



the images promised to fulfil consumers' desires and which Morrison presents with heavy irony:

She bought a Playtex garter belt, I. Miller No Color hose, Fruit of the Loom panties, and two nylon slips -one white, one pink- one pair of Joyce Fancy Free and one of Con Brio ("Thanks heaven for little Joyce heels")...Myrurgia for primeval woman who creates for him a world of tender privacy where the only occupant is you, mixed with Nina Ricci's L'Air du Temps... Peachy powders and milky lotions were grouped in front of poster after cardboard poster of gorgeous grinning faces. Faces in ecstasy. Faces somber with achieved seduction. Hagar believed she could spend her life there among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream, in satin. In opulence. In luxe. In love. (311)

This was probably the same department store where Hagar's mother, Reba, had won a prize as the half a millionth person to walk in, but whose photograph had not even appeared on the newspaper because she was black (instead, they put the picture of the white man who walked in after her). In a typically magic realist manoeuvre, the narrative has moved from the deep South full of magic, witches and treasure caves, to the Northern world of brand names and labels that eventually destroys Hagar.

After a sudden shower that leaves her and her new acquisitions soaked, Hagar returns home and collapses with a fatal fever. Hagar has lost the battle, because she believes that Milkman likes 'curly, wavy, silky hair', 'penny-colored hair', 'lemon-colored skin', 'grey-blue eyes', 'and thin nose' (315-16), all the attributes of American society standards of female beauty. Hagar's lack of all these characteristics captures the horror of seeing oneself as Other and inferior and also questions the limits of reality: what is more real, the 160-year-old witch Circe or a pathetic Hagar trying to have silky straight hair and a fair complexion?

The mixture of narratives is characteristic of magic realism. We slip from a mythical world into an urban one, a striking juxtaposition that helps to define the question of social responsibility. Like his ancestor, Solomon, Milkman has flown away, leaving a life behind. According to Michael Awkward, Morrison problematizes a strictly celebratory Afrocentric analysis of Milkman's achievements through the clear presence of female pain that permeates the final chapters.<sup>29</sup> Male flights run parallel to the tremendous pain of desertion experienced by women like Hagar and Ryna. The juxtaposition of Milkman's archaeological search and Hagar's disintegration underlines the complexity of Morrison's appropriation of the epic form

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Awkward, "Unruly and Let Loose": Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*, *Callaloo*, 13 (3) (Summer 1990), 482-498 (p. 494).

and the African American folktale. There is an inherent contradiction in Solomon's flight. He is Milkman's hero and model, but at the same time he was irresponsible: he left behind his wife and children and did not show solidarity with his community. Morrison has stated in an interview that black men travel but there is a price to pay - the price is the children: 'The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation... all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologise it, make it part of their family history.'<sup>30</sup>

Milkman advances a step further by making the connection between his desertion of Hagar and Solomon's desertion of Ryna. Milkman finally accepts his responsibility for Hagar's death, confesses his so-far neglect of his mother and Pilate ('he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea', p. 331) and asserts his place within the community. I would argue that this is accomplished through a process of feminisation that subverts the male monomyth. In a similar way to the changes experienced by Tayo, the protagonist of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Milkman undergoes a transformation that links him to the earth, to the female principle of creation and harmony.<sup>31</sup> This is symbolised in the hunting scene, when he walks in communion with the earth, as we have already observed. After that, he returns as a changed man and meets Sweet, the woman with whom he will reveal his total feminisation. In their love-making, Milkman is very different from his dominating male attitude towards Hagar:

He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. (285)

This Milkman who performs typically female house chores is much different from the one that abused his sisters and mother or treated Hagar as a puppet. His feminisation becomes complete in the last scene, when he sings for the dying Pilate. So far, singing has seemed restricted to women; Pilate, Reba and Hagar sing

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<sup>30</sup>Mel Watkins, 'Talk with Toni Morrison' (1977), in *Conversations...*, ed. by Taylor-Guthrie, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> For a comparative analysis of this issue in both novels, see my article 'A Male or a Female Quest?: Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Silko's *Ceremony*', in *Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of AEDEAN, 17-19 December 1998*, ed. by Pere Gallardo and Enric Llorca (Lleida: Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2000), pp. 545-549.

frequently whereas the men like Macon, Guitar or Milkman listen in silence. Milkman manages to sing for Pilate and take up her heritage. And finally, he abandons the male dominating role to adopt the female one, surrendering which leads to empowerment to ride the air.

Commenting on the ambiguous ending to her novel, Morrison has noted her deliberate effort to keep readers from focusing on the reward that Milkman should receive and to focus instead on the process he undergoes.<sup>32</sup> Milkman learns so much in a very short time: how to love somebody, nicely, tenderly, give something in return, take risks about something important and get civilised. What happens to him afterwards, if he dies or not, is not relevant. Also, Morrison has stated the need for the protagonist to be a man, because 'men have more to learn in certain areas that women do. I want him to learn how to surrender, and to dominate - dominion and surrender.'<sup>33</sup> Morrison problematises the propriety of the traditional male quest by foregrounding the costs and exclusions: women must help the hero and then vanish. The universal myth of Western culture as a male story is brought into question.

Milkman's final flight restores his sense of community because not only does the myth open out his family's history but it also implies the recovery of names which had been kept invisible in history. On his trip, Milkman moves one generation further back to those blacks who were first taken from Africa to America. The end of his journey is the starting point of his race's history in the United States: slavery. The confrontation with the reality of slavery, coming at the end of Milkman's immersion into the historical process, is liberating because slavery is not portrayed as the origin of history and culture. Instead, the novel opens out to Africa, the source, and lets Milkman fly back there after the steps of his ancestors, the 'flying Africans'. Slavery is obliterated and substituted by liberation .

Pilate's death underlines the relation of knowing and telling to loving: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more"(336) are her last words. Milkman realises that the clue for his personal identity is inextricably linked to Pilate's principle of responsibility to others;

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Koenen, ' "The One Out of Sequence": An Interview with Toni Morrison' (1980), in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, ed. by Gunter H. Lenz (Frankfurt: Campus, 1984), pp. 207-221 (p. 214).

<sup>33</sup> Koenen, ' "The One Out of Sequence"', p. 214.

only in commitment can he be free. His flight forever sets in motion an act of communion with Pilate, his ancestors and the whole community. It implies the re-enactment of familiar rituals, an act of faith in the legacy. Milkman's name can enter the legend, for a new story to be written. The end of the novel leaves the reader with the feeling that a new song is going to be written and passed on through generations, this time with Milkman and Pilate as its protagonists.

Milkman's leap also represents the fulfilment of an individual dream. It brings us back to our initial question, faith as a cornerstone in magic realist narratives. Milkman learns to believe that 'if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it'. It is this faith that gives the novel and magic realism as a literary mode its peculiar force. In a way that traditional realism could never convey, this final magical vision convinces us that the imagination is transcendent, that there are no boundaries between reality and dreams, between fact and fiction, between what is true and what is a product of our imagination.

**2.2.**

**THERE IS MORE TO BE KNOWN  
BEHIND WHAT THE EYES CAN SEE:  
GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY* (1988)**

'I needed to find a way structurally to have you walk a thin line between that which is real and that which is not real'.<sup>1</sup> Naylor's words about her intentions when writing *Mama Day* point towards the magic realist strategy that informs the novel. Departing from the realism that characterised her first two novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Linden Hills* (1985), Naylor engaged in the mode of magic realism to construct *Mama Day*, an extraordinary exploration of the intangible and the power of belief that brings into question the limits of reality and truth. Through a formal device of alternating narrators and perspectives and a double narrative set in completely opposite worlds, New York and the island of Willow Springs, Naylor offers a unique vision of love and magic within an African American context.

Magic realist techniques help Naylor create a world that lures the reader into its depths forcing him/her to question accepted ways of perceiving reality. An urban, realistic discourse set in New York enters into conflict with an archetypal, mythical discourse that presents the cosmology of Willow Springs, unfolding a dialogical encounter between two cultures, American and African. A mixture of genres and narrative conventions characteristic of different literary traditions produces a mosaic that functions as a revision of traditional narratives. Storytelling, oral tradition and folklore practices occupy a predominant position, conforming to anthropological magic realism as it has been defined in this thesis. The slippage between two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, implies the crossing of multiple boundaries, between the spiritual and the material, animate and inanimate, life and death, nature and technology and ultimately between reality and fantasy.

*Mama Day* starts with a prologue in which the communal voice of Willow Springs describes this peculiar island that belongs to no state and has an almost magical nature. The collective narrator sets the time of the events narrated in the novel: a summer fourteen years ago when Abigail's granddaughter, Cocoa, came visiting from New York with her first husband, George. The time is now August

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Bonetti, 'An Interview with Gloria Naylor' (New York: American Prose Library, 1988 - audiotape), quoted in Virginia Fowler, *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 91.

1999 - but that, as the narrator reminds us, is just another fiction, another part of the magic of reading: 'Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-knows-where. It's August 1999 - ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own.'<sup>2</sup> The fiction/magic of the novel is thus established from the beginning, forcing readers to question their perception of the world and the concept of reality itself, and therefore establishing the premises for a magic realist strategy. What is real and what is not? Is there more to be known behind what the eyes can see?

After the initial collective prologue, the novel is divided into two distinct parts: the first one takes place in New York and the second one in Willow Springs. We are presented with a dialogue between Cocoa and George who remember their first meeting, marriage and early life together. They address their first-person narrations directly to each other, providing two versions of their story and particularly of that eventful summer in Willow Springs. Only at the end of the novel do we realise that George has been dead for a number of years and we have been listening to a spectral voice all along. Cocoa talks to him on the rise over The Sound, where his ashes were dispersed, as she sits next to the family graveyard, where the voices of her ancestors mingle and survive. The novel ends with the same collective voice of Willow Springs back in the present, August 1999, closing the novel and the century/millennium with Miranda ready to depart as she has passed her heritage to Cocoa, who has finally found the meaning of peace.

An outer and an inner frame can be distinguished: the outer story is archetypal and corresponds to the legend of Sapphira, an African slave woman who persuaded the white owner Bascombe Wade to deed the island to his slaves in 1823. The inner frame is a love story in contemporary New York. The modern, urban world symbolised by New York is juxtaposed against the natural world of Willow Springs. George and Cocoa's dialogue also inserts a narrative tension between a male and female heritage and a different background and world view. The

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<sup>2</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 10. All subsequent references will be to this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

rationalistic and scientific education received by George as an orphan contrasts with Cocoa's intuitive and communal upbringing in the deep South.

*Mama Day* is framed by two documents that aim to render a historical background however fictitious. They are part of a magic realist strategy to provide a legendary story with verisimilitude. First, we are presented with the genealogical tree of the Days' family, starting with Sapphira and her seven sons down to Mama Day (the daughter of the seventh son of a seventh son - a circumstance imbued with magical connotations) and Cocoa. The footnote to the tree reads: "'God rested on the seventh day and so would she.'" Hence the family's last name' (1). With this indication, Sapphira is given a divine nature and equated with God. The names of her sons are all taken from the Old Testament, names of prophets, whereas her grandsons' names come from the New Testament. As already discussed regarding Morrison's writing, the Bible and family history have an enormous importance for African Americans. Naylor further appropriates and transforms stories from the Old and New Testaments in her following novel, *Bailey's Café* (1992).

The history of the family and of race are inextricably linked and, therefore, the narrative has to go back to slavery. The genealogical tree is followed by the bill of sale of Sapphira in 1819, a terrible testimony of the cruelty of white owners and of slavery in general. Described as 'inflicted with sullenness and entertains a bilious nature' and 'suspicions of delving in witchcraft' (2), Sapphira is sold to Bascombe Wade for one-half gold tender, one-half goods in kind.<sup>3</sup> Time will do justice and the bill will become unintelligible except for a few words: '*law... knowledge... witness... inflicted... nurse... conditions... tender... kind*' (280), which change completely the original meaning. The manipulation of the white owner's discourse offers a powerful revision of the negative implications of slavery.

What is the function of these two documents? They provide factual data in the way Western culture seems to need written official papers to prove the authenticity or validity of things. They put the reader in a position of superiority as s/he knows more than the characters in the novel (Sapphira's name, for instance), and convey an ironic intention. A genealogical tree is certainly rare for a family of

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<sup>3</sup> The choice of the name Bascombe echoes the figure of the fake and worthless Southern gentleman caricaturised by William Faulkner in Uncle Maury Bascomb, from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).



African Americans, always deprived of such a historical record by the institution of slavery. George comments on Cocoa's luck for knowing her ancestors, a privilege denied to most black people. And the bill of sale seems to mock the official nature of white papers that justify such an atrocity as selling a human being by merely stating it with written words.

The genealogical tree and bill of sale also offer a strong contrast with the oral quality of the prologue. The relevance of the prologue is immense on thematic and formal levels, as it provides the clues for the understanding of the novel. It introduces the main themes of *Mama Day*, namely, land, heritage, ancestry and the power of believing. Formally, it appropriates the syntax, vocabulary, and commentary of the whole rural Southern community of Willow Springs and thus inscribes the narrative within an oral tradition.

Gloria Naylor focuses a great deal on the issues of land and genealogy, as she had already done in *Linden Hills*. Although Willow Springs is located between Georgia and South Carolina, it does not belong to either state. Furthermore, as George will discover when he is making preparations to visit it, Willow Springs does not appear on any map. Connected to the mainland only by a wooden bridge that disappears with every hurricane, Willow Springs represents an isolated world, practically untouched by the Western American civilisation, where the original African culture of the slaves has survived.

Naylor locates Willow Springs among the Sea Islands, barrier islands along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina that have been populated for two centuries by black Americans descendants of slaves from West Africa and Barbados and who speak their own dialect, Gullah. As Harold Courlander explains in *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*:

Well into the first half of the twentieth century the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina, particularly the offshore islands, remained in a state of cultural isolation from most of the mainland. The black islanders, in their rural environment, maintained a seemingly more tangible tie with their past than did most Negroes of the south, and spoke in a dialect, known as Gullah, which is believed to contain remnants of some West African languages. They had recollections not only of African ancestors but of stories and tales told by those ancestors; of harvest celebrations related to similar celebrations in Africa... They "recollected" as fact tales about African slaves who soared into the air and flew back to Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Courlander, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976), p. 281.

The Sea Islands, then, occupy a unique place as a source of black identity and an intact African heritage. They function as the symbolic centre of an autonomous African American expression. Since Bascombe Wade was from Norway and Sapphira was African-born, there is a detachment from America: the island inhabitants are accused of being 'un-American'. The island community has kept its traditions and does not get fooled by the plans of real estate developers, since 'the only dark faces you see now in them "vacation paradises" is the ones cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass. On their own land, mind you, their own land' (6).

The location of Willow Springs on the edge of things, without belonging to any American state or appearing on any official maps, denotes the magic realist strategy of building an autonomous world with a particular cosmology where supernatural events are possible, and also a political strategy. The fact that it cannot be inscribed in the American geography and is inhabited by former slaves underlines the definition of a free territory, where a community that is deprived of its own culture and alienated in the mainland can escape white conventions and recover its own traditions, myths and way of life. Unlike the majority of Africans, who were expropriated of their freedom and culture when dragged as slaves to the New World, this group which populates Willow Springs presents an alternative to official white history. According to H  l  ne Christol, topography and genealogy are two essential elements that 'allow Naylor to reconstruct a parallel black history, to reinvent America by subverting its historical and mythical elements.'<sup>5</sup>

## ORAL TRADITION

The prologue is also highly relevant to the formal structure of the novel because it places it within a black oral tradition. The use of a 'we' narrator conveys the idea of storyteller central to oral cultures. This communal voice introduces us into a magical world and also guides us towards its correct interpretation. It relates the legend of Sapphira Wade, 'A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red

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<sup>5</sup> H  l  ne Christol, 'Reconstructing American History: Land and Genealogy in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*', in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Werner Sollors and Maria Dietrich (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 347-356 (p. 348).

as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her' (3) and her incredible powers:

She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies. (3)

The community of Willow Springs is defined by the story of Sapphira Wade which, reciprocally, is whatever the people understand it to be. As in all oral narrative, there are different versions of the legend. Basing the narrative on a legend foregrounds one of the principal strategies of anthropological magic realism. Storytelling and oral tradition are fundamental to the mode of magic realism and, in Naylor's novel, they specifically conform to a black literary style as defined by Toni Morrison, with an oral quality, the presence of a chorus, the figure of the ancestor, and the participation of the reader.

The chorus is represented by the community of Willow Springs, that comments on the events and shares textual information with the reader. The collective voice is essential to provide Western readers with a complete picture of rituals and traditions. Naylor plays with the limits of individual and collective knowledge. The chorus of Willow Springs symbolises the collective unconscious using Jung's terminology: the magic is attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams/visions. It is therefore very close to the concept of anthropological magic realism as has been defined in the introduction, which relies heavily on ancient systems of belief and local lore. Steven F. Walker has noted that:

Jungian psychology, with its interest in the occult, with its high regard for primitive cultures and their mythological worldviews, and with its relentless search for mythological parallels in the dreams of modern men and women, has the potential to inspire fresh psychological perspectives on magical realism.<sup>6</sup>

A Jungian psychological context can certainly help to detect unconscious symbolism in *Mama Day*, as we will see when analysing the final scene.

Together with the chorus, African cosmology is introduced through the figure of the ancestor, represented in the novel by both Sapphira and Miranda. Sapphira is

the archetypal storyteller, some kind of Scheherazade: 'she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days' (3). Although 'Sapphira Wade don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words' (4), she is part of the racial memory of people of African origin, of their collective unconscious. Following the tradition of conjure women initiated by Sapphira, Mama Day is the matriarch and spiritual guide for all the community thanks to her healing and psychic powers. Close to the magical Pilate in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Miranda uses her intuition and foreknowledge for the benefit of the community. Her extraordinary connection with nature and with the spiritual world turn her into a figure on the border between the worlds of the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural. It will be through this character that the major magic realist strategies operate in the text.

*Mama Day* is a multi-layered novel narrated by several voices. Naylor has acknowledged her debt to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in the structure of her novel.<sup>7</sup> The strategy of using a shifting, first person narration facilitates the presentation of different perspectives of reality, different points of view. The story has many sides to it: there is not a single truth. As Cocoa reflects at the end: 'what really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean - there are just too many sides to the whole story' (311). The novel works as a commentary about reality and truth and recalls the main quality of oral narratives: they are told again and again, always providing different versions and permitting endless additions.

Naylor accomplishes an oral quality mainly through the use of Black English vernacular. The speech of the inhabitants of Willow Springs, and particularly of Mama Day, follows morphological and syntactical structures characteristic of Black English. The following sentence can provide an instance of the approximation to this style: 'But ain't a soul in Willow Springs don't know that little dark girls, hair all braided up with colored twine, got their "18 & 23's coming down" when they lean too long over them back yard fences' (4). The use of Black English vernacular and the voices at work in *Mama Day* turn the novel into a 'speakerly text', in Henry

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<sup>6</sup> Steven F. Walker, 'Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*', in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 347-369 (p. 347).

Louis Gates' terminology, a text which privileges the representation of the speaking black voice in writing.<sup>8</sup> Naylor's novel belongs to the double-voiced black tradition: as a Talking Book, it 'talks' to other texts, particularly those by other African American women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. In this tradition, language and signifying practices aim to subvert imposed discourses.

According to Gates, the language of Signifyin(g) is a strategy of black figurative language use, 'the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning.'<sup>9</sup> The circulation of the date 1823 in Willow Springs as a colloquial expression with different meanings depending on the context provides a good example. The term has no literal denotation but an infinite number of figurative applications: a child's birth ('won't be no "early 18 & 23's" coming here for me to rock'), taking advantage of someone in a deal ("tried to 18 & 23 him") or a summer with a terrible hurricane ('we had that "18 & 23 summer" and the bridge blew down') (4).

Karah Stokes has noted that *Mama Day* highlights the importance of knowing when to shift from literal to metaphorical, and that is why it begins with 'schooling' the reader in the preface.<sup>10</sup> In an ironic tone, the communal voice warns about the dangers coming from the mainland as it tells the story of one of their youngsters, Reema's son, who went to a fancy college beyond the bridge and forgot his roots. He returned to Willow Springs in order to do research on ethnography and speech patterns, but reached wrong conclusions because he was unable to listen to his own people. The trained anthropologist cannot interpret correctly what '18 & 23' means. He is unable to switch from literal to figurative and concludes after extensive field work that 18 & 23 'was really 81 & 32, which just happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map' (8) and

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Fowler, 'A Conversation with Gloria Naylor, 6 September 1993', in Fowler's *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. xxv-xxvi.

<sup>9</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 82.

which, according to him, the natives have reversed to invert hostile social and political parameters. In the tradition of the Signifying Monkey tales<sup>11</sup>, this small story is a lesson, a 'schooling' for the reader, who has to learn how to read the metaphors of the text, how to leave behind Western conventions and aim to reach an aural understanding of the novel.

The narrator then gives the hint of how to listen to Mama Day and Miss Abigail or to Cocoa and George talking (neither saying a word) about that summer fourteen years ago when Cocoa left but he stayed:

He coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you... Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name. You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car - you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word. (10)

The reader is thus instructed on how to read the novel correctly. The prologue gives a lot of information that does not make sense at this point, but this is precisely where the magic of the novel lies: only once we have left behind our Western rationalistic conventions and learnt how to listen, can we enjoy the story and safely go back to its prologue when we finish it. If we want to know more about this magic island, about the legend of a conjure woman, we have to enter the text, believe its strategies, belong to a community with June peas and coughing babies that is nonetheless completely fictitious.

The participation of the reader is particularly sought in this novel. It is directly addressed to the reader and emphasises the magic of the act of reading itself. As Wendy B. Faris remarks, metafictional dimensions are common in contemporary magic realism: the texts provide commentaries of themselves, drawing attention to the magical power of fiction itself, and refer repeatedly to the process of storytelling.<sup>12</sup> However, how do I feel as an individual European white reader, 'from beyond the bridge', facing this text? As we have seen, the communal narrator

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<sup>10</sup> Karah Stokes, 'Ripe Plums and Pine Trees: Using Metaphor to Tell Stories of Violence in the Works of Gloria Naylor and Charles Chesnutt', in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. by S. Felton and M. C. Loris (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 199-210 (p. 208).

<sup>11</sup> See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by L. Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris, pp. 163-90 (p. 175).

proposes a number of conditions for the reader to follow. They are precisely magic realist strategies that permit the entrance of the reader into the text. The reader is practically textualised, in such a way that s/he can get literally absorbed into the world of fictional stories. The suggested interpenetration between worlds that seem irreconcilable allows the reader to accept the truth of the narrator's words. In magic realist writing, the reader never questions the narrative but accepts the events as logical outcomes. We are invited to abandon rationalistic and scientific methods of understanding and to identify ourselves instead with the cosmology of Willow Springs. If we can read outside the dominant white male culture, we can participate in the magic of this world.

## GENRE SUBVERSION

How do African American writers negotiate the conventions, plots and politics of Anglo-American cultural traditions? Valerie Traub argues that 'texts of the dominant culture are read and reread, invoked and reworked to undermine their pretensions to universality and transcendence.'<sup>13</sup> This revision is also part of the agenda of magic realism; since it is a writing from the margins that aims to give voice to the voiceless, the negotiation with an Anglo-American tradition becomes essential.

*Mama Day* puts its revisionary project into operation through a mixture of genres and traditions. We find elements from the pastoral genre and the vision of America as the Adamic dream, elements from the *Bildungsroman* in its structure of an initiation journey of self-discovery, references to earlier texts from the African American tradition, mainly from Hurston, Walker and Morrison, biblical references and direct allusions to Shakespeare's work. Naylor deliberately reworks these elements with a subversive intention.

As Leo Marx points out in his analysis of the connections between Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and America, the new world offered a perfect topography

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<sup>13</sup> Valerie Traub, 'Rainbows of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the Work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston', in *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women's Revisions of Shakespeare*, ed. by Marianne Novy (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 150-64 (p. 151).

for the pastoral tradition.<sup>14</sup> Elizabethan ideas of America pictured a virgin land, a natural paradise that looked the way the world might have been supposed to look before the beginning of civilisation. Shakespeare's island recalls this remote and unspoiled place where utopian fantasies were still possible. However, it also embodied different images of man's basic relation to his environment: an enchanted garden and a hideous wilderness. The European hero had to struggle with raw nature on the one hand and the corruption within his own civilisation on the other.

Although Naylor has stated that she did not have *The Tempest* in mind while writing *Mama Day*<sup>15</sup>, the similarities are striking, as many critics have noted: an island full of magicians, a storm, the theme of reconciliation, a close juxtaposition of fact and fancy in the romance tradition, a character named Miranda, a rational Western hero (George) in search of an Edenic paradise. The idea of America as the modern Eden is a result of European aspirations to impose an order on the New World. Naylor, although exploring certain Edenic aspects of the island of Willow Springs, shows also its natural dangers and potential for evil. A place where the destructive power of nature manifests itself in terrible hurricanes, and people resort to voodoo practices to harm and kill, is very far from the pastoral scene expected in the genre. On that score, Michael Lynch points out that 'Naylor's work reflects the reluctance in African American literature to join in the romantic quest for an Eden which is so common in American literature'.<sup>16</sup> A false Eden such as Linden Hills or Willow Springs does not give the answer to African American communities.

A reading of *The Tempest* within a colonial context and particularly of the figure of Caliban also reveals other strategies inherent in Naylor's revision. In 'Caliban's Triple Play', Houston A. Baker Jr. analyses the duality suggested by the Western trope of Prospero and Caliban, figures portrayed in terms of self and other,

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<sup>14</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 34-72.

<sup>15</sup> To Donna Perry's question 'Did Shakespeare's *The Tempest* influence *Mama Day*?', Naylor replied: 'Consciously, no, although people have commented on that...Shakespeare has appeared in each of my works. For *Mama Day*, he was consciously there because of *King Lear* and with the star-crossed lovers idea from *Romeo and Juliet*. I read *The Tempest* ages ago, so even though I wasn't consciously doing that, who knows?', in Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> Michael F. Lynch, 'The Wall and the Mirror in the Promised Land: The City in the Novels of Gloria Naylor', in *The City in African-American Literature*, ed. by Y. Hakutani and R. Butler (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), pp. 181-195 (p. 194).



the West and the Rest of Us, the rationalist and the debunker, the coloniser and the indigenous people. Language, writing, ideology, race, and other Western signs are conveniently given force by the simple iconography of the conquering magician Prospero and his enslaved and deformed island subject Caliban. But the indigenous appears monstrous and deformed only to the intruder. Houston Baker speaks then of 'deformation of mastery',<sup>17</sup> a strategy used by African American writers to transform a situation or status imposed by the dominant culture into a signal self/cultural expression: master texts are reworked in order to deconstruct their assumptions.

Naylor deliberately invokes Shakespeare in the choice of the names Miranda and Ophelia and then she distances herself from him by providing different fates for her characters. Gary Storhoff remarks on Naylor's revisionary project as she names her main character Miranda: the daughter, and not the father, is given voice.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the matriarch is the guide not only over her household but over the island in general. *Mama Day* abandons the benevolent patriarchy advocated in *The Tempest* as it foregrounds motherhood and the importance of nurture. If Prospero uses magic as a means of control, Miranda employs her natural powers to heal, making clear Naylor's strategy to rewrite male white texts. For Elaine Showalter, Naylor's Miranda is both a critique of the phallogentric Prospero-Caliban relation and an effort to rewrite *The Tempest* as a revolutionary text for women. In *Mama Day*, the tension between the intruder and Caliban is resolved through a matriarchal, female-centred, postcolonial scene. Colonialism and slavery are extinguished thanks to the agency of a woman, Sapphira. The patriarchal magician and slaveholder Prospero is displaced by a lineage of female conjurers. In Showalter's words, Naylor presents a 'black Miranda who incorporates the identities of Prospero, Caliban, and Sycorax as well.'<sup>19</sup>

*Mama Day* is also a novel of maturation with a home-coming plot and in that sense follows some of the *Bildungsroman* conventions. Cocoa leaves her home and roots to go North. Her return to Willow Springs implies necessarily a return to her African heritage as the condition for the success of her journey of self-discovery. For

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<sup>17</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., 'Caliban's Triple Play', in "Race", *Writing and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago and London: University Chicago Press, 1985, 1986), pp. 381-395 (p. 390).

<sup>18</sup> Gary Storhoff, ' "The Only Voice is Your Own": Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*', *African American Review*, 29 (1) (Spring 1995), 35-46 (p. 37).

the Northern-born George, the trip Southwards to Willow Springs also represents a journey of initiation. Within the European tradition of heroic quest legends, George is the romantic hero who must overcome a number of trials in order to save his beloved. However, Naylor subverts such tradition once again. George, armed exclusively with the rationalistic devices provided by a Western white culture, cannot solve the riddles posed by old ways of belief and does eventually fail in his quest. It seems that the failure or success of such a quest depends also on a number of conditions that are not incorporated in the mainstream culture. Whereas Milkman in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony* reach an understanding of other ways of perceiving reality and acknowledge the supernatural, George fails to do so and dies. He tries to save his woman on his own, as the chivalrous real man admired in the white world, without realising that the answer to save Cocoa's life lies in a communal effort. The rite of passage that Mama Day prepares for George in the chicken's nest is far removed from the heroic legends that he is familiar with from white popular culture. As Susan Meisenhelder remarks, 'George embarks on a quest designed not to acquire a symbol of his individual prowess but to transcend those very values.'<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of this mixture of narrative conventions and traditions reflects Naylor's revisionary project. It also proves the relevance of magic realism within a postcolonial context. The aim of magic realism as a literary mode is implied in Naylor's statement about survival: Cocoa and African American culture in general survive thanks to the ability to connect different cultures, Western and African traditions, city and country, rational and supernatural. And that certainly seems the direction magic realism is taking in contemporary fiction.

## COEXISTENCE OF DIFFERENT CODES OF REALITY

In *Mama Day*, two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, coexist and blend perfectly. The complete background of African cosmology portrayed in

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice. Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Meisenhelder, ' "The Whole Picture" in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*', *African American Review*, 27 (3) (Fall 1993), 405-420 (p. 412).

the novel supports and validates the magic realist techniques, since it allows the unproblematic slippage between realist and magic discourses within a coherent *Weltanschauung*, in the same way as Native American myths authorise the magic realism of Erdrich and Silko. In animist religions, the material and spiritual worlds are deeply interconnected and the frontiers between death and life are delimited in a different way from Christianity. John S. Mbiti explains that in African religions death is a process which removes a person gradually from the Sasa period (now-period) to the Zamani (unlimited past).<sup>21</sup> After the physical death, the individual continues to exist in the Sasa period and does not immediately disappear from it. The departed appear mainly to members of their surviving families. Mbiti talks then of the 'living dead', a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him/her in life, as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. The living-dead do not vanish out of existence, rather they enter into the state of collective immortality.

This concept of death is essential for understanding Naylor's novel, which is based on a conversation between a living person, Cocoa, and a living-dead, George.<sup>22</sup> Within an African cosmology, this spectral conversation is perfectly acceptable as a fact. Textually, the narrator never puts into question the veracity of the conversation or the connections with spirits of the past. Different characters experience this communication as they hear voices from Sapphira, Bascombe, John Paul, etc., particularly Miranda and Cocoa. While George and Cocoa are walking across the family plot, Cocoa can hear silent whispers from the graves saying '*you'll break his heart*' (224). George, of course, is unable to hear them. Later, however, after his terrible fight with Cocoa, he climbs up to Chevy's Pass, where Bascombe Wade's tombstone is, hears the words '*Waste. Waste*' (248), and interprets them as the sound of the oak branches in the wind. His rationality prevents him from acknowledging the possibility of communication with the dead (although, ironically, he is already dead as he provides his narration). Miranda's connection with the dead is continuous. She can hear Sapphira's 'long wool skirt passing', Bascombe's 'tread of

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<sup>21</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> This notion also forms the basis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where the dead girl Beloved literally comes back in the flesh to the world of the living.

heavy leather boots' (118), and her father John-Paul instructing her to 'look past the pain' (283). Miranda also talks to her sister Abigail and to George after their deaths.

It is interesting to note another characteristic of the living-dead described by Mbiti. If the departed appears, s/he is recognised by name; so long as the living-dead is remembered, s/he is in the state of personal immortality and is imbued with a mythological nature, built around fact and fiction. The importance of naming and remembering is also emphasised in this novel. Mama Day struggles to recall Sapphira's name. It is not revealed to her, but it will be revealed to Ophelia, who will continue the Days' heritage and grant her ancestors immortality through keeping them and their names in her memory.<sup>23</sup>

This idea of death and immortality is linked to the African perception of time. The linear concept of time in Western thought is practically foreign to African thinking. The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place and cannot, therefore, constitute time. Actual time is what is present and what is past. According to Mbiti, it moves 'backward' rather than 'forward':

Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real. A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth...numerical calendars are both impossible and meaningless in traditional life. Outside the reckoning of the year, African time concept is silent and indifferent...Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past. Endlessness or 'eternity' for them is something that lies only in the region of the past'.<sup>24</sup>

This African notion of time is key in the novel. As we have seen in the previous chapter, magic realist writing questions received ideas of time. *Mama Day* plays with time in its structure. The collective narrator situates itself in a future time, the year 1999 (in relation to the writing and publishing of the novel) and narrates events that happened in the past, in 1985. Time is inextricably linked to space, and it is differently experienced in New York and in Willow Springs.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the narrative that takes place in New York follows expected Western parameters of linear time, once the action moves to Willow Springs, the sense of time changes completely: it becomes circular, eternal, mythical, complying with the African conception described

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<sup>23</sup> A similar search for the ancestors' names can be observed in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

<sup>24</sup> Mbiti, *African Religion...*, pp. 17, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Mbiti remarks that space and time are so closely linked in African cultures that often the same word is used for both. Mbiti, *African Religion...*, p. 27.

by Mbiti. Even the narrative pace changes. The first part of the novel follows a steady rhythm as we witness a traditional urban romance, from the first meeting to the courtship, problems, quarrels and marriage. In contrast, the second part of the novel starts with a slow rhythm. Time seems suspended in Willow Springs, 'Time don't crawl and time don't fly; time is still. You do with it what you want: roll it up, stretch it out, or here we just let it lie' (161). For the New Yorker George, brought up within the rigid mechanical time of a shelter for boys, this place suggests eternity, 'it all smelled like forever' (175). Crossing the bridge takes him into a new and unknown world: 'The closeness of all this awed me - people who could be this self-contained. Who had redefined time. No, totally disregarded it' (218).

As the pace of the narration gets faster towards a conclusion of that eventful summer, we do not feel immersed in a frantic, mechanical rhythm, but rather in a sort of mythical timelessness which is deeply connected to and governed by nature and which escapes any attempts at human control, as George desperately realises while trying to save Cocoa, 'Time, for its own sake, was never a major factor here. The crops, the weather, the seasons - they all controlled behavior much more than your elaborate digital watch' (281). The notion of cyclical time is important in this novel, as it emphasises the repetition of history: 'It's all happened before and it'll happen again with a different set of faces. So time's doing what it's always done, standing still this summer here in Willow Springs' (163).

The natural world of Willow Springs offers then a powerful contrast to the urban landscape of New York City. On the island, aptly named Willow Springs, nature is alive. Trees are a symbol of immortality in African cultures. Miranda's extraordinary unity with nature makes her literally fuse with the woods: 'she'd walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood, flatten herself so close to the ground under a moss-covered rock shelf, folks started believing John Paul's little girl became a spirit in the woods' (79). As a bridge between the secular and the sacred, Mama Day is almost immortal: she's well past a hundred years old when the novel finishes, '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).

The African belief system operating in Willow Springs is also noticeable in the field of religion. African practices adapted to the New World replace Western

rites. For instance, the yearly Candle Walk takes place on December 22<sup>nd</sup> (midwinter solstice), substituting the Christmas celebration on the 25<sup>th</sup>. It is close to the Christian theme of rebirth but it is not a celebration based on a Eurocentric approach to Christianity. In Candle Walk night, the inhabitants of Willow Springs take to the road holding some kind of light in their hands and exchange presents that ‘come from the earth and the work of your own hands’ (110). It is a way of receiving help from neighbours without having to compromise one’s pride and a way of saying thank you for favours received during the year. It is also a celebration of the origins of the island. There are different cosmogonic myths that portray Sapphira as the Great Mother, the greatest conjure woman on earth and explain the symbol of the candle and the phrase ‘Lead on with light’: ‘The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars... “Leave ‘em here, Lord,” she said. “I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light”’ (110). Other interpretations refer to Sapphira’s journey back home east over the ocean in a ball of fire or how she took her freedom in 1823 and walked down the main road, candle held high to light her way to the east bluff over the ocean (111). At the end of the novel, we are offered still another explanation of Candle Walk, referring to the light that burned in a man’s heart, that of Bascombe Wade, abandoned by Sapphira.

Another example of a modification of a Christian religious ceremony occurs in Bernice’s son’s funeral. The standing forth, as it is called in Willow Springs, takes place in a church, but it is very different from a conventional funeral: no flowers, no music, no special clothes. The members of the community simply stand in front of the coffin in turns and talk to the dead person, describing the first time they saw him, and the way they will see him again. It is interesting to note that the standing forth is narrated by George, who finds it difficult to fully understand this tradition from his rationalistic point of view:

Why did I get the feeling that this meeting wasn’t meant to take place inside of any building? The church, the presence of the minister, were concessions, and obviously the only ones they were going to make to a Christian ritual that should have called for a sermon, music, tears - the belief in an earthly finality for the child’s life. (269)

The ceremony is based on the African belief that there is no line separating the dead from the living. Bernice’s poignant words to her dead child emphasise this idea:

'when I see you again, you'll be forgiving of your old mama, who didn't remember for a moment that you were still here' (269).

### The Conjure Woman

The insertion of African magic and religious views of the world requires a different narrative mode from traditional realistic narratives and also elicits a different response from the readers. Magic realist techniques become essential for creating a verisimilar world where the reader may accept the truth of the narrator's words. Lindsey Tucker points out Naylor's intention to accomplish a textual restitution of the figure of the conjure woman, a figure that has existed mostly on the margins of folklore and ethnography and is therefore barely credible.<sup>26</sup> In *Mama Day*, the conjure woman has a concrete presence and is connected to the history, legend, and myth that constitute the community's collective imagination. Conjurers performed a crucial political and historical role for an African diasporic community. They were supposed to be closer to their African roots than other more acculturated slaves and, therefore, used their psychic abilities and second sight to hold the communities together.

Miranda continues Sapphira's tradition of the conjure woman. In the middle of an increasingly industrialised world, she functions as the source for spiritual regeneration and keeper of traditions in Willow Springs. Tucker makes an interesting connection between Miranda and the West African trickster figure Esu-Elegbara, employed by Henry Louis Gates as the base for his theory of African American literary criticism.<sup>27</sup> According to Gates, this divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology is a recurrent topos throughout black oral narrative traditions. Esu-Elegbara is a mediator, a master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane. He connects truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation: 'In Yoruba mythology, Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests

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<sup>26</sup> Lindsey Tucker, 'Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*', *African American Review*, 28 (2) (Summer 1994), 173-88 (p. 174).

in this, our human world.’<sup>28</sup> Miranda seems indeed close to this trickster figure. Like Esu, the guardian of crossroads, Mama Day is in constant movement along the roads, armed with her walking stick and slightly limping (due to her rheumatism, we are told). She is associated with divine processes of creation and performs conjure practices inherited from her ancestors (she also plays tricks, particularly on Dr. Buzzard!). Mama Day serves as the mediating figure of the community, the link between the everyday world and the African sacred world, the quotidian reality and ‘the other place’.

Mama Day is also a fine example of how the fields of medicine and religion are so thoroughly intertwined in African culture. In her healing practices, she employs both her supernatural powers and her knowledge of natural medicine. The text emphasises Miranda’s medical knowledge and her success as a healer and midwife. We are given a detailed description of the herbs, barks and roots that she uses in her cures and also a verification from the white doctor Dr. Smithfield, who over the years has seen the effectiveness of Miranda’s methods. This textual proof is important because it comes, not from the magical world of Willow Springs, but from the rational world of the mainland. It is also located right after the story of the white young deputy sheriff who had called one of the locals ‘Nigger’. Mama Day had used her powers to teach him a lesson: the young deputy got lost in the swamps in the middle of a terrible lightning storm. No rational explanation is given; Miranda was clearly the instigator of the storm. Dr. Smithfield’s function in the novel lies in providing a rationalist validation for Miranda’s medical gifts: ‘Being an outsider, he couldn’t be expected to believe the other things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her’ (84). In this way, African lore traditionally discredited by the West becomes valorised.

Elizabeth Hayes states that ‘Intuitive thinking, or “connected knowing”, the ancient system of nonrationalist thought long denigrated by Post-Enlightenment rationalists, is practised with consummate skill by Miranda’.<sup>29</sup> Mama Day’s foreknowledge of various events is certainly impressive. However, it is always

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<sup>27</sup> Tucker, ‘Recovering the Conjure Woman...’, p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. 5-10 (6).



presented in a matter-of-fact way in the text. Nobody in Willow Springs puts it into question or seems surprised by it. For instance, she foresees that Cocoa will travel from New York by plane instead of the usual train to surprise them with an earlier arrival. Miranda knows perfectly this plan although Cocoa has written stating the date and means of her arrival. Miranda tells Abigail, who does not question her prescient powers at all but accepts them as a fact:

“Baby Girl is coming in today.”

“Well, Lord. It’s gonna be good to see my child. I better get her room dusted out and ready. And she thought she was catching the train up there tomorrow night - even wrote and said to meet her at the station Tuesday morning.”

“It’s the airplane though, at that field beyond the bridge.”

“Oh, no. Now what put it in her mind to do that? I never did trust them things - they ain’t natural.” (36)

This last remark is particularly interesting: planes are not natural, since they are the product of technology and imply a gift only given to birds by nature. However, prescient powers are perfectly natural and acceptable, and Abigail does never doubt her sister’s foreknowledge, even though it differs from the rational facts at hand. Furthermore, when Cocoa plays a last trick and hides in Buzzard’s lorry, who has gone to the airport to pick her up, Miranda still insists that she is there. With this and many other details, the reader becomes convinced of Miranda’s intuitive knowledge and is bound to accept it as part of Willow Springs reality.

Miranda’s intuitive knowledge goes farther than quotidian details to foresee tragedies in the future. She feels changes in nature that communicate to her signs of what will happen and also help to create a textual atmosphere of uneasiness for the reader. This way of directing the telling of the story is particularly characteristic of magic realism. For instance, after Miranda has been to Ruby’s house to warn her that Cocoa is coming with her new husband and she does not want any problems, she starts feeling heaviness in the air, a recurrent motif that foreshadows tragic events: ‘the air hangs heavy around her and she’s bearing down on the stick real hard’, ‘heavy air that stays just above the knees’, ‘she’d really have to concentrate: look and listen’, ‘there was something in the air’ (173). Miranda seems a passive subject in this communication from nature, a receptive body who is getting old and tired:

But it’s not her legs, it’s the heavy air in the woods that finally makes Miranda turn around. It’s like the air ain’t willing to be breathed: the birds are motionless on the pine

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth T. Hayes, ‘Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* as Magic Realism’, in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. by Fenton and Loris, pp. 177-186 (p. 179).

branches, the katydids can hardly be heard, and there ain't a butterfly in view. The sound of the twigs breaking under her feet is hollow and the echo can't move up through the haze. Miranda stands still and listens. Funny. There's something funny going on... And I'm tired, tired of knowing things I can't do nothing about. Whatever is waiting in here today, I just ain't ready to face. (174)

These presentiments are always stated as facts and give no space for the reader's hesitation. They are actually corroborated in the text by the happening of the predicted events. Miranda's foresight is also validated by nature itself. She can listen to and read nature's indications, as when she feels the hurricane coming. Naylor presents Miranda's intuitive thinking in a matter-of-fact way with the purpose of building her credibility in the text, so that, in the novel's climax, readers can believe that Miranda is able to save Cocoa using her non-rational connected knowing.

### Female/Magic vs. Male/Rationalism

Gloria Naylor has stated in an interview that *Mama Day* is an exploration of magic:

You get a hint with the opening of the novel. I moved from the most universally accepted forms of magic into those things that we're more resistant to accepting. You're first made aware that the act of reading, itself, is an act of magic. That's when the narrator turns to you and says, "Ain't nobody really talking to you." And yet, by that point you've laughed with these people; you've been moved by certain parts of their stories. And they say "We're not real." And then the reader should go, "Oh, of course: the magic of the imagination!"

I move from that into having a man like George and a woman like Cocoa, who are totally incongruent, meet and fall in love... We do accept that; we accept the magic of love. And then, from there, I take you to the last frontier. That's where there are indeed women who can work with nature and create things which have not been documented by institutions of science, but which still do happen. So the book's an exploration of magic.<sup>30</sup>

Through these uses of magic, Naylor succeeds in exploring her central concern with belief and the intangible. Readers are expected to believe the different degrees of magic present in the text. The novel is certainly full of magicians. Naylor sets Miranda's practices against those of Dr. Buzzard and Ruby. Dr. Buzzard, with red chicken feathers in his hat and a string of white bones around his neck, functions as a caricature of voodoo and that world of occult medicine, mojo hands and deceit, which is far away from Miranda's healing remedies. Although Dr. Buzzard talks

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<sup>30</sup> Donna Perry, 'Interview with Gloria Naylor, December 1991', in *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 217-44 (p. 233).

about 'professional rivalry' between him and Miranda, he is well aware of the authenticity of her powers and the falsehood of his.

Miranda's healing gift is clearly distinguished in the text from both false mumbo-jumbo and from voodoo practices. She does not believe in superstition and keeps away from the struggle between Frances and Ruby over a man, Junior Lee. Fearing that Ruby is working roots to steal her man away, Frances uses voodoo: she sprinkles salt on Ruby's doorstep, throws eggs up against her porch and even hangs a hog's head from the limb of her peach tree with bits of paper with Ruby's name written on them (93). This information provided by a local gossip, Pearl, could be dismissed as false and mere superstition. However, we are informed later that Frances ends up in a mental institution after Ruby has worked her powers on her. Ruby's knowledge of herbal medicine is directed towards killing, rather than healing. Her poisoning of Cocoa with nightshade stresses the terrible results of conjuring.

Mama Day's magic stems from her intuition, herbal knowledge and prescient powers. Her skills transcend the world of science and many of her practices do not have a rational explanation in the text. For instance, she is actually responsible for the initiation of George and Cocoa's romance because she sprinkles a magic yellow powder in the letter that Cocoa sends him after a job interview. George notices the yellow talc stuck to his fingers but does not realise its influence on his subsequent behaviour. The reader is given the option to believe that it was a mere coincidence or that Miranda has used a sort of love charm.

Miranda is involved in the most mysterious incidents that happen in the novel. A number of scenes are narrated using magic realist strategies. The supernatural events are deeply grounded within a realistic setting. Mama Day performs magical pregnancies with the same ease as she bakes peach pies. The occurrence of the supernatural is mainly concentrated in what they call 'the other place', the Days' old house where Miranda and Abigail used to live as children.<sup>31</sup> Abandoned now and with a wild garden where Miranda gets her herbs from, this big house was the setting of several family tragedies. Miranda's mother drowned herself after her baby Peace fell in the house well. Abigail cannot visit the other place

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<sup>31</sup> More Shakespearean echoes here; note the similar use of the phrase 'the other place' to refer to Hell in Shakespeare (see for example *Hamlet*, 4.3.33).

because the memories are too painful. As in many magic realist narratives, we find a magical space linked with the wild female zone which leaks its magic to the rest of the narrative.

A particularly disturbing scene occurs in the other place when Bernice visits Mama Day in order to become pregnant. An initial innocent image of an old woman sewing a quilt in a rocking chair acquires mysterious tones as the atmosphere and the surrounding nature become menacing. It is the first new moon come spring as Bernice approaches the house:

Moving through the bush, guided by the starlight that glints off the two pair of eyes waiting and rocking, both unblinking. One pair cradled low in the lap of the other, soft rumbles vibrating its feathered throat. One pair humming a music born before words as they rock and stroke, forefinger and thumb, gently following the path of feathers, throat, breast, and sides. The right hand stroking, the left hand cupping underneath the tiny egg hole that sucks itself open and closed, open and closed.' (139)

Miranda seems to be holding a chicken on her lap. The associations of chickens/hens and voodoo are well-known and foreshadow some sort of sacrificial rite. Hens and eggs also stand as the symbol for fertility. The whole natural surrounding helps to build the magic atmosphere: the garden, the thick air, tuberose, camellias, hanging vines of the dwarf honeysuckle, everything seems to acquire a life of its own, 'feet passing into the other place where flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly' (139).

Miranda continues the strange ritual as she takes an egg from the hen and, while the shell is still pulsing and wet, breaks it and eats it. The scene moves then to the inside of the house, where the dining table is covered with a white sheet for Bernice to lie on. The ritual that takes place there is quite otherworldly. Bernice feels in her body Miranda's hands, 'and it can't be human hands no way, making her body feel like this' (140). There is an emphasis on the connection to the past, since the action seems to happen in an old time, a primitive age when there was a closer connection between humans and animals:

She ain't flesh, she's a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in... the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing and alive - wet - the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight. (140)

The reader is not given a rational explanation of what has happened in the other place. Later, we are told that Bernice has a baby. The logical implication seems that Miranda assisted Bernice in conceiving by following some rite of fertilisation with the help of a chicken. Miranda possesses extraordinary powers usually associated

with Mother Nature and the Life Force. Hens and eggs as symbols of fertility acquire a sacral dimension within an animistic universe, and will play an essential role in George's final trial. The episode shows a reverence for female powers of creation. This is a female-centred world, a place of nurture and growing.

The whole scene is made even more disturbing by the sharp contrast with the narrative that immediately follows: George describes his initial impressions after his marriage with Cocoa. The tone is extremely quotidian, as he recalls the difficulties of life in common and his rational attempts to understand women's behaviour by buying books on female cycles and biology. The departure from the previous scene is certainly shocking, an effective magic realist device which serves to mingle together both discourses. Furthermore, George's patriarchal vision reinforces by juxtaposition the emphasis on maternal power and its implications with magic and a mythical world view.

Throughout the novel, George's rationalist discourse functions as a powerful counterpoint to Miranda's intuitive one. Such strategy is required to engraft the magical discourse onto a realistic setting, a primordial condition in magic realist writing. George represents rationalism, patriarchy, Western urban world. Brought up in a shelter where he is taught that 'only the present has potential' and encouraged to pursue practical activities, he becomes an engineer and establishes a successful company with a partner. George stands for the white ideals established by Western culture: logical, with a practical mind, realistic, down-to-earth. With this characterisation, Naylor intends the cultural shock to be stronger when he is faced with the altogether different reality of Willow Springs. The contrast is made evident by episodes full of humour such as the poker game. Invited by Dr. Buzzard to play poker with some Willow Springs locals in the woods, George is amazed at the general attitude of the participants: they expect to lose since Dr. Buzzard always cheats and wins. The fact is to lose as little money as possible. George, however, is determined to win and to that purpose, he puts in practice his theoretical knowledge learnt in a mathematics course at Columbia. This is rationality at its highest. The city boy does not realise that he should respect the traditions of the new place where he is only a visitor. Furthermore, he does not seem to read in the invitation a sign of welcoming and a privilege - he is too obsessed with succeeding. George's behaviour foreshadows his inability to interpret Willow Springs correctly. Like a colonialist, he

disrupts the local conventions without thinking of the consequences. What is more telling in this episode is the acceptance by the Willow Springs men of his intellect: when he wins the game, they start a ritualistic clapping followed by religious songs in the form of a chorus. George is moved by their rhythm, their warmth, a sort of communal bond which is new for him and connects him with a primeval world. In the final battle to save Cocoa, however, his rationalism will predominate with terrible consequences.

As the hurricane unleashes its force in Willow Springs, the magical discourse starts to dominate the novel. From the description of Cocoa's hair-braiding by Ruby, which runs parallel to the gathering of the hurricane forces, to the deadly effects of both these, and George's desperate attempts to save Cocoa, the narrative rhythm increases and the rational discourse gives way completely to irrational, dark forces that astonish George and the reader. Hair braiding has traditionally been a symbol of sisterhood in African American culture. In *Mama Day*, however, the scene of Ruby braiding Cocoa's hair is highly disturbing. The magic realist narrative incorporates a dark side to a ritualistic experience of female bonding. The passage is described by two narrative voices. First, the third-person narrator depicts Ruby's preparations. The scene is related from the distance and backed up by natural signs that precede the hurricane: 'That spreading cloud net from the south is just about over the main road as Ruby brings out a little stool to her front porch. She arranges her tiny ceramic jars on the table beside her chair and sits to watch for Cocoa' (243). Although Ruby is the focus of the narration, she is not given the role of focaliser: we do not gain access to her thoughts or intentions. We only perceive a sense of waiting, as though she is planning to do something to Cocoa besides braiding her hair. This narrative distance makes the scene even more disturbing; if Ruby's thoughts were made clear, the following events would be easier to grasp rationally. Instead, the reader is left with an uneasy narration accentuated by the sinister landscape: '[Cocoa's] long-legged stride that Ruby watches intently as the webbed clouds move on northward to cover Willow Springs' (244).

The next narrative corresponds to Cocoa's first-person description of the hair braiding. After her terrible fight with George, her hair braiding is a soothing experience that transports her back to her childhood, when life used to be simple: 'Sitting on that little stool and letting her braid my hair brought that comfort back...

Twenty years melted away under her fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair' (245-6). After Cocoa's narrative, we go back to the third-person perspective, detailing the braiding as a sort of ritual:

She moves her hands along the temples to get the shape of the head before making the first part. A straight part down the middle, north to south. The teeth of the comb dig in just short of hurting as she scratches the scalp showing through the parted hair before she dips her fingers into the round jar and massages the warm solution down its length. The second big part crosses the first, going east to west, and this time she dips her fingers into the square jar, massaging hard. North to south, east to west, round to square. (246)

All these realistic details are very important because they apparently refer to a quotidian, innocent act. However, as we will discover later, Ruby is massaging in Cocoa's scalp a substance that causes horrible hallucinations, sickness and eventually death. It will be an illness difficult to apprehend or believe from a rationalistic point of view: it produces worms inside Cocoa that literally eat her up. It is therefore important that the source of the mysterious illness is described with all realistic detail. At the same time, the language of the description provides hints of the deadly consequences. It is cryptic, ominous: north to south, east to west, round to square. Its full meaning will only become clear when Cocoa falls ill.

The third-person description of the hurricane has an apocalyptic tone, with lines from the Bible interspersed in italics. The narrative also summons up echoes from the hurricane in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The wind starts on the shores of Africa and after a long trip reaches Willow Springs and brings destruction. This symbolic journey from Africa to America implies a revision of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, the biblical passages are subverted as the narrative ends up with the statement that such a power can only come from Sapphira: 'while prayers go up in Willow Springs to be spared from what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name' (251). In this way, Sapphira, a black slave woman, is again equated with God.

The hurricane is also described by George's first-person narrative. Interestingly, the rational George compares nature's power with man-made technology and is awed by the superiority of the former. Talking about a nuclear steam turbine generator, he says: 'That was power. But the winds coming around the corners of that house was God' (251). As we have seen, George's rationalistic discourse is essential to provide the balance required by magic realist narratives. The

fact that he is the narrator chosen to describe the next scene, Bernice's driving with her dead child, gives the realistic background necessary for accepting such a disturbing event. George cannot believe his eyes and starts doubting that he lives in the twentieth century. The reader is bound to identify with George and feel the same confusion, particularly as George's narrative is preceded by the collective voice picturing Bernice's actions in a nearly surrealistic fashion. It takes the perspective of the whole community which witnesses Little Caesar's death without actually seeing it:

Folks is sure to disagree for years about what caused the death of Little Caesar...There's no eyewitnesses to the condition of his body as his mama drives him up the main road - some things you just can't watch. Nobody was there but everybody heard the door open up on that white convertible. (256)

In silence, they see her passing by in her way north towards Mama Day's silver trailer. Bernice is taking her dead baby to the other place to have Miranda bring him back to life. The silent acceptance of her conduct by the community contrasts strongly with George's incredulity. He needs to think of Bernice in a daily frame that transports him back to reality, to that reality represented by his New York world:

I had sat in her home, a split-level ranch with central air conditioning. Her husband had plans for building on his stereo system and ordering a new diesel tractor. They had a highschool yearbook, wedding pictures, and a tuition account for their son. I had talked to that couple about the advantages of municipal bonds over no-load mutual accounts for that very account. She had brought me a linen napkin and served me coffee. (257)

This passage works as a telling example of magic realist strategies. The realistic details are necessary to ground the whole picture in the immediate Western world readers are living in. In Willow Springs, people have central air conditioning and tuition accounts for their children, and that is what makes Bernice's belief in the possibility of resurrecting her child even more dramatic. As George concludes, 'If this was reality, it meant I was insane, and I couldn't be - and she couldn't be, because I had met that woman...No, this was the stuff of dreams. I spoke because I needed to hear the reality of my own voice' (258).

This episode prepares the reader for subsequent events which are more difficult to accept from a rationalistic point of view, those surrounding Cocoa's mysterious illness and near death. When Miranda realises that Ruby has poisoned Cocoa with nightshade and has fixed her with hatred to destroy her, she knows that it will take more than herbal remedies to save Cocoa, because as she and Abigail agree,



'we ain't talking about this world at all' (268). From then on, it is a question of believing or not for both George and the reader.

Miranda takes revenge on Ruby; she goes to her house and spills a silvery powder around its four sides. Immediately after that, a lightning storm develops and the third-person narrator states in a matter-of-fact way that the lightning 'hits Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes' (273). The reader is not given space for disbelief: Ruby's house burning is obviously a result of Miranda's powder and also of her sorcery to conjure up a lightning storm. If any doubt appears, it is soon dispelled by George's scientific explanations:

there was something *strange* about this lightning. It struck twice in the same place...That's rare. Unless, of course, in a scientific experiment someone purposely electrifies the ground with materials that hold both negative and positive charges to increase the potential of having a target hit. No one was running around with that kind of knowledge in Willow Springs, and it was highly improbable that it would happen naturally. (274)

But we readers know that Mama Day is running around with that kind of knowledge! Once again George finds a rational explanation for an apparently supernatural phenomenon. Although the reader occupies a similar position to George's, s/he has superior knowledge which gives access to the supernatural but does not necessarily demand acceptance of it. Whereas George has only one view, the reader can negotiate between both perspectives.

As Cocoa's illness progresses, the supernatural and unexplained gain ground. Cocoa starts having terrible hallucinations. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees a distorted face: 'My eyes, lips, chin, forehead, and ears have been smeared everywhere, mashed in and wrinkled, with some gouged places still holding the imprints from my fingers' (276). There is nothing wrong with her face, though; it is only an image. When Cocoa explains to her grandmother what is happening, she does not express any surprise and tells her that everything is in her mind. In a matter-of-fact way, Abigail proceeds to cover all the mirrors in the house. The absence of surprise in the characters is extremely important in the mode of magic realism. Indeed, throughout her illness, Cocoa does not show any surprise: everything happening to her seems perfectly normal. Brought up in Willow Springs, her frame of reference and world view are very different from George's, who cannot accept by any means occurrences which have no rational explanation.

The description of a supernatural event as normal eliminates the antinomy between the real and the magical on the level of the text. The reader suspends his/her normal reactions of wonder in order to conform to the requirements of the textual code. As Amaryll Chanady explains: 'An antinomy which exists on the semantic level is resolved in the act of reading if the focaliser does not perceive it and if the narrator invalidates the contradiction between the real and the impossible by describing both kinds of phenomena in the same way.'<sup>32</sup> The resolution of this antinomy characterises the mode of magic realism. Authorial reticence plays an essential role in this naturalisation of the unusual. It refers to the absence of obvious intrusions and manipulation on the part of the author. The narrator presents Cocoa's illness without any comments about its lack of veracity and, therefore, the reader is bound to accept it without questioning it.

### **The Power of Believing**

Mama Day bases her strategy to save Cocoa on George's belief. She receives the solution through a dream in which she meets Sapphira: she opens door after door in search of her name and her condition of daughter, not only of Mama. Within her dream, she has another dream that gives her the clue to find Cocoa's salvation: 'look past the pain' and the instructions to uncover the well where her sister Peace died. There is no clear narrative transition between her dream and her visit to the well. The description of the well, however, is grounded in the conventions of realism. The well is physically real, covered with moss, holly, wild ginger. It is important that it is depicted in all detail so that the supernatural that is about to occur is fully effective. We are given all the meticulous steps followed by Miranda to uncover the mouth of the well. Since it had been cemented by her father, it takes her hours to undo the rusted spikes and loosen the boards.

Once Miranda has uncovered the well and looks into it, the supernatural takes over. She hears the screams of her grandmother, mother and baby sister, women who

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<sup>32</sup> Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York and London: Garland, 1985), p. 36.

died without finding peace. The magic scene is narrated in all vividness and sensory detail:

She wants to run from all that screaming. Echoing shrill and high, piercing her ears. But with her eyes clamped shut, she looks at the sounds. A woman in apricot homespun: Let me go with peace. And a young body falling, falling toward the glint of silver coins in the crystal clear water. A woman in a gingham shirtwaist: Let me go with Peace. Circles and circles of screaming. Once, twice, three times peace was lost at that well. (284)

The screams and images are presented in a matter-of-fact way, as real as the mortar of the old well or the rusty spikes. The supernatural is integrated within the phenomenal world, with no need for rational explanations.

For Suzanne Juhasz, Miranda's dream vision is the true centre of the novel. For the first time in the book, and in her life, Miranda's identity shifts from mother to daughter.<sup>33</sup> The love that will save Cocoa is based in mutual need, in the same way she must be mothered as well as mother: the daughter helps to make the mother whole, just as the mother does for her daughter. Dreams play an important role in magic realist narratives where the barriers between being asleep and awake are usually blurred. They function as a non-rational device of obtaining knowledge. Before the tragic events develop, George has a disturbing dream which will prove prophetic. He is swimming across The Sound as Cocoa is desperately calling him. In spite of his efforts, the shore seems farther and farther away. He sees Mama Day over the bridge telling him to get up and walk. He thinks she is an old crazy woman and gets angry at her for not helping them - when he pushes his shoulders out of the water to scream at her, he finds himself standing up in the middle of The Sound (183-4). The same night, Cocoa has an identical dream: George is also swimming in The Sound. She is in some trouble and calls him but he keeps swimming in the opposite direction and starts to falter - if she keeps shouting, he will drown (189).

This shared dream seems to work thematically as a hint of what will happen to George if he does not listen to and believe in Mama Day. However, it also has an important narrative function. Cocoa and George never discuss this dream with each other, and therefore are not even aware that their spiritual connection goes as far as having identical dreams. This places the reader in a position of superiority at an early

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<sup>33</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, 'The Magic Circle: Fictions of the Good Mother in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*', in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. by Felton and Loris, pp. 129-142 (p. 138).

stage, able to draw conclusions about the relationships between characters and to foresee half way through the book what course of action must be taken in order to save Cocoa.

After looking for answers inside the well which contains her tragic family history, Miranda becomes aware of the pain of those men abandoned by Sapphira and her own mother, men who would not let them go. Those men believed in themselves, in the power of their feelings. Mama Day realises that the clue for Cocoa's salvation lies in George handing her his belief:

she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to *hand* it over to her. She needs his hand in hers - his very hand - so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. Yes, in his very hands he already held the missing piece she'd come looking for. (285)

George must symbolically place his hand in Miranda's in order to join the secular with the sacred, the real with the magical, and in that way save Cocoa together. Belief becomes the core of Naylor's novel. The question of faith is essential for the understanding of such a mode as magic realism. As stated in the Introduction, anthropological magic realism requires an element of faith in the marvellous on the part of the author and the audience, since in Alejo Carpentier's words, 'Who does not believe in saints, cannot be cured by saints' "miracles"<sup>34</sup>.

The way in which the readers get engaged in the magic of the text is indeed compelling. The reader undergoes a parallel process to George's, as he receives instructions in how to believe. In this spiritual journey into himself, George must achieve a connection between the individual and the collective self. However, in the end he does not succeed because he fails to believe all that which cannot be rationally or logically explained. George can only see what he has been taught beyond the bridge, the reality offered by Western civilisation, and he clings desperately to that: 'I had to hold on to what was real...there were ten more feet added on to the bridge - that was real. And the sun coming up to bring in the outlines of the other shore - that was also real' (291).

Miranda's concept of reality is quite different from George's. When he visits her in the other place and asks for her instructions, he dismisses them as mere

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<sup>34</sup> See Introduction, p. 4.

metaphors. Miranda notices his misinterpretation: 'Metaphors. Like what they used in poetry and stuff. The stuff folks dreamed up when they was making a fantasy, while what she was talking about was *real*. As real as them young hands in front of her' (294). The events taking place in the novel are clearly not a fantasy but part of Willow Springs reality. Miranda's thoughts rendered through a free indirect style seem to warn the reader not to consider this as a fantastic narration. The allusion to and debunking of metaphors work as another subversion of Western literary modes.

Cocoa's illness is certainly depicted in a very realistic way. The welts on her body, the worms eating her insides up, the putrid odour of decaying matter, everything is described with realistic detail. There is no doubt that this young woman is mysteriously dying because of Ruby's doings. But George ultimately needs evidence: only when he sees a real, live worm coming from her, does he obey Miranda's instructions.

The scene of George entering the chicken coop is the climax of the novel. Miranda has instructed him to go there with a book and a walking cane (which belonged to Bascombe Wade and John-Paul, men who had been in a similar position to George's in the past). He has to search in the nest of an old red hen and bring her whatever he finds. These commands seem indeed some mumbo-jumbo. There is however a whole ritualistic meaning surrounding hens and eggs, particularly in voodoo practices, where chickens are the usual victims chosen for sacrifice.

As George enters, he spots the red hen in the northwest corner of the coop. The huge hen seems to be in a trance, sitting immobile, until George approaches her and then she attacks him. A horrible struggle between man and animal follows. The hen sinks her claws into George's wrists, shoulders, back, until all his body is bleeding. He turns the whole nest over, but finds nothing. In mad desperation, George smashes the hens and nests first with the cane and then with the ledger. 'Nothing. There was nothing there - except for my gauged and bleeding hands. Bring me straight back whatever you find... Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?' (300). In fact, that is what Miranda requires, George's hands, but he fails to acknowledge it.

The image of hands is one of the most dominant throughout the novel. It suggests a connection with a rich African tradition of healing and conjuring. Gifted hands indicate creation, solidarity, connections to both the earth and to each other.

George's refusal to hand in his hands denote his highly individualistic attitude to life, a result of a Western upbringing. Within the novel, the maternal world of Willow Springs is symbolised by Miranda's gifted hands, which treasure the heritage coming down from Sapphira and from Miranda's father (a gifted wood carver). Hers are hands that can heal, grow gardens, cook food, sew quilts.

In his interpretation of the novel, Gary Storhoff resorts to Carl Jung's theories of archetype as a means of negotiating the tension between the mimetic and the mythic.<sup>35</sup> Jung's concept of the collective unconscious is more relevant to anthropological magic realism than a Freudian individualistic perspective. Beyond the individual unconscious there exists a collective unconscious, shared by all people, which is the repository of archetypes. Archetypes are the inherited patterns of psychological experience, the basic images and shapes of myth and culture. According to Storhoff: 'George sets out on an archetypal quest to recover an aspect of his own psyche that he has disavowed and discounted throughout much of his life: Miranda symbolically challenges George to go to the henhouse to recover his complete Self.'<sup>36</sup>

Authentic selfhood in the novel depends upon a discovery of one of the most important Jungian archetypes, the anima/animus: the unconscious image representing the 'contrasexual' side of the individual's psyche ('Aion'). In a man, the anima is the repressed 'woman within', and embodies powerful traits culturally defined as 'feminine': intuition, sensitivity to nature and beauty, and emotionality. The anima personifies the feminine image: a nurturing, nature-connected earth goddess, linked to images of fertility, growth, and the power of instinct and intuition. In order to become a whole person, for Jung the man must acknowledge and accept his own anima, must celebrate the feminine within him. In a similar way to Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony* and Milkman in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, George is exposed to a process of feminisation. However, whereas Tayo and Milkman succeed in such process, George resists any feminisation; he goes his own way, relying on his male strength alone.

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<sup>35</sup> Gary Storhoff, ' "The Only Voice Is Your Own": Gloria Naylor's Revision of *The Tempest*', *African American Review*, 29 (1) (Spring 1995), 35-46.

<sup>36</sup> Storhoff, ' "The Only Voice..."', p. 40.

As in fairy tales, Miranda's instructions entail sexual directives; the cane and the ledger are symbols of masculinity. As a lost child, George must rely on an old woman whose advice seems to him irrational and absurd. Miranda does not tell George precisely *what* to retrieve from the chicken coop. What he misses in the coop is central to the novel's archetypal meaning. Naylor tests the reader also: she never reveals what he was supposed to find. Miranda sends George to gather *eggs*, the text's dominant symbol of the anima. Throughout the novel, Miranda has identified with eggs and chickens, while George has avoided them. The symbolic egg (also present in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, where it is associated with Pilate) is a trope for female creative powers and particularly for Miranda's entire way of life. It implies her commitment to the community, her love of nature, and her work as midwife, helping women conceive.

George fails his quest because he does not accomplish what is required of him: to gather the eggs, to acknowledge his feminine side, to trust Miranda and hand her his belief. George persists in discrediting the nonrational and the feminine which is clearly associated with it. He regards all that which does not fit within his rationalistic world view as ridiculous, insane, Other. The book seems to imply that this refusal to acknowledge the other leads to death. George dies to maintain the rationalist boundaries between worlds, while Mama Day asks him to erase such boundaries.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek reads *Mama Day* as the suggestion of a new way of ordering the world that creates 'a working nurturance for both men and women.'<sup>37</sup> Although George apparently fails in establishing this working nurturance, his death makes Cocoa's survival possible. We are not given any explanation about Cocoa's recovery, but it is implied that George gave his own life for her. Again, a rational perspective does not provide all the answers. George believes only after he loses his physical existence: he talks about his 'real death' that day: 'But I want to tell you something about my real death that day. I didn't feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace' (302). In a

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<sup>37</sup> Missy Dehn Kubitschek, 'Towards a New Order: Shakespeare, Morrison, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*', *MELUS*, 19 (3)(Fall 1994), 75-90 (p. 88).

skilful shift from figurative to literal, the persistent metaphor about men with broken hearts turns into George's already flawed heart physically bursting.

In spite of some hints given throughout the text, George's death surprises the reader. We have been listening to a dead person's voice all along. George's narrative voice has always been extremely lively and immediate and, therefore, knowing that it belongs to someone who has been dead for fourteen years breaks all the reader's expectations. Furthermore, George's death as a character coincides with his last intervention as a narrator: once he relates his own death in the story, his role as a narrator in the text finishes. The demarcation between life and death disappears, as does the thin line between fiction and reality. The side of the alive narratee, Cocoa, is the same as the reader's side, and not that far from George's narratorial locus. Naylor plays a last trick of metafiction: the death of the character and the narrator does not kill the magic of fiction - Cocoa continues endlessly her conversation with George, and readers only have to open the book to witness such conversation.

## AN UNFINISHED QUILT

George's death allows Cocoa to come to terms with her heritage and its tradition of acknowledging the supernatural. She is eventually able to connect different cultures, different worlds, rejecting the strict and mutually exclusive polarities imposed by realistic epistemologies. Only by transcending the boundaries of her physical experience can she talk to George. The book ends with a serene Cocoa who has reconciled herself with her loss and found the meaning of peace. She has also established the necessary spiritual link with Miranda to continue the magical line of Day women. For the first time, both women can hear that on the east side of the island (facing Africa) and on the west (facing the mainland), 'the waters were still' (312). Cocoa is now ready to go in search of her mother's garden, to borrow a phrase from Alice Walker, to discover the legacy of black women's artistic traditions.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (London: Women's Press, 1984).



*Mama Day* embodies a celebration of black sisterhood. Like many other contemporary writers, Naylor incorporates the motif of the quilt in her fiction as a symbol of female creativity, of the fusion of imagination and practicality. Furthermore, the novel as a whole resembles a quilt. Miranda and Abigail sew a double-ring quilt as a wedding present for Cocoa. This quilt represents their family history since they stitch together different pieces and fabrics that have belonged to various members of the Day family. It comprises all the happiness, sadness, suffering and loss of generations. The quilt works as a symbol on several levels. It stands for the notion of circularity in time and in narrative structures: 'When it's done right you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins. It's like they ain't been sewn at all, they grew up out of nowhere' (138). It emphasises the idea of sisterhood and links between generations (especially from mothers to daughters). It requires improvisation, creativity and use of old bits to make up something new, much of what black art consists of in general. It implies a community and a working together. The quilt also represents history, and not the traditional chronological history, but one that includes past and present, joy and suffering, winners and losers. Most importantly, the quilt motif works as a metaphor for the form and structure of the novel: a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, talking from the past, present and future, belonging to dead and alive people, to individuals and to a community, weave a complex structure of real and supernatural elements. It adds magic realism to the African American tradition as it subverts realistic assumptions and challenges to look for alternative modes of creation and perception of the world. *Mama Day* is, like a quilt, an unfinished story that requires constant revision.

The reader is also stitched into this narrative quilt. Racial, cultural and time barriers have disappeared and we are positioned as listeners within the world of Willow Springs. Sceptical Western readers have been invited throughout the narrative to reconsider their own belief system in order to enter the intimate space of this magical island, a community which stresses shared ways of knowing, telling and listening.

Magic realism does not arise from the conflict between science and myth but rather from the necessary negotiation between them. Magic realist techniques allow African American authors to write from within an alternative non-rationalist

paradigm, as they contribute to hybridise the ontologies of American and African cultures. Gloria Naylor joins Morrison's attempts to make the world larger:

I also want my work to capture the vast imagination of black people. That is, I want my books to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element. We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on an equal footing. Birds talk and butterflies cry, and it is not surprising or upsetting to them. These things make the world larger for them.<sup>39</sup>

That is precisely Naylor's agenda. From African lore to supernatural connected knowing, the non-rational, the information discredited by the West, is consistently valorised in *Mama Day*. This novel builds a bridge between what can be perceived and what is beyond perception in order to explore all dimensions of reality, because as Miranda would put it, there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see. Much more.

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<sup>39</sup> Nellie McKay, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (4) (1983), 413-429 (p. 428).

**CHAPTER THREE**

**MAGIC REALISM IN NATIVE AMERICAN WRITING**

The American Indian in the world consciousness is a treasured invention, a gothic artifact evoked like the “powwows” in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” out of the dark reaches of the continent to replace the actual native, who, painfully problematic in real life, is supposed to have long since vanished.

Louis Owens, *Other Destinies. Understanding the American Indian Novel*, 1992.

In 1968 N. Scott Momaday published his Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, beginning what has come to be known as the American Indian Literary Renaissance. Although other American Indian authors had published before Momaday, such as D’Arcy McNickle and John Joseph Mathews, it was only in the 1970s that Native American writing began to receive wide recognition and spur a considerable body of criticism. In recent years, writers like James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich have reached the mass market and achieved great popularity.

Contemporary Native American writing primarily addresses the problematic questions of ethnicity and identity. Indian tribes in the U.S. have suffered a history of annihilation, dispossession and alienation in reservations. Their identity has been undermined by the systematic imposition of Western religions, language and culture, at the same time as their individuals have entered the American popular consciousness as mere stereotypes. As Louis Owens remarks in the above quotation, the American Indian appears as a product of literature, history and art, an invention that often bears little resemblance to actual Native American people. In their exploration of the conflict between a disappearing tribal mythology and a Western cultural system, Native American writers aim to subvert the clichéd view of the Noble Savage and the vanishing Indian. Their novels are mainly populated by mixed-bloods who struggle to come to terms with both American and Indian ethnicity. They attempt to articulate their identity by rediscovering a sense of place and community.

Thanks to their bicultural nature, Indian writers are able to participate in both tribal and mainstream culture. James Ruppert claims that they act as mediators between Indian and Anglo traditions:

Contemporary Native American writers are in an innovative position full of potential. As participants in two cultural traditions, their art is patterned by discursive acts of mediation at many levels. By mediation, I mean an artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other.<sup>1</sup>

As participants in two rich cultural traditions, American Indian authors adopt a number of strategies to address different audiences. They employ Western literary genres like the novel together with Native American forms derived from an ancestral oral tradition.

Most Native American contemporary fiction aims to approach oral performative techniques in written form, much in the same way as African American literature does. The notions of storyteller and audience are crucial in this rendering; speaker and listener are co-participants in the telling of a story. There is a constant tension between the Western concept of a single individual author and the Native American communal storytelling, as well as between the use of an alien language, English, and the representation of a non-literate ceremonial culture. Magic realism proves to be a suitable mode to reflect such tension and produce hybrid narratives that incorporate both oral and written traditions and various genres, and allow the unproblematic insertion of a mythical world into a contemporary reality.

Magic realism reflects in the language of narration the encounter of two cultures and two opposing perceptions of reality. In Native American tradition, there are fluid boundaries between the realms of the material and spiritual, animals and human beings, and a constant slippage between the codes of the natural and the supernatural. Writers include myths, folktales and legends from their respective tribal traditions to provide their texts with cultural specificity. Elaine Jahner emphasises the vitality of myths in many American Indian communities: 'There the myths are an intimate part of ordinary daily activities, because they tell of the drama that gives meaning to the ordinary.'<sup>2</sup> The conventions of realism seem inadequate for conveying certain cosmologies and perceptions of reality, a deficiency that Native

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<sup>1</sup> James Ruppert, 'Mediation in Contemporary Native American Writing', *Genre*, 25 (4) (Winter 1992), 321-37 (p. 321).

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Jahner, 'A Critical Approach to American Indian Literature', in *Studies in American Indian Literature. Critical Essays and Course Designs*, ed. by Paula Gunn Allen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983), pp. 211-224 (p. 214).

American writers try to compensate for through their use of lore, mythic presentation and magic realist strategies.

However, establishing large critical generalisations is always problematic. The concept of Native American literature as a homogeneous literature is a Western invention. Many writers and critics have pointed out the extraordinary diversity of tribes, a fact that makes it impossible to talk about a single tradition. According to Laura Coltelli, Native American literature has to be seen as multiethnic.<sup>3</sup> The tribal background and geographic origins of authors necessarily affect the elaboration of themes and the definition of characters. Therefore, it is interesting to analyse two novels by authors who are based on geographically distant areas. Louise Erdrich writes about Indians and mixed bloods on and around North Dakota reservations, near the Canadian border. The reservation of Mountain Turtle, to which Erdrich's maternal family belongs, corresponds to the tribe of the Chippewa or Anishinabe, as they call themselves, a hunting patrilineal tribe. On the other hand, the novels by Leslie Marmon Silko centre on the Pueblos from the Southwest, particularly the Laguna, agricultural matrilineal tribes with many connections to neighbouring Mexico. As the critic Susan Pérez Castillo explains, for historical and geographical reasons, the Chippewa tribe has suffered the effects of acculturation on a far greater scale than the Laguna Pueblo, a tribe which is almost unique in that it has succeeded to a notable degree in maintaining its collective identity while adapting to change.<sup>4</sup>

Both Silko and Erdrich employ magic realist strategies to develop coherent world views by presenting the collective perspective of Native American communities. The characters in their fiction endeavour to reconnect themselves to a vanishing inheritance of sacred ceremonies, tribal wisdom and a belief in the harmony and unity of life. Numerous references to Laguna Pueblo and Chippewa traditions, rituals, folklore and legends provide a complete vision of the Indian cosmology and way of being. Nature and the importance of land, recurrent themes in Native American writing, are widely explored in Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Whereas *Tracks* goes back to the beginning of the twentieth

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words. American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Pérez Castillo, 'Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy', *The Massachusetts Review*, 32 (1) (Summer 1991), 285-94 (p. 288).

century and traces the implementation of the policy of allotment and reservations and the subsequent loss of land and Indian tribal identity, *Ceremony* reflects the alienation and displacement of reservation Indians in the mid-1950s. The conflicts suggested and foreseen in *Tracks* are then fully materialised in Silko's novel. Erdrich reflects the cultural clash in a double narrative based on oral tradition that examines the various possibilities of integration, rejection or assimilation of Western values. Silko's novel is formally more complex and self-reflexive. It combines oral and written traditions and different genres in a way that recalls the metadiscursive reflexivity of postmodernism. In this sense, it seems closer to the postmodernist techniques employed by the Chicano writer Ana Castillo and the Mexican Laura Esquivel. After all, Silko is writing from the American Southwest, and the Mexican influence seems strong, although *Ceremony* is more ritualistic in tone and lacks the self-parody found in Castillo's and Esquivel's novels.

The fact that both these texts are female-authored is also significant. Women writers play a unique role in current Native American Literature.<sup>5</sup> Indian women have traditionally held positions of power in their tribes. In many creation myths, especially in the Southwest, woman is perceived as the creative force, one with Mother Earth. Women represent continuity and wholeness and have been repositories and transmitters of culture. Contemporary women writers take up the storytelling tradition to maintain vital connections from one generation to the other, since most communities have experienced a devastating loss of traditional ways and still undergo a constant process of acculturation. Both Erdrich and Silko populate their pages with extraordinary women characters with magical powers who embody the survival of their tribes. Their narratives offer a portrayal of gender roles which differs highly from that of patriarchal Western literature and allows alternative and more dynamic concepts of gender and ethnicity.

Erdrich and Silko offer dialogic narratives that express a mixed heritage and reach a balance between Native and Western elements. They employ magic realist strategies that facilitate the smooth incorporation of different, and in many aspects contradictory, cultural codes. Their ultimate goal is to find ways to address multiple

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, in Coltelli's book, among the ten writers interviewed, six are women. For interesting course designs, see 'Teaching American Indian Women's Literature' in *Studies in American Indian Literature*, ed. by P. Gunn Allen, pp. 134-144.

audiences who have diverse ontological approaches to reality. In doing so, they re-educate readers so that they can understand two different world views and literary traditions. As Erdrich and Silko bring communal tribal vision into modern thinking, and myth into contemporary reality, we enlarge our own perceptions of both worlds. Like the writers, readers too become competent mediators between discourses.



**3.1.****SUSPENDED BETWEEN WORLDS:  
LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS* (1988)**

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a light push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.

Franz Kafka, 'The Trees', 1913.

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary Native American writer of mixed descent French-Chippewa on her mother's side, German-American on her father's. Her novels reflect her dual cultural background by featuring the tension marking the lives of Native Americans, mixed-bloods and other culturally and socially displaced characters on and around North Dakota reservations. *Tracks* (1988) forms part of a tetralogy, together with *Love Medicine* (1984 - revised edition 1993), *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Although all four novels are self-contained and can be read as independent units, they have an interrelated network of characters and events. The third one to be published, *Tracks* is chronologically the first one of the quartet, a fact that, together with its extensive use of magic realist strategies, makes it more relevant to my discussion. It focuses on the lives of several interconnected Indian families in a Chippewa reservation during a period of twelve years, from 1912 to 1924. Significant socio-historical topics are treated, such as the policy of allotment, the loss of Indian land to white hands or the hard conditions of illness and starvation suffered by the inhabitants of the reservation. The narrative presents a masterful use of oral tradition and multi-layered stories with a particular emphasis on community and survival. It incorporates non-realistic elements, belonging mainly to Indian folklore and beliefs, into a realistic frame, creating an impression of magic and mystery. The natural and the supernatural coexist, constantly slipping into each other. Western concepts of time and space are subverted and the effects of the introduction of Christianity into Indian societies are foregrounded. *Tracks* reflects a collision of cultures, of two opposing world views, the shamanic and the Catholic, the Western and the non-Western. Characters are suspended between worlds; they experience confusion, fractured identity, alienation, and eventually dissolution as they are forced either to assimilate into white culture or to lose their own tradition.

Magic realism proves to be a suitable literary mode to convey the tensions that exist between disparate cultures and different perceptions of reality. Its narrative strategies reflect the dissonances inherent in the Native American experience in a way which is unavailable to realism. Louise Erdrich's writing has often been described as magic realism, most notably by fellow writer Joyce Carol Oates. However, when asked in a 1993 interview how she felt about her work being labelled 'magical realist', Erdrich revealed her discomfort:

The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable. I think the term is one applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world.<sup>1</sup>

Without denying that the yoking of the natural and the supernatural that one sees in her fiction has its origin in Erdrich's Chippewa heritage, it can also be linked to anthropological magic realism as defined in this thesis. In fact, in another interview, Erdrich quotes García Márquez when trying to describe her own narrative technique and concludes: 'It's the object, or grounding reality, that makes the unreal seem plausible.'<sup>2</sup> This seems to me the main characteristic of magic realism, the insertion of supernatural or unreal events into the most prosaic of worlds, the grounding reality. Erdrich has also explained her intention behind interweaving real and imaginary events in *Tracks* along these lines: 'There is no quantifiable reality. Points of view change the reality of a situation and there is a reality to madness, imagined events, and perhaps something beyond that.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I would like to contend that magic realism, in its challenging of the demarcations of reality, becomes a subversive practice for Louise Erdrich to represent the marginalisation of Native Americans and the irony of being exiled in their own land. It makes readers reconsider received ideas and present realities of a determined ethnic group and, at the same time, enlarge their general perception of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Allan Chavkin, 'An Interview with Louise Erdrich (1993)', in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, ed. by A. Chavkin and N. Feyl Chavkin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 220-53 (p. 221).

<sup>2</sup> Gail Caldwell, 'Writers and Partners (1986)', in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, ed. by A. Chavkin and N. Feyl Chavkin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 64-69 (p. 67).

<sup>3</sup> Chavkin, 'An Interview with Louise Erdrich', p. 224.

## ORAL TRADITION AND STORYTELLING

As many folklorists and critics have noted, Native American fiction seeks to connect itself to the oral tradition of tribal narrative. Paula Gunn Allen remarks that:

The oral tradition, from which the contemporary poetry and fiction take their significance and authenticity, has, since contact with white people, been a major force in Indian resistance. It has kept the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures. Contemporary poets and writers take their cue from the oral tradition, to which they return continuously for theme, symbol, structure, and motivating impulse as well as for the philosophic bias that animates our work.<sup>4</sup>

Louise Erdrich's narrative is certainly based on the traditional oral narratives of Indian tribes. Each of the novels of her tetralogy offers stories (usually monologues) which are complete in themselves but at the same time circularly webbed one into each other. In A. Robert Lee's words, 'an 'Indian' pattern runs right through her novels, one in which the circle is all and life operates as a kind of mysterious or magic revolving wheel.'<sup>5</sup> Erdrich's novels lack plot in the conventional sense of the term, that is, the notion of plot as consisting of beginning, conflict rising action, resolution, ending. There is not a logically linear development but instead, Erdrich moves back and forth through space and time, making it almost impossible to do a plot summary of her novels. Each novel presents a circular design, characteristic of oral tradition, as well as the entire tetralogy, which begins and ends with the image of June Kashpaw walking in a snowstorm.

The folklorist Kathleen E. B. Manley suggests that the work of many Native American writers (N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich) shows how contemporary writers influenced by their own oral tradition attempt an approximation of oral performance by involving an audience.<sup>6</sup> Actually, the two major areas of difference between oral and written art lie in the fixity of text and the immediacy of audience. Whereas the audience for an oral performance is physically present, the audience for a literary text is an isolated individual. Native American

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<sup>4</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> A. Robert Lee, 'Ethnic Renaissance: Rudolfo Anaya, Louise Erdrich and Maxine Hong Kingston', in *The New American Writing*, ed. by Graham Clarke (London: Vision Press, 1990), pp. 139-164 (p. 150).

writers try to encourage a sense of shared experience to involve the audience. They do not treat written storytelling as an activity performed or received in isolation but as intertwined with oral storytelling. Consequently, storytelling is not considered as static or fixed but as continuous and open-ended: events are incorporated within events and the story is carried farther with each telling.

*Tracks* draws on a variety of oral storytelling strategies. Erdrich resorts to a dual narrative perspective, alternating between the viewpoint of the old storyteller Nanapush and that of Pauline Lamartine. In a phone interview with Deborah Stead, Erdrich explained how she came up with the idea of using a dual narrative after a comment made by her late husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris: 'Michael started talking about the Athapaskin Indians who live around Tyonek, Alaska, where he once hunted. In their language, there is no word for "I" – only "we"'.<sup>7</sup> This immediately suggested the concept of multiple narration, which would allow Erdrich to recover the collective perspective which characterised traditional Chippewa oral narratives and also to highlight the spiritual fragmentation of her tribe. Interestingly, the novel opens with a 'we' narrator, corresponding to the Chippewa community, 'We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall', that shifts to a first person narrator in the last sentences of the first paragraph, 'In the years I'd passed, I saw more change than in a hundred upon a hundred before'.<sup>8</sup> Such a shift dramatically emphasises the horror of genocide, since this voice belongs to the only surviving witness, Nanapush, and also marks the change from a collective oral tradition into an individualistic written one, and from an Indian to a Western culture.

As in most magic realist texts, there is a constant dichotomy between orality, associated with magic and folklore, and the written word introduced by the colonising white culture; the government papers become symbols of loss and destruction. Nancy Peterson has observed that the need to know history as it is constructed both orally and textually is indicated by the contextual phrases that begin each chapter: first a date, including the designation of season(s) and year(s), then a

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen E. B. Manley, 'Decreasing the Distance: Contemporary Native American Texts, Hypertext and the Concept of Audience', *Southern Folklore*, 51 (2) (1994), 121-135 (p. 121).

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Stead, 'Unlocking the Tale', *The New York Times Book Review*, 2 October 1988, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 1-2. Further quotations will be from this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

phrase in Anishinabe followed by an English translation. This information establishes two opposing frames of reference: one associated with orality, a seasonal or cyclic approach to history, a precontact culture; the other linked with textuality, a linear or progressive approach to history, a postcontact culture.<sup>9</sup>

*Tracks* counterpoints two narrative voices which seek to accommodate the past through its telling: the male voice of old Nanapush, an Anishinabe educated as a Christian but striving to maintain Indian ways of life and perception, and the female voice of Pauline, a mixed-blood who tries to break free from her Indian heritage and descends into madness through religious fanaticism. The tension between both storytellers' voices reflects the conflict between a vanishing tribal mythology and an intruding Western religious system. There emerges a dialectic between the two narratives which sets in contrast two different perceptions of reality. Both narrators are extradiegetic and homodiegetic, since they take part in the story that they narrate. Nanapush addresses his narration to his granddaughter, Lulu, a homodiegetic and covert narratee who figures prominently in other Erdrich's novels. This narratee occupies a parallel position to the implied reader, who becomes a 'reader-as-listener' in Catherine Rainwater's words, a characteristic device of oral tradition.<sup>10</sup> Nanapush wants to pass the story of his people on and make his granddaughter aware of their past to be responsible for her present. He is a reliable narrator, whose rendering of the story is presented as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. The implied reader is supposed to take Nanapush's commentaries as reliable. Therefore, his apparently totally objective presentation of supernatural elements validates a magic perception of reality. Within an Indian frame of beliefs there is no distinction between magical and real.

There is, however, a problem of reliability as regards Pauline. She is a victim of acculturation; her loss of cultural and personal identity becomes apparent in her storytelling, with her gradual abandonment of the Indian heritage. She is considered as a liar by the community, 'she was given to improving truth. Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy J. Peterson, 'History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*', *PMLA*, 109 (5) (1994), 982-94 (pp. 985-6).

odd tales that created damage' (39). Signs of unreliability come from her personal involvement and also from her problematic value-scheme. She lies to other characters to cover herself and her progressive descent into madness distorts her perception of reality, as will be discussed later in more detail.

Unlike Nanapush's, Pauline's narrative does not have a direct narratee. On occasions, she adopts a collective voice, a 'we' position that points towards the narration by a community. What is the effect of her narration? Who does she address it to? It may be thought that Pauline's voice corresponds to the community's, to those Indians who sold their lands and adopted white ways, forgetting their inheritance. It may also be considered as the narration of a mad person, madness resulting from white influence, which would pose an epistemological problem: the magic elements presented through her eyes could be merely considered as the product of a deranged mind. Or it may work mostly as a contrast to Nanapush's serene and tragic storytelling, and their opposite development throughout the novel: Nanapush grows up as Christian in a Jesuit school, but later chooses life in the woods and Chippewa tradition; Pauline is raised in the Native American tradition, but she wishes to be white and becomes a fanatical nun, constantly at war with the 'pagans'. More interesting appears the possibility that Pauline's represents the voice of marginality. Pauline is a woman and she is mixed-blood. She is often considered as being invisible, despised for her ugliness (she does not fulfil ideals of female beauty) and her hybridism (she does not fit in the Indian society nor in the white one). Her mysticism and eventual fanaticism appear as an escape from such invisibility, from her condition as woman and mixed-blood.

Dialectic within dialectic: characters are caught between worlds and so is the reader. The text presents antithetical ways of constructing experience. The narrative discourse is forced to resolve such textual tension, either privileging one code over the other or reaching a synthesis. Nanapush's narration reaches a synthesis between Indian and Western perceptual frames, whereas Pauline's leads to a state of irresolution, since it seems to lie suspended between both frames.

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Rainwater, 'Ethnic Signs in Erdrich's *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*', in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. by Allan Chavkin (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 144-160 (p. 145).

## MOVING BETWEEN WORLDS

### The Natural / the Supernatural

The magic realist text exists at the intersection of two realms, the natural and the supernatural. There are fluid boundaries between the world of the living and the dead, between animals and human beings. In *Tracks*, characters are formed through series of references to natural elements. Metamorphoses are common and the narratives are populated by ghosts, dogs made of smoke and women with wings. In the intersection of worlds, the narrative enacts a fundamental magic realist strategy, namely, the unproblematic insertion of the supernatural within a realistic frame. In *Tracks*, characters and events are presented to the reader from a certain point of view, that of Nanapush or Pauline, who then become focalisers in Genette's term.<sup>11</sup> If the focaliser places a supernatural event on the same level as an ordinary occurrence, the narrative voice fuses the two levels. Iser's implied reader<sup>12</sup> suspends his/her normal reactions of wonder in order to conform to the requirements of the textual code; therefore, if the supernatural is described as normal, the reader's response will be accordingly. To achieve a successful reader response, it is essential that coherent well-developed codes of the natural and the supernatural are created in the text. Chanady has noted that:

The presentation of a coherent world view in which the rational and the irrational are not perceived as contradictory is somewhat easier if the author creates a specific code which can be identified with a *Weltanschauung* characterizing a society radically different from ours.<sup>13</sup>

Louise Erdrich succeeds in developing coherent world views by presenting the collective perspective of the Chippewa community, much in the same way as rural Colombian communities figure in García Márquez's fiction or the Maya of Guatemala do in Miguel Angel Asturias' writing. In *Tracks*, both narrator-focalisers believe in the myths and superstitions of the Indians. They have a coherent

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<sup>11</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 72-8.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic. Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York and London: Garland, 1985), p. 111.



*Weltanschauung* and interpret the world correspondingly. Numerous details on Chippewa traditions, rituals, folklore, beliefs and legends are included in the text providing a complete vision of the Indian cosmology.

*Tracks* opens with Nanapush describing the death of all his family and most members of the Anishinabe tribe in the winter of 1912, as a direct result of an illness, consumption, introduced by the whites. A detailed realistic description of the illness and its effects is fused with supernatural beliefs about ghosts who inhabit the woods and the Chippewa three-day death road. In Nanapush's discourse, there is no distinction between talking to the dead and talking to the living. Events caused by supernatural forces are described as everyday 'normal' occurrences, without any attempt to find a rational explanation. So, Nanapush reports that Pukwan the policeman dies because he does not give the Pillager family a proper burial. The tribal police has strict instructions from the governmental Agency to burn down the properties of the deceased by consumption. Pukwan's official duties clash with the traditional burying rituals and his fear of the Pillagers, a powerful clan of healers. Their dissatisfied spirits prevent the house from burning:

He carefully nailed up the official quarantine sign, and then, without removing the bodies, he tried to burn down the house. But though he threw kerosene repeatedly against the logs and even started a blaze with birchbark and chips of wood, the flames narrowed and shrank, went out in puffs of smoke. (3)

We are not given any rational explanation of why the Pillagers' hut cannot be burnt. After this incident, the narrator tells us that Pukwan simply goes home and dies, in such a matter-of-fact way that there is no choice but to conclude that his death is a direct consequence of the Pillagers' curse: '[he] came home, crawled into bed, and took no food from that moment until his last breath passed' (4). Nanapush describes the dead, ghosts, and supernatural powers with such a familiar tone and lack of surprise that there is no space left for reader's disbelief.

Pauline's narrative communicates the same impression of assurance at the beginning. She starts her story by describing the supernatural powers of Fleur and her relationship with the mythical Misshepesu, the lake monster, who wants her for himself. Every time Fleur drowns in the lake, a man takes her place on the death road. It is significant the way in which the magic realist narrative works by interweaving the supernatural with ordinary daily events. For instance, Many Women, having saved Fleur from drowning, knows his destiny and never gets near

the water. However, he dies later in his tin bathtub 'while his wife stood in the other room frying breakfast' (11). The fusion of the terrible death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive, full of mythical connotations, is counterpointed with such an ordinary, realistic event as frying breakfast.

Fleur Pillager exemplifies best the unproblematic insertion of the supernatural. Her character embodies the main site for the magical, for 'primitive' superstition and belief in the supernatural, and functions as a metaphor for the vanishing Native American culture. Her supernatural powers and the devastating result they have for those who hurt her are constantly mentioned. She is mostly associated with nature, in particular with water and her spirit guardian Misshepeshu. One of the first descriptions of her, boiling heads in the butcher's where she works in Argus, recalls a water goddess, even in such a realistic setting: 'Her green dress, drenched, wrapped her like a transparent sheet. A skin of lakeweed. Black snarls of veining clung to her arms. Her braids were loose, half unraveled, tied behind her neck in a thick loop' (22). The community thinks that she belongs to the lake monster and even her husband suspects that she has become pregnant by the lake, and imagines a baby with 'strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split back tail' (108). He sees her go into the frozen lake at night and swim under the ice crust much longer than a human could stand. The descriptions of Fleur in *Tracks* are frequently animal-like, her sly brown eyes and sharp teeth resembling those of a wolf. She is portrayed as having formidable transformational powers and the whole community believes in her shape-shifting. They *know* that Fleur turns into a bear at nights, since they even have ocular proof: 'We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough' (12). The supernatural is thus not problematised at all, but presented as part of everyday reality and a collectively accepted Chippewa belief system.

The last of the Pillagers, Fleur is also a practitioner of the old medicine and highly skilled in the use of herbal remedies. The community openly fears Fleur's magic. Her return to the reservation after her stay in Argus is associated with all sorts of strange happenings: 'The dust on the reservation stirred. Things hidden were free to walk. The surprised young ghost of Jean Hat limped out of the bushes...

A black dog, the form of the devil, stalked the turnoff to Matchimanito' (34-5). All these occurrences are described in a matter-of-fact way and believed by the members of the community, who do not show any surprise or disbelief about Fleur's doings. Therefore, when Boy Lazarre returns from the woods talking backwards and mixing his words, nobody questions that it is due to Fleur's agency, who has cut his tongue and sewn it in reversed as a punishment for spying on her. It is interesting to note that Fleur is not given a voice as a narrator and is quite a silent character; we hardly ever listen to her speaking or have access to her thoughts. She rather functions as a kind of powerful presence, a figure living between two realms, the natural and the supernatural, closer to nature and spirits than to other human beings.

The narrative suggests the possibility that Fleur has got powers to conjure hurricanes that destroy towns or lift trees on the air. For instance, Fleur's three male colleagues in Argus rape her one night after she has beaten them at playing cards. The following morning, Fleur conjures a tornado that sweeps the town and provokes the death of two of the men, who take shelter in the meat lockers and freeze. The supernatural tornado is quite selective regarding its victims, since no one else is hurt nor any property is severely damaged, even at the butcher's:

Pete paced off the distance the iron bathtub had been flung, a hundred feet. The glass candy case went fifty, and landed without so much as a cracked pane. There were other surprises as well, for the back rooms where Fritzie and Pete lived were undisturbed. Fritzie said the dust still coated her china figures. (29)

In a characteristic magic realist technique, realistic details are combined with supernatural events. The people who find the frozen men realise that the freezer was locked from outside, wedged down, and interpret it as 'a tornado's freak whim' (30). Significantly, the community of Argus is from Euro-American descent (mostly German and Scandinavian) and does not share the world view and beliefs in the supernatural with the Chippewa from the reservation.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, their interpretation of the events does not include the possibility of Fleur being responsible for the tornado. However, thanks to Pauline's narration, the reader counts on more information about the incident and can establish the link between the freaky nature of the tornado and Fleur's magical powers.

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<sup>14</sup> Erdrich fully explores this community of Argus, more related to the German side of her own ancestry, in her novel *The Beet Queen* (1986).

The two different kinds of narration used in relation to Fleur and Pauline (one extradiegetic, the other intradiegetic) seem to represent two ways of dealing with magic realism as a response to complexity. The one seeks to defamiliarise reality by juxtaposing it with the supernatural, not so as to problematise either but to allow for a free movement between them. The other does problematise both because, since she is her own (unreliable) narrator, Pauline can impose the fantastic or supernatural onto reality in a way that closes off the possibilities of dialectic, characteristic of magic realism.

### **The Crow of the Reservation: Pauline's Unreliable Narration**

The insertion of the supernatural into a realistic setting is thus gradually problematised in Pauline's discourse due to her increasing unreliability as a narrator. She is a highly complex and ambiguous character who dangerously crosses many boundaries: between Indians and Christians, magic and reality, life and death, and eventually between sanity and insanity. As a marginal character, she seems close to embodying the role of servant/rogue/clown as defined by Bakhtin (the figure of the 'third man' who can spy and eavesdrop): invisible for the others, she occupies an advantageous position to observe the privacy and particularities of their daily lives.<sup>15</sup> She is practical and grasps the reality surrounding her, which is why she insists on speaking English and sees in becoming a nun a way of entering the white world.

However, Pauline progressively loses her mental balance. It starts with her contact with dead people. Her first encounter with death, in the form of a young girl she is looking after, is described in magic realist terms. As the girl passes away, Pauline feels light and free, a freedom that materialises in her exhilarating flight:

If I took off my shoes I would rise into the air. If I took my hands away from my face I would smile. A cool blackness lifted me, out the room and through the door. I leapt, spun, landed along the edge of the clearing. My body rippled. I tore leaves off a branch and stuffed them into my mouth to smother laughter. The wind shook in the trees. The sky hardened to light. And that is when, twirling dizzily, my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay below. They were stupid and small. (68)

The reader's initial readiness to consider this as a sort of allegorical hallucination is dispelled by the subsequent explanation that she was later found on top of a high tree,

with such a smooth trunk that it would have been impossible for her to climb it. Whereas the witnesses are amazed and full of fear at finding her in the tree, Pauline is not surprised at all, since she clearly remembers her flight: 'I knew that after I circled, studied, saw all, I touched down on my favourite branch and tucked my head beneath the shelter of my wing' (68-9). However, the incident is described only through Pauline's words and therefore it could still be part of the hallucination. In a sense, Pauline precipitates the young girl's death and, consequently, the whole episode signifies her awareness of death as a form of grace and the discovery of her place in community, passing death on. She becomes 'the crow of the reservation' (54), 'death's bony whore' (86).

Another episode involving Pauline and magic occurs when she provides Eli, Fleur's partner, and Sophie Morrissey with a love medicine, as a way of taking revenge on Fleur. Pauline obtains the charm filter from the shaman Moses, who concocts the dust 'crushed fine of certain roots, crane's bill, something else, and slivers of Sophie's fingernails' (80). Pauline carefully prepares and encourages Sophie to attract Eli. The whole lovemaking scene between Eli and Sophie is directed and controlled by Pauline, who witnesses it from a near distance. The scene seems to be timeless, set in a mythical space only inhabited by Pauline, Eli and Sophie. Pauline's magical powers become dangerous and threatening as she enters Sophie's mind and makes the couple move like puppets:

I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself... I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits. I let them stop eventually, I don't know how or when. The sun was lower and on the hill appeared the tiny shadows of the men. As if cut from puppet strings, Eli lunged to the bank and clutched his trousers to his stomach, worked his way through the reeds and staggered past me, so close I could have touched him. (83-4)

From her hiding place, Pauline not only enters the young girl's mind but also receives the same pleasure and emotions. An absolutely supernatural event is incorporated into the realistic frame, since the narrative mode does not allow us to question that Pauline's agency and the magical properties of the love charm precipitate the events. Any doubts about the veracity of her account are dispelled by the reactions of other characters. Eli tells Nanapush later on that the whole incident was not his fault

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<sup>15</sup> See M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981), pp. 158-166.

because he was bewitched. Sophie enters a cataleptic state and kneels rigid in Fleur's yard for two days and two nights.

Sophie's trance seems certainly supernatural, for both her brother and uncle try to move her, to no avail. It is only terminated by a religious-connected event. In despair, Sophie's brother steals the statue of the Blessed Virgin from the mission church and places it next to his inert sister. Two religious systems enter into conflict here, as shamanic magic is counteracted by Catholic iconolatry. Sophie is finally dislodged, which Pauline interprets as a miracle performed by the Virgin, since she notices that the statue is crying:

She wept a hail of rain from Her wide brown eyes. Her tears froze to hard drops, stuck invisibly in the corners of Her mouth, formed a transparent glaze along Her column throat, rolled down the stiff folds of Her gown and struck the poised snake. It was then that the commotion took place, not over the statue's tears, which no one else noticed, but over Sophie, who tried to rise but could not, as her knees were horribly locked, who fell sprawled in the new snow. (94)

Pauline is thus the only witness to the apparent miracle, a fact that can lead the reader to attribute it to a deranged mind. Pauline has even got proof of the miracle in the hardened tears that she collects from the sculpture's feet and keeps in her pocket: 'They resembled ordinary pebbles of frozen quartz... I dropped them into my skirt pocket and did not imagine how the warmth of my legs would melt them back to tears again, which happened, on the way home' (95). At the end, the only proof left of the miracle is the damp cloth of her pocket.

The narrative maintains the ambiguity of the whole incident. The reader can find a rational explanation and consider the tears as actual snow, or believe that a miracle has occurred, or take it as Pauline's hallucination. It is interesting to note that this religious episode is directly placed after the amorous encounter between Eli and Sophie, propitiated by a love charm prepared by an old shaman. The contrast signifies the taking over of shamanic ancient beliefs by an invading religious system, Catholicism. In both frames of reference, the supernatural coexists with the natural and magic realism provides effective techniques for the expression of slippage instances.

After this incident, Pauline's relationship with magic will always be associated with religion. Pauline abandons her daughter by Napoleon Morrissey at birth and moves to live in a convent. She embraces Catholicism as a way of self-punishment. Christ appears to her on several occasions and instructs her to convert

Indian souls. These apparitions take place in ordinary settings. Christ is a dark-haired, blue-eyed radiant figure who sits on the stove when talking to Pauline and reveals human features: 'his breath was warm against my cheeks. He pressed the tears away and told me I was chosen to serve' (137). This apparition forgives Pauline her past sins and states that she is wholly white, although it has been frequently mentioned that Pauline is a mixed-blood. Pauline's fragile position between cultures leads her to self-dissolution and unfolding madness. Her attempts to sever her ties with a Native American identity run parallel to her steady movement away from shamanic culture toward Christianity.

The reader starts to question the reliability of Pauline as a narrator. Erdrich inserts an effective narrative ploy that further blurs the limits of reality and veracity. In a counterpart scene to the card game in *Argus* from the first chapter, Pauline witnesses Fleur gambling again, this time for the lives of her children. After Fleur has prematurely given birth to her second child without Pauline's assistance, they both travel to the land of the dead. A number of magic realist strategies are employed to describe this sort of visionary scene. Pauline explains with detail how Fleur walks to the door with her newborn and steps outside. She follows her:

I had been everywhere on the reservation, but never before on this road, which was strange because it was so wide and so furiously trodden that the snow was beaten to a rigid ice. I imitated Fleur when she pulled two pieces of bark off a tree, tied them around her feet with a strip of her skirt...We skated on our bark shoes, floated the iced pathway along with other Indians. How odd that there were so many, and still hungry, too... We glided west, following the fall of night in a constant dusk. We passed dark and vast seas of moving buffalo and not one torn field, but only earth, as it was before. The grass was high and brown some places, sheltered from the snow... There were no fences, no poles, no lines, no tracks. (159)

Without any narrative transition, the code of the natural slips into the supernatural, as this is the traditional road of the dead leading to the heaven of the Chippewa, that place where the grass is high and there are buffaloes left, the way it was before the white colonisers arrived. Fleur and Pauline come across all the Indians who died of starvation and consumption and Pauline's own dead parents. They also encounter the men killed by Fleur in *Argus* and she plays cards with them again. John Purdy interprets this game as an instance of Fleur playing against Euro-Americans.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> John Purdy, 'Betting on the Future: Gambling Against Colonialism in the Novels of Louise Erdrich', in *Native American Women in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Susan Castillo and M.P. Da Rosa (Oporto: Fernando Pessoa University Press, 1997), pp. 37-56 (p. 43).

older generation has already been lost as the result of the incursion of Europeans and those who survive question what the future will hold. Fleur plays then for the future generation. She loses the first hand, and therefore her premature baby, but the next hand, for Lulu, she wins.

This episode transcends chronological boundaries and moves from the universal significance of the whole tribe's future to the particular one of the Pillagers' survival. The way in which Pauline narrates the scene stretches the limits of reality. When she sees one of the players clutch a small patent leather shoe that belongs to Lulu, the supernatural scene slips back into an actual present: 'I started. I almost called out. Impossible! The child had worn those shoes as she ran for help that very same evening' (161). Later, we find Lulu's shoes returned to the narrative in such a manner that the veracity of the incident is reinforced. At the same time as Fleur and Pauline are in the land of the dead, Lulu is fighting for her life, after her feet have frozen as a result of wearing the fancy red shoes. The simultaneous occurrence of the supernatural use of Lulu's shoes with her actual use of them to run and seek for assistance highlights the magic realist nature of the episode. There are different chronological and temporal referents, as the supernatural cardgame in the Chippewa heaven is juxtaposed with the actual present chain of events surrounding Fleur's miscarriage.

The whole scene is highly ambiguous and located at the precarious line between dream/vision and reality. However, through the insertion of realistic details that refer to a verifiable present, the narration forces the reader to question any logical attempts to dismiss it as the mere dream of an unreliable narrator. Furthermore, the transition from the land of the dead back to Fleur's cabin is enacted in such a way that the supernatural reverts to the natural code without any conflict: 'We flew, we ran, we grew sails of our shawls. We went back down the road and blew into the old, still cabin. Outside, I heard Margaret's quick footfalls on the hard crusted snow' (162). We are placed once more into the realistic setting of the cabin, where Margaret is engaged in frantic practical activities to save Fleur. The newborn child is however dead and Lulu has narrowly escaped the same fate. The supernatural events described by Pauline carry then a degree of veracity which is not questioned in the narrative.



As Pauline descends into religious fanaticism, she progressively loses hold of reality and her reliability as a narrator becomes more problematic. She cannot escape her old way of constructing experience and therefore elements of the shamanic frame of reference change as they become twisted and deformed with her imposition of a Christian cosmology. Her belief in the monster Misshepesu turns into a belief in Satan. Such distortion suggests the dangers of not maintaining a balance between the two realms. In a last powerful and ambiguous scene, this equation takes place as Pauline fights the lake monster which she now identifies with Satan. The diction and style recall apocalyptic narratives. On a boat in the middle of the lake, surrounded by a menacing nature, Pauline fights for her life and for her soul:

Then the thing below severed the rope of my anchor with its long saw-tooth tail, and began to tow me toward shore. The boat traveled. The stars passed in a whirl. Wind caught my veil and chips from the crackling and singing ice glanced off my face. The waves slapped faster, but I stood, a figurehead. Held upright by the hands of God, I prepared myself to meet him without encumbrance...“Show yourself!” I challenged. And he did. (201)

The struggle that follows is extraordinary in its interweaving of natural elements and a terrible violence; again there is no sense of chronological time. In Pauline's description, the monster 'was not huge, but large enough in the flicker of brass light, a man's size... He retreated, filled his human-looking hands with small stones, and his mouth too, for I think when he spoke sheer black lake pebbles popped from his broad lips, striking me, burning with a hiss' (201-2). Pauline fights savagely and strangles him with the beads of her rosary, 'fell upon him and devoured him'. But then 'the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. Eventually, it took on the physical form of Napoleon Morrissey' (203). At this point the discourse ceases to be magic realist. A rational explanation is introduced that destroys the magic of the scene. Such magic persists however in Pauline's mind: 'How could I have known what body the devil would assume?' (203). For her, there is a supernatural fact here, by which the devil has appeared to her 'as the water thing, grass breastplate and burning iron rings' and has subsequently adopted the shape of Napoleon Morrissey, Pauline's former lover. But the reader can infer a logical explanation: the text has been providing signs of Pauline's progressive madness and, therefore, the struggle in the lake is interpreted as Pauline's hallucination which makes her murder Napoleon. The distance created between reader and focaliser destroys the magic realist frame in this scene.

As we suggested earlier, Pauline's narration leads to a state of irresolution, which produces a disturbing effect on the reader and also shows the terrible consequences that result when acceptance of the supernatural becomes distorted, so that it threatens, not incorporates, the real world. Doubly marginalised, alienated from the alienated, Pauline cannot move between two realms as Fleur does. Pauline loses her identity completely and she becomes Sister Leopolda, the character who, in John Purdy's words, 'epitomizes the powerful effects of colonialism.'<sup>17</sup> The means of her assimilation is itself an extreme form since she becomes not only Catholic but also a nun, an extreme religious image that carries ethnic and ideological implications (significantly, her order does not admit Indian girls). Unlike Nanapush, Pauline is unable to synthesise her past with her present, Chippewa and Western traditions and perceptions of reality, an inability which, Erdrich seems to imply, leads ultimately to madness and self-dissolution.

### Spiritual / Material Worlds

The spiritual and material realms continuously intermingle in Erdrich's fiction. The hunting scene in which Nanapush serves as a spiritual guide to Eli is a particularly telling example of the way in which Erdrich uses magic realist strategies to blur the boundaries between worlds. In the hard winter of 1917, Nanapush and Eli have very little food to live on. On the edge of starvation, a weak Eli goes out North with his gun in a desperate attempt to get some game. His journey is described in parallel to Nanapush's rituals in his cabin to assist the young man in the hunt. They are rituals full of magic that connect both men over a great distance. Nanapush invokes his spiritual helpers through chanting:

In my fist I had a lump of charcoal, with which I blackened my face. I placed my otter bag upon my chest, my rattle near. I began to sing slowly, calling on my helpers, until the words came from my mouth but were not mine, until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly.  
(101)

The narrative establishes two parallel scenes which correspond to a material realistic setting, that of Eli's hunt, and a spiritual magical one corresponding to Nanapush's shamanic practices. Through his invocation, Nanapush is able to clearly 'see' Eli's

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<sup>17</sup> Purdy, 'Betting on the Future', p. 41.

actions and surroundings and 'read' his state of mind. He can then transmit instructions to Eli for killing moose. 'Now the song gathered. I exerted myself. Eli's arms and legs were heavy, and without food he could not think. His mind was empty and I so feared that he would make a mistake... *Do not sour the meat*, I reminded him now, *a strong heart moves slowly*' (102). Nanapush's magically transmitted instructions work effectively and Eli kills the moose. Afterwards, Eli cuts off slabs of meat and binds them into his own body with sinew so that they mould to fit him as they freeze. This grotesque new body, 'red and steaming' (103), is the only way for Eli to carry the meat. It works as a powerful image that links the narrative to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, as will be explored in more detail later on. The effort of hunting and butchering the animal leaves Eli exhausted and he requires Nanapush's assistance to make his way back safely. The old man uses his drum to beat out footsteps for Eli to hear and follow. When Eli finally arrives, 'he glowed, for the meat strapped to him had frozen a marbled blue' (104). Man and animal are one, hunter and prey fuse with the aid of spiritual guidance. In this extraordinary hunting scene, the natural and the supernatural mingle perfectly as the boundaries between the spiritual and material realms and between animals and human beings become fluid and eventually disappear.

As in all magic realist fiction, the worlds between the living and the dead interact constantly in *Tracks*. Nanapush talks often with the spirits of his dead wives, children and friends. Pauline sees his dead parents and the people killed by Fleur's witchery. Ghosts are also common inhabitants of the reservation. Their existence is taken as a fact by the community, who simply regards them as a natural part of everyday experience. They are seen by numerous witnesses and possess a certain materiality, much in the same way as the ghosts who populate Toni Morrison's or Ana Castillo's fiction. For instance, Mrs. Bijju and her children encounter a black dog on their way home that does not let them pass. She holds up a cross to face it:

Then the dog sprang silently and horribly through the air, straight at them, but since it was *odjib*, a thing of smoke, they were unhurt. It vanished. Only the stinking odor of singed fur was left, and hung around the place, and also in their clothes, from which Mrs. Bijju could not wash it even with lye soap. (35)

This obviously supernatural creature, made up of smoke, belongs to the Chippewa spiritual beliefs; however, it is counteracted by the Christian symbol of the cross, revealing the mixture of native and imposed religions. This ghost shows its material

reality by leaving behind a stinking odour. At the same time, the narrative gives realistic details regarding the use of lye soap to remove the smell, a very ordinary act that closes an otherwise extraordinary incident.

The novel challenges established rigid boundaries between states of being. In her study of supernatural elements in contemporary women's texts, Wendy Kolmar suggests that these elements are crucial to establishing their novels as narratives of multiplicity and connection both in form and content:

Not only does the supernatural emphasize the importance of connection and of multiple rather than a dualistic view, but it is also closely associated with the telling of stories. The use of the supernatural is one essential way in which these texts recover the past. Each ghost is a recovered story, and ghost seeing is story telling.<sup>18</sup>

Supernatural elements perform a critical function in the resistance of boundaries and separations presented by *Tracks*. In its erosion of distinctions such as natural/supernatural, spiritual/material, oral/written, the text proposes interconnection between worlds. Ghosts as embodiments of the past are, like stories, associated with history and memory. Through his storytelling, Nanapush passes his ghosts and alternative vision on to his granddaughter and the reader and, in that way, keeps the Chippewa history alive.

## TIME AND SPACE

Magic realist texts question received ideas about time and space. Since Louise Erdrich writes from within two literary traditions, she brings together in her fiction two different concepts of time which are in continual confrontation: the Western mechanical sense of time as linear and chronological and the Indian ceremonial time, which is cyclic and achronological. In her discussion of an Indian as opposed to a Western sense of time, Paula Gunn Allen states that the traditional

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<sup>18</sup> Wendy K. Kolmar, ' "Dialectics of Connectedness". Supernatural Elements in Novels by Barbara, Cisneros, Grahn, and Erdrich', in *Haunting the House of Fiction. Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories*, ed. by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy B. Kolmar (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), pp. 236-49 (p. 248).

tribal concept of time is one of timelessness; time is mythic in the ceremonial world that the tribes inhabit:

The achronological time sense of tribal people results from tribal beliefs about the nature of reality, beliefs based on ceremonial understandings rather than on industrial, theological, or agricultural orderings... The basis of Indian time is ceremonial while the basis of time in the industrialized west is mechanical.<sup>19</sup>

In Western societies, time is organised around the idea that everything has a starting and an ending point. According to Allen, chronological organisation also supports Western beliefs that the individual is separate from the environment, that man is separate from God; time operates external to the internal workings of human and other beings. Such understanding implies a strong belief in individualism and contrasts with a ceremonial sense of time that considers the individual as a moving event within a moving universe.

In Erdrich's novels, chronology is constantly disrupted, as flashbacks, digressions and interwoven dream scenes defy readers' attempts to apply a conventional linear sense of time. In *Tracks*, the chronological events contained between 1912 and 1924 exist in tension with narration, which departs into mythical or ceremonial time. It encodes cyclical time by titling the chapters, together with the year, with the seasons and references to natural elements both in English and in Chippewa language (e.g. '*Miskomini-geezis* / Raspberry Sun). The magical scenes inserted, such as the moose hunt or the Argus hurricane are momentarily lifted out of time and placed into a timeless and mythical sphere.

Space also acquires mythical dimensions in *Tracks*. Magic realist texts carefully delineate sacred enclosures - such as the woods around Matchimanito Lake or Fleur's house - and allow them to leak their magic over the rest of the text. The sacred space of the woods which the ancestors' ghosts inhabit is set in contrast with westernised and institutional spaces, such as government schools, churches or cities, where Indian identity is marginalised and eventually lost. The concentration of action in a physical space of reduced dimensions, the reservation, adds to a narrative intensification. The reservation becomes a kind of microcosm, where narrative constantly exceeds temporal and experiential boundaries, in a similar way to García Márquez's village of Macondo. In *Tracks*, multiple interrelated references to natural

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<sup>19</sup> Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 150.

elements focus on the power of land, 'the only thing that lasts life to life' (33), and on the danger that dividing and selling it off represents for the Indians.<sup>20</sup> The reservation becomes a neatly divided multi-coloured map:

We examined the lines and circles of the homesteads paid up - Morrissey, Pukwan, Hat, Lazarres everywhere. They were colored green. The lands that were gone out of the tribe - to deaths with no heirs, to sales, to the lumber company - were painted a pale and rotten pink. Those in question, a sharper yellow. At the center of a bright square was Matchimanito, a small blue triangle I could cover with my hand. (173)

*Tracks* is after all the chronicle of the last resistance against the all-invading pink colour. Chippewa land becomes mythical as it gradually dwindles with the arrival of Western colonisers and finally reaches the status of a symbol for an entire vanishing culture and way of life.

Of special importance in *Tracks*, as in all of Erdrich's novels, is the motif of the road. On the road, the spatial and temporal paths of varied people intersect at one spatial and temporal point.<sup>21</sup> Time fuses together with space and flows in it. The road has an important narrative role as it opens and closes the novel, giving it a circular structure characteristic of oral tradition. The opening road is that of death, the mythical three-day road west of the Chippewas. At the end of the book, Nanapush says good-bye to Fleur, who is forced to leave her home, on the road 'traveling south to widen, flatten, and eventually in its course meet with government school, depots, stores, the plotted squares of forms' (224). This is the road through which white life style, with its square time and spaces, is introduced into the Indian community. The device of the road frames chronologically and spatially the novel and emphasises the magic realist strategies at work in *Tracks*, which give expression to the progressive transformation from a magical communal perception of the world into a realistic and materialistic individual approach.

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<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that each volume of Erdrich's tetralogy is dominated by a cluster of images associated with one of the natural elements: water in *Love Medicine*, air in *The Beet Queen*, earth in *Tracks* and fire in *The Bingo Palace*. See Hertha D. Wong, 'An Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris (1986)', in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich...*, ed. by Chavkin, pp. 30-53 (p. 45).

<sup>21</sup> For a Bakhtinian reading of Erdrich's fiction and her use of the chronotope of the road, see Barbara L. Pittman, 'Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations: The Chronotope of the Road in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*', *American Literature*, 67 (4) (1995), 777-92. For an analysis of the chronotope of the road, see also Chapter 3.2. on Silko's *Ceremony*, p.152.

## THE GROTESQUE / CARNIVALESQUE

Several critics have explored the connections between magic realism and Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque.<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin's notion of carnival includes the literary genre of 'grotesque realism', which centres on the image of the grotesque body.<sup>23</sup> In his study of Rabelais' work and medieval folk culture, Bakhtin situates grotesque realism, with its chief characteristics of exaggeration and degradation, at a crucial point in time, when the folk culture of humour and the oral tradition on which it is based begin to decline. A world of humorous forms and manifestations, including carnival festivities, opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. Robert Morace draws an interesting parallel between Bakhtin's theory of the carnival and Erdrich's fiction:

her use of carnivalizing techniques supports the communal, egalitarian values that ... characterize traditional Native American culture and thereby offer an alternative to, a decrowning double of, the nominally democratic but in fact deeply hierarchical and, by comparison, monologic Euro-American culture to which the contemporary Native American writer is inextricably and unavoidably connected.<sup>24</sup>

The carnival implies a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers, and implies change and renewal.<sup>25</sup> In that sense, it reflects strategies used in Native American culture to reflect the conflict between native beliefs and colonising hierarchies.

Much like magic realism, the carnivalesque is motivated by a human need to dissolve boundaries. In *Tracks*, there is an overall feeling of the carnivalesque, of the world turned upside down, particularly in the magic realist scene of the tornado. On his way to rape Fleur, Lily, one of the men working in the butcher's, trips over a sleeping sow and they have a bizarre fight:

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<sup>22</sup> See for example David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press Kentucky, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 18. For an excellent introduction to Bakhtin's theory, see Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), especially chapter 4 'Carnival and the grotesque body.'

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Morace, 'From Sacred Hoops to Bingo Palaces. Louise Erdrich's Carnivalesque Fiction', in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. by Allan Chavkin (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 36-66 (pp. 36-7).

They leaned into each other and posed in a standing embrace. They bowed jerkily, as if to begin. Then his arms swung and flailed. She sank her black fangs into his shoulder, clasping him, dancing him forward and backward through the pen. Their steps picked up pace, went wild. The two dipped as one, box-stepped, tripped one another. She ran her split foot through his hair. He grabbed her kinked tail. They went down and came up, the same shape and then the same color until the men couldn't tell one from the other. (25)

The fight is described in grotesque terms. Great attention is paid to all sorts of realistic details relating to their bodies. In their fierce struggle, man and animal become one. The scene establishes a poignant contrast to the ensuing event, Fleur's rape, which is not described at all. The violence inflicted on the animal serves as the substitute for that inflicted on Fleur. The sow appears again in the magical tornado that follows, a pure example of the carnivalesque in fiction:

The sky was cluttered. A herd of cattle flew through the air like giant birds, dropping dung, their mouths opened in stunned bellows. A candle, still lighted, blew past, and tables, napkins, garden tools, a whole school of drifting eyeglasses, jackets on hangers, hams, a checkerboard, a lampshade, and at last the sow from behind the lockers, on the run, her hooves a blur, set free, swooping, diving, screaming as everything in Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked. (28)

There is a sense of theatre, of a spectacle with numerous performers and spectators, where lit candles and sows fly. At the same time, the joy characteristic of festivities is imbued with the darkness of pending death and disaster. Following the tornado, the three rapists are locked in the meat freezer and die, except for one, Dutch James, who barely survives and becomes an image of the grotesque body: 'Dutch James rotted in the bedroom, sawed away, piece by piece. First the doctor took one leg mostly off, then the other foot, an arm up to the elbow. His ears wilted off his head' (62). The grotesque loss of limbs due to frostbite forcefully represents the debasement of the men's act and symbolically condemns the male physical violation of a woman's body. Magic and the carnivalesque turn hierarchies upside down and require a revisioning of the concept of reality and the limits of the natural or logical. The established authority and truth become relative and the boundaries between life and death, reality and imagination, are called into question.

The connections between carnival and Native American literature are especially significant regarding the figure of the trickster and the role of laughter. In American Indian culture, tricksters are folk figures known for their shape-shifting abilities and wry and ribald humour. In his Bakhtinian analysis of contemporary

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 89.



Native American Indian novels with prominent trickster figures, Alan Velie describes them as ‘Footloose, amoral drifters with strong appetites for women and wine, they play tricks, are the victim of tricks, are callous and irresponsible, but essentially sympathetic to the reader.’<sup>26</sup> In *Tracks*, Nanapush functions as the legendary trickster, his name drawn from the Anishinabe trickster, *nanapush* or *nanibozhu*, as Louis Owens notes.<sup>27</sup> His father told him: “‘Nanapush. That’s what you’ll be called. Because it’s got to do with trickery and living in the bush ... The first Nanapush stole fire. You will steal hearts’” (33). In his seminal work *The Trickster*, anthropologist Paul Radin claims that ‘laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does’,<sup>28</sup> features which certainly pervade Nanapush’s narrative. Together with his ribald humour and storytelling skills, Nanapush possesses transformative and magical powers, as described in the ritual performed to heal Fleur after her miscarriage. During the curative session, Nanapush puts his hands inside a pot with boiling water without getting burnt. An apparent impossible feat is given a rational explanation, since he has previously rubbed his hands with a paste made of plants. However, the magic lies in the way in which Nanapush comes across this method, through a dream/vision:

I mixed and crushed the ingredients. The paste must be rubbed on the hands a certain way, then up to the elbows, with exact words said. When I first dreamed the method of doing this, I got rude laughter... But the person who visited my dream told me what plants to spread so that I could plunge my arms into a boiling stew kettle, pull meat from the bottom, or reach into the body itself and remove... the name that burned, the sickness. (188)

This shamanic practice is counterpointed with Pauline’s attempt to perform the same action while praying in Catholic Latin and getting badly scalded, offering yet another example of the constant conflict between old beliefs and new religions.

Nanapush’s hilarious treatment of Pauline typifies the connections between the trickster’s actions and the grotesque. It centres around bodily functions and the scatological, essential components of grotesque realism since, according to Bakhtin,

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Velie, ‘The Trickster Novel’, in *Narrative Chance. Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. by Gerald Vizenor (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 121-139 (p. 122).

<sup>27</sup> Louis Owens, *Other Destinies. Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman and London: University Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 212.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Radin, *The Trickster. A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. x.

degradation is a typical operation of the grotesque: 'To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth.'<sup>29</sup> Degradation embodies the lowering of all that is high and spiritual which becomes connected to the material level and which is used by Nanapush to destroy Pauline's hypocrisy. In her religious fanaticism, Pauline inflicts on herself all sorts of ridiculous punishments as a way of reaching martyrdom. She starves herself, wears hairshirts and her shoes on the wrong feet. Nanapush notices her most secret mortification, relieving herself only twice a day, and devises a terrible practical joke in the trickster tradition. He brews a special pot of tea for Pauline and tells her interminable stories about rain and rivers: 'In the old language there are a hundred ways to describe water and he used them all – its direction, color, source and volume' (149). He also includes a number of sexual jokes. The whole episode finishes with an embarrassed Pauline who has been put to shame by old Nanapush and the whole household bursting into laughter. As Bakhtin states, 'laughter degrades and materializes' and the striking peculiarity of carnival laughter is 'its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom.'<sup>30</sup> The communal laughter offers a resistance towards the imposing Catholic hierarchical order and highlights the use of humour as a survival tactic for Native Americans. Louise Erdrich has often remarked in interviews that 'survival humour' is one of the most important parts of American Indian life and literature: 'it's a different way of looking at the world, very different from the stereotype, the stoic, unflinching Indian standing, looking at the sunset.'<sup>31</sup>

Nanapush offers, then, a modernised version of the traditional trickster and his transformational powers. His shape-shifting abilities are oriented towards his adaptation to new world views and ways of life. Nanapush is after all a translator, literally and symbolically, able to move successfully between Chippewa and white cultures, between visible and invisible worlds, in order to build bridges between past

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<sup>29</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 20, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Coltelli, 'Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris', *Winged Words. American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 41-52 (p. 46).

and future generations. Erdrich's novel seems to suggest that the conservation of the Anishinabe history and world view requires not a distorted assimilation (as in Pauline's case), but an adaptation to the modern world without losing old magical beliefs and traditions. Nanapush's negotiation between worlds foregrounds this position as the only appropriate strategy for withstanding the threat of colonialism.

## **POLITICAL DIMENSION: REWRITING HISTORY**

Nancy Peterson describes *Tracks* as a tragic-historical narrative, 'a novel entirely haunted by historical dispossession and tribal splintering, with only small hope for effective resistance.'<sup>32</sup> Erdrich's novel takes place at a turning point in the history of Anglo-Indian land conflicts. Chippewa characters must confront the various ways in which the dominant culture is defining their land, identity and political status. The narrative significantly begins with the reservation period, which marked the beginning of the disruption of tribal way of life by the U.S. government. The policy of allotment pretended to convert tribes such as the Chippewa from a communal hunting organisation to an individualistic agricultural economy. The regulations on land and the establishment of taxes resulted in loss of land, a loss which is at the centre of *Tracks*. Peterson points out that Erdrich's characters are afflicted by a homelessness and rootlessness not shared by Silko's Laguna Pueblo characters, who occupy land historically held by the tribe.<sup>33</sup> The policy of allotment also provoked a lack of unity amongst members of the tribe and a clan fragmentation, which was worsened by the effects of a Westernised education and the government schools that separated children from their families and ultimately from nature.

As we have already mentioned, the presence of a realistic framework constitutes the primary difference between magic realism and pure fantasy. *Tracks* contains many realistic descriptions of man and society which underline its socio-

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy J. Peterson, 'Indi'n Humor and Trickster Justice in *The Bingo Palace*', in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. by Allan Chavkin (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 161-181 (p. 161).

political dimension. At the same time, it employs supernatural elements and magic realist strategies to subvert the established order and proves as politically effective as any canonical realist fiction of protest. At the end of *Tracks*, we witness a scene highly reminiscent of the banana company massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the Latin American novel, thousands of workers are killed when they peacefully demonstrate to denounce the hardships they go through in the American company which dominates the village. The massacre is silenced and there is no official record of it ever happening, an atrocious erasure of history magically represented by a rain which lasts 'four years, eleven months, and two days'.<sup>34</sup> In a similar way, in *Tracks* the Turcot Company, a lumber company, destroys a whole forest in pursuit of economic benefit. The destruction of the forest has significant implications for the Indian tribe: the woods around lake Matchimanito are a sacred space, where the Indians bury their dead high up in the trees and where the ancestors' ghosts live. Its disappearance conveys the disappearance of the tribe and a whole way of living and perceiving reality.

Fleur, the last inhabitant of the forest, leaves her land in a final scene full of magic. Nanapush's discourse recounting the scene starts to change as he approaches Fleur's cabin for the last time; it becomes more lyrical, aware of the mysterious changes in nature: 'nothing about this weather seemed proper. Morning began with a greenish light. There was thunder in the distance, the smell of a storm drove me among the twisted stumps of trees and scrub' (219). He goes into the woods and starts a conversation with all his dead relatives and friends:

I saw my wives. Omiimii, the Dove, her little cries and her small unlucky face. Zezikaaikwe, the Unexpected. I touched the hands of White Beads, Wapepenasik, whom I'd loved painfully. I held our small daughter, Moskatikinaugun, Red Cradle, whom I'd called Lulu... I was with my father for a moment, Kanatowakechin, Mirage, as thick snow came down all around us, obscuring our trail, confusing the soldiers and covering the body of my mother and sister. I closed my eyes. I felt the snow of that winter and then the warmth of my first woman, Sanawashonekek, the Lying down Grass. I smelled the crushed fragrance of her hair. (220)

In this episode full of magic, Nanapush virtually melts into the past. He enters the realm of the dead, but he still feels reality with all his senses. The mention of the

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<sup>33</sup> Nancy J. Peterson, 'History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*', *PMLA*, 109 (5) (October 1994), 982-94 (p. 993).

<sup>34</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982), p. 351. My translation.

symbolic snow and of his relatives' names in the Chippewa language helps to anchor the narrative in a past of suffering, war and dispossession, and establishes a strong contrast with the materialistic present of predatory lumber companies. Nanapush decides to leave this spiritual realm and remain among the living to assist Fleur, who is facing the lumber company men outside her cabin. Only then a number of signs regarding Fleur's actions that he had previously dismissed start making sense: 'the axe she'd obviously stolen, the edge of sawtooth metal jutting from beneath the house... Small mounds of sawdust drifted on the path I took. Woodchips littered the ground. Often I smelled the spilled sap of pine' (218). In preparation for the arrival of the Turcot Company, Fleur has been sawing the trees at their base.

In a last powerful act Fleur conjures a supernatural wind which makes all the trees fall down around them causing the men to panic, 'Around me, a forest was suspended, lightly held. The fingered lobes of leaves floated on nothing. The powerful throats, the columns of trunks and splayed twigs, all substance was illusion. Nothing was solid' (223). The magical episode has temporarily been given a logical explanation, but the tale of a Chippewa woman who single-handedly chops through the base of a whole forest of trees defies natural laws. Fleur has necessarily used her magical powers for such a deed and the final supernatural wind that topples the trees upon the loggers confirms her magic. This wind connects the novel to the final cyclone that wipes out Macondo in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and to the magical tornado that avenges Fleur's rape in Argus. It is also foretold in Nanapush's dream in chapter five: 'I stood in a birch forest of tall straight trees. I was one among many in a shelter of strength and beauty. Suddenly a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks, all flattened around me in an instant. I was the only one left standing' (127). This dream becomes reality at the end of the novel, which is also the end of the forest and of the whole tribe, which becomes in Nanapush's words 'a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directive, policy. A tribe of pressed trees' (225).

Fleur is the last focal point of resistance to the encroachment of foreign ideas of resources and land use, but she is finally forced to leave the Pillagers' territory.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> John Purdy makes an interesting connection between Fleur's final act of resistance and a stick game in which the trees fall like sticks she has tossed in a game; Fleur walks away a winner against colonialism. Purdy, 'Betting on the Future', p. 43.

*Tracks* is a chronicle of disease, starvation and loss of land in which magical episodes give shape to a revised historical consciousness. At the end of the novel, Nanapush, the only survivor, will take on the colonisers' legal methods as a way of reclaiming and rewriting Chippewa history. He becomes a bureaucrat himself, and the tribal chairman, in order to recover his granddaughter Lulu from the governmental school. Erdrich closes her novel with an image of endurance and hope, Nanapush and Margaret embracing the young Lulu: 'We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind' (226). This is the wind that has brought exile and government papers, that has converted the tribe into a pile of pressed trees, but Erdrich incorporates a final ironic nod to the reader: the book we are reading is also made of pressed trees and will survive as a lasting monument to the countercolonial rewriting of Native American history.

#### A READER BETWEEN WORLDS

In a seminal and prize-winning article on Erdrich's narrative, Catherine Rainwater rendered a semiotic analysis that revealed Erdrich's concern with liminality and marginality, a concern evoked in the textual representation of conflicting codes originating both within Western-European society and within Native American culture. According to Rainwater, these conflicting codes 'lead the reader away from synthesis and into a permanent state of irresolution. Consequently, the reader is "marginalized", -left to ponder epistemological dilemmas from the perspective of one at least temporarily situated outside both systems.'<sup>36</sup> The juxtaposition of two ontological planes places the reader in an ambiguous space between worlds, both inside and outside the text, constantly negotiating conflicting conceptions of the real. Erdrich employs magic realist techniques in an attempt to make the reader aware of such a position and assume his/her responsibility as a reader-listener.

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<sup>36</sup> Catherine Rainwater, 'Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich', *American Literature* 62 (3) (1990), 405-22, (p. 409).

Following Rainwater's thesis, the presence of conflicting codes in *Tracks* has the effect of marginalising the reader, but also of freeing and empowering him/her. The unproblematic insertion of the supernatural within a realistic frame and other previously discussed magic realist strategies allow the reader to find a position of power from where s/he can pause between worlds and stop applying conventional expectations associated with realistic narratives. From such a position a new kind of power emerges: readers are given the chance to take perspective and discover the arbitrary principles of both worlds. They are then able to consider other perceptions and dimensions of reality and to avoid one-sided readings of this kind of bicultural text.

In common with the African American and Chicano/Mexican writers discussed in this thesis, Louise Erdrich blends the literary modes of the Western novel and postmodern experimental fiction with a communal oral tradition, employing magic realist strategies to remove our own cultural constrictions and facilitate our movement between imaginative worlds. Erdrich's mythic presentation and her use of lore and magic realism are subversive in that this kind of narrative strategies has traditionally been dismissed and discredited by mainstream literature. She employs magic realist techniques because conventional realism seems inadequate for conveying certain Native American beliefs and perceptions. A last boundary between magic and reality, fiction and imagination, is transgressed as Louise Erdrich leaves her characters and her readers constantly suspended between worlds. We are like Kafka's tree trunks in the snow; and even that is only appearance.

### 3.2.

## **WEAVING A MAGICAL WEB: LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY* (1977)**



In the very earliest time,  
 when both people and animals lived on earth,  
 a person could become an animal if he wanted to  
 and an animal could become a human being.  
 All spoke the same language.  
 That was the time when words were like magic.  
 The human mind had mysterious powers.  
 A word spoken by chance  
 might have strange consequences.  
 It would suddenly come alive  
 and what people wanted to happen could happen  
 all you had to do was say it.  
 Nobody could explain this:  
 That's the way it was.

*Magic Words (Eskimo)*

The American Southwest is a zone of cultural contact and conflict which has produced a rich and varied body of literary works by Native American and Chicano authors in recent years. Writing from the American Southwest has necessarily to describe the cultural clash and challenge the idea of the American frontier, as will be further discussed in the next chapter on Chicano literature. Magic realism proves to be a literary mode particularly useful to writers who belong to cultures which have been displaced from their land of origin and confined to the borders. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko literally embodies this kind of writing from the borders. Of mixed ancestry (Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white), Silko comes from an area in New Mexico along the Rio Grande where Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Spanish, and Anglo cultures have long merged and mingled with Laguna people.<sup>1</sup> In her fiction, Silko employs magic realist strategies in order to hybridise the conflicting ontologies of Native American culture and Western culture, with the aim of offering new ways of seeing, new and larger realities.

Silko is particularly interested in the figure of the half-breed, who lives on the margin of many cultures but belongs to none. Silko sees herself in this position

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<sup>1</sup> Reed Way Dasenbrock maintains the existence of a characteristically Southwestern generic space, since Southwestern literature is a literature of three cultures still in a contact which involves conflict. See Dasenbrock's 'Forms of Biculturalism in Southwestern Literature: The Work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko', *Genre*, 21 (3) (Fall 1988), 307-19.

between societies, as she remarks in a short autobiographical sketch published in 1974 with her collection of poems *Laguna Woman*:

I suppose that at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or mixed-blood person; what is to grow neither white nor fully traditional Indian. It is for this reason that I hesitate to say that I am representative of Indian poets or Indian, or even Laguna people. I am only one human being, one Laguna woman.<sup>2</sup>

A half-breed, Tayo, is the protagonist of Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977), which explores the relationships of man with nature and the cosmos through Tayo's quest for spiritual restoration. Tayo, the son of a Laguna prostitute and a white father, is raised by his aunt after his mother's death. His aunt blames him for the family's marginalisation, and Tayo grows up under the shadow of his cousin Rocky, the football star obsessed with succeeding in the white world. When World War II breaks out, the two boys join the army together and Rocky is killed in Japan. Back in Laguna, Tayo feels responsible for Rocky's death and suffers a complete breakdown. The novel follows Tayo's difficult recuperation and restoration to wholeness through a return to his Indian roots and an acceptance of his multicultural heritage.

Silko's novel is in itself a ceremony, made up of multiple ceremonies, a ritual of healing effected not only on its protagonist but also on the reader. It is distinctly Native American in its narrative structure, thematic content, and principally in its use of oral tradition. *Ceremony* has a 'homing' plot, as William Bevis designates the common plot to most Native American novels: an Indian who has been away comes home and finds his identity by staying.<sup>3</sup> Indian homing is related to a tribal past and place and is presented as the opposite of the competitive individualism of the white world. However, *Ceremony* is also a psychological narrative that portrays a fragmented self-conscious first-person speaker in search of sanity. From a Western perspective, such a strategy is akin to modernist/postmodernist techniques; the whole Native American tradition with its use of radical forms, self-reflexivity and ontological flicker between worlds has what Western criticism would call a postmodernist flavour. Therefore, interesting structural and ideological implications emerge as the novel combines oral elements from the Native American tradition

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Laguna Woman* (Greenfield Centre, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1974), p. 35.

designed to be spoken to particular clan or tribal audiences with contemporary linear narratives aimed at a broad Anglo-American reading public.

*Ceremony* juxtaposes two worlds: the one represented in Laguna oral tradition and the one corresponding to the Laguna reservation after World War II. The simultaneous presence of a mythical world and a sordid contemporary reality turns *Ceremony* into a telling example of magic realism which is particularly distinctive because of the way in which the two narrative modes intersect. The mythical world is represented through a series of folk Indian tales in verse inserted as independent units into the realist prose text. The primitive and realist stories are thus separated and intercalated. At the beginning, the poem-chants interrupt the narrative line at crucial points, shifting and guiding the reader's expectations. However, in the second half of the book, the narrative modes start overlapping until eventually they mingle and shape each other. The psychological realist story of Tayo becomes one with the mythical story of Laguna gods dealing with the problems of witchery. In order to achieve a successful intersection of both narrative modes, Silko combines a multiplicity of voices and storytelling techniques, in a wide range of genres, and challenges Western temporal and spatial notions.

## NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE AND ORAL TRADITION

What on a first impression appears to be a rather chaotic narrative, where verses referring to a mythical past mix with prose and a confusing present reality, which keeps slipping into the immediate past of war horrors, acquires a new meaning in the light of oral tradition and an Indian perception of reality. Writer and critic Paula Gunn Allen divides American Indian traditional literature into two basic genres: ceremonial and popular.<sup>4</sup> Whereas popular literature consists of humorous or pedagogical tales and songs that describe commonplace experiences, ceremonial literature is accompanied by ritual actions and music and produces mythic

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<sup>3</sup> William Bevis, 'Native American Novels: Homing In', in *Recovering the Word. Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. by Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University California Press, 1987), pp. 580-620.

(metaphysical) states of consciousness. Silko's *Ceremony* is an example of this type of literature. It contains myths, tales, songs, dreams, and prayers. The purpose of ceremonial literature, as in Silko's case, is clearly collective: to create harmony in the community, to restore the psychic unity of people.

The complexity of the novel represents a challenge for the Western reader who cannot begin to understand it within the conventions of the American genre. Some familiarity with the Pueblo cosmology is necessary. To that purpose, Silko provides a mythical framework which is simultaneously inserted into the everyday events of the contemporary world. She uses a Laguna clan ritual narrative which includes fragments of the main Pueblo myth recounting Corn Woman's abandonment of her people and the subsequent drought, as well as secondary tales (e.g. the Gambler's story), and folk beliefs ('Note on bear people and witches').<sup>5</sup> The result is an accretive achronological narrative, which requires a proper understanding of each story to grasp the total meaning. Contrary to the Western tendency to closure, stories are valued for their way of overlapping, of leading to new stories, denoting the eternal repetition characteristic of circularity in storytelling. All the traditional stories which run throughout the text appear printed as poetry and are not presented as the thoughts or speeches of any one character. They keep their narrative independence, but, at the same time, the reader recognises in them the coherence of a dispersed story and its connections with Tayo's life.

This double-mirrored structure suggests Bakhtin's concept of the double-voiced discourse internally dialogised. Discussing heteroglossia in novels, Bakhtin refers to double-accented, double-styled, and double-languaged hybrid constructions. Every novel is an intentional and conscious hybrid, one artistically organised:

In an intentional novelistic hybrid, moreover, the important activity is not only (in fact not so much) the mixing of linguistic forms -the markers of two languages and styles- as it is the collision between differing points of views on the world that are embedded in these forms... Two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 72-74.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed description of major Pueblo myths, see Marta Weigle, 'Southwest Native American Mythology', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. 333-361.

<sup>6</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422 (p. 360).

Silko's double narrative offers a dialogue between past and present, myth and reality, Indians and whites, involving the reader in an interactive dialogue with the text. The dissolution of generic distinctions foregrounds the permeability of all boundaries and challenges simplistic generalisations about the way in which Native Americans use oral tradition. According to Bakhtin, one of the most basic and fundamental forms for incorporating and organising heteroglossia in the novel lies in the incorporation of various genres, both artistic and extra-artistic.<sup>7</sup> Each of the incorporated genres possesses its own verbal and semantic forms for assimilating various aspects of reality. All these genres, as they enter the novel, bring into it their own language, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways.

Silko spins an elaborate web that brings together myths, legends, folk beliefs, chants, war stories, bar stories and conventions of the *Bildungsroman* genre, ultimately juxtaposing Western and Native American worlds. Indeed, the image of the web is at the centre of Laguna Pueblo cosmology and of *Ceremony*. Everything in the universe, animate or inanimate, is significant and occupies an ordered place. All phenomena are inextricably related. Men and women, as an integral part of the community, have immense responsibility to keep the natural order and harmony of the world they inhabit. Every thread in the web of the universe is necessary and its destruction leads to an imbalance with immediate negative consequences. Early in the novel, the Pueblo medicine man Ku'oosh uses the old language to explain this to Tayo:

“But you know, grandson, this world is fragile.” The word he chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku'oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love.<sup>8</sup>

Tayo understands that it takes only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, and the fragile world can be injured; consequently, it is his responsibility to

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', pp. 320-1.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 35-6. Subsequent references will be to this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

keep the balance. Human beings are responsible for uttering the correct meanings. Although Silko uses throughout the language of the dominant Anglo culture to speak for and represent her own culture, the dialogue between languages is subtextually present. The fact that old Ku'oosh uses his native language reveals the inadequacy of Western language to convey Native American concepts and the resulting cultural impoverishment. Like Chicano writers, Silko is highly interested in the linguistic aspect of the process of transliteration and translation between cultures.

In oral traditions, there is a particular concern about the meaning of words and stories, which highlights a central Native American idea implicit in *Ceremony*: the prominent role of language in shaping reality. The critic Barre Toelken states in his analysis of Navajo Coyote tales:

The stories provide the resource for a way of invoking a stronger reality through a kind of traditional synecdoche: the Navajos believe that language does not merely describe reality; it creates it. The telling of stories and the singing and narrating of rituals are ways of actually creating the world in which the Navajo live.<sup>9</sup>

The magical power attributed to the articulation of stories is essential in magic realist narratives, where narrative reality and ritual order are united into a powerful healing force.

*Ceremony* is mostly a novel about storytelling, about the process of narration itself. The novel begins with a prefatory poem that presents Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, sitting in her room thinking and creating, 'and whatever she thinks about/appears'(1). Thought-Woman, the Spider, is considered by the Keres-Pueblo people as the feminine creative principle of the universe, creator of this world and the four worlds below. 'She is sitting in her room/ thinking of a story now/ I'm telling you the story/ she is thinking'(1), and that is the story we are about to read. Silko thus associates creation with storytelling, emphasising the power of story and discourse to create, the power to name things to make them appear. At the same time, the narrator of the story assumes the role of traditional storyteller, placing the novel in the context of oral tradition, underscoring that she is not inventing the story (in the way an individual author would according to Western conventions), but remaking and transmitting it, as part of an old and mythical background.

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<sup>9</sup> Barre Toelken, 'Life and Death in the Navajo Coyote Tales' in *Recovering the Word*, ed. by Swann and Krupat, p. 390.

In the second framing poem, entitled 'Ceremony', a new voice (male) stresses the importance of stories: 'They are all we have, you see,/ all we have to fight off/ illness and death' (2). Stories cannot be confused or forgotten because then we would be defenceless against evil forces. They represent life and are kept within the belly of the storyteller. On the facing page, a female voice replies: 'The only cure/ I know/ is a good ceremony' (3). The male-female dialogue highlights the connection between story, ceremony and cure, and also points towards a male-female balance essential for rituals. On the next page, a single word, 'Sunrise', functions as an invocation, a prayer, to open the ceremony.

By beginning the novel with these framing poems, Silko has established the healing purposes of the story and has placed the reader within the ceremony itself. At this point, the prose narrative starts describing Tayo's nightmares. Throughout the novel, this third person narration is primarily omniscient and focused on the protagonist. Silko has disclosed that she started the original novel with a young woman as a narrator, but it did not work: it just became herself.<sup>10</sup> The choice of a male focaliser adds a different viewpoint and permits a process of feminisation parallel to the recovery of universal harmony, which will be discussed later in more detail.

Within the main narrative concerning Tayo, other narratives occur that introduce different stories in a similar fashion to a storytelling session. In discussing Native American texts, Kathleen B. Manley describes a number of techniques characteristic of oral performance such as the use of repetition, narratives within narratives, circular design, and formulaic opening and closing, which reduce the distance between storyteller and an audience that is not physically present.<sup>11</sup> All these techniques can be found in *Ceremony*. The device of repetition is more apparent in the poetry fragments, which function as kinds of chants (e.g. After four days/ you will be alive/ After four days/ you will be alive/..., 72). A sense of collective perspective is conveyed by multiple narrators, such as the Indian war veterans who reminisce about their times in the American army when they enjoyed a

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<sup>10</sup> See Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words. American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen E. B. Manley, 'Decreasing the Distance: Contemporary Native American Texts, Hypertext, and the Concept of Audience', *Southern Folklore*, 51 (2) (1994), 121-135 (p. 123).

different social status. In their bar meetings, the veterans follow a number of rituals: from cursing the barren dry land the white man has left them, to showing off about their affairs with white women, to finally boasting about the killing of Japanese. A striking example of orality is the way in which the veterans' first-person stories are inserted in the form of poems, thus becoming the formal equivalents of the mythic stories and ritual chants:

We went into this bar on 4<sup>th</sup> Ave., see,  
Me and O'Shay, this crazy Irishman.  
We had a few drinks, then I saw  
These two white women  
Sitting all alone. (57)

All these narrative devices provide the text with a powerful sense of orality. Furthermore, the novel starts with an invocation to the sunrise and concludes with the narrator's request 'Sunrise,/ accept this offering,/ Sunrise' (262), acquiring a perfect circular design, characteristic of oral tradition. The structure of the novel presents the narrator as a priest or shaman making an offering (the novel itself) and encouraging the reader to participate in such offering. Storytelling is not an individual form of experience but a means of creating a communicational bond between the teller and the listener within a socio-historical context.

## MYTHICAL / REAL

### The Juxtaposition of Two Worlds

The ritual framework emphasises the interrelation between Tayo's illness and that of the world as a whole. Tayo has returned from World War II suffering from post-traumatic shock, like many other Indian veterans that populate Native American fiction (Russell or Henry Jr. in Louise Erdrich's novels, for instance). Tayo stays in a veterans' hospital in a complete state of annihilation: he feels invisible, like 'white smoke' (14); unable to speak, his tongue is 'dry and dead, the carcass of a tiny rodent' (15). Paula Gunn Allen states that tonguelessness is a dimension of



alienation that occurs frequently in the work of American Indian writers.<sup>12</sup> The inability to speak is the prime symbol of powerlessness. Tayo suffers from speechlessness due to the tragic events surrounding him and his survivor's guilt. Tayo must become articulate to tell his story and come to terms with his painful memories. But he cannot recover the power of speech in a whites' hospital, oppressed by the alien language of the colonisers. Only by returning to the reservation and with the support of his people, can he start the healing process.

Tayo feels responsible for his cousin Rocky's death and for the drought that is destroying his land. Trying to save the wounded Rocky in the jungle during the war, Tayo had cursed the rain in despair:

He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud to find the corporal and get him up before the Japanese saw them. He wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun pressing across wide and empty horizons. The words gathered inside him and gave him strength. He pulled on the corporal's arm; he lifted him to his knees and all the time he could hear his own voice praying against the rain. (12)

Tayo considers the six-year drought as a direct consequence of his praying. Immediately following this war episode, Silko introduces a Laguna poem, the story of Corn Woman becoming angry with Reed Woman because she is always bathing instead of working. Reed Woman goes away 'And there was no more rain then./ Everything dried up/.../ The people and the animals/ were thirsty./ They were starving' (13-14). By introducing this Laguna Pueblo myth, Silko draws an analogy with Tayo's story: there is a reason for every thread in the web of the universe, even the jungle rain and death; failing to see this implies an unbalanced vision of the cosmos. Parallel to Tayo's spiritual restoration, a principal myth is intersected throughout the novel: the Corn Mother Nau'ts'ity'i punishes the people, who have neglected her, fooled by the magic of a Ck'o'yo medicine man, by taking the rain clouds away with her. Again, we find the negative results of provoking an imbalance in the crucial relationship between man and land. The people must seek help from Hummingbird and Fly, who undertake all sorts of difficulties until they bring the

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<sup>12</sup> Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 138.

Corn Mother back and with her the rain and fertility.<sup>13</sup> Tayo's quest similarly implies a search for his mother and a return to his people and traditions.

Immediately after the poem, Silko introduces the prose narrative back without any transition: 'So he had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry' (14). The way in which these two narratives are held in suspension provokes hesitation in the reader: who is responsible for the drought? Is Tayo's curse in Japan the reason for the drought in Laguna? If so, the drought would respond to a magical event. Todorov's concept of reader's hesitation in fantastic literature requires that the reader decide if an event is reality or fantasy.<sup>14</sup> The reader hesitates between accepting an apparently supernatural event and finding a rational explanation for it. Magic realism, however, entails a resolved antinomy because the rational and the irrational are not presented as antinomic by the narrator, but both as part of fictional reality. The author/narrator does not comment on the veracity or possibility of the events, facilitating acceptance and the integration of the supernatural into the code of the natural. In the above textual example, the story is not firmly established back into the realist narrative until the second sentence, which names Tayo: 'Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying' (14). This sort of transition occurs frequently in the novel and allows the narrative to hover between the gods' story and Tayo's. Magical and realist narratives establish a powerful dialogue that forces readers to make associations between the mythological story and Tayo's life, and to accept the possibility that the cause of the drought might be magical.

Later on in the novel, Silko inverts the terms in a highly symbolic passage in which Tayo performs a ceremony to invoke rain and succeeds (93-96). This seems to suggest that if Tayo's prayers had the power to bring about rain, they could also produce the drought. The scene depicts Tayo in a canyon before the war, sprinkling pollen over a spring, as he thinks holy men do to invoke rain. It is a magical passage, a kind of metanarrative which contains all the elements of the novel in miniature and offers clues to its understanding. References to the symbolic colours yellow (sunlight, pollen, sunflower, yellow sand) and blue (sky, mountain, dragonflies) pervade the scene. Tayo sees a spider and remembers stories about her: how she

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Velie makes a link of this Laguna myth with the European Holy Grail-Wasteland myths in his *Four American Indian Literary Masters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), pp. 106-121.

outsmarted the malicious mountain ka't'sina who imprisoned the rain clouds (the poem-story about Spider Woman and the Gambler occurs later in the novel). He also sees a bright green hummingbird which is a character in the principal mythical story interpolated throughout the novel. This passage is particularly significant because Tayo starts making connections between his individual reality and Laguna collective myths. He also becomes aware of how traditional storytelling enters into conflict with the Western world view:

The science books explained the causes and effects. But Old Grandma always used to say, "Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened." He never lost the feeling he had in his chest when she spoke those words, as she did each time she told them stories; and he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school... Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as Old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving. (94-5)

This is the world the magic realist mode aims to recover, relying heavily on the myths and cultural background of a social or ethnic group. As opposed to Western cultures, American Indian thought makes no dualistic division between what is material and what is spiritual; natural and supernatural are two different expressions of the same reality. Tayo feels suspended between two worlds that he must connect in order to find peace for himself and his community. He recognises the need to integrate the reality of living in the United States with belonging to an old culture.

The dialogic tension between myth and reality increases throughout the novel. The Indian tales, which appear to be separate and distinctive at the start, begin to encourage readers to adopt an ironic perspective, because we have more information than Tayo does. The mythical story of Fly and Hummingbird, the saving messengers, is always one step ahead of Tayo's realistic journey. The mythical frame seems to guide the psychological narrative. However, both planes get progressively intermingled in such a way that mythical figures like the Ts'eh woman or the Hunter do actually appear in Tayo's reality. This fusion represents the main magic realist device: the narrator presents supernatural characters and events as part of everyday reality, without questioning at any moment their impossibility. In this slippage between discourses, the treatment of time and space is highly relevant.

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<sup>14</sup> See Introduction, pp. 11-12.

## Time and Space

In *Ceremony*, as in most Native American writing, there exists a tension between the Western conception of time as mechanical and linear, and the Indian notion of time as ceremonial and circular. Such tension is a main feature of magic realism. The mythical patterns of the novel present a ritual sense of time. The stories of Corn and Reed Woman, or of the Gambler who captured the stormclouds, occur in the old days, in a mythical past when the tribes inhabited a timeless ceremonial world. In these mythic poems, there are references to the sacred number of four: Hummingbird advises the people to sing above a jar, 'After four days/ you will be alive' (72), and on the fourth day Fly appears from the jar and accompanies Hummingbird on his trip to the fourth world below.<sup>15</sup>

This achronological sense of time characteristic of legends pervades the whole narrative. *Ceremony* is certainly organised around motion and ritual. Tayo represents the individual as a moving event. He engages in a searching process of constant walking and riding, entering into a timeless space where he can achieve wholeness. At the beginning of the novel, Tayo starts to liberate himself from mechanical time when he stays alone in the ranch: 'He wouldn't waste firewood to heat up yesterday's coffee or maybe it was day-before-yesterday's coffee. He had lost track of the days there' (10). Looking then at some old wooden barrels, the staves pulled loose remind him of dancing hoops:

the rusty steel hoops were scattered on the ground behind the corral in the crazy patterns of some flashy Kiowa hoop dancer at the Gallup Ceremonials, throwing his hoops along the ground where he would hook and flip them into the air again and they would skim over his head and shoulders down to his dancing feet, like magic. Tayo stepped inside one that was half buried in the reddish blow sand; he hooked an edge with the toe of his boot, and then he let it slip into the sand again. (10)

According to Allen, the hoop dancing is a means of transcending the limits of chronological time and its traumatising, disease-causing effects.<sup>16</sup> The hoop dancer dances within what encircles him, demonstrating how the people live in motion

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<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Berner distinguishes a four-part structure in *Ceremony* (Tayo passes through three stages to reach a fourth stage of wisdom), based on the American Indians tendency to define reality in terms of a quadripartite symbolism - as opposed to tripartite Indo-Europeans mythologies. See Berner's 'Trying to be Round: Three American Indian Novels', *World Literature Today*, 58 (3) (Summer 1984), 341-344 (p. 341).

<sup>16</sup> Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 150.

within the circling spirals of time and space. Tayo will enact a similar dance moving into different ceremonial circles.

In her interview with Laura Coltelli, Silko has commented that time was one of the things that most intrigued her in *Ceremony*, since she grew up with people whose world vision was based on a different way of organising human experience, natural cycles:

I was trying to reconcile Western European ideas of linear time -you know, someone's here right now, but when she's gone, she's gone forever, she's vaporized- and the older belief which Aunt Susie talked about, and the old folks talked about, which is: there is a place, a space-time for the older folks.<sup>17</sup>

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as the expression of the inseparability of space and time seems very pertinent here. The chronotope of the road is of special relevance in *Ceremony*. Discussing the adventure novel of everyday life, Bakhtin highlights as the most characteristic aspect of this novel the way it fuses the course of an individual's life (at its major turning points) with his actual spatial course or road - that is, with his wanderings.<sup>18</sup> This novelistic chronotope of the road is deeply infused with folklore motifs. The individual sets out as a youth and returns a man; Tayo sets out as a fragmented entity and returns whole. The chronotope of the road is particularly appropriate for portraying events governed by chance. The road has a significant narrative role in *Ceremony*. Tayo spends most of the time either walking or driving along the flat Highway 66, which epitomises the way out of the reservation into the whites' world. The novel itself symbolises a road, a path full of difficulties and encounters, that leads to Tayo's cure. As Tayo advances on this spiritual road, time and space become increasingly magical.

When Tayo leaves the Veterans' Hospital, he sees at the train station a group of Japanese women and children, who trigger off his war memories. After collapsing from the impression, he vomits in an attempt to cast out the painful past. He then becomes aware of the dissolution of time and space barriers. The little Japanese boy smiling reminds him of the war but also of Rocky when they were kids:

He couldn't vomit any more, and the little face was still there, so he cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people

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<sup>17</sup> Coltelli, *Winged Words*, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> See Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 84-258 (p. 120).

could push against them and wander back and forth in time. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time. (18)

This awareness confirms the feeling he experienced in the war when he refused to shoot some Japanese soldiers because he saw in one of them his beloved uncle Josiah: slant-eyed, the same skin colour, the same features. Tayo realises that there is a sort of universality, of brotherhood, among beings that keeps the cosmos in balance and that implies a universal time and space: 'Distances and days existed in themselves then; they all had a story. They were not barriers' (19). The harmony of the cosmos depends on this dissolution of barriers.

Time and space are connected with storytelling; it is necessary for Tayo to believe in stories, even though the teachers at the Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense'. The medicine man Old Betonie teaches Tayo the importance of stories as part of a pattern that dates back from immemorial time. In his circular room, he keeps all sorts of elements from American popular culture, such as clothes, rags, boxes, newspapers, and telephone books, almost like a postmodern pastiche.<sup>19</sup> Tayo is particularly startled by the piles of calendars:

he saw layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost as if occasionally the oldest calendars had fallen or been taken out from under the others and then had been replaced on top of the most recent years. A few showed January, as if the months on the underlying pages had no longer been turned or torn away. (120)

All the things have stories alive in them. Betonie collects them to keep track of things, to keep the collective memory alive. The calendars, prime symbols of Western and linear sense of time, lose their chronological function by being piled up in an amorphous bundle. Their importance lies in their eternal circularity, illustrating the non-linear conception of time central to Native American cosmology.

Rawdon Wilson argues that in magic realism space is hybrid, since it incorporates the extratextual world even while constructing a textual space that makes unlikely events possible.<sup>20</sup> *Ceremony* creates a fictional world connected to an extratextual reality (that of post-war Laguna Pueblo) and inserts in it a space where experientially impossible events take place naturally. Wilson suggests that memory

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<sup>19</sup> Teresa Gómez Reus offers an interesting reading of hybridity in Native American literary and artistic mediums, including Silko's novel, in her article 'Escribir/pintar/pensar desde la hibridez. Apuntes sobre creaciones indio-americanas en la era del pluriculturalismo', *Asparkia*, 7 (1996), 31-44.

is, in its structure, also highly spatial: it seems to work through visual images of place.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the main device to introduce a variety of spaces in *Ceremony* is through Tayo's memories: the Japanese jungle in the war, the veterans' hospital, bars, the school he attended with Rocky, the riverbank he lived on with his mother. All these locations represent alien forces that endanger the harmony of the universe as understood by Laguna Pueblo cosmology: schools and hospitals that impose scientific knowledge and the 'white' truth and tell Indians that their beliefs are only superstition, bars where they drink themselves to death, or outskirts where they live in the mud. These spaces are mostly situated in towns which create a strong opposition to nature and Indian traditional ways of life. In towns, Indians lose their contact with land and consequently their identity. While driving through Gallup, Tayo ponders:

"I saw Navajos in torn old jackets, standing outside the bars. There were Zunis and Hopis there too, even a few Lagunas. All of them slouched down against the dirty walls of the bar along Highway 66, their eyes staring at the ground as if they had forgotten the sun in the sky; or maybe that was the way they dreamed for wine, looking for it somewhere in the mud on the sidewalk. This is us, too, I was thinking to myself. These people crouching outside bars like cold flies stuck to the wall." (107)

Gallup symbolises such a space where most Indians, like Rocky or Helen Jean, aspire to live in order to escape the reservation, but where they eventually become drunkards, prostitutes or living souvenirs for tourists. In the description of Gallup, the focaliser changes again to an unidentified child (who may or may not be Tayo) who lives on the riverbank with his prostitute mother. The effect of this passage is disturbing. Silko has explained that the Gallup section is the only surviving part of what she calls stillborn novels.<sup>22</sup> The unknown viewpoint of this story-within-a-story presents a more powerful and universal portrait of the inhuman conditions in which Indians live and also responds to the oral tradition principle of adding stories to the main plot.

However, Tayo also has peaceful recollections of his time with his uncle Josiah who taught him to respect the land, a time related to sacred spaces: the sacred

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<sup>20</sup> Rawdon Wilson, 'The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism' in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1985), pp. 209-233 (p. 220).

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, 'The Metamorphoses...', p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Coltelli, *Winged Words*, p. 140.

lava cave Northeast of Laguna which Tayo used to visit with Rocky, the ranch where Josiah gathered his cattle, or Night Swan's house are only a few examples. Most magic realist fictions define sacred places which pass their magic over the rest of the text - Macondo in García Márquez, Matchimanito Lake and its woods in Erdrich, Baby Suggs' leafy clearing in Morrison's *Beloved*. In *Ceremony*, this magic emanates from Betonie's house and the sand painting ceremony performed there, which significantly occurs right in the middle of the narrative.

### A Ceremony Within Ceremony

During his ceremonial recovery, Tayo counts on a number of helpers, both human and supernatural. Old Betonie becomes his mentor and performs crucial rites of transition over Tayo. He is a Navajo medicine man who, like Tayo, inhabits a marginal space. Also a mixed-blood with hazel eyes, Betonie lives in a circular hogan built into the hill in the old-style way in the North of Gallup, which represents the comfort of belonging with the land:

“It strikes me funny”, the medicine man said, shaking his head, “people wondering why I live so close to this filthy town. But see, this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man.” (118)

In the novel's structure, Betonie plays the role of a mediator between the primitive and modern worlds, between the magical and realist narratives. The episode in his hogan represents in itself a complex ceremony, made up of different elements. Betonie tells Tayo that he is part of a larger narrative: ‘You've been doing something all along. All this time, and now you are at an important place in this story...This has been going on for a long time. They will try to stop you from completing the ceremony’ (124-25). Tayo's sickness is only part of something larger and his cure is to be found in something great and inclusive of everything. Central to Silko's novel is the essential need for change and adaptation in the traditional Indian world, as Betonie remarks, ‘after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies....things which don't shift and grow are dead things’ (126). Similarly, the magic realist strategies in the novel start to change and become more complex; instead of interruption or intercalation between



mythical and realist discourses, overlapping and merging begin to dominate. As Mary Slowik remarks, Betonie changes Tayo's narrative position in the novel.<sup>23</sup> He is no longer an organizing consciousness but rather the protagonist of an adventure story resembling the Indian folktales. Tayo must overcome a series of obstacles, find his cattle, fight the forces of witchery and save his people. Still, Tayo remains a complex psychological character in a realist narrative that continues to give all sorts of physical details about his travels through New Mexico.

The magic realist strategies at work in the novel reach their peak when characters and events belonging to the two different narrative modes not only coexist but become interchangeable. An early example is the introduction of Betonie's helper, the boy Shush, whose name means 'bear'. Immediately after, a story inset as a poem tells us about a child who went to live with the bears and, although brought back to his family by a medicine man, was never the same afterwards, not like the other children. The implication is that Shush is such a boy, caught between the worlds of people and bears, much as Tayo is caught between two worlds. The narrator does not comment on the impossibility of the implication; it is presented as completely natural that Shush belongs to the mythical Bear People. Furthermore, a note explaining in a straightforward language the difference between bear people and witches is then included, contributing to the mixture of genres and approximation to oral literature discussed earlier.<sup>24</sup>

The sand painting ceremony also shifts the reader's position. The Indian tales or the characters like the bear boy do not serve only as a gloss for Tayo but engender and develop other stories that lead us to a polyphonic understanding of the narrative. Slowik talks about a contrapuntal reading:

as readers, we no longer follow the stories sequentially, that is as the Indian tales interrupt the realist story. We now read contrapuntally; that is, as the weave of one story crosses the weave of another...Such contrapuntal reading changes our sense of narrative as a self-contained form and our sense of what ontology is as well.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Slowik, 'Henry James, Meet Spider Woman: A Study of Narrative Form in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 57 (2) (Spring 1989), 104-20 (p. 111).

<sup>24</sup> Human attitudes towards bears are particularly intriguing since there is evidence of some kind of mystic tie between men and bears in fossil deposits that extend back more than 50.000 years. See *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, ed. by G. Levitas, F.R. Vivaldo and J.J.Vivaldo (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Slowik, 'Henry James, Meet Spider Woman...', p. 115.

The very concept of reality is brought into question as it seems to be shaped after the events from the primitive world. Characters are no longer autonomous units but can easily move between the magical and the real. The reader is then prepared to understand the importance of the next part of the ceremony which focuses on the origins of witchery. A poem-like story relates how originally there were not white people in this world but they were invented by Indian witchery. Structurally, the story is inserted exactly in the middle of the book and stresses the element of responsibility so crucial to a Native American world view. The story recounts how in immemorial time, a contest of Indian witches took place to decide who was the most powerful. The one who won did so with a story, a story with the power to set in motion the creation of white people and their terribly destructive forces.

Following from the contrapuntal technique, Silko inserts here a story/poem about a man transformed into a coyote, and the ceremonies the Bear People perform to restore him to the world of human beings. Without any narrative shift, Tayo is portrayed as sitting 'in the center of the white corn sand painting' (141). Like the Coyote man, Tayo has to be brought back into the world of his people through a series of transitions. The sand painting ceremony is obviously highly symbolic, with different hoops, paintings of mountains and bear prints in the sacred colours blue, yellow and white, and a big rainbow. It is interspersed with chants and poems referring to the cardinal directions. The whole section is full of magic due to Silko's mixture of narratives without any transitions or explanations. The reader is forced to make the connections, to see the similarities between the fragments and different genres, in order to appreciate the atmosphere of the ceremony.

After the sand painting, Tayo dreams about the speckled cattle and when he wakes up, he reaches a global understanding of the universe: 'there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. The mountains from all the directions had been gathered there that night' (145). This dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries epitomises Tayo's understanding of his own story as a magic realist narrative where spiritual and material worlds constantly interact. To complete the ceremony, Old Betonie relates to Tayo the story of his Mexican grandmother and how all this had started long ago. Silko returns to the mythical story of Fly and Hummingbird at this point to stress the fact that Tayo's quest had already been established in oral tradition. However, the

ceremony performed by Betonie is not finished yet. Betonie foresees a magic pattern for Tayo to follow and indicates it on the sand. Four elements constitute such a pattern: a design of stars, the spotted cattle, a mountain, and a woman. From this moment on, the narrative becomes increasingly magical, as Tayo encounters the elements of this pattern, entering a mythical world as if he was entering a sand painting.

But first, and immediately following the ceremony, Silko skilfully introduces a realistic narrative: on the highway, Tayo is picked up by his friends, the veterans Harley and Leroy, and a young Indian woman named Helen Jean who travels with them in their newly-acquired truck. The sordid reality of trucks and dirty bars contrasts greatly with the previous magic-mythical section and shows the consequences of the forces of witchery's actions. Throughout the novel, there is always a marked tension between the road, setting of the present reality, and the mountains, setting of magic and a mythical past.

A narrative within the narrative is inserted by changing the focaliser from Tayo to Helen Jean, who represents the fate of most Indian women who leave the reservation to succeed in the white world and end up prostituting themselves (her story is highly similar to that of June who opens *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich; it is easy to guess their common end). The technique of the story-within-a-story relates to old storytellers and has an important structural function, as Silko herself has noted:

In one way, if you were judging her [Helen Jean] by more conventional structural elements of a novel, she just sort of comes and goes. But I would rather have you look at her, and get a feeling for her, so that when we make a brief reference to Tayo's mother...then I don't have to tell you that story... Again it was important to see a woman caught somewhere -I wouldn't even say between two cultures- she was just caught in hell, that would be the woman who was Tayo's mother, or the woman who is Helen-Jean, or the woman who was down in the arroyo with the narrator of the Gallup section.<sup>26</sup>

In his role as the questing hero, Tayo needs a series of transitions to be made whole again, represented by the different elements of the pattern seen by Betonie. As a hint for the reader of Tayo's ultimate success, Silko interpolates another traditional Pueblo story, that of the Sun Man's journey to recover the stormclouds from The Gambler. He succeeds in his quest and, with the return of the stormclouds, the balance and harmony on the earth is recovered.

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<sup>26</sup> Coltelli, *Winged Words*, pp. 140-41.

### Mundane / Magical Women

Although Silko's novel focuses on a male protagonist, women play an essential role in his quest and recovery. According to Paula Rabinowitz, women characters in *Ceremony* tend to fall into two categories: mundane women who maintain and reproduce daily life and magical women who enter fantasy, myth and power.<sup>27</sup> This distinction is pertinent to the discussion of the text as a magic realist narrative because both categories of women are represented by two styles of writing.

The mundane women in *Ceremony* are those who surround the protagonist as relatives or acquaintances. They belong to the real contemporaneous world and are therefore portrayed with realist conventions; background details of their daily activities are given without any symbolic connotation. As opposed to Western patriarchal societies, Laguna society has a matriarchal organisation. Social identity passes through women and clans are matrilineal. Religious identity and access to ideology formally pass through men.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Tayo must also have male religious guides like Ku'oosh or Betonie to reach a male-female balance. Old Grandma and Auntie are the owners of the house, land and cattle, and they take the decisions concerning their extended family (the Indian concept of family is based on the clan as a social unit, rather than the Western nuclear unit). Grandma as the matriarch is the one who decides that Tayo needs a medicine man. She is a storyteller and Silko grants her the last words of the prose narrative, stressing the influential role of maternal grandmothers in matrilineal societies. Auntie, however, embodies a cultural conflict. She has converted to Christianity and looks up to white authorities (teachers, priests, and doctors). Auntie encourages her son Rocky to adopt white ways and all the symbols that measure success in Western societies and, in that sense, she represents the dangers of acculturation.

The magical women have a more direct influence on Tayo's restoration and allow the unproblematic insertion of the supernatural into the realist narrative, since

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<sup>27</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, 'Naming, Magic and Documentary: The Subversion of the Narrative in *Song of Solomon*, *Ceremony* and *China Men*', in *Feminist Revisions: What Has Been and Might Be*, ed. by Vivian Patraka and Louise A. Tilly (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Women's Studies Program, University of Michigan, 1983), pp. 26-41 (p. 33).

<sup>28</sup> See Edith Swan, 'Laguna Symbolic Geography and Silko's *Ceremony*', *American Indian Quarterly*, 12 (3) (Summer 1988), 229-49 (pp. 235-6).

they are simultaneously magical and made of flesh and blood. They appear in various guises and help Tayo at crucial moments. The critic Edith Swan suggests that the entire cast of female characters in *Ceremony* are individual permutations of Spider Woman.<sup>29</sup> Night Swan is an old cantina dancer who magically arrives at the edge of the reservation drawn by the sacred mountain Tse-pi'na (Mount Taylor) and becomes Josiah's lover. She is strongly associated with the colour blue and her house has particular magical connotations: the door of her room is bright blue, with a blue armchair, blue flowers painted in a border around the walls, blue sheets. She wears a blue satin kimono and blue slippers. The colour blue figures as a positive motif throughout the novel. In an interesting article on Silko's use of colour in *Ceremony*, the folklorist Kathleen Manley states that the colours that appear most frequently are primarily those of Navajo and Pueblo Indian ceremonial art, and contribute to the structure and theme of the novel.<sup>30</sup> The Keresan pueblos associate the four cardinal directions with distinct colours: yellow for north, blue for west, red for south, and white for east. Night Swan then is linked with the west, the direction of rain and symbol of fertility. When Tayo visits her, a big storm is starting and he can hear the rain rattling on the tin roof while they make love. Night Swan and her space seem magically suspended in eternity: 'She did not look old or young to him then; she was like the rain and the wind; age had no relation to her' (98). Susan Pérez Castillo remarks that Night Swan has many of the attributes of the *kat's'inas*, the half-humane, half-divine beings of Pueblo mythology: blue is the colour traditionally associated with the *kat's'inas* and she also embodies the regenerative power of the earth.<sup>31</sup>

Night Swan plays the role of the first helper to Tayo, similar to that of Fly in the parallel mythical story (significantly, Fly is introduced in the poem section just before Tayo's meeting with Night Swan). She teaches Tayo about himself and his part in the larger ceremony. Night Swan also functions as an important structural

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<sup>29</sup> Edith Swan, 'Feminine Perspectives at Laguna Pueblo: Silko's *Ceremony*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 11 (2) (Fall 1992), 309-328 (pp. 317-18).

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Manley, 'Leslie Marmon Silko's Use of Colour in *Ceremony*', *Southern Folklore*, 46 (2) (1989), 133-46 (p. 134).

<sup>31</sup> Susan Pérez Castillo, 'The Construction of Gender and Ethnicity in the Texts of Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 24 (1994), 228-236 (p. 234).

link in the novel, because it is through her connections to Mexico and her cousin Ulibarri that Josiah acquires the speckled cattle. Due to her Mexican origin, Night Swan can be associated with Betonie's grandmother, the Mexican captive with supernatural powers who too had hazel-green eyes. Finally, Night Swan functions as an anticipation of Ts'eh, the woman central to Tayo's restoration. A whole pattern is disclosed through this line of magical women who share hazel-green eyes, a tell-tale mark that reflects their mixed ancestry and sets them apart from ordinary characters. The eyes motif creates a bond between them, Betonie and Tayo.

The Montaña woman, Ts'eh, is the most magical character in the novel. She is a Mexican-Indian medicine woman and has supernatural abilities. She is also connected to the sacred mountain Tse-pi'na, both by her Indian name and by the name of her clan which means 'mountain' in Spanish. Over her house, Tayo recognises the pattern of stars that Betonie drew on the sand and it is she who recovers the cattle from the mountain. Tayo's cure rests in living in harmony with nature and being initiated into the values of motherhood. Abandoned by his natural mother, Tayo completes his cure through his love for Night Swan and especially for Ts'eh. Both women play the role Mother/Lover for Tayo and are strongly associated with elemental forces of nature and the myth of Mother Earth. Mothers hold the highest status in ritual cultures where the primary potency in the universe is female. They have the power to make, create, transform. Allen interprets the resolution of Tayo's conflict within a mother-ritual based culture:

She [Silko] writes a novel [*Ceremony*] all about the feminization of a male. That's really what it's about. And the ideal for a Laguna or an Acoma male is that he learn how to be a woman. That's because at those pueblos God is a woman. And the important deity besides Thinking Woman is Iyatiko, Earth Woman, Corn Woman; and so in order for the land to be balanced and the people to be happy, all the people, men and women alike, must learn to nurture and to think more about peace and harmony and prosperity, making things grow.<sup>32</sup>

In this sense, *Ceremony* has a great similarity to Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, also published in 1977. Both novels present an alienated male protagonist who embarks on a journey of self-discovery. On the surface, they follow the conventions of the classical male quests and the *Bildungsroman* genre. However, they employ a variety of narrative strategies to subvert the male monomyth and expose their protagonists to a process of feminisation with the aim of emphasising the need for a balanced, co-

operative participation of both females and males in universal quests.<sup>33</sup> While the novels follow a standard pattern for the male hero, the quest or odyssey, the classical westward direction is reversed as both Milkman and Tayo travel back to the sources of their cultures. In *Ceremony*, Tayo finds the connections of his people in the East, in Asia, as his identification of Japanese soldiers with his uncle indicates. In a similar way to Milkman, Tayo gets immersed in a world essentially female and only recovers his lost identity by adopting women's vision and completing the necessary rituals to be connected to the universe and its feminine power.

Indeed, Ts'eh teaches Tayo how to live in harmony with nature. She appears to Tayo with a small willow staff in the middle of a cool wind from the mountain. She is wearing a yellow skirt and moccasins with rainbirds carved on them. The blanket around her shoulders has some designs woven in four colours, 'patterns of storm clouds in white and gray; black lightning scattered through brown wind' (177). She is mostly linked to yellow, the colour of pollen, fecundity and the North. Her eyes are ochre and she offers corn to Tayo, corn being the symbol of origin and the feminine. Yellow Woman is the generic name for all female ka't'sinas, supernatural beings impersonated by men inducted into certain medicine societies.<sup>34</sup> Significantly, after making love to Ts'eh, Tayo rises to see the dawn 'spreading across the sky like yellow wings' (181) and he remembers the arrival of the ka't'sinas before dawn in his village. Tayo then repeats their song for sunrise:

He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones, but feeling they were right, feeling the instant of the dawn was an event which in a single moment gathered all things together -the last stars, the mountaintops, the clouds, and the winds- celebrating this coming... Sunrise. He ended the prayer with "sunrise" because he knew the Dawn people began and ended all their words with "sunrise." (182)

Sunrise symbolises Yellow Woman and more generally harmony and rebirth. Silko enacts the role of the Dawn people/ka't'sinas by using the invocation to sunrise as an organisational principle of the novel, starting and ending it with these words,

<sup>32</sup> Coltelli, *Winged Words*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> For a comparative analysis of both novels and their subversion of the male monomyth, see my article 'A Male or a Female Quest?: Silko's *Ceremony* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon*', in *Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of AEDEAN*, ed. by Pere Gallardo and Enric Llorca (Lleida: Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2000), pp. 545-549.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the myth of Yellow Woman, see Marta Weigle, 'Southwest Native American Mythology', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. by Carolyn Larrington (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. 333-361 (p. 347).

providing it thus with a circular and mythological structure, as has already been mentioned.

Feeling whole through his love for Ts'eh, Tayo undertakes the search of the cattle that belonged to Josiah on the sacred mountain. There he experiences an incident with two white cowboys guarding the fences and is helped by another mythical figure, the Mountain Lion, the Hunter, connected with the wind, the north and winter. The cowboys prefer to hunt the lion and release Tayo. However, the snow starts to fall, covering the lion's tracks and making it impossible for the cowboys to trace it. Returning to Ts'eh's house, Tayo meets a hunter carrying a deer across his shoulders. The hunter has the same characteristics as the Mountain Lion: 'the cap he wore over his ears was made from tawny thick fur which shone when the wind ruffled through it; it looked like mountain-lion skin' (207). The narrator does not comment on the magic of this character but the connections with the mythical Mountain Lion are made clear in the narrative. Furthermore, in a very matter-of-fact way, the hunter asks Ts'eh to fold up her blanket to stop the snow. It is then obvious that Ts'eh is not only a medicine woman who collects roots and plants, but also a supernatural being able to provoke a snow storm by spreading her storm-pattern blanket. This slippage between magic and reality exemplifies the unproblematised insertion of the supernatural, characteristic of magic realism. The author/narrator does not comment or judge the veracity of the supernatural events, but integrates them into the code of the natural. Likewise, Tayo is not disconcerted in the slightest by Ts'eh's or the hunter's behaviour.

Louis Owens interprets the meeting of these three characters as the re-enactment of a story from Pueblo mythology.<sup>35</sup> The Hunter-Mountain Lion is also Winter, who lives on North Mountain in Keres tradition, and Tayo represents Summer in this particular legend. Yellow Woman, Winter's wife, meets Summer one day and invites him to sleep with her while her husband is out hunting deer. When Winter returns in a snow storm, he gets angry but they reach an agreement:

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<sup>35</sup> Louis Owens, *Other Destinies. Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman and London: University Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 187.



Yellow Woman will spend part of the year with Winter and part with Summer.<sup>36</sup> A reader familiar with this traditional story will understand at once all the details and foresee that Tayo and Ts'eh will meet again at the beginning of the summer, as happens. However, what is the position of a Western reader, ignorant of such legends? Silko's use of mythical stories throughout the novel has created a pattern, in such a way that the reader, even the Western one, can easily make connections between myth and reality. The important fact in this section is that Tayo has entered the mythical pattern designed by Betonie in the sand painting ceremony (an entrance performed smoothly through the fusion of worlds), and that all this is part of a mythical communal past, which has already occurred and which will happen again and again.

The reader is in a position to understand that with his love for Ts'eh comes wholeness and health for Tayo and that he is very close to completing his cure. The drought is finally over, 'He was dreaming of her arms around him strong, when the rain on the tin roof woke him up' (217) (parallel scene to that with Night Swan mentioned earlier). The land is green again and Tayo, the questing hero, has succeeded in an archetypal pattern. Nevertheless, his story is not yet finished: he must fight off the forces of witchery. Before parting, Ts'eh warns Tayo about Emo and the Destroyers. When he asks her how does she know about the future, she keeps silent and her visionary powers appear unequivocal:

She stared up at the sky for a long time; a shooting star arched from west to east, scattering light behind it like dust on a trail. When she did not answer, he knew; like old Betonie, she could see reflections in sandrock pools of rainwater, images shifting in the flames of juniper fire; she heard voices, low and distant in the night. (232)

The circle is almost completed. Supernatural characters have instructed Tayo about his role in an ongoing ceremony which transcends the limits of his individual illness to affect the whole universe. Tayo feels strong enough to face the enemy.

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<sup>36</sup> This myth recalls the Greek Persephone, a daughter of Zeus and Demeter, abducted by Hades and made his wife and queen of the underworld, but allowed part of each year to leave it, representing thus winter and spring. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), pp. 89-96.

## OF CATTLE, URANIUM MINES AND THE FORCES OF WITCHERY: ETHNIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

*Ceremony* deals with socio-economic problems affecting Native Americans after World War II and extending to the present. The novel foregrounds the situation of war veterans and marginalised Indians who fall into a pattern of drunkenness and self-destruction. The inhuman conditions in which prostitutes and their children live or the reification of Indians into living souvenirs that white tourists stare at in the Gallup Ceremonial are fully explored in the realistic narrative. Silko addresses questions of ethnicity in the way different characters react to old traditions. One example of this is in their attitude towards the issue of the cattle. The spotted cattle, a mixture of Mexican and Hereford breeds, work as a symbol for dynamic ethnicity. Uncle Josiah represents the full-blood Indian who respects Laguna traditions but believes in the need for change and syncretism to keep their culture alive. He is the one to decide that they should acquire mixed-breed cattle, because they are more able to survive than the white-faced Herefords in times of drought since they live off rocks and sand.<sup>37</sup>

Rocky, ironically a full-blood unlike Tayo, stands for the loss of Native American values and assimilation into white culture. He deliberately avoids the old-time ways, as it is shown in the deer-hunting episode when he refuses to follow traditional rituals. He blindly believes in the textbooks that he reads at school and scorns old practice as superstition. Josiah and Tayo are able to see the weaknesses of scientific cattle-breeding books:

The problem was the books were written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which the cattle had to live with. When Tayo saw Ulibarri's cattle, he thought of the diagram of the ideal beef cow which had been in the back of one of the books, and these cattle were everything that the ideal cattle was not. They were tall and had long thin legs like deer. (75)

Rocky's attitude to science books is quite different and symbolises his state of acculturation: 'Those books are written by scientists. They know everything there is to know about beef cattle. That's the trouble with the way the people around here have always done things – they never knew what they were doing' (76). The white

'truth' imposes its dominion over native knowledge through Western education of American Indians. In this sense, Rocky and Erdrich's character Russell are extremely similar: they both try to find a place in the white world by becoming football stars and joining the army, but they just find mutilation and death.<sup>38</sup> Michael Hobbs interprets Tayo and Rocky as two different kinds of readers of threatening discourses of authority. Rocky is the orthodox reader who follows white science textbooks that teach him to despise his own Indian cultural heritage. In contrast, Tayo is the radical reader who survives his confrontation because he is able to liberate himself from the powerful dominance of various authoritative discourses and negotiate between them.<sup>39</sup>

In the character of Tayo, Silko advances further in her statements on ethnicity. In his condition of half-breed, he is the one to understand the mythical role of the cattle in the survival of Laguna people. The cattle have a materiality that make them a specific element in the realist narrative, but also have ideological and ethnic implications that give them a symbolic role in the magical narrative. They are part of the sand painting ceremony and the whole ritual of restoration. Tayo and the new breed of cattle represent a new Mestizo culture, a syncretism based on Laguna traditions, a Hispanic heritage and twentieth-century American culture; this Mestizo culture also figures prominently in Chicano literature. Silko thus implies that in fusion and hybridisation, in new ceremonies adapted to the new times, lies the solution to the conflict. Old ethnic stereotypes of evil whites and doomed Noble Savages have to disappear. Ethnicity implies a dynamic vision of the changing historical reality.

Through her use of magic realism, Silko sets up a political agenda; *Ceremony* is a cry for ecology and pacifism. There is an emphasis on the dangers of industrialised societies and the need for a return to nature. The critic Wayne Ude

<sup>37</sup> Peter G. Beidler reads the white-faced Herefords as acculturated Indians. See his article 'Animals and Theme in *Ceremony*', *American Indian Quarterly*, 5 (1) (February 1979), 13-18 (p. 17).

<sup>38</sup> Russell's character is primarily developed in Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (London: Flamingo, 1994), although he also appears in *Love Medicine* (London: Flamingo, 1992, rev. ed.) and *Tracks* (London: Flamingo, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Hobbs, 'Living In-Between: Tayo as Radical Reader in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*', *Western American Literature*, 28 (4) (Winter 1994), 301-12 (pp. 302-3).

reflects on the change in the ideas of wilderness and the American frontier that have occurred in recent Native American and Chicano novels:

Their characters still find themselves on one side of a frontier, hoping that frontier can protect them against the wilderness beyond, but the terms have changed... Industrial and commercial civilization has become the savage wilderness, and their characters wish to retreat to a more natural world. Nature, once the wilderness, has become a place of peace, safety, and harmony, where intuition, perhaps guided and corrected by reason, is a human's most important sense. And civilization has become the untamed, savage, logical but not rational, dark side of life.<sup>40</sup>

In *Ceremony*, the highway represents this frontier between nature and savage civilisation that Tayo continuously crosses. Along it, there is a line of bars built one after the other - the bars where the Indian vets drink themselves to death. It is also the road where Tayo is picked up in different occasions by other war vets who act first as friends and then as part of the forces of witchery.

The last section of the novel concentrates on modern witchery, a mythical representation of the terrible reality of wars and the possible destruction of the entire planet. On the narrative level, this final part is an authentic man chase. Tayo is hunted down by Emo and his henchmen. His escape along highways and mountains is subjected to an extreme heat and dry hot wind and perfectly fuses the magical and realist planes. Tayo takes refuge in an old uranium mine. Silko chooses a meaningful scenario for the novel's climax. Discovering the mine, Tayo understands a story that Old Grandma told him about a bright flash of light, like the sun rising again, that she saw once. It was an atomic bomb exploded near their village. Significantly, the uranium mine was closed in August 1945, when the bomb fell on Hiroshima. Silko brings attention to the use of atomic weapons and their fabrication and testing in lands inhabited by marginal groups, ironically the territory of Indians who have a special relationship with the land and who struggle for the maintenance of natural balance. Tayo perceives the place of the Laguna and other Pueblos in the general history of nuclear holocaust and war, and sees the convergence of all beings as one clan against the evil forces:

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

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<sup>40</sup> Wayne Ude, 'Forging an American Style: The Romance-Novel and Magical Realism as Response to the Frontier and Wilderness Experiences', in *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream: Essays on American Literature*, ed. by David Mogen et al (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989), pp. 50-64 (p. 60).

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; 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)

Tayo abandons his liminal position by realising that his personal healing is a communal one. At last Tayo sees the pattern, 'the way all stories fitted together -the old stories, the war stories, their stories- to become the story that was still being told' (246). And so does the reader, who now understands better the design of the whole novel, 'the bundle of stories', as Silko herself has called it.<sup>41</sup>

The destructive potential of humankind is embodied in the character of Emo. Significantly, the forces of witchery are within the Indians themselves. As James Ruppert reminds us, the mythic story of the Destroyers is not a traditional Laguna narrative but an invention, a mediation that both addresses and furthers Native discourse.<sup>42</sup> Silko fabricates this legend to suggest that Indian evil may share responsibility for the devastation that has occurred in the twentieth century. Witchery is larger than white people; it stands for the ultimate denial of community values and universal harmony. Laguna oral tradition is thus enlarged and complemented to include contemporary cross-cultural realities.

Before the scene of ritual witchery in which Emo tortures and sacrifices Harley (in place of Tayo), Silko inserts another story-poem about witchery and how it is rendered ineffective if it is witnessed by an outsider. This story contains the clue to understanding Tayo's final behaviour. He watches the satanic rites and Harley's death, but he cannot intervene. He is tempted to kill Emo but that would mean to nurture the evil forces of the destroyers. Therefore, the mythical story intervenes directly in the reality. Tayo's role consists of being a witness and returning home to teach the responsibility to watch and control evil forces in order to keep the delicate balance of the world. He has become himself a myth.

The transition is completed and Tayo dreams as he walks that 'he was wrapped in a blanket in the back of Josiah's wagon... Josiah was driving the wagon,

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<sup>41</sup> Coltelli, *Winged Words*, p. 141.

old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered "my brother." They were taking him home' (254). Tayo's dreams and his reality are the same, as myth and reality completely merge in the narrative. Symbolically, Tayo crosses the river at sunset (in a similar way to the end of Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, when Lipsha crosses the river bringing his mother home). Now Silko can complete the story of Fly and Hummingbird. They succeeded in purifying the town and the storm clouds returned, although Corn Mother reminded them that 'It isn't very easy/ to fix things up again.' (256).

Tayo returns home and sits at the centre of the kiva (an underground chamber used for ceremonies) to tell his story to the old men. He has completed his circular journey in search of his mother and a coherent centre that gives wholeness to his fragmented self, and that centre is located within his community: 'It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that he noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the sun.' (257). Silko gives the last words of the prose narrative to the matriarch, Old Grandma, who finishes with her wisdom the full circle of the novel: 'It seems like I already heard these stories before...only thing is, the names sound different' (260).

The novel thus reaches a tribal rather than an individual definition of being. Tayo has played a mythical role which will turn him into a character of future communal stories. From a psychological narrative centred on an individual consciousness, we have moved to a collective mythical story. The multicultural background of Silko's tribe contributes to restoring the community after cultural disruptions. Laguna Pueblo is particularly successful in maintaining its collective identity while adapting to change, whereas other tribes, like Erdrich's (Chippewa), have suffered the effects of acculturation to a higher degree.<sup>43</sup>

*Ceremony* confirms that magic realism is a highly interactive mode, which requires readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions and put them into question. Readers are caught between mythical and realist narratives and have to make the connections themselves, since they are not given by the narrator. The

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<sup>42</sup> James Ruppert, 'Dialogism and Mediation in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*', *Explicator*, 51 (2) (Winter 1993), 129-34 (p. 132).

<sup>43</sup> See Susan Pérez Castillo, 'Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy', *The Massachusetts Review*, 32 (1) (Summer 1991), 285-294 (p. 288).

reader is then forced to negotiate multiple codes inherent in the text. S/he is provided with the devices to reconfigure history and understand the native culture which produced the magic realist narrative; consequently, even Western readers can participate in this process. Silko's novel conveys the idea that storytelling and reading/listening are not mere forms of entertainment but constitute tools of struggle for survival. Like Tayo, we are responsible for the meaning of the story and only when we are able to merge myth and reality, can we interpret the novel as a healing ceremony. The reader of *Ceremony* sits in the centre of a sand painting ready to skip boundaries between worlds.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

**ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER:  
MAGIC REALISM IN CHICANO AND MEXICAN  
LITERATURE. THE CHILDREN OF LA MALINCHE**



This is my home  
this thin edge of  
barbwire.

This land was Mexican once,  
was Indian always  
and is.  
And will be again.

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 1987.

Mexico and the American Southwest share a past of colonisation, oppression and syncretism of races and cultures. Political borders have not disrupted a common mythology, language and world view, but have introduced distinctive features and given rise to a rich borderland culture. The Chicanos inhabit this borderland and internalise its inherent cultural and identity conflict. Generally called Mexican Americans and defined as American citizens of Mexican origin, they do not totally identify with the Anglo-American cultural values nor with the Mexican ones. They call themselves Mexican when referring to race and ancestry; *mestizos* when affirming both their Indian and Spanish ancestry; Hispanic or Spanish American or Latin American when linking themselves to other Spanish-speaking peoples; Chicanos when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the United States. This last term is considered preferable because it was chosen by members of the group itself and not imposed by Anglo-Americans, as were the terms Mexican American or Spanish American.<sup>1</sup> The Chicanos today search for their identity in their Indian ancestry and see themselves as people whose true homeland is Aztlán.

The American Southwest, Aztlán, was the mythical place of origin of the Aztecs.<sup>2</sup> The Aztecs (the Nahuatl word for people of Aztlán) left the Southwest in 1168 A.D. and migrated towards what is today Mexico and Central America. After the Spanish conquest and Hernán Cortés' invasion of Mexico, Spaniards took Indians and *mestizos* (a new race, people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood) to explore and settle the U.S. Southwest. For the Indians, this meant a return to the place of origin,

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<sup>1</sup> For origins and terminology see Edward Simmen, ed., *Pain and Promise: The Chicano Today* (New York: New American Library, 1972), pp. 53-56, 72-73.

Aztlán, thus making Chicanos originally and doubly indigenous to the Southwest. The culture of the Hispanic period (1542-1821) contributed important elements in determining the nature of contemporary Chicano life. It was during that early period that Spanish/Mexican culture was firmly established in the Southwest, with the introduction of the Spanish language and the Catholic religion.

In 1846, the United States incited Mexico to war and invaded its territory. With the victory of the U.S. forces in the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48), Mexico had to give up almost half of its nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California. The border fence that divides the Mexican people came into existence on February 2, 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which left 100,000 Mexican citizens on the U.S. side, annexed by conquest along with the land. A Mexican American culture emerged then in the borderlands in mid-nineteenth century that expressed in oral and written form their bilingual and bicultural experience under the Anglo-American economic and ideological domination. This was the beginning of Chicano literature.<sup>3</sup>

The recognition of Chicanos as a distinct people came with the nationalistic movement of the 1960s, specifically around 1965 when César Chávez organised the farmworkers and *I Am Joaquín*, an epic poem by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales about the complex identity of the Chicanos, was published. The Chicano movement promoted protest, resistance and active change and claimed a distinctive identity and language (Chicano Spanish) to describe their reality as an ethnic minority within the United States. The 1960s also signalled a 'Chicano Renaissance' with the rise of a new writing characterised by the search for native roots in the Indian past of Mexico, as well as the use of both English and Spanish in the same work, often in the same sentence, creating a literary discourse that would reflect the speech patterns of the Chicano population.

Chicano literature is thus doubly enriched by Anglo and Hispanic traditions. It has received influences from the great United States' and Latin American authors

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<sup>2</sup> See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3-8.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Chicano literature from its origins, see Luis Leal and Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez. 'Chicano Literature' in *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Roberto González Echevarría and Enrique Pupo-Walker (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1996), II, 557-86.

of the nineteenth and twentieth century. As Leal and Martín-Rodríguez point out, Chicanos insist on being considered as:

an ethnic group whose literature contributes, on the one hand, to the enrichment of the kaleidoscopic nature of North American literature, and, on the other hand, to the creation of a bridge between that literature and Latin American letters, especially since chicano literature is written in both English and Spanish, or in a combination of the two languages.<sup>4</sup>

Chicano and Latin American literature share a similar past, oral tradition and folklore. Of course, this is particularly true of Mexico. There has been a conscious and consistent relationship between Chicano and Mexican literature, especially from the mid-1970s to the present.<sup>5</sup> The rich Mexican narrative of the twentieth century has explored primarily the components of the Mexican national identity and a *mestizo* culture, created out of the encounter and mixture of European and indigenous cultures and races in Mesoamerica. In the 1950s Mexican novels became increasingly experimental and entered into the realms of surrealism and magic realism. Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and Elena Garro's *Recuerdos del porvenir/Recollections of Things to Come* (1963) are two fine examples of magic realism that have exerted an immense influence on contemporary Mexican and Chicano writers. The impact of the Latin American Boom and magic realism was indeed remarkable in the U.S. Southwest.<sup>6</sup> A number of important Chicano male writers have used magic realism in their novels: Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1971), Ron Arias' *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), Miguel Méndez's *El sueño de Santa María de las piedras* (1986). Because both Mexican and Chicano literatures occupy a junctural national position and reflect a borderlands culture in continuous reshaping, magic realism becomes for them an appropriate literary mode. For Chicano writers in particular it offers a meaningful way of describing life on the Mexican American border.

Magic realism, originally associated with male Latin American writers, has more recently been taken up in female texts. The 1980s were notable for the

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<sup>4</sup> Leal and Martín-Rodríguez, 'Chicano Literature', p. 558.

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting study of such relationship, with a particular focus on ideology, see Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez, 'Mexican and Mexican American Literary Relations', in *Mexican Literature. A History*, ed. by David William Foster (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 385-438.

emergence and profusion of Chicano women writers. Chicana fiction has provided a fresh vision of self and society by presenting an alternative view of the world filtered through myth and storytelling. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), and Denise Chávez' *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) have achieved wide critical acclaim. Ana Castillo, also an accomplished poet, has published three novels: *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), *Sapogonia* (1990) and *So Far From God* (1993). Such works have opened up a new cultural space, a border zone with conflicting worlds and a plurality of voices and languages. The borders have inspired Chicana writers to find multiple strategies for survival. Caught between two strong cultural currents, American and Mexican, they feel the pressure either to conform and acculturate to mainstream literature or to preserve and transmit the culture of their ancestors, and their writing reflects this dilemma. They have expanded the Chicano literary space by demythifying the stereotypical roles of the passive, submissive Chicana/Mexicana imposed upon them.

Chicana and Mexican writers undertake a re-visioning of their own cultural metaphors, especially of the myth of La Malinche.<sup>7</sup> The Aztec Malintzin, also known as Doña Marina or La Malinche, played a key role in the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards. Sold to Hernán Cortés, she became his translator, guide, mistress, strategic advisor and mother of his son. She was the mother of a new race, a new culture, symbol of the union of Amerindian and European. La Malinche is a complex and ambiguous figure who has had contradictory interpretations. For a long time, she has been seen as the betrayer of her culture and her race.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, taken by violence, she is *la chingada*, the forced one; Mexicans refer to themselves as *hijos de la chingada* (children of the raped one), acknowledging their origins from Indians raped by Spaniards. But contemporary Chicana and Mexican women writers have explored and vindicated this extraordinary woman in order to re-elaborate an image

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<sup>6</sup> The term Boom refers to the unprecedented world-wide recognition that the Latin American literature written in Spanish began to enjoy in the 1950s and that culminated in the 1960s, especially in the genre of the novel. See Introduction, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> There is extensive criticism on the treatment of La Malinche's myth. See for instance Elba D. Birmingham-Pokorny, 'La Malinche: A Feminist Perspective on Otherness in Mexican and Chicano Literature', *Confluencia*, 11 (2) (Spring 1996), 120-36.

<sup>8</sup> In present-day Mexico, the adjective 'malinchista' means betrayer and is often used to pejoratively designate those who become 'Americanised' or tend to favour foreign ways. See Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, ed. by E.M. Santí (Madrid: Cátedra, 1993), p. 224.

of themselves that subverts the masculine dominant discourse. Malintzin was a translator, able to use words to communicate culture, to integrate, to build bridges between cultures. Contemporary Chicana writers are also translators as they shift from one culture to another. In their search for self-definition, they claim Malintzin's voice, silenced by history and patriarchy. Two groundbreaking works by Chicana feminists have contributed both to the range and to the reception of contemporary Chicana literature. *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) edited by Chicana writers Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, is a collection of essays, poems, tales and testimonials that give voice to the experiences of women of colour in the United States. It problematised many versions of Anglo-American feminism and helped open the way for alternate feminist discourses.<sup>9</sup> In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, an illuminating hybrid book that transcends genre barriers. It switches freely from poetry to essay, autobiography and fiction, from English to Spanish, in an attempt to engage in the exploration of self and community from different perspectives.<sup>10</sup> These works offer a new direction for Chicano literature away from predominant Anglo-American models.

The following section discusses the use of magic realism by two representative writers on both sides of the frontier, the Chicana Ana Castillo and the Mexican Laura Esquivel. Their respective novels *So Far From God* (1993) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) present a distinctive kind of magic realism which has several significant aspects. Their techniques, while reminiscent of 'classic' male Latin American magic realists, such as Gabriel García Márquez or Carlos Fuentes, are particularised by the emphasis on gender. As has already been suggested, they are aware of the additional borderland existence –over and above cultural and national plurality- experienced by women, and their modes of magic realism are used to explore this awareness. Their narrative strategies include a metafictional self-referentiality and parodic use of popular discourses. Both Castillo and Esquivel call attention to the fact that the division between 'real' and 'fantasy' may be dependent

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<sup>9</sup> See Norma Alarcón, 'The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism', in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, ed. by Héctor Calderón and José Saldívar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 28-39. Significantly, Ana Castillo translated it into Spanish and published it in 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987)

on how it is presented. The use of humour and the extensive employment of hyperbole are Latin American techniques that both writers appropriate in their parodic revision of traditionally female discourses. The genres given parodic treatment range from romances to sentimental novels, women's magazines and 'advice' books. In their reworking of these popular genres, Castillo and Esquivel both subvert and endorse them in an attempt to recover a feminine voice. In this way, strategies taken from Latin American magic realism appear especially suitable for women's writing and contribute to provide a culturally validated form of subversion.

While women's issues are often to the fore in their fiction, as they are in almost all the texts discussed in this dissertation, their brand of magic realism differs in several respects from that of African or Native American female writers. There are some similarities, as will be shown, especially in the female association with the paranormal, but other aspects are notably dissimilar. Chicana and Mexican writers are consciously revising a Latin American tradition which includes a distinctive thematic and formal preoccupation with the grotesque and the extravagant, with violence, deformity and exaggeration, a tendency that Alejo Carpentier termed 'baroque' and related to his concept of *lo real maravilloso*, the marvellous real.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, *So Far from God* and *Like Water for Chocolate* embody a more self-referential, metafictional and humorous mode than the novels discussed in previous sections, and contain a stronger element of absurdity. Their playful and experimental style recalls the fiction of Borges and Cortázar and reflects the incorporation of certain aspects of metaphysical and ontological magic realism into the anthropological variety, a fact that confirms the high degree of overlapping between these three types.

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<sup>11</sup> Carpentier considered the baroque as a distinctive Latin American cultural category. See Alejo Carpentier, 'The Baroque and the Marvelous Real', in *Magical Realism*. ed. by Zamora and Faris, pp. 89-108.

**4.1.****BUILDING BRIDGES:  
ANA CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD* (1993)**

Hay tantísimas fronteras  
que dividen a la gente,  
pero por cada frontera  
existe también un puente.

Gina Valdés, *Puentes y fronteras: Coplas Chicanas*, 1982.<sup>1</sup>

Ana Castillo locates her novel *So Far from God* in that border zone of the American Southwest where several cultures, Anglo, Hispanic and American-Indian, coexist. The small town of Tome, somewhere in New Mexico, frames the story of Sofia and her four extraordinary daughters. The conflict between worlds is represented through magic realist techniques that allow a constant slippage between different ways of perceiving reality. The crossing of boundaries leads towards a fusion of opposites, a building of bridges that creates a synthesis in the model of the bilingual and bicultural Chicano/a who is able to survive.

The title of the novel discloses the importance of this location. It is the beginning of a famous phrase uttered by Porfirio Díaz, dictator of Mexico (1877-80, 1884-1911): 'So Far from God - So near the United States', a phrase that summarises the cultural conflict of Mexico and especially the American Southwest, a land usurped by the United States and dispossessed of its language and traditions. This sentence recalls a history of past and present oppression: firstly, by the Spanish conquest, with the extermination of the native culture and religion (as stated in the novel, this new land of pagans was for the Spanish conquistadores a place forsaken by God); and later by the Anglo invasion, following the U.S. victory in the war with Mexico (1846-48), with the appropriation of land and reduction to economic and social poverty of its inhabitants.

Magic realism is a particularly suitable mode to describe the experience of the American Western frontier, understood as the confrontation between European civilisation and 'others', exoticised or objectified as savages, and which is symbolised by that imaginary line that allows a superior civilisation to tame nature and the wilderness. The metaphor of the frontier is often associated with a narrow

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<sup>1</sup> 'There are so many borders / that separate people, / but for each border / there is also a bridge' (my translation).



zone of intense ambiguity, much like magic realism itself.<sup>2</sup> However, the literary treatment of the frontier in Chicano literature is different from that of mainstream Anglo-American myth. The acquisition of the Southwest by the United States created another boundary, the Southern border, consisting of the Rio Grande and a line westward across the desert to the sea. But, as Joan Penzenstadler remarks, this line was an Anglo creation, a result of the invasion and conquest by Anglos of Mexicans.<sup>3</sup> It was a boundary imposed by one group which maintained control over the other. Interestingly, the frontier myth gets reversed in Chicano literature. Since the danger comes from the American side, crossing the frontier implies entering a barbaric world, as opposed to the civilised Chicano one, a world where the spiritual values, self-esteem, family cohesiveness and respect for nature are irremediably lost.

The danger of acculturation and the falsehood of the American Dream are explored in all Chicano fiction. Many novels deal with the experience of the *mojados* (wetbacks) who illegally cross the border river, and the racism the emigrants suffer. As for the Mexican Americans who populate the area north of the border, they are racially discriminated against in their own land. The writer Sabine Ulibarri denounces such injustice when he declares:

We never left our native land. New Mexico is our native land...We never set out in search of the American Dream. The American Dream came to us unannounced and uninvited [and] remains just that, a dream, unfulfilled and unrealized. The mainstream has marginalized us.<sup>4</sup>

This concept of an uninvited American Dream is fully explored in Ana Castillo's novel. The frontiers here consist less of geographical lines than of differences in world views and perceptions of reality. Characters are situated between worlds and struggle to achieve a cultural identity. However, the old choice between either Mexican or American seems to be overcome by a fusion, a hybridisation of cultures. The Chicano characters in the novel are bilingual, bicultural, ready to cross frontiers easily and acquire a transcultural identity.

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<sup>2</sup> See Wayne Ude, 'Forging an American Style: The Romance-Novel and Magical Realism as Response to the Frontier and Wilderness Experiences', in *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream. Essays on American Literature*, ed. by David Mogen et al (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989), pp. 50-64.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Penzenstadler, 'La Frontera, Aztlán, el barrio: Frontiers in Chicano Literature', in *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream.*, ed. by David Mogen et al, pp. 159-79 (160).

Magic realism is also a hybrid mode that attempts a fusion of opposites to bridge the gap between worlds. It explores frames of reference from different cultures and is therefore highly useful to contemporary Chicano writers. *So Far from God* starts with a magical event, the resurrection of Sofi's youngest daughter, nicknamed 'La Loca' (the crazy one). This beginning sets the magic realist tone of the novel, where the natural and the supernatural coexist as the inhabitants of the borderlands present their views of reality. The novel obviously reworks a religious motif, that of Sofia and her martyr daughters. In the Catholic tradition, Sofia had three daughters, Faith, Hope and Charity who all died as martyrs and became saints. *So Far from God* re-enacts such martyrdom in modern terms and with a clear socio-political intention. The following possible origin of Sofia (Greek term for wisdom) and her daughters is given in *Butler's Lives of the Saints*:

The Roman widow St. Wisdom and her three daughters are said to have suffered for the faith under the Emperor Hadrian. According to a spurious legend, St. Faith, aged twelve, was scourged, thrown into boiling pitch, taken out alive, and beheaded; St. Hope, aged ten, and St. Charity, aged nine, being unhurt in a furnace, were also beheaded; and their mother suffered while praying over the bodies of her children. That the whole story is a myth is very likely, the legend spreading to the East from Rome, where there is reference to two groups: a family martyred under Hadrian and buried on the Aurelian Way... their names were Greek, Sophia, Pistis, Elpis and Agape; and another group of martyrs of an unknown date, Sapientia, Fides, Spes and Caritas, buried on the Appian Way.<sup>5</sup>

In Castillo's novel, Sofi also sees her daughters suffering from different kinds of torture, close to martyrdom, while she keeps praying and maintains her faith. They are, however, contemporary versions of torture that come to symbolise the ills of the present world: war, AIDS, gang rape, intoxication and death by chemicals. Significantly, nothing is left of the girls' bodies; one after the other, they vanish or disintegrate. Loca does not correspond to any of the three martyrs, although, like Charity in the aforementioned account, she also escapes unhurt from a wood-burning stove. Loca seems more like a fusion of all three and the only one that reaches sainthood.

The magical discourse is thus developed in the novel through the characters of Sofi's daughters who come to grips with their bicultural heritage and negotiate the

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<sup>4</sup> Sabine R. Ulibarri, *La fragua sin fuego/No Fire for the Forge* (Cerrillos, N.Mex.: San Marcos Press, 1971), quoted in Penzenstadler, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> *Butler's Lives of Saints*, ed. and rev. by H.J. Thurston and D. Attwater (London and Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1981), III, 238-9.

natural/supernatural dualism in various ways. The eldest, Esperanza (Hope), stands for the politically conscious Chicana, who majors in Chicano Studies at university, explores Native American culture and shamanic practices (especially in her relationship with Rubén and their sweat lodge sessions) and is deeply engaged in political and social questions. Her job as a newscaster takes her to cover the Gulf War and she disappears in the conflict. Esperanza returns as a spectre. Her down-to-earth existence, with her logical approach to things, is continued in her afterlife. The second daughter, beautiful Caridad (Charity) has an ordinary youth, after which she has a low-paid job and an unsuccessful marriage with her high school sweetheart. After being dreadfully attacked, raped and mutilated, she undergoes a miraculous recovery that makes her whole and beautiful again, although with a big personality change; she goes into becoming a healer with special powers. Her death, flying off from a cliff leaving no traces of her body, places her forever in the realm of the supernatural. The third daughter, Fe (Faith), is the most materialistic, with a realistic approach to life. She has a steady job at a bank and a boyfriend she plans to marry in a white wedding. Fe's aim in life is to fulfil the commercialised American Dream: a nice house, car, job, loving husband. The abandonment by her boyfriend leads her to near madness. Ironically, Fe dies at the end as a result of that capitalist society in which she so strongly intended to fit. The fourth daughter, La Loca, belongs from her childhood to the realm of the supernatural. Miracles and premonitions surround her. She is socially dysfunctional; she cannot stand human contact or smell, and never leaves the safety of her house and mother. Her powers and healing skills are exceptional. Her death from AIDS presents a last unexplained event and she becomes a saint. Since she is a person who has no human contact at all, the choice of her illness works as a further metaphoric indictment of modern society.

As already discussed in the introduction to this section, Chicano magic realism is closer to that from Latin America than to that from North America. Castillo's metafictional self-referentiality turns her narrative into a distinctive example of magic realism which is strongly linked to the Mexican form of it as employed by Laura Esquivel in *Like Water for Chocolate*. According to Wendy B. Faris, the texts provide commentaries on themselves that foreground the magic of

fiction rather than the magic *in* it.<sup>6</sup> They employ a number of strategies such as irony, parody, hyperbole and intertextuality that underline the self-reflexivity of fiction. In their blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction and the confrontation between different ontological levels, they further confirm that magic realism is central to postmodernism. Both Castillo and Esquivel undertake a parodic revision of popular genres that adds a new dimension to the mode of magic realism. They appropriate and subvert a variety of narratives associated with female discourses and traditionally devalued by high culture in order to recover a feminine voice.

### **CLARK GABLE MOUSTACHE AND OPRAH WINFREY: REWRITING SENTIMENTAL NOVELS AND SOAP-OPERAS**

*So Far from God* is mainly a parody of sentimental novels, much in the same way as Esquivel's gastronomic romance. Its division into chapters with long-winded titles in cursive font and the paragraph alignment at the beginning of each chapter recall novels written in instalments. It includes numerous elements from popular culture and soap-operas, with particular reference to the famous *telenovelas*, Mexican and Latin American lachrymose TV serials. There are many melodramatic accounts of sad stories typical of these soap-operas, such as doña Dolores losing her eleven children in infancy one after the other or doña Felicia's children being kidnapped, raped and murdered.<sup>7</sup> References to TV talk shows like Oprah Winfrey's are common. Sofi's love story with the Clark Gable-lookalike Domingo has all the elements of the romantic novel: their first meeting in a social dance, Sofi's family disapproval of Domingo, their elopement, Domingo's abandonment of her and their reconciliation twenty years later. The novel also includes recipes and home remedies in the tradition of the women's magazines that came into vogue during the mid-

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*. ed. by Zamora and Faris, pp. 163-190 (166, 173).

<sup>7</sup> Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (London: The Woman's Press, 1994), pp. 20, 61. All subsequent references will be to this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

nineteenth century, a device further developed by Laura Esquivel in her cookbook novel.

Ana Castillo reworks all these elements from romance and popular culture with parodic purposes. The novel is a parody in Linda Hutcheon's sense, that is, a 'repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity... Ironic inversion is a characteristic of all parody.'<sup>8</sup> Parody is often the mode of those who are fighting marginalisation by a dominant ideology because it allows the writer to work from within and from outside the dominant culture. The hyperbolic language, plot digressions and melodramatic tone are deliberate strategies employed to emphasise the ironic distance that exists between the text and the formulaic ones it recasts. The appropriation and reworking of popular genres written by women and for a female audience are a means of undermining the patriarchal system. The conscious re-elaboration of this type of discourse, which has traditionally been devalued by high dominant culture, implies a vindication of a female genre and its suitability to construct a particular collective identity which denounces oppression because of gender, race, social class and language. The Chicanas, doubly oppressed as women and as Mexican Americans, claim their own literary space where women's discourse is empowered.

Castillo's irony and humour, already a trademark in her poetry as noted by Norma Alarcón, play an essential role in her re-writing of popular genres.<sup>9</sup> Chicana authors attempt to break constricting cultural stereotypes through humour and clever manipulation of language. In *So Far from God*, the narrator takes a distance from the events described by adopting an ironic stand that offers a counterpoint to their tragic nature. This mixture of irony and tragedy characterises Latin American magic realism, as does the use of the rhetorical trope of hyperbole, widely used in Castillo's novel. The ironic third-person narrator is not only omniscient but also actively present in the narration, as shown for instance in one of the chapter titles: 'and a Few Random Political Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator' (238). This metafictional device works as yet another parodic strategy, this time of the narrators

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Norma Alarcón, 'The Sardonic Powers of the Erotic in the Work of Ana Castillo', in *Chicana Critical Issues*, ed. by N. Alarcón et al (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1993), pp. 5-19 (p. 5).

frequently used in English novels from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As in these novels, the reader is also directly involved here, since the narration is addressed to a second person. This involvement is noticeable in the chapter titles: 'What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account' (120). The parodic element lies in the fact that an archaic fictional device is used in a contemporary work, highlighting once again the fictionality of truth and the postmodern nature of the text.

The relationship between narrator and reader also recalls storytelling and oral tradition. As in a storytelling session, the reader occupies the role of a listener, and phatic expressions to keep his/her attention are frequent: 'by this point you can guess that...' (58). The narrator represents in fact the collective voice of the community of Tome. As we have seen in previous chapters, the recovery of oral tradition and folklore practices characterises magic realist fiction. The communal magic of storytelling plays a major role in *So Far from God*. Stories of myths and folk wisdom refer to the Chicano/Mexican collective memory. Many traits present in oral narratives occur in the text. The community of Tome represents the chorus that comments on the events and affairs of Sofia's family. The compadres and comadres provide numerous side stories that help to depict a general portrayal of a Southwestern community. Narrative detours are recurrent, such as chapter 5, entitled 'An Interlude: On Francisco el Penitente's First Becoming a Santero and Thereby Sealing His Fate'. The narrator justifies such narratives in the interest of a more complete picture.

The narrative also draws attention to the magic of fiction and the possible different versions of a story, which preclude a single truth, as stated in the account of Francisco El Penitente's actions: 'this all depends on who is telling the story' (120). The narrator frequently employs digressions that underline the self-reflexivity of fiction, as when a parenthesis is used for over a page in order to give additional details about Helena and Maria, two secondary characters:

(So this account which leads us temporarily astray from our story is about all kinds of beginnings and endings but mostly, like all accounts, about what goes on in the middle... But a lot can happen even in between the middle of things, not the least trying the patience of a good ear, and since "brevity is the noble soul of wit," like ese Hamlet said, I will do my best to keep this story to the telling of events of that day.) (124)

The reference to 'ese Hamlet' (that Hamlet) foregrounds the frequent instances of intertextuality. Castillo also intertextually references her own novels, as in the case of the protest singer Pastora, a fictitious character from her previous novel, *Sapogonia*,<sup>10</sup> who makes her apparition in the Cross procession at the end of *So Far from God*.

The use of hyperbole is another device that enhances the blurred distinction between fiction and reality. It is much used in Latin American magic realism and may also remind us of the naïve hyperbole of popular romance fiction. Examples of exaggeration are numerous in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: colonel Aureliano Buendía started thirty-two wars and lost all of them; he had seventeen sons from seventeen different women, who were all killed in a single night; in Macondo, it rained continuously for four years, eleven months and two days; José Arcadio slept for three days, woke up and ate sixteen raw eggs. Ana Castillo also employs frequent hyperboles in *So Far from God*. After being jilted by her fiancé, Fe starts screaming and continues to do so for a year. The hyperbolic scream, ironically designated as 'el big grito' (the big scream), acquires a magical connotation due to its impossible occurrence within a rational context but, at the same time, stresses the terrible reality of Fe's pain better than any realistic device. Her scream is a reality that leaves her vocal cords forever damaged and that becomes part of daily life: 'Fe and her bloodcurdling wail became part of the household's routine so that the animals didn't even jump or howl no more whenever Fe, after a brief intermission when she dozed off, woke up abruptly and put her good lungs to full use' (32).

In García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a metaphor is made real in a similar hyperbolic way. When José Arcadio Buendía shoots himself, a trickle of his blood flows under his door, out into the street, avoids a number of obstacles until it reaches his mother's house and directly enters her kitchen, so that his mother can follow the trickle in the opposite direction and find her dead son.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor that blood is thicker than water comes to life. The hyperbole draws attention to the verbal magic of the text and the possibilities of literalisation, a distinctive feature of

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<sup>10</sup> Ana Castillo, *Sapogonia. An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter*, rev. edn (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1994) (Originally publ.: Tempe, Ariz.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1990).

magic realism. In *So Far from God*, an amusing literalisation occurs in the description of Fe's husband. Coming from a ranchers' family, Casimiro suffers from a strange affliction, bleating: 'there was no doubt that her fiancé had this inbred peculiarity that couldn't be helped,... after three hundred years of shepherding and a long line of ancestors spending lifetimes of long, cold winters tending their herds' (175). Fe's embarrassment and her attempts to disguise her husband's condition are related in a hilarious way. Still, this impossible bleating is always presented as a fact and with all sorts of realistic detail. The use of hyperbole underlines the element of absurdity and brings a humorous tone to the narrative. It pushes the borders of veracity as it questions what 'literal' means and helps to create a very distinctive linguistic magic, so that the reader does not experience any surprise when Caridad sleeps non-stop for fourteen days or when her small trailer is occupied by a physically impossible crowd of eleven people plus a dog. The magical capacities of fiction are endless.

## **BORDER LITERATURE: BETWEEN WORLDS**

Gloria Anzaldúa has written extensively on the experience of living in one country but in two cultures at the same time, with the consequent dangers of acculturation and oppression from both cultures: 'The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture.'<sup>12</sup> There is a cultural collision as beliefs from Anglo, Mexican and indigenous cultures come together. Since people perceive the version of reality that one particular culture communicates, living in more than one culture implies getting multiple and often contradictory messages. Anzaldúa elaborates a theory of a new *mestiza* consciousness, a consciousness of the borderlands which departs from the American melting pot notion and tends towards synthesis and fusion

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<sup>11</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982), p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 3.



of opposites.<sup>13</sup> The new mestiza has a plural personality and, rather than being assimilated into mainstream culture, she learns to juggle cultures. By creating a new mythos, that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, la mestiza creates a new consciousness that uproots dualistic thinking. The future depends on the breaking down of paradigms and the straddling of two or more cultures.

This is also the agenda of magic realist writing, where multiple boundaries are crossed as the realistic and magical discourses constantly slip into each other. In their search for identity as Chicanas or new mestizas, the characters of *So Far from God* explore the interaction between Anglo and Mexican cultures, physical and spiritual worlds, Catholic and Native religions.

### Border Tongue

*So Far from God* interweaves English and Spanish to reflect and vindicate Chicano Spanish as a border tongue which corresponds to a distinctive ethnic identity. Although the novel is written in English (as is the majority of Chicano literature), a multitude of Spanish words and expressions pervade the narrative and convey particular meanings that are untranslatable into English. The persistence of Spanish is another way of claiming a culture and tradition oppressed by the Anglo rule of teaching only English in schools. The bilingualism serves as a weapon and a device to claim the value of hybridism. Chicano Spanish is a living language, a border tongue which developed naturally out of the Chicanos' need to identify themselves as a distinct people, since, in Gloria Anzaldúa's words, 'Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language.'<sup>14</sup> It is a forked tongue, a variation of two languages, neither Spanish nor English but both.

It is interesting to note that Spanish words are employed in certain contexts, mainly those regarding religion, the domestic domain, healing practices and spiritual beliefs, areas that seem untouched by the American influence and that vindicate a distinctive cultural identity. The examples are numerous. Prayers and addresses to God and Catholic Saints are invariably in Spanish: 'Ave María Purísimas' (Hail

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<sup>13</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, pp. 77-80.

Marys, 20), 'El Milagro' (the miracle, 28), 'Gracias a Dios' (Thank God, 34), 'que en paz descansa' (rest in peace, 105). Terms for food, recipes, illnesses and home remedies are in Spanish: 'carne adovada', 'posole', 'biscochitos' (166-7), 'te de demiana' (52), 'romero' (64), 'empacho' (gastrointestinal obstruction, 65), 'limpias' (spiritual cleansings, 68). Numerous traditional sayings and proverbs are also kept in Spanish, as shown in the hilarious verbal battle between Sofia's husband, Domingo, and one of her comadres. The witty proverbs are given an English paraphrase by the narrator, although in Spanish they still have an untranslatable connotation. Inverse translation does not work either, as when Sofi says in English, as a way of putting an end to the verbal row, 'let's just throw those little hairs into the sea' (146), a direct translation of the Spanish expression 'pelillos a la mar' (let bygones be bygones). Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word, as in 'traila' (trailer, 114), 'un parna' (partner, 115), 'lonche' (lunch, 72), is widely used, pointing towards the creation of a hybrid language.

The use of Spanish expressions is particularly noticeable in the field of magic and superstition. Certain spiritual maladies and magical practices cannot be translated into English, a language that is associated with a rationalistic attitude and logical way of perceiving reality. 'Mal de ojo', 'caída de mollera', and 'susto' (62) are spiritual maladies that have to do with evil eye and bad intentions. The 'malogra' is that evil, pure force, that takes a number of shapes and attacks at night; again, an English translation is not available. Spanish idiomatic expressions are imbued with spiritual connotations and dominate the magical discourse. This particular use of language in Chicano literature provides magic realism with a new dimension, since the slippage into the supernatural is signalled by a change in the linguistic register which is not found in non-bilingual narratives.<sup>15</sup> The relevance of Chicano Spanish is great as a language capable of communicating different perceptions of reality and values distinctive to Chicanos; a new language for a specific way of life. By

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<sup>14</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, there are references to the old Indian dialect spoken by the medicine man Ku'oosh, which is associated with magic and the supernatural; however, the narrative is in English and does not include any words from that language. Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 34-35.

employing and feeling proud of this border tongue, Chicanas find their own voice, which fuses different cultures and overcomes a tradition of silence.

### Natural / Supernatural Codes

The supernatural is inserted into the story in a matter-of-fact way and the narrator and characters accept it as part of everyday reality. La Loca (we are never told her real name) dies at the age of three, after suffering a violent seizure in her sleep. The day after the wake, Sofi, her daughters and the whole community of Tome gather for the funeral. The small casket is placed in front of the church and, while the priest is delivering his sermon, the whole crowd begins to scream and faint: 'The lid had pushed all the way open and the little girl inside sat up, just as sweetly as if she had woken from a nap, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "¿Mami?" she called, looking around and squinting her eyes against the harsh light' (22). This image of innocence contrasts strongly with the grotesque scene of a little baby coming out of a coffin. The reader is initially given the chance to pause and find a logical explanation for this bizarre event; the baby might have had an epileptic fit and been wrongly given up for dead. However, this scepticism is soon challenged by the statement that 'as Father Jerome moved toward the child she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof' (23). We are then placed in the arena of the marvellous, in the tradition of Latin American magic realist writing. The episode brings to mind Remedios the Beauty's ascension towards heaven, in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the quotidian frame of women hanging sheets on clotheslines, Remedios suddenly rises up and disappears into the air waving goodbye.<sup>16</sup>

La Loca declares that she has been to three places while she was dead: hell, purgatory and heaven. After this trip, she is to be repulsed forever by the smell of humans. La Loca's experience is considered as certainly extraordinary by the community but its reality is never questioned. In the novel, the supernatural is closely associated with religion. When the Catholic priest expresses his doubts as to whether this is an act of God or of Satan, La Loca replies that God sent her back to

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<sup>16</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*, pp. 281-2.

pray for them all. The whole scene is a telling example of magic realist techniques: the natural and the supernatural are perfectly blended in the discourse. In a realistic mode, it is reported that 'The crowd settled down, some still on their knees, palms together, all looking up at the little girl like the glittering angel placed at the top of a Christmas tree. She seemed serene and, though a little flushed, quite like she always did when she was alive' (24). In the same matter-of-fact way, her descent is described: 'With the delicate and effortless motion of a monarch butterfly the child brought herself back to the ground, landing gently on her bare feet, her ruffled chiffon nightdress, bought for the occasion of her burial, fluttering softly in the air' (24). The dramatic effect of such an extraordinary event as a baby being resurrected and flying to the top of a church is naturalised through the technique of presenting realistic details (her chiffon nightdress) and images of serenity and innocence (an angel, a butterfly).

Throughout the novel, La Loca's supernatural powers are never questioned. She is involved in similar miraculous occurrences on several occasions, which gain her the reputation of saint (La Loca Santa), and her psychic powers are accepted by her family and community. When she announces that her sister Esperanza is dead, much before the official letter arrives, for the characters or the reader there is no doubt about the veracity of her premonition (159). La Loca embodies different parameters of reality to the extent that the codes of the natural and the supernatural seem reversed for her: 'card games and cheap magician's tricks ... to Loca were nevertheless extraordinary' (152). Through this poetics of defamiliarisation, the real as we know it may be seen as amazing. In fact, the first chapter of *So Far from God* ends with the return of Sofi's estranged husband, Domingo, which is described as an equally astonishing occurrence as Loca's resurrection or Caridad's miraculous restoration: 'Some say, *that* was the true miracle of that night' (40).

The realms of the living and the dead are deeply interconnected in Castillo's novel. As in all magic realist narrative, there are fluid boundaries between the material and spiritual realms, and ghosts and spectral apparitions are part of everyday communal reality. After Esperanza's disappearance in the Gulf War, she returns in

'ectoplasmic' form to visit her family.<sup>17</sup> It is not only La Loca who sees the spectral Esperanza but other members of the family as well, like Domingo who 'saw her from the front window, although he didn't dare go out and call to his transparent daughter'(163). Sofi also sees her daughter, who 'came and lay down next to her mother, cuddled up as she had when she was a little girl' (163). The reality of the dead person's reappearance is thus verified by several people. And the details accompanying the sightings are important because they insert the supernatural within a frame of daily life. Since the line between life and death is indeed very thin, the deceased keeps the same identifying traits as s/he had in life; Esperanza's ghost has long discussions about politics with her sister Caridad.

Lois Parkinson Zamora has explored the function of ghosts as metaphors of transition in several magic realist texts. According to her, literary ghosts, themselves in-between beings, dramatise cultural displacement and foreground magic realism's most basic concern, the nature and limits of the knowable:

Ghosts embody the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honor that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define. Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable, and ghosts are often our guides.<sup>18</sup>

In *So Far from God* ghosts perform this mediating function between worlds that questions received ideas about reality. They function as metafictional entities, as metaphors for the magic of fiction. This connection can be clearly seen in the narrator's intervention when Fe is discarding the idea of inviting her spectral sister to her wedding: 'But where was Fe to get an escort for a transparent sister (and I am not speaking metaphorically here)' (174). This brief commentary draws attention to the accepted materiality of the ghost and once again challenges the meaning of 'literal'. Ghosts imply a disembodiment, an eventual fusion of material and spiritual. Significantly, all of Sofi's daughters lose their physical bodies in one way or another,

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the Gulf War was the first 'virtual' war to be followed live on TV from its outbreak and merely regarded by the West as an image, a kind of invisible and removed-from-reality war. Its reference in the narrative brings again into question the boundaries between reality and fiction.

<sup>18</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction', in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by L.Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 497-550 (498).

and only their spirits are left. The novel ends with a celebratory vision of ghosts and spirits of saints and martyrs that intermingle with the living in perfect harmony.

### Catholicism vs. Native Religions

The role of religion in the perception of the supernatural is highly relevant in Castillo's novel. Catholicism was enforced by the Spanish conquistadores, who systematically tried to obliterate all signs of native religions. The Christianisation of Amerindians and the cruel punishment for their alleged paganism is well-known.<sup>19</sup> The ruthless Spanish Inquisition found in the indigenous populations a wealth of 'new heretics' to seize upon. However, native religious practices survived, even if in a disguised form, and merged with the imposed Catholic practices. In fact, we could also speak of an appropriation of native beliefs by institutional religion. The clearest example is provided by the Virgin of Guadalupe, a powerful figure in Chicano and Mexican society and literature. Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, on the hill where the Aztec goddess Tonantzin ('Our Lady Mother') had been worshipped by the Nahuatl and where a temple to her had stood.<sup>20</sup> Speaking Nahuatl, she told Juan Diego, a Christianised Indian, that her name was María Coatloapeuh ('she who has dominion over serpents'). Because Coatloapeuh was homophonous to the Spanish Guadalupe, the Spanish identified her with the dark virgin of that name, patroness of West Central Spain. Coatloapeuh is an aspect of earlier earth goddesses, mainly Coatlicue and Tonantzin. Whereas Coatlicue was hideous and had a thirst for blood (she had two coiled serpents for a head and a necklace of human hearts and hands), Tonantzin was a good mother who represented the power of the earth. The Catholic Church obviously took away the dark aspects of Coatlicue in their appropriation of the goddess.

The Virgin of Guadalupe soon began to eclipse all the other male and female religious figures in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. In 1660, the Roman Catholic

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<sup>19</sup> See Eduardo Galeano, *Memorias del fuego (I) Los nacimientos* (Mexico, D.F. and Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982)

<sup>20</sup> For an account of this apparition and Aztec goddesses see Susanna Rostas, 'Mexican Mythology', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. by C. Larrington (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. 362-87.

Church named her Mother of God and she became the patroness of the Mexicans.

Her importance is immense, in Anzaldúa's words:

Today, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the *mestizo* true to his or her Indian values. *La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth... To Mexicans on both sides of the border, *Guadalupe* is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middleclass; against their subjugation of the poor and the *indio*.<sup>21</sup>

As a synthesis of cultures, beliefs and world views, the Virgin of Guadalupe is also an appropriate topos for magic realist discourse. Guadalupe is strongly associated with nationalism and a collective sense of identity. Converting the mother goddess, Tonantzin, into the Virgin Mary as Guadalupe was the Mexican Amerindian people's way of attempting to hold on to their own beliefs. The influence of Catholicism on Chicano culture is then combined with an attempt to recover the deities and religious figures of Amerindian ancestors.

In the task undertaken by Chicano writers of rewriting legends from pre-Hispanic and Hispanic conquest times, the Mexican myth of La Llorona or Weeping Woman has received extensive treatment and critical attention, especially by women authors, and is also present in Castillo's novel. The legend refers to a mythical woman who, after murdering her children, is doomed to wander the earth through eternity in search of her dead offspring and peace of mind.<sup>22</sup> La Llorona is fundamentally part of the oral folk tradition and there exist different versions of the reasons behind her crime (to escape with her lover, because her lover wanted to take her children away, etc.). La Llorona, always weeping for her loss, is associated with the colour white and usually appears near bodies of water and at crossroads. Since she seeks other children as replacement, she functions as the bogeyman, a threat to mischievous children. The archetype of La Llorona is fascinating and open to many

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<sup>21</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> La Llorona recalls the Greek myth of Niobe, a daughter of Tantalus and wife of Amphion, king of Thebes, by whom she became the mother of seven sons and seven daughters. Being proud of their number, she deemed herself superior to Leto, who had only two children, Apollo and Artemis. They felt indignant at such presumption and slew all Niobe's children. Niobe was turned into a stone and still periodically wept for her children in streams which trickled down the rock. See Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York and London: Longman, 1985), pp. 144-45. Also C. Larrington, ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora Press, 1992), p. 86.

readings. Robert Franklin Gish makes an interesting connection between this female myth and magic realism.<sup>23</sup> La Llorona as legend in its structural and thematic applications in fiction is similarly predicated on cultural, aesthetic, and moral ambiguities. The wailing woman is ambiguously real/unreal, historical/fictitious (many efforts have been made to locate her origin in a specific historical figure and she has, on occasions, been identified with La Malinche) and reflects the universal female archetype of the good/bad woman, the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore so rooted in Mexican tradition. Due to this blurring of boundaries, magic realism becomes an appropriate literary vehicle for the legend.

Ana Castillo offers a revision of La Llorona in her novel. The mysterious lady with the long white dress who appears to La Loca near the *acequia* (ditch) and talks to her, giving her information about Esperanza's death, is doubtless La Llorona. Interestingly, La Loca has never heard of this legend because Sofi did not want to scare her daughters with such a story. The narrator describes then the legend of La Llorona: 'The Weeping Woman astral-traveled all throughout old Mexico into the United States, and really anywhere her people lived, wailing, in search of her children whom she drowned so as to run off with her lover. For that God punished her forever on earth.' (160) La Llorona's legend is used in contemporary Chicana writing as a way of stressing cultural, political and social assumptions about women. As the narrator states of this modern 'Chicana international astral-traveler' (162), she had been given a bad rap by every generation of her people since the beginning of time. However, at early stages she might have been a loving mother goddess or any of the Aztec deities like Matlaciuatl, Ciuapipiltin or Cihuacoatl. This vindication of pre-Hispanic culture and female goddesses is relevant within a context of Chicana writing that searches for a change of women's role in society. In *So Far from God*, La Llorona is depicted as a positive figure who gives her affection and support to Loca. And again, the myth is carefully intertwined within the everyday domestic reality of the family in a magic realist way, so the novel includes both the suggested mythical figure and a contemporary revisionist version of her, Sofi. If La Llorona allegedly was a bad woman who left her husband and drowned her babies to run off

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Franklin Gish, *Beyond Bounds: Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American, Indian and Chicano Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 110-28.



and have a sinful life, Sofi, on the contrary, has been abandoned by her husband and left alone to raise her four daughters by herself. The mythical roles attributed to women in patriarchal societies are reworked and subverted. The incorporation of legendary/supernatural figures into magic realist fiction facilitates such subversion.

In *So Far from God*, the close link between religion and the supernatural is further examined through the figure of the Lady in Blue who visits Loca during her last days (244-5). This spectral Lady has Virgin-like qualities and is clearly differentiated from La Llorona in the text. She appears next to Loca's bed and gives her support. She looks like a nun and always carries a lantern. Loca cannot determine if she is dead or alive, a present nun or a past nun. The reader also finds it difficult to locate this figure. In Mexican history, the nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is an important cultural heroine who symbolises the intellectual woman.<sup>24</sup> Sor Juana lived in the late seventeenth century and defied all the social norms with her desire for learning and pursuing intellectual study, something that was only men's privilege at the time. She emphasised the importance of formal training, empirical observation and intuitive knowledge, and elevated the everyday work of women into the realm of science. Sor Juana has become a cultural icon for contemporary Chicana writers and is frequently fictionalised. However, the nun who visits Loca sings to her a Portuguese fado, implying that her origin might be Lucia Santos, the child who witnessed the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917 and subsequently became a Carmelite nun.<sup>25</sup> Loca notices that she wears a horsehair vest, a possible reference to the austerity of the Carmelites. The religious reference is thus ambiguous; however, the presentation of this supernatural figure accords with magic realist techniques. In the characteristic blending of magical and realistic discourses, this supernatural nun plays Mexican bingo and cards with Loca as the most perfectly ordinary action.

Religion thus permeates the community described in *So Far from God*. A great deal of attention is given to rituals, prayers, offerings, and the interconnection

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<sup>24</sup> For biographical details of Sor Juana see E. Galeano, *Memorias del fuego*, pp. 270-9; for her importance in Chicana literature see Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow. A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson and London: University of Arizona Press, 1995), pp. 58-62.

<sup>25</sup> On 13 May 1917, three illiterate children saw a vision of a lady in the small Portuguese village of Fatima. The lady reappeared on five subsequent occasions, declared herself to be 'Our Lady of the Rosary' and asked for a chapel to be built in her honour. Two of the children died in 1919, but the third, Lucia Santos (still alive), became a Carmelite nun at Coimbra. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F.L. Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 600-1.

between physical and spiritual realms. Of particular interest is Francisco's story, inserted as an interlude in the novel. It focuses on his role as 'santero' within the religious belief system of his community. A 'santero' is the person (usually a man) who makes wooden sculptures of saints, known as 'bultos'. This job symbolises the fusion of materiality and spirituality. As described in Francisco's case, the santero has a special connection with his sculpture and with the saint it represents, capturing his/her soul in wood. Santeros are highly religious people who see their profession as a spiritual one, directly connected to God: 'His expert hand was not guided by the aesthetic objectives of artists, but by the saint himself in heaven, as permitted by God, because that wood-turned-bulto would become the saint's own representation on earth to aid those who were devoted to him' (96).

Francisco is the seventh son of a seventh son (since his uncle Pedro acts as a surrogate father), endowed thus with magic qualities, and his vocation comes after his terrible experience in the Vietnam War, a fact that adds a contemporary historical dimension to the tradition of santeros and foregrounds a chronological and temporal interconnectedness. The discourse embodies a double concept of time: an ancient and mythical one relating to the santeros and a contemporary one represented by the Vietnam War. This distinction recalls the two different times explored in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* through the opposite settings of New York and Willow Springs. As explained in the novel, the role of santero has different origins and characteristics (96). Caribbean santeros, for instance, are based on ancient African rites, with drums and frenzy dance, in which the santero himself contains the power to answer prayers, perform miracles, and cast out demons from the possessed; it consists of a Yorubic adaptation of the names of European and Hebrew Saints to African gods. In New Mexico, however, the practice is based on medieval Catholic rituals seeking absolution through penance and mortification. Francisco is called el Penitente in reference to his self-assigned penance. The ritual to prepare a bulto is a mystic experience. Santeros work with their own hands to prepare the paints, the material, labouring with the natural elements, sun, air, and earth and praying all the while. As

Wendy B. Faris points out, the character of Francisco el Penitente embodies a latter-day Saint Francis in the Southwest countryside.<sup>26</sup>

Francisco's conflict between his high spiritualism and his love for Caridad will seal both their fates. Francisco identifies Caridad with the Virgin Mary and becomes obsessed with her. He actually equates his desire with his spiritual calling. Francisco's love for Caridad runs parallel to Caridad's for Esmeralda. Their parallel destinies embody a conflict between Catholic and Native American religions. Caridad's and Esmeralda's magical deaths significantly occur in Sky City, part of the Acoma Pueblo and described as 'the oldest city in all of the Americas that has had constant habitation' (208).<sup>27</sup> In front of numerous tourists (again the notion of an ancient and sacred place being invaded by outsiders), the two women jump off from a mesa and fly off. Whereas the reasons for this action remain surrounded by mystery and no rational explanation is given, the actual death is clearly interpreted within a Native American religious frame:

*Tsichtinako was calling!...*The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female, although no one had heard it in a long time and some had never heard it before. But all still knew who It was... Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out outward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (211)

The absolute and magical lack of trace of the women's bodies suggests a fusion with Mother Earth (and not with the Sun, which would be a male god). As described in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Ts'its'tsi'nako or Tsichtinako, also known as the Spider or Thought-Woman, is considered by the Keres-Pueblo people as the feminine creative principle of the universe, creator of this world and the four worlds below.<sup>28</sup> By providing Caridad with this fate, Castillo is stressing the importance of Native American cosmology for Chicano culture. At the same time, the scene is connected with the African flying myth explored in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which ends with Milkman leaping into the air from a rock. Caridad's death is portrayed in a

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<sup>26</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*. ed. by Zamora and Faris, pp. 163-190 (p. 182).

<sup>27</sup> In 1598, the inhabitants of Sky City suffered one of the worst atrocities committed by the Spaniards against the Indians: after a brief but violent siege, five hundred men and three hundred women and children were massacred in cold blood. See Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos. A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 35.

rather positive light in contrast to Francisco's more anguished suicide 'dangling sorrowful-like like a crow-picked pear from a tall piñon' (212), which evokes Judas' suicide hanging from a tree in the Catholic tradition. Francisco's death also recalls that of Hagar in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, who lets herself die due to unrequited love, although the religious connotations are absent there. Chicano writing emphasises the clash and interaction between pagan and Christian religions to a greater extent than African American novels do. Due to the links of Chicano literature and culture with the Hispanic tradition, the religious context is all-pervasive and represents an essential element in the configuration of Chicano magic realism.

### **Curanderas and Invisible Doctors:**

#### **A Brief Sampling of Common Ailments and Remedies**

The combination of ancient folk traditions and Catholic faith is highly relevant to magic realist narratives which foreground the figure of the healer, the 'curandera'. For Tey Diana Rebolledo:

perhaps the most prominent contemporary archetypal heroine in Chicana literature is the curandera/partera (healer/midwife) who is also the witch. As do most complex symbols, the curandera/bruja encodes both positive and negative attributes... Like La Llorona, the curandera emerges from the history and traditions of multiple cultures: the complex and intricate healing knowledge that the Arab culture had brought to Spain, the medieval Euro-Spanish healing traditions, and the Native American (both Mexican and southwestern) traditions of herb women, folk doctors who taught the Spanish arrivals their knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

In general, the curandera is positive, a woman devoted to healing and helping, attributes commonly associated with the Virgin Mary. The curandera possesses intuitive and cognitive skills and is closely connected with the natural world. She understands and works for the good of the community. By incorporating intuition and rationality, she performs a primary role in magic realist fiction. The curandera has emerged as a powerful figure in Chicano writing, a proof not only of her enduring representational qualities as myth but also of the identification of the culture with mystic and spiritual qualities.

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<sup>28</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 83.

Curanderas or healers use Catholic rituals (petitions to saints, prayers) together with ancient native practices in order to effect spiritual healing. Judeo-Christian beliefs and also African beliefs which came to the Americas with the slave market are an integral part of curanderismo. This traditional healing includes herbal medicine, baths, massages, votive candles and spiritism. According to Ana Castillo, 'In terms of curanderismo, magic is directly related to the supernatural realm of our reality. However, for curanderas the supernatural *is* a reality based on the natural forces of the universe.'<sup>30</sup>

Curanderas and healing practices pervade *So Far from God*. Like Catholicism, remedies require faith. Chapter 3 of the novel focuses on doña Felicia's life and gives a 'Brief Sampling of Doña Felicia's Remedies' (pp. 65-71) that are presented in the way of traditional nineteenth-century home treatises. Each paragraph describes a certain illness, physical or spiritual (gastrointestinal obstruction, evil eye, etc.), and gives doña Felicia's treatment for it. It is addressed to a second person, the potential healer, but also the reader, suggesting an immediate oral discourse. The chapter begins and ends stressing the link between curanderismo and faith in God:

First and foremost, doña Felicia will tell you that nothing you attempt to do with regards to healing will work without first placing your faith completely in God. (59)

there are many ways to cleanse but what we must remember above all is that it is He who performs the work and we are only His servants made of vulgar flesh here on this earth. (70)

While the cleansing rituals are performed, the healer often prays. Rituals are highly important and combine different Native and Hispanic beliefs. Since the maladies are both physical and spiritual, rituals incorporate magic. In doña Felicia's remedies we find instructions such as rolling an egg in the sign of the cross on the stomach of a patient with 'empacho' and breaking it to discover where the obstruction is, or eating the meat of a black hen if a pregnant woman suffers from evil eye. These rituals seem very close to the African voodoo practices described in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, where hens, eggs and hands play an important role in healing. As in all magic realist fiction, acceptance of ancient systems of lore and natural medicine is essential for the understanding of Castillo's novel.

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<sup>30</sup> Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), p. 155.

Doña Felicia teaches her healing knowledge to Caridad, who also has clairvoyant powers. Caridad is quite a silent character; she gives the impression that she never talks, only listens and stares, in contrast to the articulate Esperanza or the screaming Fe. After her 'holy restoration', as it is known in the community, Caridad starts foreseeing the future. Going into trancelike states, she utters domestic prophecies: her sister's Esperanza's arrival, a number which will win the lottery, their dog's return. These prophecies are accepted as facts by her family, without any questioning; actually, Domingo makes a profit in the lottery. While Caridad is learning healing skills from doña Felicia, they go on a pilgrimage to Chimayo, where she falls in love with a woman, Esmeralda. Falling in love, such an ordinary act, is however regarded as something extraordinary by Caridad: 'to Caridad such events as her Holy Restoration, her clairvoyance, the Screaming Sister (as some unkind people back in Tome still referred to Fe), and such were just part of life. Falling in love ... now *that* was something else altogether!' (80). This remark is very relevant within a magic realist framework, as the rationalistic perception of reality is reversed and considered 'unnatural'.

There is a magical disruption of time in the narrative, since Caridad defers her next meeting with Esmeralda for a year. On her way to take a mineral bath, where Esmeralda works, Caridad suddenly disappears. She becomes a hermit and lives on her own in a cave until she is found one year later. When she recovers the sense of time, she resumes what she was doing before entering her seclusion, as if no chronological time had elapsed. This deviation of the plot holds in suspense Caridad's future, a cliffhanging device typical of popular genres, and questions received ideas about time, a characteristic of magic realism. Caridad's survival is regarded as miraculous and she is soon the object of a pilgrimage. She is believed to be the ghost of Lozen, an Apache mystic woman warrior. The connotations of this identification are important since they show the strong links with Native American Pueblos, especially the Zuñi, Hopi and Yaqui, who live in reservations in the Southwest. As we have already seen, both Chicano and American Indian communities coexist and share legends and traditions. In that sense, Castillo's fiction is close to that of Leslie Marmon Silko, who also writes from the American

Southwest and explores the interaction between different Pueblos, as has been discussed in the chapter on her novel *Ceremony*.<sup>31</sup>

La Loca is a special sort of curandera due to her supernatural characteristics. She has impressive natural gifts and an intuitive connection with all animals. Without anyone teaching her, she perfectly knows the workings of women's bodies, how to train horses or how to play the fiddle. From her early resurrection, she performs several miracles and has contacts with spirits and saints. However, she never mixes with other human beings, apart from her close family. We are told that she never went to school, a dance or Mass. This fact makes more extraordinary her death by AIDS, which becomes a social and political statement.

When Loca starts feeling ill, she allows their family doctor to visit her. Doctor Tolentino is, like doña Felicia, impossibly old. Realising that Loca has an incurable illness, he proposes an alternative treatment learned from his Philippine mother. Doctor Tolentino is an 'invisible doctor' - he practises psychic surgery. Again, this treatment is based on faith and closely associated with religion, supported by prayers and performed with the aid of holy oil. The description of Dr. Tolentino's treatment follows magic realist techniques in its crossing of physical and psychical boundaries:

Doctor Tolentino dipped a cotton ball in a pan of warm water and as he dripped the water on Loca's stomach with his right hand, his left hand made an opening through her flesh and disappeared right up to the wrist inside her stomach. They did not stop their psychic surgery to tend Sofi, and Loca did not seem to notice that her mother had fainted, so fascinated was she to see the doctor's hand disappear into her body. She felt no pain. (228)

After pulling out some blood clots and tumours, Dr. Tolentino removes his left hand and wipes up 'the slender line of blood that was left on the red mark across Loca's belly as the only sign that any surgery had been performed.'(229) The whole scene is depicted in a matter-of-fact way, with an emphasis on Loca's calm. Her mother, though, faints at the beginning and, when she recovers, finds it hard to believe, trying to convince herself that it is nothing more than a hallucination, at which point Dr. Tolentino, as if reading her thoughts, warns her "Don't forget your faith, señora..." (229).

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<sup>31</sup> The Native American scholar Jack D. Forbes claims that Mexican Americans are the largest Indian tribe in the United States. Forbes, *The Indian in America's Past* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 3.

The contrast established in the novel between this sort of healing, that alleviates Loca's pain without making her suffer, and the medical treatment that Fe undergoes in the hospital, a series of atrocities and 'mistakes' (such as forgetting to remove from her collarbone a catheter to supply chemotherapy) that she describes as a 'torture' (186), is very important. As a medicine woman, doña Felicia also comes to the help of Loca and shares her remedies with Dr. Tolentino. Connections are made between the similarities of ancient herbal remedies and psychic surgery found in both doña Felicia's homeland and the doctor's Philippine Islands. However, none of their practice can stop Loca's hideous disease. Loca dies for the second time, 'magically' killed by an epidemic that has become one of the worst ills of our present world.

### SOME CULINARY ADVICE

In contemporary magic realism, the insertion of recipes and home remedies into the narrative as a way of preserving the magic of folk wisdom is common. Chicana literature is pervaded with images of women preparing food. One of the spaces traditionally construed as female, and hence marginalised, is the kitchen. Claiming this space as a nourishing one turns it into a domain of empowerment, where women express their individual and communal subjectivity in the process of formulating an ethnic and female identity. This newly empowered discourse leads to the establishment of important links between cooking and writing: the writer as cook, as the one who remembers recipes, who represents the oral tradition and maintains the female heritage passed down from mothers to daughters. Recipes become metaphors for life and connectedness to tradition. Diana Tey Rebolledo analyses the metaphorical aspects implicit in the concept of Chicana writers as cooks:

In Chicana writing, the recipes use traditional Mexicano/Chicano/Indian foods. The ingredients become the symbolic substances that make up "ethnic" identity. Cooking thus expresses an identity politics, coming to represent tradition, the breaking of tradition, the understanding of that tradition. It is a way of inscribing oneself into the collective representation of women's work. It also represents work, sexuality, and women's spiritual and cultural hunger. Thus the idea of cooking and authorship are connected. Both are the agents for the "text" and control the ingredients.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, pp. 133-4.



When cooking discourses are embedded in the narrative they become clearly gendered. As will be discussed in the next chapter, in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* recipes do actually structure the novel and cooking makes up the basis of the magical discourse. In Castillo's novel, recipes are inserted as part of chapter 10, under the section 'Three of La Loca's Favorite Recipes Just to Whet Your Appetite' (165-169) where La Loca teaches her favourite recipes to her sister Fe. Loca's culinary discourse conveys peculiarities of each sister, family relationships and cultural nuances. La Loca, the unsociable and the misfit, discloses her philosophy of life through the manner in which she cooks: "If you want to be a good cook," Loca started out in a solemn tone with her sister..., "you have to first learn to be patient." Loca believed in doing things from scratch.' (165). Her favourite recipes are all of Mexican origin: blue corn tamales, chili sauce, carne adovada, posole, biscochitos. Time and patience are the key for good cooking, as for Loca's life. The preparation of food also provides women with a chance to meet in the kitchen and share their experiences. It is while cooking biscochitos or Mexican cookies that Fe tells her mother and Loca about her romance with Casimiro. The magic is embedded in their conversation, as when Sofia is recalling the day of Loca's funeral and asks her if she remembers a certain detail. Fe's reaction is immediate: 'Fe gave her mother a hard nudge, moving her lips so that only her mother could get the message: Loca was dead then. Remember, Mama?' (168). Loca's magical death and resurrection is so engrafted onto the family world that they even forget the details of such an extraordinary occurrence.

The section of Loca's recipes is also highly interesting as regards the narrator's participation, a role already discussed in the analysis of the novel's form. As Loca addresses her cooking secrets to a second person, presumably her sister but also any reader of a cooking book, the narrator adds her own authorial knowledge as cook: 'Next you roll it out on the board to about a third of an inch thick. (Loca would not say a third of an inch, of course, but for our purposes here, I am adding specific measurements myself.)' (167). In another instance of self-referential metafictional narrative, the narrator's intervention further blurs the thin line between fact and fiction and foregrounds the magic of the text.

## SOME POLITICAL REMARKS FROM THE HIGHLY OPINIONATED NARRATOR

Chicano writing is in general highly political. It aims to represent the Chicano experience of exploitation and marginalisation, of being Other because of the Mexican and Indian heritage. In *So Far from God*, political and social claims are foregrounded through magic realist techniques. Numerous issues regarding race, gender and social class are dealt with in the text, with particular emphasis on women's position.

The question of land and its illegal appropriation by the U.S. after the Mexican-American War occupies a central space in the novel. Sofi and her neighbours are all descendants of landowners who were slowly tricked and dispossessed of their land and rights. Land is a symbol of connection to nature and to their Mexican origins. As in the case of American Indian tribes, the original inhabitants of the Southwest have been reduced to life in poor *barrios* (Mexican American ghettos) or emigration to the North:

there were a lot of outsiders moving in, buying up land that had belonged to original families, who were being forced to give it up because they just couldn't live off of it no more, and the taxes were too high, and the children went off to Albuquerque or even farther away to work, or out of state to college, or out of the country with the Army, instead of staying home to work on the rancherías. The truth was that most people had not been able to live off their land for the better part of the last fifty years. Outsiders in the past had overused the land so that in some cases it was no good for raising crops or grazing livestock no more. (139)

The chapter that deals more thoroughly with this problem is the one dedicated to Sofi's decision to run for mayor. In a reversal of the traditional role assigned to women, Sofi decides to take a political position. She shows initiative and determination to improve life in her village, Tome. The place is not only forsaken by God but also by U.S. financial help; it is not even an incorporated village. Tome does not feel like part of the United States. The way of life and of perceiving reality is very different. Sofi manages to establish a co-operative for sheep-grazing, wool-weaving, and food, improve women's education, alleviate the drug problem and achieve numerous benefits for the community. With the help of her neighbours, this strong woman is able to start a model of social improvement that allows the community to stay in their ancestors' land.

Sofi's political action is parallel to her determination never to let her husband have the last word. Women are the ones to accomplish economical and social changes, and claim a position of power within a patriarchal tradition. Herrera-Sobek notes that 'the role of the Mexicana has been stereotyped and presented as that of the submissive wife, the type of woman with absolutely no initiative to confront a swaggering and abusive *macho* husband.'<sup>33</sup> Ana Castillo debunks this stereotype in the creation of her heroines. Her fiction reflects the ideas on Xicanisma explored in her collection of essays *The Massacre of the Dreamers*. Castillo coins the term 'Xicanista' to refer to Chicana feminists and proposes the developing of a consciousness specifically rooted in their culture and history. Xicanisma intends to reconsider behaviour long seen as inherent in the Mexican Amerindian women's character (patience, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty to one's clan, commitment to one's children) and regard it as a strength in order to redefine women's roles within families, communities at large and white dominant society.<sup>34</sup> Sofi certainly represents this new model of Chicana consciousness.

In *So Far from God*, Castillo employs different narrative modes in order to blend political forms with magic realist techniques. Political and propagandist elements are conveyed by means of 'pure' realistic writing, some more experimental or generically hybrid writing, and some actual magic realist techniques that are already familiar to us from previous discussion.

Fe's death as a result of her contact with chemicals in the factory where she works is described in an overtly realist mode. Her illness and death is counterpointed with Caridad's magical death in the following chapter. Both imply a disintegration of the body, but whereas Fe's is due to contemporary silent killing by economical interests, Caridad simply jumps off a cliff and fuses with Native American deities. The contrast of realist and magical discourses stresses the socio-political claims of the text. Throughout the novel, Fe embodies the characteristics of capitalist society and the American Dream. The aspiration to acquire all the possessions promised by Western consumer society leads her to change her job in the bank for an assembler

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<sup>33</sup> María Herrera-Sobek, ed., *Beyond Stereotypes. The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Binghamton, New York: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1985), p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), pp. 40-1.

job in a chemicals company. Slowly, the deadly chemicals she handles damage her health and finally kill her, but not before Fe, by earning all the bonuses for special jobs (with illegal use of chemicals), gets 'the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR' (171). The widespread message in the United States that acculturation can be rewarding discloses its falseness. America, the 'Land of Enchantment', becomes the 'Land of Entrapment' (172).

The whole episode of Fe's experience at the chemicals company Acme International is narrated in a highly realistic tone, with no space for magical discourse. It establishes a powerful contrast with the previous description of her wedding, which her sister Esperanza attends as a spectre and her sister Caridad 'channeled' in her aura. Acme International represents the big companies that do not care for their workers' health but only for the benefits; people are given raises on the sheer basis of 'utilization and efficiency' (178). Most of the workers are women from Mexican or Native American origin, who speak Spanish, Tewa, Tiwa, or some other Pueblo dialect as a first language, and who have got hardly any schooling. Their conditions of poverty make them easy prey to such companies. All women workers suffer from similar symptoms, such as nausea and severe headaches, and many have miscarriages and hysterectomies. The company tries to cover all that up with false explanations and bureaucratic silence. When Fe is diagnosed with cancer, she cannot even sue the company that keeps itself safe in endless legal procedures. Although the FBI gets involved in the case, because the company was using illegal chemicals, the whole matter is soon dropped and left unexplained. The company's silence, success in keeping their workers in ignorance and complete lack of concern for the individual reveals a tremendous social injustice. Fe, who just wanted to have a life like people do on TV, falls victim of the worst side of the Land of Entrapment. The narrative makes clear political statements about the dangers of present society and the consequences for the environment and the whole planet. Fe's death, after terrible suffering and medical torture that leaves hardly anything of her body, is possibly the most tragic in the novel:

Because 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. And when someone dies that plain death, it is hard to talk about. (186)

The whole episode foregrounds the realistic dimension of magic realism, with its extensive use of detail to describe the phenomenal world. The realistic details emphasise the antibureaucratic position of the text and allow a criticism of the established order. The reversion to a more realist discourse in the more overtly political and propagandist sections of the novel is characteristic of many Latin American magic realist texts, possibly due to the unstable situation of the countries that they portray. For instance, Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus/The House of the Spirits* (1982) moves from an initial magic realism towards a political realism, as it increasingly focuses on the violence and repression of the recent history of Chile, particularly after the military coup d'état in 1973.<sup>35</sup> The stronger the historical and political references are in Allende's novel, the more distant the magical. In a similar way, Castillo's novel makes exclusive use of realist techniques in the more overtly political and exemplary section of Fe's death, where the magical is absent.

The passage of the Cross Procession on the Holy Friday is also particularly relevant for its socio-political content. However, the narrative mode employed here is quite different from the 'straight' realism of Fe's death. It combines more experimental techniques with allegoric writing. This atypical procession in which Loca takes part (her only outing into the external world), symbolises a modernisation of religious practices and incorporates the worries and claims of contemporary Chicano society. It is used with a clear political intention by the narrator. Traditional images of religious processions, such as scapulars, songs, prayers and speeches are endowed with an entirely new meaning and purpose. For example, instead of religious hymns, a protest singer sings about workers and women strikers, people carry photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around their necks like scapulars (this image recalls the mothers of Argentina and Chile who carry the photographs of their missing children under military dictatorships), speeches are delivered on different causes that are killing the land and endangering its inhabitants.

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<sup>35</sup> Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1985). For an interesting comparison between Allende's and Toni Morrison's uses of magic realism, see P. Gabrielle Foreman, 'Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call', *Feminist Studies*, 18 (2) (1992), 369-88.

Allegory is employed in conjunction with magic realist strategies in the description of the procession. Two symbolical discourses are counterpointed: there is one religious and the other political, as the narration of Jesus' crucifixion is paralleled and intermingled with facts from the contemporary situation in the Southwest. Both discourses mix perfectly and fuse typographically to great effect:

Jesus fell,

and people all over the land were dying from toxic exposure in factories.

Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation, and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer...

Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus' face. Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals...

Jesus fell a third time. The air was contaminated by the pollutants coming from the factories.

AIDS was a merciless plague... It was the Murder of the Innocents all over again...

Jesus was stripped of his garments

¡Ayyy! Jesus died on the cross.

No one had understood the meaning of the brief war in the Middle East (242-3)

A religious account of the particular torture of Jesus is allegorically applied to a universal present-day situation. At the same time, the mixture of discourses responds to a desire for narrative freedom from realism which facilitates a political critique, since the reader is forced to scrutinise the workings of the narrative and of reality itself. Parkinson Zamora comments on the links between magic realism and allegory: 'the effectiveness of magic realist political dissent depends upon its prior (unstated, understood) archetypalizing of the subject, and its consequent allegorizing of the human condition.'<sup>36</sup> Religion, perception of the supernatural and political claims all come together in the portrayal of the Chicano community and the world at large.

Magic also serves the cause of satire and political commentary. At the end of the novel, Sofi is encouraged by her community to found the organisation 'M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints', in memory of her saint daughter who died twice and her similarly ethereal sisters. The M.O.M.A.S. conferences represent the further connection between the world of the living and the dead. Saints and spirits intermingle with human beings and are equally subjected to the ordeals of contemporary materialistic society. The borders are finally erased and the interconnection is open. Wandering among the living:

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<sup>36</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism', *Magical Realism*, p. 504.

would be their all-too-glorious (if hard to pin down) santito and martyred 'jitos. They came to converse with their moms, as well as with each other...But what a beautiful sight it all became at those reunions: 'jitos from all over the world, some transparent, some looking incarnated but you knew they weren't if you tested them in some way, like getting them to take a bite out of a taquito or something when, of course, after going through all the motions like he was eating it, the taco would still be there. (251)

This description of a supernatural being performing such an ordinary act as eating a taco highlights the magic realist strategy embedded in the narrative. Castillo employs then yet another discursive mode as she applies here straight magic realist techniques to political issues. Apart from the humorous touch of the acronym M.O.M.A.S., it is our collective desire to codify the sacred that is satirised, as Faris has noted.<sup>37</sup> An organisation of such a spiritual nature is however pervaded by bureaucracy. Applications and nominations follow standard legal procedures and decisions are not always accepted by applicants:

The decision as to whether a " 'jito" of a M.O.M.A.S. member would be designated as a saint or a martyr was also very touchy for a lot of people...Saints had the unquestionable potential of performing miracles while martyrs were simply revered and considered emissaries to the santos. In many cases, this was nearly an impossible decision to make, except in the one of the original founding president's; there was never no question at all about that: Sofia had truly been the mother of a saint. (248)

The workings of the organisation are ironically described within the frame of contemporary mass media and popular culture shows: 'The annual conference of M.O.M.A.S. eventually became, as anyone could easily imagine, a world event each year, taking the cake over the World Series and even the Olympics' (249). The prospective members acquire a Hollywood-star like status as 'droves of spectators attended with high hopes and often heavy hearts to catch a glimpse of their favourite martyrs and saints' (249). The conferences are accompanied with all the paraphernalia characteristic of such events: souvenirs, T-shirts with stencilled phrases ('My Mother Is a Member of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints - Genuflect, Please!'), posters, even a tarot deck with drawings of La Loca and her sisters. Castillo employs all these elements in her narrative to offer a wider critique of the consumer society. Even sacred subjects are commodified. The book concludes with a celebration of motherhood (the organisation is obviously limited to mothers who gave birth to saints or martyrs), but not as a proof of woman's reproductive ability but rather as a historical claim over past patriarchal domination. M.O.M.A.S. works

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<sup>37</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children...', p. 169.

as an ironic icon for the synthesis of natural/supernatural, officiousness, pop culture, religion, reversal of gender roles, and contemporary society, in a telling magic realist fashion.

This land is not so far from God after all, if yet too near the United States. Deeply embedded in religion and spiritualism, the Chicano community searches for identity and resists acculturation. Ana Castillo's novel joins recent Chicana fiction in giving voice to women and creates a larger-than-life character, Sofi, who symbolises the power of matriarchy and community-oriented attitude. She is not only a fighter but also a survivor. From the novel, a new model arises drawing from the New Mestiza consciousness proposed by Gloria Anzaldúa, a synthesis of woman, race and borderlands which corresponds also to the hybridity of magic realism. The emphasis is on fusion of opposites and wholeness rather than dualisms. The women in *So Far from God* perform as mediators between worlds, translators between cultures. In their bilingualism, biculturalism and their condition of women, they find a model of strength and survival. Like magic realism, these Chicana women cross borders by building up countless bridges.



## 4.2.

**MAGICAL COOKING: LAURA ESQUIVEL'S**

***COMO AGUA PARA CHOCOLATE/***

***LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE (1989)***

What can we women know but kitchen philosophies? As Lupercio Leonardo rightly said, one can well philosophise and prepare dinner. And I often say observing these things: If Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 'Response to Sor Filotea,' 1691.<sup>1</sup>

The colonial Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz experimented with flour, eggs, and sugar to discover important laws of Physics within the walls of the convent kitchen. She saw the intricate connections between cooking, culture and gender-writing, and knew that the kitchen was a space for the expression of women's creativity, in spite of its devaluation by a patriarchal society. Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* is sold in Mexican bookshops both in the fiction and in the cooking sections.<sup>2</sup> Often described as a '*folletín gastronómico*' (a gastronomic soap opera), this book is a peculiar example of generic hybridisation. It draws on conventions from popular literature, mostly from sentimental novels, Harlequin romances, nineteenth-century women's magazines, soap operas and fairy tales. It is at the same time highly parodic of all these genres. The use of magic realist strategies allows Esquivel to transgress established borders and valorise para-literary forms. The kitchen is no longer a marginal space but a productive, magical site where cooking becomes a metaphor for writing. As Kemy Oyarzun puts it, 'An object (the kitchen, the family, social structures) creates a subject (passive, hysterical woman), but ... woman has the option of transforming objective reality by engaging

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<sup>1</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 'Respuesta a Sor Filotea', in *Selección*, ed. by L. Ortega Galindo (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1978), p. 71. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate* (Barcelona: Grijalbo Mondadori, 1990). Subsequent references will be to this Spanish edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text. The translation into English is my own. For an English edition see *Like Water for Chocolate*, trans. by Carol and Thomas Christensen (London: Black Swan, 1993). The inaccuracy of this translation has been pointed out by Linda Britt, 'Translation, Criticism or Subversion? The Case of *Like Water for Chocolate*', *Translation Review*, 48-49 (1995), 10-14.

in the battlefield of “concoction”: cultural hegemonic or counter-hegemonic practices.’<sup>3</sup> The domestic sphere engenders then aesthetic and public products.

Set in the Mexican rural region of Coahuila, on the U.S.-Mexican border, at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel represents a continuous border crossing between countries, cultures, world views and perceptions of reality. Against a background of political turmoil in Mexican history, the story centres on Tita and the life of social impositions and constraints that she leads in her family ranch. Following an old family tradition, Tita, the youngest daughter, is forbidden to marry in order to look after her mother until the latter dies.<sup>4</sup> The plot covers the period between 1910, the beginning of the first Mexican Revolution, when Tita is about 15 years of age and her beloved Pedro agrees to marry her older sister Rosaura only with the intention of staying close to her, and 1934, when both Pedro and Tita die.

Although the Mexican Revolution does not play a principal role in *Like Water for Chocolate*, it is an essential and carefully chosen background to the novel’s action. A time of rebellion and violence, the Revolution signalled the anxiety of the Mexican society at the beginning of the century and the need for a radical change in social and cultural values. In contrast to novels and films of the canon that centre on the historical aspects of the Mexican Revolution and almost exclusively on the male experience, Esquivel’s novel depicts a personal revolution, that of a subjugated woman who rebels against tradition and searches for justice. The novel can be read as emblematic of the more general struggle for independence of the nation.

According to John H. Sinnigen:

The Mexican Revolution of 1910, aside from being a massive insurrection against the exploitation and the tyranny of a dictatorship, was also, to a certain extent, a rebellion against the modernizing economic policies of the *Porfiriato* policies that included the introduction of advanced technologies, foreign investment, economic well-being for a small minority, and poverty for the majority of the population.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kemy Oyarzun, ‘Beyond Hysteria: ‘Haute Cuisine’ and ‘Cooking Lesson.’ Writing as Production,’ in *Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women Writers in Search of Themselves*, ed. by L. Guerra Cunningham (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Latin America Literary Review Press, 1990), pp. 87-110 (p. 88).

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that this is not a Mexican tradition, as has been wrongly interpreted by some critics, but a convention invented by the writer. Esquivel herself sets the record straight in an interview. See Claudia Loewenstein, ‘Revolución interior al exterior. An Interview with Laura Esquivel’, *Southwest Review*, 79 (4) (Autumn 1994), 592-607 (p. 595).

<sup>5</sup> John H. Sinnigen, ‘*Como agua para chocolate*: Feminine Space, Postmodern Cultural Politics, National Allegory,’ *Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages Bulletin (CIEFL)*, 7 (1-2) (June-Dec 1995), 111-131 (p. 127).

Tita's struggle is one against the social values strengthened during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (*Porfiriato*), exemplified in the etiquette code *Manual de Carreño*, a nineteenth-century manual for good manners that glorified hierarchies and a bourgeois patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> Tita constantly opposes the teachings of this manual that immobilise her, and by extension all her gender, in a forced state of social isolation. She starts her own revolution around 1910, when Francisco Madero rebels against Díaz' regime. It is equally significant that Tita's death occurs in 1934, the year in which Lázaro Cárdenas is designated president and the succession of coups d'état, military governments and dictators that characterised the after-revolution period comes to an end. Cárdenas' agrarian reform programme had an enormous impact upon Mexico's traditional social structure and, more than any other measure brought to consummation, after almost two decades of setbacks, the social goals of the revolution.<sup>7</sup>

John Foster's concept of 'felt history' as one powerful way in which literature can depict history is relevant to this discussion. It refers to the phenomenon by which a character experiences historical forces bodily: 'felt history refers to the eloquent gestures and images with which a character or lyric persona registers the direct pressure of events, whether enlarging and buoyant or limiting and harsh.'<sup>8</sup> This is exaggerated and particularised in magic realist fictions, and explains the coincidence of Tita's coming of age and death with key dates in Mexican history. The narrative works on two levels at once, both on the individual occurrence and on the total picture of the times. The author recontextualises history from a female point of view and confronts Mexican popular myths of femininity. Since the novel focuses on the lives of triply marginalised groups, women, Indians and servants, it opens up a space to question and re-evaluate official history.

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<sup>6</sup> For an interesting study of the intertextuality between this manual and Esquivel's novel, see Salvador A. Oropesa, 'Como agua para chocolate de Laura Esquivel como lectura del *Manual de Urbanidad y Buenas Costumbres* de Manuel Antonio Carreño', *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica*, 8 (1992), 252-60.

<sup>7</sup> See Jan Bazant, *A Concise History of Mexico from Hidalgo to Cárdenas, 1805-1940* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), especially chapter five 'The Civil War, 1910-1920' and chapter six 'Social Reforms, 1920-1940.'

<sup>8</sup> John Burt Foster Jr., 'Magical Realism, Compensatory Vision, and Felt History: Classical Realism Transformed in *The White Hotel*', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by L. Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 267-83 (p. 273).

Tita and Pedro's love story is framed by a cookbook and related from the present by Tita's grand-niece, the unnamed narrator and giver of recipes. This format, the mixture of discourses and the inclusion of supernatural elements, turn the novel into a distinctive instance of magic realist narrative, in which the interaction between aesthetics and between different female discourses implies that a devalued genre such as melodrama is legitimised by the more prestigious magic realism. However, this interaction also implies the possible reading of the novel not as a parody but as a schmaltzy example of romantic novel. This ambiguity, which has led to a critical division between those who read it as a feminist text and those who consider it in literary terms a poor and conventional best-seller, foregrounds the multiple readings that Esquivel's novel permits, to which I would like to add a magic realist one. *Like Water for Chocolate* has a more structured and formal framework than the other texts discussed so far. With them, 'story' (albeit contained within racial, sexual, or political parameters) is the primary motivator of discourse, and the magic realist elements feed into it and comment on it. However, *Like Water for Chocolate* is almost metafiction since the text self-consciously sets up two main discourses - 'factual', present-tense recipes, and 'imagined', past-tense story - in such a way that the interplay between them *is* actually the 'story' of the novel.

## FORMAT AND STRUCTURE

*Like Water for Chocolate. A Novel in Monthly Instalments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies* is divided into twelve chapters, each corresponding to a month of the year, starting in January, and detailing a recipe. Each chapter starts with a list of ingredients for the corresponding recipe and a *Manera de hacerse* (method of cooking). The first-person narrator begins with the instructions on how to make *Tortas de Navidad* (Christmas Cakes) and a cook's trick to stop crying when cutting onions. The motif of the tears is used to introduce the story of the narrator's grand-aunt, Tita, who was very sensitive to onions. The impersonal narration, addressed to a second-person (reader of the cookbook *and* the novel), which is characteristic of culinary discourse, gives way to a third-person narration that

describes Tita's life. Recipes are then embedded in the discourse. Susan Leonardi writes on the significance of culinary discourse as a narrative strategy:

Even the root of *recipe* -the Latin *recipere*- implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be. A recipe is, then, an embedded discourse, and like other embedded discourses, it can have a variety of relationships with its frame, or its bed.<sup>9</sup>

In Esquivel's novel, the recipes are both frame and what is framed, bed and embedded narrative, as the whole novel becomes a kind of recipe on how to survive as a woman in a Mexican patriarchal society at the beginning of the century. They are true recipes from all over Mexico and include traditional Mexican/Indian ingredients, such as *pithaya*, *chiles*, *ajonjolí* (sesame seeds), *ejotes* (string beans), *jitomates* (tomatoes), *mole*, *frijoles* (beans), *chicharrón* (pork rinds), that reinforce the links to a pre-Hispanic past and the notion of a distinctive ethnic identity. Most similes, metaphors and proverbs that pervade the novel are related to food: Tita feels as lonely as 'the last chilli in walnut sauce left on a platter after a big banquet' (54-55), or as fresh as 'a cucumber that had just been cut' (201). They work as culinary images that reflect Tita's emotional and physical states, but also add a comical dimension to clichés of popular literature. Even the title of the novel is taken from a Mexican saying applied to someone who is feeling highly irritable. As Esquivel herself explains in an interview, before the Spaniards arrived, the natives used to have hot chocolate with water because they did not have cows. They had to wait until the water was just about to boil and that was the appropriate moment to make chocolate. When someone is about to explode, Tita in the novel's case, that person is said to be 'like water for chocolate.'<sup>10</sup>

But, as the subtitle reminds us, this is more than a cookbook, since it also includes romances and home remedies, and is given in monthly instalments. Together with the recipes, there are other sorts of interdiscourses which contribute to the mixture of genres, such as remedies for bad breath or for syrups, instructions for making ink, a letter written by Gertrudis, Tita's eldest sister, inserted in epistolary form within the narrative and an Ottoman poem that Nacha, the ranch cook, taught Tita when she was a child. The format of *Like Water for Chocolate* was inspired by

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<sup>9</sup> Susan J. Leonardi, 'Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riselholme, and Key Lime Pie', *PMLA*, 104 (3) (1989), 340-347 (p. 340).

<sup>10</sup> Loewenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior', p. 606.

nineteenth-century magazines for women that featured serialised novels, recipes, advice, and home remedies, and which were very popular in Mexico (called there *calendarios para señoritas*). These were magazines written by women for women, which centred around domestic activities considered exclusively feminine and which conserved and transmitted a Mexican female culture. Kristine Ibsen remarks that, by using this format, Esquivel reinforces the idea of a community of women.<sup>11</sup>

The inclusion of romances in these magazines was based on the sentimental and domestic novels so popular in the nineteenth century both in North and South America. According to Tania Modleski, they were an English import rather than an indigenous American product and could be traced back ultimately to the novels of Samuel Richardson.<sup>12</sup> Domestic and sensational novels were marginalised genres, regarded as infra- or paraliterature by the canon. Their success was, however, immense and they constituted the prototypes of the modern *telenovelas* or TV soap operas (in Mexico and Latin America, the lachrymose TV serials are called *culebrones*, literally 'big snakes', referring to their endless succession of chapters). Elaine Showalter credits sensation writers with a subversive appeal, claiming that they inverted 'the stereotypes of the domestic novel...they expressed female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than had been done previously.'<sup>13</sup>

*Like Water for Chocolate* makes use of a number of set conventions followed by popular romances, such as set phrases, hyperbolic language and narrative suspense. Each chapter finishes with the word *Continuará* (To be continued) and the name of the recipe offered in the following instalment-chapter. The plot also complies with the typical story lines of popular romances and familiar tropes that will be easily recognised by the reader: a good and beautiful heroine is deprived of the man she loves; her family and society are against their union; she is treated like a servant in her own home; a gentle and older man will rescue her; the lovers have to go through multiple obstacles (there is even the obligatory pregnancy) until their love triumphs at the end. There is a continuous play of climax/anti-climax as the tensions

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<sup>11</sup> Kristine Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*,' *Hispanic Review*, 63 (2) (Spring 1995), 133-46 (p. 137).

<sup>12</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance. Mass-produced fantasies for women* (New York and London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 160.

get resolved, which is typical of serial publication, and a highly melodramatic prose. Examples are numerous. Tita first notices Pedro's 'hot gaze burning her skin' as the waltz 'The Eyes of Youth' is being played on the pianola (21); the meeting of lovers' gazes is a widely-used literary cliché. Pedro's love declaration is another instance of overblown language: 'one doesn't think about love, one either feels it or doesn't ... I swear that you'll have my love forever' (23). Pedro is later described by Tita as 'Pedro, so decent, so proper, so manly, so... so wonderful!' (55). *Like Water for Chocolate* uses a great number of sudden cuts, changes of scene and cliff-hanging devices, such as the one employed when chapter eleven finishes with a hesitant Tita considering if she should marry Dr. Brown or not, and chapter twelve starts with a wedding. The mystery about the identity of bride and groom, characteristic of popular romance, is deliberately kept for a while, until we are told that it is Tita's niece's wedding. Overplotting and abuse of coincidence, as in Mamá Elena's forbidden love story, are also characteristic elements of popular fiction.

I would like to argue that Esquivel employs all these formulae as deliberate parodic strategies. They establish an ironic distance between the text and the reader, which forces a rethinking of both high and popular literature. Similarly to Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, Esquivel's novel can be read as a parody in Linda Hutcheon's sense, that is, 'a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text... Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.'<sup>14</sup> The overdone rhetorical embellishments, striking juxtapositions, plot digressions and lack of verisimilitude are deliberate strategies employed to emphasise the ironic distance that exists between the text and the conventions that it recalls. As Dianna C. Niebylski has shown, the comic strategies that pervade the novel are a strong evidence of its parodic intentions.<sup>15</sup> Humour is all-pervasive. Word play is frequently used with ironic intentions; the *entregas mensuales* of the subtitle can mean not only monthly instalments but also refer to sexual surrender and menstruation. Alliteration and rhyme also add comic emphasis, as in Rosaura's

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Dianna C. Niebylski, 'Heartburn, Humor and Hyperbole in *Like Water for Chocolate*', in *Performing Gender and Comedy*, ed. by Shanon Hengen (Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1998), pp. 179-197.



words being described as 'repugnantes, malolientes, incoherentes, pestilentes, indecentes y repelentes' (131) (revolting, stinking, incoherent, foul, indecent and repulsive).

The conscious re-elaboration of popular genres written by women and aimed at a female audience challenges patriarchal and high dominant culture, which has traditionally devalued them. In her analysis of the romance and popular literature, Janice A. Radway states that 'romance novels essentially portray the female quest for social identity.'<sup>16</sup> The act of romance reading is also used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture.<sup>17</sup> Laura Esquivel is both using and transgressing the conventions, an aspect which has escaped several critics, such as Antonio Marquet, who attacks precisely its features taken from popular culture:

From a literary point of view, the defects of the novel are evident (in fact, it contains all the elements typical of "popular literature"): it is simplistic, Manichean; there is in it a logic which pretends to be childish, it is full of banal conventionalisms, lacks any specific stylistic intention and being a novelty is its only purpose.<sup>18</sup>

*Like Water for Chocolate* represents a postmodern pastiche of genres which draws attention to the assertions of femininity found in popular culture. The author follows a double strategy of inscribing certain codes established by patriarchy and then subverting those very constructs, criticising the social structures that engendered the need for these narratives rather than the genres themselves. Esquivel's appropriation of popular discourse fluctuates between parody and homage. As Lillo and Sarfati-Arnaud remark, the distanced and ludic position (characteristic of irony and critical parody) coexists with a position of identification and empathic adhesion (typical of pastiche).<sup>19</sup> Borders between canonised and popular literature are thus transgressed. Magic realism functions as a means of deconstruction. As the present analysis will show, the basic tropes of the parodied genres are subjected to a magic realist treatment; for instance, the romantic lover who carries away the virgin on his horse

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<sup>16</sup> Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> Antonio Marquet, '¿Cómo escribir un best-seller? La receta de Laura Esquivel', *Plural*, 237 (June 1991), 58-67 (p. 58). My own translation.

has been inflamed by a dish which he has not even eaten, and the tears of a love-lorn maiden create havoc at a wedding. By inserting magic realist elements within this parodic rendition, Esquivel produces a hybrid text and opens up a new space for women's discourse that re-centralises marginality. In foregrounding that the genres given parodic treatment are all female discourses, the novel is attempting to recover a feminine voice. As the critic Lucía Guerra Cunningham suggests, the image of womanhood as an existential condition overwhelmed by social repression appears frequently in Latin American literature and art created by women:

Together with unveiling the power mechanisms of a system which made of woman the silent Other, it is necessary to search for the hidden signs of women's own culture... How did they view reality from the domestic sphere of the house? What were the actual experiences of sacralized motherhood? In the domestic activities of sewing, cooking, and raising children, were women producing imaginary and cultural artifacts?<sup>20</sup>

Laura Esquivel's novel attempts to answer such questions as it locates the transcendental search for female identity in the often trivialised realm of women. The kitchen becomes a site of creative and magical events, a threshold between the real and the imaginary.

## INTERPLAY OF REALIST AND MAGICAL DISCOURSES

### Food for Thought

Laura Esquivel has declared that 'Cooking is a reminder of perceived and unperceived forces.'<sup>21</sup> We are connected through food. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, magic is mostly associated with cooking. Food works as a narrative site/subject which allows an unproblematic slippage between magical and realist discourses. The kitchen becomes a sacred space which presents a different dimension of reality. The

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<sup>19</sup> Gastón Lillo and Monique Sarfati-Arnaud, 'Como agua para chocolate: determinaciones de la lectura en el contexto postmoderno', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 18 (3) (1994), 479-90 (p. 480).

<sup>20</sup> Lucía Guerra Cunningham, ed., *Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women Writers in Search of Themselves* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Loewenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior', p. 606.

novel's protagonist, Tita, is the cook who can magically transform food and endow it with powerful properties that affect all those who eat it.

Tita has mythical qualities that correspond to archetypal heroines, although her actions are always enclosed within a realistic-culinary discourse. Her magical birth is induced by her mother cutting onions and Tita's sensitivity to them. Tita already cries within her mother's womb, so strongly that she can be heard by the partially-deaf house cook, Nacha. Her coming into this world takes place, obviously, in the kitchen, pushed by an impressive stream of tears. The scene has a highly symbolic implication. Tita is born into a Valley of Tears, where her tragic destiny is already sealed. The reader might interpret the depiction of the birth as an allegory or a kind of surreality, but any disbelief regarding the true nature of the events is quickly dispelled, as the narrator states in a matter-of-fact way that, when the tears dried out, Nacha swept the floor and collected five kilos of salt which was used for cooking for a long time. This striking juxtaposition of a rationally impossible event with a daily activity and a specific use for the result of such event is a main strategy in magic realist narratives and sets the tone for the whole novel.

Relegated by her mother to the kitchen, Tita is excluded from the rest of the house and, implicitly, society: 'she mixed up the joy of life with the joy of eating. For a person who got to know life through a kitchen, it was not easy to understand the outside world' (13). However, she dominates the kitchen space and makes of her culinary skills a way of self-expression and intervention into that world she has been denied access to. Each recipe reflects a different aspect of Tita's state of mind, in such a way that an alternative reality is constructed in which Tita finds a way to express her love and sexuality. The first magical event that signals her new way of communication occurs during her sister Rosaura's wedding with Pedro. Mamá Elena, the tyrannical mother, commands Tita to cook the food for the reception. While making the wedding cake, Tita cannot help crying over the dough. Her tears and tremendous sadness affect the cake which, in turn, affects all the guests:

All the guests were filled with an immense nostalgia as soon as they took their first bite of the cake... the weeping was the first symptom of a rare intoxication that had to do with a great melancholy and frustration that seized all the guests and made them end up in the yard, coops and bathrooms, each longing for the love of their lives. Not a single one escaped from the spell and only a few lucky ones reached the bathrooms in time; those who didn't join the collective vomiting that was going on in the middle of the courtyard. (39)

This extraordinary event is described in all realistic detail. The narrator does not leave any space for the reader's disbelief. Tita's tears provoked this chemical reaction in the cake which influenced all those who ate it. Food is invested with magical properties that go beyond providing physical satisfaction. The final proof of the veracity of this event is that Nacha dies of nostalgia, holding 'the photograph of an old boyfriend in her hands' (41). The magic realist strategy of transforming Tita's feelings into food with an immediate effect on diners is again employed on two other occasions - at her nephew's Christening, where Tita's happiness provokes euphoric reaction and laughter among the guests (chapter four) and in the last chapter, her niece's wedding banquet, which urges the guests to frantic love-making.

The narrative gradually builds a framework where extraordinary events of this kind are presented and accepted as everyday occurrences. Neither the narrator nor the characters question their verisimilitude in any way. This leads to a suspension of the reader's disbelief, an essential requirement in magic realist narratives. It prepares the reader to accept the subsequent events, those surrounding the outrageous escape of Gertrudis, Tita's eldest sister. Starting again with a recipe, quails in rose petals, chapter three is particularly relevant in its magic realist strategies. Pedro gives Tita a bunch of roses to mark her first anniversary as the ranch cook, a gesture that, of course, angers Mamá Elena, who demands immediately that Tita destroy the flowers. A full-of-love Tita employs the roses to prepare a pre-Hispanic dish which Nacha, who is now dead, magically dictates to her. This preparation makes consumption an erotically-charged experience, which will provide Tita with a new way of communicating her feelings to Pedro. Since Tita pricks herself with the roses thorns, her blood becomes an explosive ingredient in the dish, provoking an aphrodisiac effect on those who eat it. The rendition of this magical effect is accomplished through a number of techniques. There is, first of all, a striking juxtaposition of discourses. The straightforward culinary instructions (how to prepare the rose petals or kill and pluck the quails) are interleaved with Nacha's supernatural voice and with the language characteristic of popular romances. The discourse that describes Pedro's and Gertrudis' reactions contains set phrases and fantasies that introduce the sexual elements in such romances:

when Pedro, not satisfied enough with making his wife jealous, tasted the first bite of the dish, he couldn't help exclaiming, closing his eyes with authentic lust: -This is a god's pleasure!... It seemed that the food she [Gertrudis] was eating had an aphrodisiac effect

on her, since she started to feel an intense heat invading her legs. A tickling sensation down the centre of her body did not allow her to sit properly in her chair. She began to sweat and imagine how would it feel to ride a horse, embraced by a *villista*, one of those she had seen entering the village square the previous week, smelling of sweat, soil, dawns of danger and uncertainty, life and death. (49)<sup>22</sup>

The use of this romantic language provides the magical scene with a touch of humour. In contrast to the remarkable effects of the food on Gertrudis, Tita is described as being absent and lifeless. In an ironic reworking of the popular romance clichés, Tita magically enters the body of her beloved through the food. There is an almost mystical communion in place of an expected sexual penetration:

in a strange alchemical phenomenon, her entire being had dissolved in the rose petal sauce, in the flesh of the quails, in the wine and every one of the meal's aromas. In this way she was penetrating Pedro's body, voluptuous, aromatic, warm, completely sensual. It seemed that they had discovered a new code of communication, in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and Gertrudis the lucky one in whom this singular sexual relationship, through food, was synthesised. (50)

This passage embodies eucharistic connotations in a parodic reference to Christian rituals. There is a close relation between food and the body as Tita herself becomes incarnated in the food. The rose-petal sauce becomes an extension of herself. Food is not only self-expression but also communion. As Cecelia Lawless observes, 'food transforms Tita's body into the site of desire to be consumed at the same time that it articulates her desires.'<sup>23</sup> This highly climactic moment is suddenly counterpointed with the continuation of the recipe on how to prepare the sauce. The impersonal narrator and the realistic frame remind the reader that this magical narrative is well-engrafted onto daily life. The practical task of cleaning the mortar closes the culinary instructions and serves as a link to the following scene, one of the most magical, and also comical, of the novel.

Instead of washing the pots, Gertrudis feels such an 'internal heat' that she rushes to have a shower in the little shed outdoors. However, the drops of water do not even reach her body - they evaporate before this. Her body heat is so intense that the wooden shed starts to burn. This impossible occurrence is counterpointed with a connected happening at the outskirts of the village, where the rose aroma expelled by Gertrudis' body reaches a revolutionary soldier who feels the imperious urge to ride

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<sup>22</sup> *villistas* were the soldiers who followed the Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa.

<sup>23</sup> Cecelia Lawless, 'Experimental Cooking in *Como agua para chocolate*', *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica*, 8 (1992), 261-272 (p. 265).

to the ranch. The whole episode is a comical rewriting of tropes from popular culture. The common 'burning love' metaphor is actually literalised. The naked Gertrudis being picked up by the rider and both galloping off the ranch re-enacts the classical rescue of the damsel in distress by the hero. According to Susan Lucas Dobrian, the scene highlights and parodies the sexual context of the typical rescue paradigm.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Gertrudis is rescued from society's enforced sexual repression. The incorporation of supernatural events and the use of hyperbole, like the pink cloud that reaches the soldier or the smell of roses which remains till the present day, offer a re-visioning of the clichés and force the reader to question the limits of perception and reality.

Further examples of Tita's effects on food are numerous. The hate for her mother can provoke the sausages that she prepares to rot without any logical explanation (90), and her bad mood prevents the beans from cooking; she needs to sing to them until they soften (187). These supernatural events contain an irreducible element of magic that disrupts ordinary laws of logic but that simultaneously coexists with realistic events. Neither Tita nor the narrator show any surprise at the fact that the beans refuse to soften. Singing to them is depicted as the natural and logical thing to do. Magic is, therefore, established as part of daily activities within a realistic framework and characters are defined according to their relationship to food.<sup>25</sup> Mamá Elena and Rosaura have unnatural relations to food which reflect their inability to nourish and care for children. They do not enjoy Tita's food and both die directly or indirectly because of it. Mamá Elena, under the suspicion of being poisoned by Tita, secretly takes purgatives and syrup of ipecap, a very strong emetic that kills her, wracked by horrible pains and violent convulsions (120). Similarly, Rosaura dies of terrible digestive problems. On the other hand, Tita's extraordinary relationship to food provides her with magical nourishing powers. Since Rosaura

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Lucas Dobrian, 'Romancing the Cook: Parodic Consumption of Popular Romance Myths in *Como agua para chocolate*', *Latin American Literary Review*, 24 (48) (July-Dec 1996), 56-66 (p. 59).

<sup>25</sup> For a fascinating study of the interrelationship between human beings and food, see D.W. Curtin and L.M. Heldke, eds., *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992). For Deane Curtin, culinary knowledge is social knowledge and requires 'an artful blending of the mental and physical, of "theory" and practice. As sustenance, food is as much mental and spiritual as it is physical' (p. 10). In the same volume, Lisa Heldke explores the erotic and emotional potential of foodmaking, since 'cooking is a form of love' (p. 223).

does not have any milk to feed her baby and the hired wet nurse dies of a stray bullet, Tita takes charge of her nephew's feeding. The virginal Tita is magically able to produce milk and breast-feed the child. This unexplained event is highly symbolic of Tita's nourishing role and, as Fernández Levin points out, it recalls the similarities between Tita and the fertility Aztec goddess Tonantzin. Like this goddess, Tita exhibits a perplexing duality, for she can create harmony or discord, love or hate, nurturing or death.<sup>26</sup> Because she is confined to the kitchen, her interpolation into the outer world takes the form of a harmonising of two traditional female activities - cooking and supernatural intervention. Tita embodies the woman-witch who is a nurturer but also a caster of spells. There are other similar 'magical' women in magic realist texts, such as Mama Day in Gloria Naylor's novel, Pilate in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Fleur in Erdrich's *Tracks*.

The response to food can thus reveal psychology. Food, in the sphere of fantasy, can metonymically enter the discourse of narration in connection with human behaviour. There is a close link between food and expression. After her nephew's death, Tita finally rebels against her mother's tyranny. Mamá Elena violently hits her and Tita takes refuge in the dovecote.<sup>27</sup> Re-enacting the figure of the 'madwoman in the attic', she refuses to speak or eat, and therefore to live, in a clear opposition to patriarchal authority.<sup>28</sup> Tita overcomes her emotional breakdown by choosing her own way of expression and asserting her will. The narrative foregrounds the act itself of writing/cooking as an essential process in rescuing women from silence. The domestic sphere acquires a whole new meaning as the heroine establishes her independence outside social structures imposed upon her. Throughout the novel, the kitchen acquires an erotic and transformative power that reveals the characteristics of gendered discourse present in culinary language. Tita develops both an alternative space for female discourse and a new code of communication. In this way, she

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<sup>26</sup> Rosa Fernández-Levin, 'Ritual and "Sacred Space" in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*', *Confluencia*, 12 (1) (Fall 1996), 106-120 (pp. 114-16).

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting the extraordinary resemblance between Mamá Elena and Bernarda Alba, the tyrannical mother from Federico García Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936). Mamá Elena's words 'I don't want any tears' (89) after her grandson's death recall Bernarda's when hearing about her daughter's death.

<sup>28</sup> I am drawing here in the motif analysed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

validates a feminine activity and brings about the creation of a feminine logos. Cooking works as an important cultural link that unites feminine experience and becomes a metaphor for writing and living.

### Use of Hyperbole as a Magic Realist Technique

The use of hyperbole is particularly distinctive of Latin American magic realism. Both Laura Esquivel and Ana Castillo employ this strategy more profusely than the Native and African American writers discussed. Gabriel García Márquez, referring to Latin America, has stated that 'Excess is also a part of our reality.'<sup>29</sup> This lack of moderation, a recurrent trope in magic realist narratives, is evident in multiple aspects of daily life and conveys a pronounced sense of absurdity. In Esquivel's fictional world, everything is disproportionate: 170 eggs are needed for a wedding cake, 200 roosters have to be castrated for a dish, a thousand walnuts have to be shelled for a sauce, and Rosaura is able to lose 30 kilos in one week.

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, hyperbole is mainly expressed through literalisation of metaphors and through the recurrence of magical motifs. After refusing to eat or speak for many days, Tita consumes a revitalising stew that makes her speak again and cry with happiness. The common metaphor of a river of tears is actualised in a hyperbolic way as 'a creek that streamed downstairs' (110). This exaggerated event does not surprise the rational Dr. Brown, who rejoices in Tita's recovered happiness. Another example is offered by the first amorous encounter between Tita and Pedro. The frequent metaphor of 'sparks' or 'burning fire' between lovers is literalised in an amazing display of fireworks coming from their room and seen in the distance. Ironically, they are interpreted by Rosaura and Chenchá as the spirit of Mamá Elena who cannot find peace. There is a continuous crossing between symbolic and literal levels. For instance, Mamá Elena's power is symbolised by her expertise in cutting watermelons. The hyperbolic account of her skills in 'splitting, dismantling, dismembering, desolating, weaning, hamstringing, destroying or dominating' (87) has a doubly literal and metaphorical significance in her treatment

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<sup>29</sup> 'La desmesura forma parte también de nuestra realidad', Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba. Conversaciones con Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1982), p. 85. My translation.



of animals and of Tita. This foregrounding of images and metaphors draws attention to the metafictional dimensions of the text.

Wendy B. Faris points out metafictional elements and a pervasive linguistic magic as characteristics that run through contemporary magic realism and help to situate it within postmodernism: 'The reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic - a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we may call the linguistic nature of experience. This magic happens when a metaphor is made real.'<sup>30</sup> *Like Water for Chocolate* provides a telling example of this verbal magic in chapter eleven, when Tita has a row with her sister Rosaura while breaking some corn *tortillas* into pieces. She is so upset about her sister's plans of condemning her own daughter to the same fate as Tita was by her mother, that she wishes with all her heart that 'her sister would be swallowed up by the earth' (184). Since Tita gives the remains of the *tortillas* to the chickens, the effects can be easily foreseen. The chickens become crazy and start attacking each other:

they could not escape the whirl of feathers, dust and blood that began to spin faster and faster until turning into a mighty tornado that destroyed everything in its path...[Tita] was swept away by the force of this powerful whirlwind that lifted her several feet above the ground and gave her three infernal turns in the air among the fury of the pecks before violently flinging her on to the opposite side of the yard, where she landed like a sack of potatoes.... This vortex of chickens kept drilling the yard grounds, making a deep well through which most of them disappeared from this world. The earth swallowed them up. (186-187)

The description of this tornado draws on a number of magic realist rhetorical devices. The code of the natural, a group of chickens eating in a yard, slips into the supernatural as their fighting turns them into a whirlwind. The impossible event from a rationalistic point of view is described with all sorts of factual details. The language is increasingly hyperbolic as the whirl becomes a tornado which can lift a person into the air. The scene is highly reminiscent of Father Nicanor levitating several inches after drinking some hot chocolate or Remedios the Beauty ascending into the heaven amongst white sheets in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>31</sup> It also accomplishes the literalisation of the metaphor previously hinted

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<sup>30</sup> Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by L. Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 163-190 (p. 176).

<sup>31</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982), pp.136, 279-80.

at, that is to say, being swallowed by the earth, a fate desired for Rosaura but suffered by the chickens instead.

Another magic realist strategy consists of using magical motifs with remarkable hyperbolic features. Word-objects become recurrent metaphors that take on a textual life of their own. The most prominent case is that of the bedspread that Tita starts weaving the day that Pedro first proposes, intended to be a wedding quilt. The patchwork bedspread keeps growing throughout the novel, symbolising the internal cold and desolation suffered by Tita but also the multitude of scraps and textures that make up her life. It is an enormous quilt that reaches fantastic dimensions. When Tita leaves the ranch, the hyperbolic bedspread is so big that it has to be dragged behind the carriage

like the enormous and kaleidoscopic train of a wedding dress which covered a whole kilometre. Since Tita used any yarn she happened to have, no matter the colour, the bedspread showed an amalgam of colours, textures and shapes that appeared and disappeared as if by magic in the monumental dust cloud that rose up behind it. (91)

At the end of the novel, the quilt covers three hectares, the totality of the ranch. It represents an artistic manifestation of women's imagination, creativity and craftsmanship, and functions as a symbol for women's lives and culture. The quilt also becomes a metaphor for the making of fiction and for the novel itself, a recurrent image that pieces together magic and realism.

### The Grotesque

As already discussed in the chapter on Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, several critics have examined the connections between magic realism and Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. David Danow, who has devoted a book to this subject, points out the dark side of the carnivalesque found in Latin American magical realism, which 'while heralded for its cheerful presentation of the utterly unexpected, may reveal as well an uncompromising, grievous aspect that is equally a part of the reality it depicts.'<sup>32</sup> *Like Water for Chocolate* explores manifestations of popular culture that show a world upside down in order to abolish social hierarchies

and the established order. In line with the features that Bakhtin examined in Rabelais' work and medieval folk culture, great importance is given to perception through the senses (especially, smell and taste), the figure of the banquet as social event, the close links between food and sex, and between life and death.<sup>33</sup> These elements approximate Esquivel's novel to Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity... The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, the grotesque is mainly built around the character of Rosaura. Within the romantic novel genre, Rosaura constitutes the heroine's rival, a villainous character who marries Tita's boyfriend. According to the melodramatic dichotomy of good and evil, the heroine's positive attributes shine more brightly when compared to the negative characteristics of her enemy. The magic realist characterisation of Rosaura must then include aesthetic elements of the grotesque to emphasise such contrast. Right after her wedding banquet, when all the guests suffer from a terrible nostalgia, Rosaura is already subjected to a grotesque characterisation:

She had the intention to save her wedding dress from the excretions of her relatives and friends, but, when trying to cross the yard, she slipped and not a single inch of her dress escaped the vomit. A voluminous putrid river wrapped her and swept her away for several yards, forcing her to, without being able to hold back any longer, throw up uproarious gulps of vomit like an erupting volcano, right before Pedro's horrified eyes. (40)

This passage presents several magic realist devices, such as hyperbole and an impossible event engrafted onto a realistic setting, which are provided with a grotesque dimension. The language, the tone and the powerful image created aim to provoke laughter in the reader.

Rosaura's progressive decay and death are also portrayed in grotesque terms with an emphasis on the scatological. She gradually develops bad breath, obesity and digestive problems, which are provoked by food and Tita's hostile attitude towards

<sup>32</sup> David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press Kentucky, 1995), p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> For a Bakhtinian reading of the novel, see Amalia Chaverri, 'Como agua para chocolate. Transgresión de límites/ Reivindicación de espacios,' *Sociocriticism*, 8 (1) (1992), 7-35.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 19-20.

her. The description of her death and burial, surrounded by a nauseating smell, combines hyperbole and a comic tone with the tragedy of the events. Pedro confuses the sound of his wife's digestive problems first with the rumble of cannons signalling that the revolution has started up again and then with the engine of one of the neighbour's motorcars. Finally, he finds Rosaura 'her lips purple, body deflated, eyes wild, with a distant look, sighing out her last breath. John's diagnosis was an acute congestion of the stomach. Her burial was very poorly attended, because the disagreeable odour Rosaura's body gave off got worse after her death' (198). This grotesque scene is inserted within the recipe for chillies in walnut sauce that Tita is preparing for her niece's wedding. The striking juxtaposition of discourses draws attention to the triumph that this wedding represents for Tita over Rosaura. After all, Tita's food can also provoke death.

Other instances of the grotesque can be found in the relationship between food and sex as described in the final banquet scene. Once again, the effects of food on Tita's guests have extraordinary consequences, this time resulting in an uncontrollable sexual desire:

Everyone else, including the ranch hands, was already making passionate love, wherever they had happened to end up. Some under the bridge between Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass. The more conservative, in their cars, hastily pulled over to the side of the road. The rest, wherever they could. Any spot would do: in the river, on the stairs, under the washtub, in the fireplace, in the oven of a stove, on the counter of the chemist's, in the clothes closet, on a treetop. Necessity is the mother of invention, and of every position. That day there was more creativity than ever before in the history of Humankind. (206)

The scene is certainly described in carnivalesque terms: exaggeration, close connection between food and sex, trope of the banquet as social event, transgression of the established order and suppression of hierarchies. The critic Jeanne Delbaere-Garant employs Bakhtin's term grotesque realism to describe a combination of North American tall tale, Latin American baroque, and Bakhtinian carnivalesque: 'Grotesque elements are used to convey the anarchic eccentricity of popular tellers who tend to amplify and distort reality to make it more credible.'<sup>35</sup> Thus the grotesque stories told by the servant Chenchá about the horrors of the Revolution: hangings, shootings, dismemberments, decapitations and even sacrifices in which the

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<sup>35</sup> Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, 'Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English,' in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Parkinson Zamora and Faris, pp. 249-263 (p. 256).

victim's heart was cut out in the battlefield, since Pancho Villa would eat his enemies' bleeding hearts (64). As used here, hyperbolic distortion and the grotesque create a sense of strangeness and defamiliarisation which characterises magic realism and foregrounds the interpenetration of different realms.

## BORDER-CROSSING

Magic realism reveals the human need to dissolve borders and explore alternative dimensions of reality. *Like Water for Chocolate* crosses boundaries on several levels, spiritual, physical and temporal. There is a remarkable communication between the worlds of the living and the dead, and scientific and intuitive knowledge are often set in contrast. Characters continuously cross the borders between Mexico and the United States, offering different world views and opposing Western and native perceptions of reality.

Located on the frontier, the Mexican world of Piedras Negras is closer to the Native Americans' systems of beliefs than those of the Western culture. Tita and her family are fluent both in Spanish and English. Their family doctor lives in Eagle Pass, Texas, and Tita is very close to marrying him and therefore moving into the other side of the U.S. border. However, unlike in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, the U.S. is not presented as a threat to the Mexican way of life. In general terms, it is described with positive characteristics. Pedro and Rosaura go to San Antonio to live because the political climate is not so violent there. Tita encounters refuge, peace and hospitality in Eagle Pass (although she does not like the bland and tasteless food prepared there!). It is the worst time of the revolution and Mexico is far from a paradise; many Mexicans feel forced to flee the country.<sup>36</sup> María Elena de Valdés has observed that the way of life along the Mexican-U.S. border from the 1850s to the narrative time of 1895-1934 was a period of constant border-crossing and numerous intimate ties not only within families whose members had been arbitrarily

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<sup>36</sup> For example, on a single day in October 1913, 8,000 refugees crossed the border from Piedras Negras, Coahuila, to Eagle Pass, Texas. See Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos. A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 118.

separated by the border, but also between Mexicans and American newcomers. It is only in the post-World War II era that the border has become a barrier.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, it must be noted that the Coahuila ranch is located in a rural area, far from the socio-political centre of Mexico capital and also far from the First World power of the United States. This situation on the border between worlds emphasises the marginalisation suffered by its inhabitants. Once again, the text would fit well into Hutcheon's idea of the ex-centrics, previously silent groups who have been empowered to express their concerns.

### Material / Spiritual Worlds

The connection between the spiritual and the material world is established from the beginning of the novel. Nacha, the Indian cook, dies in chapter two, but her presence pervades the novel. She performs the role of the ancestor, the spiritual guide who transmits her culinary knowledge to Tita and helps her out even after death. Significantly, Nacha is an Indian and her knowledge of cooking and of life corresponds to pre-Hispanic cultures. On several occasions, the narrator stresses this pre-Hispanic origin of the orally transmitted recipes and the responsibility to maintain a heritage handed down from one generation to the next: 'Tita was the last link in a chain of cooks who, since pre-Hispanic times, had been passing culinary secrets from generation to generation, and she was considered the finest exponent of the marvellous art of cooking' (45).

Nacha often crosses the realm of the dead into the living to directly aid Tita, as when she gives her instructions to assist Rosaura in labour or explains to her the remedy to cure Pedro's burns. Her spiritual presence is unproblematically inserted within the narrative. At the end of the novel, Tita and Pedro enter a room covered with flowers and with 250 lit candles. Whereas each thinks that the other has performed this feat, the narrator points out Nacha's agency: 'they were so filled with pleasure that they did not notice that, on a corner of the room, Nacha lit the last candle and silently faded away' (207). The ghost of Nacha is provided with a

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<sup>37</sup> María Elena de Valdés, 'Verbal and Visual Representation of Women: *Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate*', *World Literature Today*, 69 (1) (Winter 1995), 78-82 (p. 82).

physical presence which can be seen and which can execute acts in the world of the living.

As has already been discussed regarding Morrison's and Castillo's fiction, the treatment of ghosts is a distinctive magic realist strategy. The most notable case in Esquivel's novel is that of Mamá Elena's ghost, which is as powerful as her own living person. Her spectral appearances are described in all realistic detail. She first appears to Tita in the kitchen, together with a gust of gelid wind. She keeps her hard look and speaks roughly to Tita, cursing her baby. It is a requisite of the magic realist mode that ghosts be verified in the narration so that they cannot be simply dismissed by the reader as a figment of imagination or guilt, so Mamá Elena's ghost has to be 'real'. To prove her materiality, the ghost is also noticed by the house dog, whose hair stands on end and runs away scared. In her final appearance, Mamá Elena's ghost is again described as showing her characteristic attributes in life: a recriminating look, anger, a hard language and the emotional tactics that she uses to impose her will. When Tita finally faces her mother and expresses all her accumulated hatred, the ghost disappears. In an already magical discourse, a talking ghost, which is however naturalised by being described in realist terms, slips into a further magical mode as the image of Mamá Elena diminishes and starts spinning at high speed. It then crosses the window and goes towards the yard, 'like a firecracker out of control' (172), until it hits a lamp next to Pedro who gets badly burnt. This completely supernatural event is not questioned by either Tita or the other guests. It is narrated in a matter-of-fact way, offering the reader no opportunity to doubt its veracity.

Another contact with the spiritual world is that established through the figure of Dr. Brown's grandmother, the Indian Kikapú Luz del amanecer (Morning Light). She first appears to Tita while she is recovering in Dr. Brown's house. Described as a pleasant Indian woman in her eighties, making a delicious tea in a small room, she establishes a communication without words with Tita. Only later, the narration makes it clear that this lady is Dr. Brown's grandmother, who has been dead for a number of years. On finding out, Tita does not show any surprise. The living and the dead are on the same level within the narrative framework.

### Intuitive / Rational Knowledge

The realms of intuition and reason are frequently explored in magic realist fiction. *Like Water for Chocolate* sets in contrast Tita's intuitive and supernatural approach to reality against the rational perspective adopted by Dr. Brown. Chapter four provides a scientific explanation of a particular exhibit of the supernatural. When Rosaura is about to give birth and Tita is the only one left on the ranch with her, the spirit of Nacha comes to their aid. The narrative moves into the register of the supernatural as Nacha, already dead, gives detailed instructions to Tita about the steps to follow in childbirth. The correctness of her actions are later scientifically confirmed by Dr. Brown, who examines Rosaura and discovers that it had been a dangerous birth because she had suffered an attack of eclampsia that could have killed her. Dr. Brown is amazed at Tita's behaviour under such unfavourable circumstances. His medical explanation, down to the technical terminology, functions as proof of the validity of the supernatural. Although Dr. Brown explains the illness, not Tita's capabilities, the rational account facilitates the acceptance of the supernatural by the reader.

It is mainly through the figure of Morning Light that the contrast between intuitive and rational knowledge is enacted. A great emphasis is placed on Morning Light's knowledge of herbal remedies and natural medicine. The rational attitude of disbelief maintained by the white North American family of her husband is dispelled when she is the only one able to heal one of their members. Morning Light represents the figure of the *curandera*, a common character in Mexican and Chicano literature that has already been discussed in the analysis of Castillo's *So Far from God*.<sup>38</sup> This Indian Kikapú introduces her grandson, John Brown, to natural medicine but he abandons her theories when he enters university, only to return to them later on in life. Esquivel uses these two characters to explore the theme of the Native knowledge extirpated by the scientific methods of colonising cultures. The discussion of the slippage between real and fantasy is thus also explored in terms of gender specificity within a colonial context. Woman's magic, representing intuition,

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<sup>38</sup> For a study of this figure in Esquivel's novel, see Clara Román-Odio, 'Clarividentes, curanderas y los nuevos rituales de la literatura Latinoamericana', *SECOLAS-ANNALS*, 27 (Mar 1996), 41-48.



indigenous knowledge and emotion, is opposed to man's rational science and technology.

In his study on the relations of colonising Gringo Scientist and Colonised Woman/Nature in the novel, Jerry Hoeg warns about the dangers of idealising a mythical past while characterising science and technology as foreign in edenic Latin America. According to Hoeg, the notion of science as an imported cultural product in Latin America is false and dangerously reactionary.<sup>39</sup> Although this is a strong argument, the privileging of intuition in Esquivel's novel can also be read within a magic realist agenda that searches for a return to origins and a mythical knowledge that has been marginalised and practically obliterated. *Like Water for Chocolate* presents a clear contrast between the rationalistic dominant attitude of the *Porfiriato* period (presidency of Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911), which privileged a Western way of life, and an indigenous knowledge and folklore. This contrast implies a vindication of an alternative world view and perception of reality and, in that sense, it is transgressive rather than reactionary. In his book *Myth and Archive*, González Echevarría remarks that the privileging of mythical knowledge is characteristic of Latin American narrative in the twentieth century and emphasises the role of anthropology as a mediating element.<sup>40</sup> Deeply embedded in Mexican tradition, *Like Water for Chocolate* relies on ancient systems of belief and folklore that strongly link it to other Latin American fiction.<sup>41</sup> Laura Esquivel has drawn attention to the magical dimension of Mexico itself:

Fantasy is a part of our daily lives. It is in our architecture, in our painting. What we call magic realism is something pre-Hispanic. Our tradition tells us about flying snakes... We thought that the indigenous culture had disappeared, but it has remained untouched and that world that concerns the sacred is now reviving.<sup>42</sup>

A reading of *Like Water for Chocolate* from an anthropological magic realist perspective simplifies the exclusive binary oppositions between gringo reason and

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<sup>39</sup> Jerry Hoeg, 'Como agua para chocolate and the Question of Viable Alternatives to Technologies of Domination', *Confluencia*, 12 (2) (Spring 1997), 112-27 (pp. 121-3).

<sup>40</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive. A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 10-14.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Miguel Angel Asturias' *Hombres de Maíz/Men of Maize* (1949), Alejo Carpentier's *Los Pasos Perdidos/The Lost Steps* (1953) or Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955).

<sup>42</sup> Soledad Alameda, 'Entrevista con Laura Esquivel. El sueño y la vida', *El País Semanal*, no. 247, 12 Nov 1995, pp. 40-45 (p. 45). My translation.

indigenous emotion, and draws attention to the coming together of cultures and traditions.

### Race and Gender Crossing

Most magic realist fiction questions received ideas about gender and identity. Esquivel's novel stresses the hypocrisy of racial, social and gender discrimination. The different female characters represent various components of Mexican society. Mamá Elena and Rosaura stand for the Catholic and repressive Creoles who want to perpetuate traditional hierarchies. However, in her youth Mamá Elena transgresses such codes when she falls in love with a mulatto man, a union forbidden by her family. Their love will result in Gertrudis, who embodies the stereotypes associated with blacks; she has a good sense of rhythm for dancing and is highly erotic. Nacha, Chenchá and Morning Light represent the indigenous, the Other, source of pre-Hispanic science, medicine and cooking obliterated by Western civilisation.

Laura Esquivel has declared in an interview that she wanted the three sisters to represent three different attitudes and stages of women's liberation.<sup>43</sup> Rosaura continues the masculine world and repression imposed by their mother, for she does not want anything at all to change. Gertrudis stands for the first stage of feminism, that is, breaking away and total sexual liberation. Tita represents the revolution achieved from within the private sphere; she is the transgressor who performs the necessary changes to reach a balance in new generations. Whereas public revolution has degenerated in the course of years, Tita's personal revolution brings about a new generation of women, exemplified in her niece Esperanza, who symbolises women's collective hope.

The novel enacts a deliberate inversion of gender roles in an attempt to dispel common stereotypes of passive Mexican women. Women were outside historical/political discourses and confined to private scenes: the home, convent or brothel. Although perpetuating the established social order, Mamá Elena is an uncharacteristic woman in that she contravenes gender codes by performing the role

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<sup>43</sup> Claudia Loewenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior. An Interview with Laura Esquivel,' *Southwest Review*, 79 (4) (Autumn 1994), 592-607 (p. 594).

of the patriarch. A strong and dominant woman, she handles the ranch on her own and is even able to face, rifle on hand, a patrol of revolutionary soldiers. Gertrudis represents a total transgression of both sexual and gender codes, since she works as a prostitute and later as a revolutionary soldier. Her sexual transgression is thus linked to social revolution. In Gertrudis, Esquivel depicts *la soldadera*, a deeply-rooted figure in Mexican popular culture that corresponds to the women soldiers who fought next to men during the Mexican Revolution and who became powerful icons and protagonists of many popular *corridos* songs.<sup>44</sup> According to Susan Dobrian, the independent and active female soldadera is an embedded historical figure characterised by the dual role of warrior/mother which date back from pre-Columbian Mexico.<sup>45</sup> The dual portrayal of woman as warrior/mother is particularly evident in the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is both a maternal saint and a battle icon, as already discussed in reference to Chicana writing. Gertrudis is not only a female soldier, but she reaches the rank of general, exerting an obvious control over her troops. In an inversion of roles, she commands her tough sergeant Treviño to cook some sweets. After a few initial problems with understanding the female language of cooking, the sergeant succeeds in preparing the sweets. Culinary discourse is not biologically determined but learnt through tradition. The narrative thus questions the rigidity of conventional roles. Similarly, gentle Dr. John Brown, always patient and nurturing, is feminised; he waits all his life for Tita like a stereotypical long-suffering Mexican woman. The intentional inversion of roles allows the author to once again parody the popular genre that she is appropriating, since, unlike the characters in popular romance fiction, the female characters depicted in Esquivel's novel are stronger and more resolute than the male ones.

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<sup>44</sup> The *corridos* are folk songs of love and death on the Texas-Mexican borderlands. They are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa's song, '*La cucaracha*', is the most famous one. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 61.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Lucas Dobrian, 'Romancing the Cook: Parodic Consumption of Popular Romance Myths in *Como agua para chocolate*', *Latin American Literary Review*, 24 (48) (July-Dec 1996), 56-66 (p. 63).

## Treatment of Time

Like most magic realist narratives, *Like Water for Chocolate* questions received temporal notions in its combination of a linear chronological time with a mythical and achronological one. In the novel, several time levels can be distinguished. One corresponds to the narrator's time, the present, which follows a calendar-like form from January to December. On another level, the chronological events of Tita's life are narrated, from her birth (1895) to her death (1934), although it must be noted that specific dates are not provided in the text; rather, the reader has to infer them from the historical events mentioned.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Esquivel establishes a total absence of chronology that endows the physical space of the ranch and its inhabitants with magical qualities. As readers of a cookbook, we enter a timeless sphere. The recipes are the 'real': they not only exist in the narrative present, but can also be extrapolated out of the text to continue in a never-ending future (for instance, in the case of all the reader-cooks who put them into practice). Thus there is the paradox of two kinds of timelessness: the mythical timelessness of what happens to the characters in the story, and the rational, mundane timelessness of cooking instructions that are textually transmitted.

Recipes perform a double function as structural nexus within the narrative and as temporal nexus. The recipes are detailed in present tense but they function as devices to evoke and fix a past moment. Smells and tastes perform a continuous shift between past and present, between a modern city and a rural ranch, which facilitates the shift from a realistic discourse into a magical one. Kathleen Glenn observes that recipes function as Proustian madeleines, since they serve to recuperate the past and thereby expand the time frame of the novel.<sup>47</sup> So the past tense of the linear narrative is broken by interpolation of the present tense (a-temporal) of recipe instructions. Since the culinary tradition is passed on from one generation of women to the next,

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<sup>46</sup> The highly successful film based on Esquivel's novel, with her own script and directed by Alfonso Arau, her husband at the time, provides three dates: 1894, 1910 and 1934. This added information facilitates the temporal location of the action for the viewer (possibly taking into account an audience who is not familiar with Mexican history), but removes the atmosphere of timelessness so crucial to the novel. See Alfonso Arau, dir., *Como agua para chocolate* (Mexico City: Miramax, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen M. Glenn, 'Postmodern Parody and Culinary-Narrative Art in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*', *Chasqui*, 23 (2) (Nov 1994), 39-47 (p.45).

the recipes bridge the gap between present, past and future generations. The recipes link Tita and the narrator to a feminine mythical consciousness whose power has not been interrupted since pre-Hispanic times. The fairy-tale elements of the novel also provide it with a timeless nature. A modern Cinderella, Tita is relegated to the kitchen and forced to work ceaselessly. She is dominated by a terrifying mother and an unpleasant sister, and counts on a benevolent fairy godmother in the figure of Nacha.

The novel's division into episodes reflects a serial nature that is adapted to rhythms of women's lives and work in the home. Nancy Chodorow has pointed out that women's activities in the home involve continuous connection to, rather than separateness from, others, and that the work of maintenance and reproduction is characterised by its repetitive and routine continuity.<sup>48</sup> This is precisely the impression given in Esquivel's text by the detailed description of endless daily activities performed by women on the ranch. There is a strong sense of circular, women's time in Kristeva's terms.<sup>49</sup> The novel itself has a circular structure as it begins and ends in the kitchen, with the narrator preparing Christmas cakes. Nothing changes throughout the years. Time itself resists definition; unbounded and unchanged, it remains precisely the same as it had been before. The cookbook's pages span a year, but an interminable year that also spans the protagonist's entire life. Its pages place Tita into a self-contained universe where time and space are abolished by an act of endless repetition. The parallel between cooking and creation and destruction of life are then emphasised as the novel re-enacts the never ending cycle of nature; out of the ashes of the ranch, Tita's cookbook re-emerges and the land becomes the most fertile in the region, producing all sorts of delicious fruits and vegetables.

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<sup>48</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 179.

<sup>49</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 187-213.

## A HAPPY ENDING?

The apocalyptic novel's ending has received multiple interpretations. Once Tita and Pedro feel free of all social restrictions and are left alone on the ranch, they can unleash their passion. The scene of their love-making is set in magic realist terms. Magically-lit candles surround them while a thousand doves fly free above them. Signs of an approaching catastrophe make all the animals flee the ranch. At the moment of ecstasy, Pedro's heart stops beating. When Tita realises that he is dead, she decides to die as well. Esquivel employs then the motif of the matches, introduced in chapter six, in order to incorporate magical elements in the final scene of the novel and provide Tita with a supernatural death. Significantly, the recipe for making matches occurs in the middle of the novel and is the only one that does not include cooking food. It signals Tita's tremendous crisis and links her to her Indian ancestry. While preparing the mixture for making matches, Dr. Brown explains to Tita his grandmother's philosophical theory about the box of matches that each person has inside. We have to search for emotions to ignite them and cause combustions that nourish the soul. However, Dr. Brown warns Tita about the danger that lighting them at the same time conveys:

If a powerful emotion should ignite them all at once they would produce a splendour so dazzling that it would illuminate far beyond what we can normally see; and then a brilliant tunnel would appear before our eyes, showing us the path we forgot the moment we were born, and summoning us to regain our lost divine origin. The soul ever longs to return to the place from which it came, leaving the body lifeless... (103-4)

In a typical magic realist technique, Esquivel transforms this metaphor into an actual happening. The metaphoric plane is literalised as Tita takes a box of matches and eats them up one by one, until she can reproduce enough emotions to make the bright tunnel appear. Joining Pedro in a long embrace, 'they left together for the lost Eden. Never again would they be apart' (209). This image recalls the romantic cliché of lovers departing hand in hand into the sunset. It is however comically contrasted by the subsequent hyperbole. Their bodies begin to throw off glowing sparks that set the bedspread and the whole ranch on fire. The tragic tone of the comparison with an erupting volcano and the inferno is again contrasted with the comic fact that people from neighbouring towns regard it as celebrating fireworks. Only when the fires continue for a week, do they approach the ranch to get a closer look. Within a single

paragraph, Esquivel manages to combine tragedy and comedy, clichés and jokes. The result is certainly parodic but without abandoning the parameters of magic realism and the possibility of alternative dimensions of reality. Esquivel parodies the final scenes of happy lovers heading off into marriage; instead the couple walks off into death. At the same time, they ultimately die of love/ lovemaking, fulfilling a literalisation of figurative speech that serves to further subvert the prescriptions of the sentimental canon. The literalisation of their burning love adds a comic tone to an otherwise tragic event.

Whereas critics like Nieblyski have identified the comic strategies present in this ending scene and stress its parodic intention, some other critics offer a different reading. For Mónica Zapata, magic realism is distorted by the pathos of the 'lesser' genre, since the romanticism of the final union of the two lovers (with its language of lost Eden, never again to be apart) introduces a discordant element to the concluding phantasmagoria.<sup>50</sup> Cecelia Lawless reads the ending of the novel as a betrayal of the kitchen space previously vindicated, because 'Tita sets the ranch and what it represents on fire by literally cooking herself, - the ultimate female sacrifice of self.'<sup>51</sup> I would suggest that the ending has a positive dimension within a context of re-generation and new order. Esquivel herself has explained the reasons behind having the protagonists die: '[their love] is too perfect and too intense to live in this plane of existence, and so dying was a way in which they could remain together.'<sup>52</sup> A supernatural ending provides the narrative with this other plane of existence and once again links magic realism with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, in which death allows for re-birth and new life. The humour inherent in the scene of the lovers' death and the strong imagery of the inferno foregrounds the regenerative power of fire and the possibilities of renewal. Bakhtin's words on Rabelais' imagery would be pertinent here, 'In his work the dual body becomes a dual world, the fusion of the past and future in the single act of the death of the one and the birth of another,

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<sup>50</sup> Mónica Zapata, 'Like Water for Chocolate and the Free Circulation of Clichés', in *Latin American Postmodernisms*, ed. by Richard A. Young (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 205-220 (p. 209)

<sup>51</sup> Cecelia Lawless, 'Experimental Cooking in *Como agua para chocolate*', *Monographic Review/ Revista Monográfica*, 8 (1992), 261-272 (p. 268).

<sup>52</sup> Loewenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior...', p. 604.

in the image of the grotesque historic world of becoming and renewal.’<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Esquivel’s novel performs a final carnival play with the boundaries of life and death as the self-immolation leads to a reintegration to earth and a return to the origins. A new generation, Tita’s grand-niece, represents the continuation of the life-death cycle.

In a similar way to Melquiades’ manuscript in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Tita’s cookbook/diary is the only remains of the destruction of the ranch.<sup>54</sup> A text, ‘which tells in each of its recipes this buried love story’ (210), survives death and passes history on to new generations. The written word resists destruction and, furthermore, represents the endurance of women’s writing and domestic culture. In a highly self-referential fashion, this text is also implicitly the cookbook that we are reading. The boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and magic, are once more blurred and transgressed. However, the novel ends not with the fantastic combustion of the lovers, but with the practical action of the narrator cutting onions and preparing Christmas Cakes. The narrative closes then in a perfect circle that enhances the combination of the magical and the real in the text, without either taking precedence over the other but forming a delicate balance that affirms the magic of cooking and writing.

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<sup>53</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 435.

<sup>54</sup> In García Márquez’s novel, Aureliano, the last member of the Buendía family, spends his last days reading the manuscript of the gypsy wiseman Melquíades which details the story and end of his family, and which is the novel we are reading. As Aureliano reaches the end of the manuscript, so does he obviously reach the end of his life and the reader the end of the novel. See Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1982), pp. 446-48.



**CHAPTER FIVE**

**SUGGESTED CONNECTIONS**

**AND CONCLUSIONS**

Don't be so surprised... All of this is life.

Gabriel García Márquez, *In Evil Hour*, 1980.

The oxymoron magic realism certainly represents a complex and problematical critical concept; still, 'it retains a strange seductiveness' in Fredric Jameson's words.<sup>1</sup> This thesis has attempted to map out such seductiveness in a number of selected works by women writers that confirm the important presence of magic realism in contemporary world literature. The novels under analysis cover a span of roughly sixteen years, from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, and belong to different literary ethnic traditions in the American continent. In their uses of magic realism, multiple similarities as well as differences can be distinguished among them that suggest the existence of a flourishing literary mode and facilitate the formulation of a reading model which naturally combines ethnicity and gender.

All the novels comply with the central concept of magic realism, that is, its emphasis on the co-existence of magical and realist discourses which are held in suspension without one dominating the other. Despite the presence of fantastic events that defy natural laws as we know them, the narratives are always grounded in the 'real' world through social, historical and political references. Magic realism calls into question traditional reading expectations as it repositions readers in an ambiguous space between worlds where they are forced to wonder how to locate the real in the narrative. In this way, readers are required to suspend received ideas about fantasy and reality and to form new habits of reading. The texts underscore the importance of the narrator's role in the presentation of the supernatural. The narrator reports magical events in a matter-of-fact tone that changes the reader's initially rigid concepts of what is real and what is not. There is much more than knowledge and rationality. According to Seymour Menton, 'the emergence and persistence of magic

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'On Magic Realism in Film', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (2) (Winter 1986), 301-25, (p. 302).

realism in the twentieth century may be attributed to the Western world's search for an alternative to the limitations of an overtly rational and technological society.'<sup>2</sup>

The dialectic present at thematic and structural levels in the novels is also apparent as regards the relationship between the implied author and the text, a fact that increases the ambiguity of such a mode as magic realism. The implied author is a literary person educated according to our conventional norms of reason and logic, and can therefore recognise the supernatural as contrary to the laws of nature. However, she fuses the two antinomic levels of the real and the unreal in a coherent structure by adopting the world view of a focaliser who believes in magic. Western readers of Native, African or Mexican American literature face the challenge of mediating between the familiar literary patterns that arise from their own traditions and unfamiliar patterns that convey alternative cultural meanings. The conventions of genre establish a kind of contract between the text and the reader, so that some expectations are rendered plausible, others ruled out, and elements which would seem strange in another context are made intelligible within the genre. Thus a human being growing wings and flying in the air or a woman conjuring up a hurricane can be made acceptable if the text belongs to the literary mode of magic realism. In order to appreciate the narrative, the reader must adopt the temporary role of identifying with the indigenous community. This does not imply a reader's complete identification. Western readers accept the unconventional world view only within the context of the fictitious world, without obviously integrating it in their own perception of reality. Any experiences of alienation or marginalisation by facing a hybrid and ambiguous narrative disappear if the reader enters into a dialogue with the text. As Wolfgang Iser asserts, it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of their own experience that readers can truly participate in the adventure the literary texts offer them.<sup>3</sup> Reading across cultures while acknowledging one's own culture can be enriching for the reader and lead to a better understanding of the text.

The various literary traditions discussed in this thesis have obviously different belief systems and approaches to reality. Their uses of magic realism are therefore

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<sup>2</sup> Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1983), pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 282.

conditioned by their cultural and political backgrounds. The double-consciousness characteristic of African American writing, although present in contemporary Native American writing, differs from the American Indian experience. Indian tribes were deprived of their land and decimated but they were still in their country, among their people. Some tribes suffered a stronger process of acculturation than others, depending on their location. For the Africans transported to the American continent as slaves, the preservation of their African heritage was more problematic and has developed into a central concern in contemporary fiction. As regards Chicano literature, explorations of identity must necessarily take into account at least three different racial and ethnic groups, Mexican, Indian and white, and a more recent past of colonisation by the United States. Latin American narrative itself is shaped by the confluence of Hispanic, Native and African cultures under colonialism. The Chicano and Mexican authors studied employ techniques closer to Latin American magic realism, since they share a common mythical, religious and historical background.

The analysis undertaken has proved that magic realism in the United States is not merely the result of literary influences from South America. Magic is indigenous to African and Native American cultures. At the same time, the writings of Morrison, Naylor, Erdrich and Silko are also shaped by the confluence of American popular culture and the rich tradition of Western literature (including such movements as Romanticism, Surrealism, modernism and postmodernism). The critic Mary Slowik draws attention to the literary sophistication inherent in such syncretism:

magical realism lures us away from our faith in rationalist verification and in conceptual structures towards a more "primitive" understanding of everyday life as a fabric of interwoven stories. Not at the expense of our modernity, however. Gabriel García Márquez, Leslie Silko and Toni Morrison are as much twentieth century modern and post-modern Western as Colombian, Native American, and Black. They are self-conscious and psychologically sophisticated writers. Yet the counterpoint between the primitive and the modern which they achieve allows us to simultaneously suspend and not suspend our disbelief. Magical realism let us have faith without assaulting our basic skepticism.<sup>4</sup>

In combining these traditions, the authors emphasise the necessity of magic to mediate events and reshape our understanding of history. They also corroborate the

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Slowik, 'Henry James, Meet Spider Woman: A Study of Narrative Form in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, 57 (2) (Spring 1989), 104-20 (pp. 105-6).

relevance of magic realism as a strain of postmodernism and challenge any simplifying generalisations about the narrative techniques used by ethnic writers.

The novels employ techniques based on oral tradition and recreate a non-written literature through the subversive use of language. For instance, Morrison and Naylor rely on the idioms of Black English and signifying practices that foreground black folklore as a legitimate literary source. Castillo reflects the dual Chicano identity and heritage in her insertion of numerous Spanish words and expressions into the English text. These linguistic negotiations draw attention to the imposition of an alien language (English) on a colonised community and the strategies devised to keep the indigenous language alive. They reveal the difficulties of transliteration and translation and the cultural and identity impoverishment that the loss of a native language conveys. Within a postcolonial context, these sorts of subversive linguistic strategies reflect social and cultural relations between colonised and coloniser.

The authors selected also subvert numerous Western genres in their fiction. They rework traditional genres, such as the *Bildungsroman* or the pastoral genre, from an ethnic and feminist perspective and privilege elements from popular genres which have been devalued by high dominant culture, such as sentimental novels, soap-operas, women's magazines or cookbooks. The Chicano and Mexican writers make use of popular culture to a greater extent than the African and Native American ones. Both Castillo and Esquivel offer a distinctive blend of parody of and homage to traditionally female discourses which shows their awareness of a written Latin American literary heritage that they are consciously revising.

Numerous Western and native myths are explored and re-elaborated. Notions of the American Dream and the frontier between civilisation and wilderness are examined and subverted. The myth of the American frontier is often reversed, as the dangerous wilderness is now placed on the side of industrialised civilisation and a return to nature is advocated. The individual native mythologies are described in all detail and provide the Western reader with a complete picture of legends and beliefs. The primary narrative interest seems to be in collective practices that bind communities together. The novels perform a recovery of ancient systems of belief and local lore with the implication that magic and folk wisdom are essential elements of our collective memory. They also dramatise the conflict between an intruding Western religious system and a vanishing tribal mythology. The cultural and identity

crisis caused by the introduction of Christianity in communities with shamanic or animist practices is widely documented in the Native and African American novels. The pervasive influence of Catholicism in Mexican and Chicano societies is fully explored and set in contrast with indigenous Aztec mythologies.

All the authors studied employ magic realist strategies with the aim of preserving and passing on a past which has often been trivialised or erased. They posit women at the centre of such historical recuperation and, therefore, revise the traditional Latin American male magic realism. In their narratives, women are the site of the magical. Larger-than-life figures such as Pilate, Mama Day or Fleur represent the ancient tradition of the conjure woman. They use magic in everyday situations and epitomise a gendered magic realism. They embody characteristics of the folk figure of the trickster, from the African tradition (Esu-Elegbara) or the Native American (Nanibozhu or Nanapush), and enrich them with distinctive female elements which aim to benefit the community and maintain the continuation of traditions. Women are associated with the concepts of cyclical time, nature, shamanic practices and tribal kinship tradition to a greater extent than men. Narratives challenge and rework stereotyped images of women as passive and submissive through the creation of strong female characters who rebel against social and cultural constrictions. Women writers thus express a feminist and also a historical urge, a need to recover their past and their inherited culture. Their incorporation of the magical into a realistic frame is challenging because it gives credibility to that which had long been exiled into the realm of the unreal. In searching for the alliance between the real and the magic, they are investigating both realms.

The narratives investigate the dangers of acculturation and focus on marginal figures and borderland territories. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, magic realism represents a way of access to the main body of Western literature for authors not writing from the perspective of the privileged centres of this literature. However, we must consider that current magic realist practitioners include recent Nobel Prize winners, such as García Márquez or Toni Morrison, and widely read writers like Isabel Allende or Salman Rushdie, a fact that requires a re-negotiation of the nature of marginality itself. Furthermore, issues traditionally marginalised by

mainstream literature occupy a prominent position in the studied novels. As the critic Kenneth Roemer remarks:

The importance of orality and oral cultures, of complex perceptions of sense of place, of multiethnicity, and of women's perspectives are not marginal or minority issues in late twentieth-century American literature. They represent central social and literary concerns.<sup>5</sup>

The so-called minority literatures are indeed central to contemporary critical debate in their ability to express the evolving multi-ethnic meanings of America.

We can then conclude that magic realism is a hybrid mode, suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, which facilitates the fusion or coexistence of possible worlds that would be irreconcilable in other modes. It makes use of magic as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions and is, therefore, invested with political potential. Contrary to the widespread notion that magic realist fiction is escapist literature, the textual analyses have stressed the extensive range of socio-historical issues addressed and the ideological and political action endorsed in the novels. In his discussion of virtual reality, magic realism and the twentieth-century technologies of representation, Robert Kelley states 'Fiction is no longer a replacement for or escape from a flawed or oppressive reality; instead, it is a device which increases the range of personal choice and the potential for agency.'<sup>6</sup> Novelists with a social agenda in addition to their artistic agenda find in magic realism an appropriate medium to enhance the staples of realism.

Although keeping in mind John Barth's statement 'It goes without saying that critical categories are more or less fishy as they are less or more useful',<sup>7</sup> I believe that categories help shape the phenomena we perceive. Since generic descriptions are not neutral but culturally grounded, we need to reflect critically on categories so that they enhance our criticism. I hope that this study has helped to prove the usefulness of magic realism as a category and its validity in contemporary criticism.

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth M. Roemer, 'Contemporary American Indian Literature: The Centrality of Canons on the Margins', *American Literary History*, 6 (3) (Fall 1994), 583-599 (p. 586).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Thomas Kelley, 'Virtual Realism: Virtual Reality, Magical Realism, and the Twentieth-Century Technologies of Representation' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1993; abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts*, 53 (9), DA93-01454), p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment' (1979), *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam's, 1984), pp. 193-206 (p. 200).

Almost thirty years after Emir Rodríguez Monegal's indictment against magic realism quoted on the first page of this thesis and his proposal to abandon the term completely, we can perceive that magic realism has grown into an international mode and is successfully applicable to a number of literary traditions. It *does* stimulate dialogue, it *does* allow communication and it definitely throws new light on a number of works. Therefore, the possibilities for further research in this area are manifold and challenging. Since contemporary American magic realism is a productive site for ethnic women writers, then, comparative account could be made of their male counterparts and their gendered uses of the mode. Also, interesting connections could be outlined between American practitioners of magic realism and their British counterparts, such as Angela Carter or Graham Swift. Their different cultural and literary backgrounds would be the source of exciting comparisons (Angela Carter, for instance, could be associated with the metaphysical branch of magic realism represented by Jorge Luis Borges). Flourishing postcolonial literatures in English from India, Canada, Australia or New Zealand also include numerous authors who write magic realist fiction (Salman Rushdie, Robert Kroetsch, Jack Hodgins, Michael Ondaatje, Peter Carey, Janet Frame), opening up endless lines of research.

I would like to finish this thesis with the words of a magic realist practitioner, Isabel Allende, that corroborate the universality of magic realism:

What I don't believe is that the literary form often attributed to the works of Latin American writers, that of magic realism, is a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. 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... Magic realism is all over the world. It is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality.<sup>8</sup>

Latin American writers may have headed this literary mode in the recent past, but magic realism is now clearly on the map of world literature. The novels under analysis in this study confirm that we are not culturally nor historically homogenous, but profoundly multi-narrational and multi-ethnic, like magic realism itself. Authors

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<sup>8</sup> Isabel Allende, 'The Shaman and the Infidel. Interview', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 8 (1) (1991), p. 54. Quoted in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Parkinson Zamora and Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 187-88.



from different cultures use magic realist strategies in order to reflect the mysticism of their native traditions, the collision of world views and the cultural enrichment that emerges from transformation, hybridisation and synthesis. In magic realism, they find a narrative mode that has freed them from the constraints of realism, since it allows them to combine the factual and verifiable features of realism with the magical aspects we associate with myth and folklore. Contemporary magic realist fiction has become Hawthorne's neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary meet and each imbues itself with the nature of the other, and where ghosts might enter without affrighting us. It is a space populated by ghosts, women without navels and dogs made of smoke; but it does not frighten us, instead it stretches the bounds of our reality and makes it magical.

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