Myth y la magia: Magical Realism and the Modernism of Latin America

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, who taught me that my words could be magic.

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I would like to acknowledge Dr. Michael Handelsman for introducing me to the magical *Hombres de Maíz*, my committee members, Drs. Allen Dunn and Urmila Seshagiri for their feedback and support, and of course my director, Dr. Lisi Schoenbach for her consistent encouragement, without which this thesis would never have taken shape. And I would like to thank my friend, colleague, and superb writing partner, Justin.

ABSTRACT

The similarities between Latin American magical realism and European surrealism have long been regarded as part of a shared, cohesive movement in literature and art. After all, they share certain nonsensical and fantastical traits that place both movements far away from the Realism that modernism, as a whole, refutes. But in light of postcolonial theory, it becomes more and more necessary to explore magical realism as a geographically and politically situated movement with its own unique value in discussions of Modernism; not an offshoot of surrealism, but a sister genre, born in the distinct atmosphere of a region trying to self-identify in the face of postcolonial modernization. By exploring the conventions of the genre through some of its foundational texts—A *Universal History of Infamy, The Kingdom of this World*, and particularly, *Men of Maize*—we can then reinsert magical realism into a larger discussion about modernism in order to enrich and complicate what its global iterations mean outside of Europe.

After a quick historical background regarding the origins of magical realism, first as a regional genre and then as a field of academic study, the thesis will engage with a close reading of some of the mythological elements of Miguel Angel Asturias' *Men of Maize*. The novel will be read in light of mythmaking, postcolonial theory, and theory regarding both genre and novel conventions. The claim in the end is that *Men of Maize* showcases a Latin American encounter with modernism and modernity that results in a fractured identity, which Asturias ultimately attempts to heal through myth and magical realism.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

"In America everything is fantastical."

-Alejo Carpentier, *Concierto barroco*

Introduction

When magical realism first entered into academic discussions during the late 1940s and early 50s, it was often connected to the work of surrealists in Europe as a means of scholarly legitimization. Though direct comparisons were sometimes made, often, the association happened when critics would attempt to style the genre as having "surreal" elements or as invoking surreal imagery. A version of magical realism had, of course, existed as an artistic movement in Germany and as a relatively undefined regional subgenre that responded to what many artists considered the shortcomings of realism and a need to create a distinctly Latin American brand of literature. But as the movement gained momentum and more literary critics were interested in the scholarly merits of magical realism, it became all too easy to continue likening it to the already-established surrealism of Europe. Indeed, many early writers of the movement, such as Arturo Uslar Pietri and Alejo Carpentier, used surrealist techniques throughout their literary careers. Sometimes, this was a direct effect of time spent in Europe, exposed to avant-garde movements. As a result, it still seems nearly impossible to begin a discussion about magical realism without at least acknowledging the similarities between the two movements.

Both magical realism and surrealism seek to express an alternative reality and both play with irrational narrative and illogical imagery to express aspects of reality that fail to fit neatly into the supposedly empirical world that Realism tried to represent. The genres often diverge in their philosophies regarding the figurative location of this alternative reality and the best way to access it—surrealism, as its prefix suggests, connotes a reality that exists above and outside of our own, while magical realism looks for mystery and magic within the already existing reality—but in attempting to access this alternative reality, they share a similar goal. Thus, putting them in conversation certainly helps to better understand the subtleties of in each.

However, while it is vital to note the similarities between the movements, conflating the two does a disservice to the rich complexities of magical realism, for much of what characterizes these movements has no direct counterpart in European modernist movements. Admittedly, this conflation is less and less prevalent in the scholarship of the last few decades, and many literary critics acknowledge the oversight of equating magical realism and surrealism. Thus, this thesis will be a complement to these conversations. As a step further, it will consider the benefits of inserting magical realism into discussions of what modernism as a global movement means. Magical realism is, after all, an exceedingly global genre, both in its origins and in its continuing manifestations. Traveling as it has, the genre has become as a self-contained Tower of Babel, deflecting most attempts at its definition. But this indefinability is valuable; as Stephen Slemon contends in his article, “Magical Realism as Post-Colonial

Discourse," "there is something in the nature of the literature it identifies that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with it" (10). Slemon is not the only critic to define that genre by its indefinability—such a refusal to commit to genre conventions is practically synonymous with magical realism. But if we cannot define it, it may at least be of some use to trace its origins; to do so, we begin in the Weimar Republic.

In 1925, German art critic Franz Roh used the term "*Magischer Realismus"* to refer to the features of "New Objectivity," an artistic style of art popular in Germany at the time. A push back against Expressionism, which valued emotion and subjective experience, New Objectivity called for a return to reality and "practical" concerns. Intrinsic to it, however, was the notion that reality held wonder. Within New Objectivity, "the wonder of matter that could crystallize into objects was to be seen anew" (Zamora 15-16). Substance itself and the process of becoming were held as a sort of secularized sacred by the very act of being tethered to reality—something to be esteemed in divine proportions, but esteemed for its ordinariness. Proponents of New Objectivity chastised Expressionism—which dominated the German art scene in the early 20th century—for its impracticality, inability to create social change, and its refusal to engage with immediate political and social issues. But the Realism that preceded Expressionism failed to meet the New Objectivists' expectations as well; thus, a new movement was in order. For them, reality no longer needed to be characterized as one-dimensional or superficial, but needed to be represented as irrational and dynamic—the inexplicable needed attention, even if it could not be

explained. And though New Objectivity faded away with the decline of the Weimar Republic in 1933, its spirit lived on in Europe through surrealist and Dadaist movements.

Most histories of magical realism will locate the birth of the genre in Roh's essay. Though the term was first used to refer to German visual art and was retrospectively applied to work by Kafka, the movement as it applies to Latin American fiction is its own distinct animal, driven by and responding to cultural conflict that simply had no match in Europe. As already mentioned, trying to define magical realism per the genre conventions of much of the Western canon fails to recognize the complexities of a genre that springs out of a region as culturally diverse and tense as Latin America. Thus, this thesis will not attempt to define magical realism in concrete terms—indeed, if we are placing it within a conversation about modernism, its dynamism is of far more value than any sort of pinprick designation. So rather than puzzling out denotative parameters, I aim to tease out some of the genre's intricacies to showcase the ways in which it is culturally and geographically situated and the reasons why its situatedness offers new and provocative insights into discussions of late modernism. In doing so, we can enrich the conversation of global modernisms and further explore the ways that postcolonial encounters have helped to shape our ideas of modernist genre conventions.

Latin America (and thus, magical realism) is of particular interest in postcolonial studies for a variety of reasons, least among them being its expansive revolutionary wave in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the blend of

cultures that resulted from its colonization. As Peter Childs contests in the introduction to *Modernism*, situating "non-western" literatures within a movement so often characterized as elitist reimagines modernism's boundaries:

> [T]here has developed in literary studies a[n]…ever-growing body of critics since the 1980s foregrounding alternative and other writers, [including]…novelists and poets from outside Euro-America, whose work contests the ground that has be staked by the assertions, claims and practices of the familiar names and their critics. It is consequently invidious to have to say what modernism was, precisely because any history or definition insinuates many implicit exclusions. Modernism has predominantly been represented in white, male, heterosexist, Euro-American middle-class terms, and any of the recent challenges to each of these aspects either reorients the term itself and dilutes the elitism of a pantheon of modernist writers, or introduces another one of a plurality of modernisms (13-14).

Between Childs two option of "reorientation" or "pluralism," this thesis will consider the ramifications of both, but invest itself more in the latter, motivated partly by the already intricate definition(s) of modernism(s).

While delineations of modernism's timespan are already debatable, the primary texts discussed herein will further press its limits, as their publication dates range between 1935 and 1949. Per some definitions, this is well beyond the duration of modernism (indeed, some critics locate magical realism within

postmodernism), but if we take into account the physical distance between modernism's origins and its eventual manifestation in Latin America, we can at least consider these texts as late modernist. This thesis will first recall the beginnings of magical realism in Latin America by briefly looking at Jorge Luis Borges' *A Universal History of Infamy* as well as Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* and his seminal essay that prefaces the novel. But the project will then take up a close reading of a novel by Miguel Ángel Asturias entitled *Men of Maize*. This text, in particular, acts as a culmination of many of magical realism's diverse characteristics, but is still obscure enough that room remains within scholarship to critically re-read the novel.

As this paper discusses the typology of magical realism in the past, scholars like Roberto González Echeverría and William Spindler will go on to determine specific varieties of magical realism. But *Men of Maize* fuses the incongruent definitions of magical realism, situates itself very directly in a postcolonial space, and mythologizes the process of modernizing indigenous territory. Stylistically, it incorporates supernatural elements seamlessly, as if becoming a riverbed, or an ant, or a coyote postman were not a physical impossibility, but rather a matter of faith and necessity. Moreover, Asturias takes careful measure to maintain a cyclical narrative structure reminiscent of indigenous oral tradition, thereby matching content and form. And finally, it grounds itself firmly in the physical consequences of commercialized agriculture and the mixing of races. Thus, Asturias' Nobel Prize winning novel exemplifies

much of Latin America's encounter with not only modernism as an artistic movement, but with modernity as an unstoppable force.

Much of the scholarly work devoted to magical realism, and to *Men of Maize* in particular, concerns itself with elements of genre theory and how to best define magical realism, the use of mythology in the text and the process of myth-making within the content of the story, and the novel read through a postcolonial lens. By following and then synthesizing these lines of inquiry, magical realism will prove its unique merit in discussions of global modernisms.

Global Background

Since this thesis draws on international works, it is important to acknowledge that translation will be a component of the discussion. When possible, original texts will be consulted and referenced, and the linguistic integrity of scholarly work done in languages other than English will be maintained. In terms of close readings, English translations of the primary texts will often be used to discuss general plot points, but when precise language is the focus, the original text will be consulted. In some cases, the issue of translation actually facilitates a fruitful conversation regarding the syntax and structures of languages used. For instance, in Miguel Angel Asturias' *Men of Maize*, Asturias worked meticulously to maintain the narrative structure of indigenous Mayan language that is intrinsic to the novel. This will be discussed at greater length later in the paper, but it helps us keep the importance of translation in mind.

Moreover, some terms ought to be situated before a thorough discussion can take place. To begin in the most general sense, when considering modernism on an international scale, the Spanish language offers a false cognate of the movement: *modernismo*. As Cathy Jrade points out in her *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature*, *modernismo*, though difficult to simplify into a singular definition, is a Spanish-American artistic movement more akin to a cross between romanticism and symbolism prevalent in European literature. Perhaps best exemplified by the poetry of Rubén Darío and Jose Martí, its influence spread to nearly every part of the Spanish-speaking world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, it functions as a precursor to magical realism and shares similar aims (Jrade, 12).

In contrast, the Latin American equivalent of "European" Modernism is typically labeled *vanguardismo*, an etymological relative of the French *avant-garde,* which lasted from approximately 1920-1940 (like Modernism in general, these dates are debatable). It should be noted as well that *vanguardismo* is of little direct relation to the Marxist revolutionary struggle (vanguard), but some writers of the movement did subscribe to fascist ideals.

To zoom in a bit more, magical realism is translated quite literally from its original Spanish: *el realismo mágico*. There remains some debate as to the difference between "magic realism" and "magical realism," but for the purpose of this paper, the distinction is rather arbitrary and culminates in translation discrepancies. "Magic realism" was translated from Roh's use of it in German (as mentioned earlier), while the Spanish term is typically thought of as "magical

realism." This is largely due to Spanish literary critic José Ortega y Gasset's translation of Roh's text into Spanish in 1927.[1] Once the text started circulating in Latin America, critics finally began applying the term "magical realism" to literature rather than visual art; Uslar Pietri was the first to use it to describe Latin American literature specifically.[2]

Arguably the first self-identifying use of the term, some critics point toward Cuban novelist Carpentier as the inaugural writer to distinguish his work as part of the magical realism movement, as his preface to *The Kingdom of this World* refers to the text as *lo real maravilloso* (TK cite Preface). However, many also argue that his novel is merely a precursor or a primordial version of the subgenre, still trying to navigate its surrealistic influences. And while *lo real maravilloso* translates into "the marvelous real," it should not be regarded as synonymous to magical realism. The distinction between magical realism and *lo real maravilloso* is subtle, but is typically determined by the world in which each type of story operates. *Lo real maravilloso* is set in a universe that readers understand to be familiar to some extent, but fundamentally different from the "real world" in which we live; fairy tales are a type of marvelous real, for example.

Magical realism, in contrast, is set rather definitively in the "real world" that we inhabit. Similarly, magical realism must also be distinguished from the fantasy genre, which, once again, is set in a world separate from our own, typically with its own author-created mythos. For the purpose of this project, the fantasy genre

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[1] Refer to José Ortega y Gasset's *Revista de Occidente*.
[2] Refer to Uslar Pietri's *Letras y Hombres de Venezuela*.

is not of high priority, but since magical realism is sometimes generalized as being similar to it, it is worth mentioning. The distinction between settings in these genres is vital—much of the unique value of magical realism resides in its very tangible connection to reality, as it is perceived by the senses. And since part of this thesis will read magical realism as a postcolonial movement, place and space are of the utmost importance.

It should also be acknowledged that magical realism exists outside of Latin America. This thesis in no way asserts that the genre is exclusive to one particular region, but only that Latin America proved to be a rich space in which the movement took root, and arguably the only place that it could have developed as it did. But it is certainly worth noting that the genre continues to be explored in the contemporary fiction across the world. Eva Aldea, whose book, *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature*, puts magical realism in conversation with the theory of Gilles Deleuze, uses examples of the genre that originate in Latin America, as well as in the United States, China, the UK, and India.[3] Elements of Aldea's book will be discussed more thoroughly in the third chapter, but her work is a useful showcase of magical realism's internationality.

By 1959, *Men of Maize* appeared on the scene, and at a formative stage in the development of magical realism. Conventions of the genre had been influencing the work of Latin American writers for approximately two decades,

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[3] Refer to Eva Aldea's list of primary works discussed on page x of *Magical Realism and Deleuze: the Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature*.

and the region's "Boom" was just on the horizon, thus *Men of Maize* is situated right in the midst of the genre's most productive period. Shortly before its publication, the genre had seen its first well-publicized acknowledgement and definition. At the 1954 MLA Conference, Spanish-American literature scholar, Angel Flores, cited a collection of short stories by Jorge Luis Borges' as the true beginning of magical realism:

> For the sake of convenience I shall use the year 1935 as the point of departure of this new phase of Latin American literature, of magical realism. It was in 1935 that Jorge Luis Borges' collection *Historia universal de la infamia* made its appearance in Buenos Aires, at least two years after he had completed a masterly translation into Spanish of Franz Kafka's shorter fiction (189).

Distinguishing Borges as the harbinger of magical realism is important to Flores because of what the rest of the world considered Latin America's less-than-impressive literary reputation leading up to the mid-20th century. The region's literary encounters with Realism and Romanticism were often characterized as overly sentimental; a kind hackneyed baroque, as even Borges himself admitted. But his work with European fiction also highlights Borges' Westernized education and his familiarity with already canonized work. Moreover, Flores' mentions Dudley Fitts claim that, as of 1954, Latin and Spanish American literatures had not proven themselves anything but mediocre, "except[ing] the Argentinians Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea," further deifying Borges as the region's literary messiah. Flores himself came to a similar conclusion before encountering

the criticism of Fitts, but more specifically locates the greatness of Latin American literature in magical realism (188).

This early invocation of the term serves as a milestone in the development of Latin American literature in that it provided a vehicle through which the region could be expected to produce its prolific works; a particular niche that it could fill. Via this genre, Flores hoped that scholars, “may claim, without apologies, that Latin America is no longer in search of its expression, to use Henriquez Urefia's felicitous phrase--we may claim that Latin America now possesses an authentic expression, one that is uniquely civilized, exciting and, let us hope, perennial” (192). Flores recognized one of the primary problems in terms of legitimizing Latin American literature within not just modernism, but the literary canon in general. Scholars’ inability or perhaps simple lack of interest in analyzing the stylistic, formal, and generic natures of various Latin American works resulted prior to the influx of magical realism in vague and ambiguous classifications wherein texts were “realist romanticist” or “romantic naturalist.” Flores argued that, “Had the line of analysis followed a more rigorous examination into the emotional and stylistic peculiarities, it could have been ascertained that, at least in Latin American prose fiction, it is difficult if not impossible to categorize faithfully each movement” (187). The issue, then, could be seen as an inability to translate the classification method of Euro-American literature to the culturally complex region of Latin America. But where Modernism (particularly avant-garde movements) invested much of its energy into playing with genre conventions and destabilizing notions of institutionalized literature and the canon, magical

realism's inability to be concretely defined or categorized fits in quite well with the spirit of the movement. Magical realism's liminality, both in regards to its straddling reality and unreality and in its origins in a borderland space, is highlighted by the movement's resistance to clear definition and the fact that any attempt to correspond it to European modernism typically fails.

As Flores goes on to explain, his own predecessors and contemporaries believed that the difficulties of defining these Latin American literatures were twofold, and could be identified either as (1) "psychological," tracing back its Spanish roots, rather than more well-received literature, or, (2) more provocatively, as:

> [A]scribed to the unstable economic and social milieu of the writers of Spain and Latin America, which forces them to improvisation. The conditions of life are so difficult that they are unable to devote the time and travail required for all memorable achievements, with the result that their output is heterogeneous, often careless (188).

Perhaps, then Borges and his work reflect a more well-read example of Latin American literature—a literary liberator in a comfortable enough social station to truly devote his genius to a homogenous practice of writing.

Borges would not think quite so fondly of the text that Flores cited as the start of magical realism. Written serially in 1934 and 1935, *Universal History of Infamy* consists of seventeen short stories, sixteen of which are fictional retellings of true criminal cases which span both time and space. Borges makes a number of changes to names and dates, sometimes for what seem like arbitrary reasons,

leaving the collection far from reliable in terms of historical accuracy. Borges himself characterizes the collection as baroque, a style that is invoked “when art flaunts and squanders its resources.” In fact, he wrote in the preface that the stories are “the irresponsible sport of a shy sort of man who could not bring himself to write short stories, and so amused himself by changing and distorting (sometimes without aesthetic justification) the stories of other men” and that “under all the storm and lightning, there is nothing” (TK cite, 1954 preface). By taking “true” stories and altering them in unspecified ways, Borges destabilizes both the genre of historical fiction and the notion of “reality” as it can be conveyed in literature.

But such a destabilization, vital though it is to the spirit of modernism, does not read as particularly motivated or charged with social/political purpose by Borges. As his preface indicates, Borges was rather self-deprecating in his reflection on the text. It is interesting, then, that Flores would cite the *Universal History of Infamy* collection as the start of magical realism, especially since he fails to defend precisely what makes the text so exemplary of the genre. Flores certainly carved out a spot for magical realism in academic discussion, but by relying on Borges’ European influences, Flores keeps magical realism somewhat dependent on notions Western canonization. So if we are seeking to frame the movement as less dependent on Eurocentric tradition, perhaps, we should turn to Alejo Carpentier, since his preface to *The Kingdom of this World* places him squarely in Latin America and at odds with much of European modernism. This is not to argue that Flores was mistaken and that Carpentier should hold the title of

magical realism's true forefather; instead, a reframing of the movement's beginnings as deeply invested in its geographical origins develops a useful juxtaposition between European modernity and its influences (Borges, to some degree) and the intrinsic mysticism of Latin America (Carpentier). Thus, the two writers and their work serve as enriching foils through which we can see the tensions of magical realism play out. Though he was of European descent and involved himself actively in the surrealist scene of Paris during his early, Carpentier championed a distinctly American kind of fiction; he labels it *lo real maravilloso*, but what he calls for is so vital to the development of magical realism that it cannot go unacknowledged.

The Kingdom of this World

Though he was born in Switzerland to a French architect and a Russian teacher, Carpentier strongly identified as Cuban and spent extensive parts of his life in South America and Mexico. Because he was openly affiliated with leftist communist politics, he moved to Venezuela in exile in the 1940s during a time of political unrest in Cuba. However, he returned to Havana in 1959 after Fidel Castro took control of the country. In looking at his other work, his interest in the baroque aesthetic seems quite clear, something that he shared with many of his Latin American contemporaries, Borges included. However, Carpentier would eventually set aside baroque aesthetics—a move that separated magical realism and his own *lo real maravilloso* from prior romantic and realist traditions and established him as one of the first magical realist (or magical realist-esque)

writers to consciously develop some of the movement's defining characteristics in his own work.

Some fourteen years or so after the publication of Borges' *Universal History of Infamy*, Carpentier produced *The Kingdom of this World*. Locating the novel as Latin American has been a matter of debate for some time, since it is set in Haiti and is thus technically Caribbean. But Carpentier himself identified as Cuban, and he refers to the text as Latin American in his preface, so the novel is often placed in discussions of Latin American magical realism without much controversy.

Through the eyes of a slave who is eventually freed, *The Kingdom of this World* tells the story of the Haitian revolution for independence in the early 19th century. In the process, Carpentier makes use of real historical persons like Henri Christophe who eventually became the leader of Haiti, and Macandal, a slave refugee leader that locals speculated was a voodoo priest. But through Carpentier's devotion to the creation of an American mythology and his determination to venerate the uniquely fantastical nature he saw in the region, his characters—Macandal in particular—are written into nearly mythic stature despite their very real origins. Carpentier chose to write about story of Henri Cristophe, a black slave who eventually would become king of Haiti, specifically because of the outrageous idea of slave actually leading a successful revolt and

becoming king.[4] But Carpentier never claims to tell a true history—instead, his role as an author is to draw out the natural marvelousness of the land, its peoples, and its stories.

The story is told from the perspective of Ti Noel, a slave who is eventually freed and who possesses no particularly extraordinary traits. In many ways, he represents the regular folk of the land. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert elucidates in her article, "The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: A Re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*," "Ti Noel has been considered a product of creolization, combining the African magical perspective of Macandal with the Catholic realism of Henri Christophe" (120). Ti Noel is an inhabitant of the Americas—he was born in Haiti and lives his entire life there. But even as a native Hatian, he is a creation of cultural blending, and as Carpentier conveys through the novel, the magic that he witnesses is only made possible by that particular blending. He is only able to see the fantastic transformation of Macandal into an insect because he possesses within himself a native/African capacity to believe in magic. However, he is only able to remain grounded because he has also been exposed to the (relatively) realist Catholic traditions of people like Henri Cristophe and the plantation owners of the island. Both perspectives are required in order to create a composite that is able to believe in

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[4] Despite his revolutionary attitude, Christophe was himself an autocratic, tyrannical ruler whose reign was opposed by much of Haiti by the time it ended. Carpentier characterizes him as such in *Kingdom*. Refer to Clive Cheesman's text on the reign of Christophe.

the magic *and* incorporate it into reality. Ti Noel is, essentially, a witness; our window into the fantastical America that Carpentier exalts.

Keeping this tendency toward the fantastic in mind, however, it should be reminded that Carpentier prefaces his novel by regarding it as an example of *lo real maravilloso* and not magical realism. What is perhaps more important than the precise classification of Carpentier's novel is, instead, that call for a Latin American literature that successfully conveys the inherent marvelousness of its region. Meanwhile, Asturias was meeting that challenge in the very same year Carpentier issued it. But before we move to a reading of Asturias' novel, it is important to explore why surrealism appealed to scholars and critics as a comparable movement for magical realism, and what sort of moves magical realism makes that separate it from surrealism. This will serve as a foundational lens through which we can later read Asturias.

CHAPTER II
SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORY

"With the word 'magic,' as opposed to 'mystic,' I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it."

- Franz Roh, Preface to *Magical Realism: Post Expressionism*

In 1995, comparative literature scholars, Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris collected an anthology of key essays of the genre entitled *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. The text is broken up according to its subtitle, with sections on the genre's foundations, its theory, its history, and its community, and is remarkable in the history of magical realist criticism in that it represents the first and foundational critical anthology dedicated to the genre. Moreover, it provides an account of the ways that magical realism has translated internationally into texts from Eastern Europe, Asia, North America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia. This chapter will take cues from Zamora and Faris in addressing a few different conversations, not in an attempt to define magical realism, but simply to gain a better understanding of how it has developed over time.

As previously mentioned in chapter one, scholarship regarding magical realism tends to fall into one or more of a few different categories. This thesis is most interested in the attempt to outline the generic conventions of magical

realism, particularly its use of myth, its connection to and distance from surrealism, and most importantly, its interactions with postcolonial theories. By approaching the movement from these diverse angles, its dynamism will hopefully become clearer. Since it is reluctant to be pinned down, parsing magical realism into some of its key characteristics and then approaching them separately will help to locate the edges and the heart of the movement, if not its precise shape.

Theorizing Magical Realism

In 1977, Cuban literary scholar, Roberto González Echeverría set out to make theoretical sense of Carpentier's call for a distinctly American, fantastical literature. Though a bit dated, González Echeverría's system is an attempt at empirically defining and dividing the movement into its different iterations, since it was already clear by the mid-70s that magical realism was resistant to being a simple, cohesive movement. Ultimately, he distinguishes between two types of magical realism—phenomenological and ontological. 'Phenomenological magical realism' corresponds to Roh's ideas that were originally founded in the visual arts, and 'ontological magical realism' stems from Carpentier's approach that is primarily concerned with celebrating and expressing the naturally marvelous components of American history of mythology. The phenomenological type grows out of "subjectivity and reality, mediated by the act of perception [which] generates the alchemy, the magic," while reality itself "remains unaltered." In other words, assuming that there is some sort of true, physical reality,

phenomenological magical realism creates magic during and out of our process of discernment. Typically, phenomenological magical realism involves some sort of fantastical element that the characters themselves are aware of and disturbed by—Kafka's Gregor Samson and his subsequent panic at being turned into an insect exemplify this.[5] In the ontological type, however, the magic is far more situated, comes from reality rather than the process of perception, and "exists in Latin America," but it is only "revealed to those who believe" (113-123). Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, and Ti Noel in particular, with his faith in the magic of Macandal, fall into this ontological type of magical realism.

Later in the chronology of scholarship on magical realism, William Spindler expounds upon the dichotomy set up by González Echeverría by essentially splitting ontological magical realism into two separate types. Spindler's typology divides the genre into three categories: metaphysical, anthropological, and ontological. Per Spindler's definitions, the metaphysical type results in "an uncanny atmosphere and the creation within the text of a disturbing impersonal presence, which remains implicit" but does not actually include any supernatural content (79). Here, we can draw a connection between González Echeverría's phenomenological type of magical realism and Spindler's metaphysical—both classifications rely on the creation of magic during the reading process without including supernatural elements explicitly. Spindler cites Kafka's *Das Schloß*,

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[5] Much of Kafka's work would eventually be labeled "magical realist" but it and other European iterations of the genre differ from Latin American tradition in that the supernatural elements are acknowledged as unreal, unsettling, and entirely out of place.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and even Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* as examples of metaphysical magical realism wherein the supernatural is little more than an uncanny feeling, rather than an explicit invocation of mysticism.

Making a similar sort of connection, Spindler takes González Echeverría's ontological type and divides it into two separate categories. Spindler's anthropological is characterized as using two separate narrative voices—one that is logical and tied closely to reality and another that somehow believes in a magical element. These two sides coalesce, for Spindler, when the author "adopt[s] or refer[s] to the myths and cultural background (the 'collective unconscious') of a social or ethnic group" (80). The anthropological type, then, is culturally and socially situated. Moreover, Spindler relegates this type of magical realism exclusively to Latin America, thus corresponding with the first component of González Echeverría's ontological type. Anthropological magical realism does not invest itself exclusively in the supernatural, but rather weaves in and out of it, offering a distinctly "magical" perspective and a distinctly "realist" perspective. As has already been suggested in the first chapter, Spindler also contends that this type of magical realism is so successful in Latin America because of its status as a "peripheral" space.

> The strength of Magic Realism in the "periphery" (Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean) and its comparative weakness in the "core" (Western Europe, the USA), could be explained by the fact that collective myths acquire greater importance in the creation of new national identities…Magic Realism gives popular culture and

> magical beliefs the same degree of importance as Western science and rationality. In doing this, it furthers the claims of those groups which hold these beliefs to equality with the modernising elites which govern them. (82).

If this is the case, and magical realism elevates "popular culture and magical beliefs" to the level of Western empiricism, it must be read as a complete destabilization of pre-modern Euro-American literary values as established by the Enlightenment and Realism. Such a perversion of conventional institutions is highly modern, as we see European modernists like Yeats drawing from ancient myth as well. Here, we once again encounter a difficulty in establishing magical realism—as distinct to Latin America as its origins are and as bound up in the region's mythos and history as it is, comparisons to Western modernism are unavoidable.

Finally, Spindler outlines his ontological type, which represents the exact opposite of the metaphysical. Per Spindler's ontological, supernatural elements exist comfortably in reality without much concern from the characters within the novel or the narrator. *Men of Maize* seems, at times, like an example of this ontological type, but because it is so deeply rooted in the land, it also exhibits characteristics of Spindler's anthropological type.

As has long been the case, delineations of magical realism often break down when the texts are analyzed closely. And so in attempts to generalize and describe the genre, the word "surrealistic" gets tossed about, even in an article as brilliant and well-conceived as that of Lund and Wainwright's mentioned in

chapter two. But Carpentier, as indicated in preface, would be terribly offended to hear the idiosyncratic marvelousness of (Latin) American literature labeled as "surrealistic." In an impassioned moment of discontent with every attempt at conveying the marvelous, both contemporaneous of and prior to his own time, Carpentier chastises surrealism for its synthetic creations,

> [M]anufactured by tricks of prestidigitation, by juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together: that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table that led to ermine spoons, the snail in a rainy taxi, the lion's head on the pelvis of a widow, the Surrealist exhibitions…The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bureaucrats. (Zamora, 85).

The beauty of Carpentier's lo real maravilloso and the magical realism that would develop from it is that its marvelous need not be willed—it exists innately, bound up in the land, a natural product of the geography. For Carpentier, this is something that European writers seek to achieve but will never quite be able to manage.

Magical Realism v. Surrealism

As mentioned earlier in the first chapter, when magical realism initially broke into the global literary scene, it was typically compared to surrealism. Modernism itself is comprised of a variety of smaller movements, many of which fall under the *avant-garde* classification, and one of which is surrealism. Since the mantra of the *avant-garde* demands that its participants lead the forefront, it

comes as no surprise that subtle, sometimes miniscule changes in ideology and aesthetic would develop as the forefront moved forward, leading to murky and sometimes difficult to distinguish categories of texts. And while the German version magical realism stems from one of these *avant-garde* movements, and the Latin American literary tradition shares characteristics with surrealism, conflating it with surrealism has been shown as being problematic.

Surrealism arose in France as both a development of and a push back against modernism. Among its primary goals was the perversion of the reality that we perceive with our senses in an attempt to create dreamlike spaces and experiences. For the surrealists, these bizarre creations held some sort of essence or truth that rational reality failed to fully express or appreciate. Thus, reality needed distortion if anyone were to successfully represent it. This in and of itself is remarkable enough, but beyond the application of these ideologies to art and literature, the historical event of Surrealism foregoes any notion of aesthetic in an attempt to force political and social action. In fact, if it has any aesthetic at all, it may be that of shock. In *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, Jonathan Eburne outlines the shift from post-Dada (for our purposes, shortly after the decline of New Objectivity) to proto-surrealism. According to Eburne, surrealism has roots in violence, where disagreeing members of the school physically brawl and injure one another in the struggle to either reconcile Dadaism and surrealism or move beyond Dadaism altogether (61). The creation of the movement was itself a violent, often physical performance, as opposed to a mediated development that took place over time, from circulated text to

circulated text. Surrealism as a social and political entity functioned as a space that members were either allowed to occupy or forced to evacuate. As such, it was a self-conscious movement that facilitated the environment that necessitated its development.

In 1924, André Breton penned the *First Surrealist Manifesto*. In repurposing the manifesto genre, Breton practiced one of the most transparent textual markers of modernism's connection to politics. Between 1909 and 1959, dozens of movements would use the politically charged genre of the manifesto to outline the ideals and regulations of their respective schools of creation. The manifesto itself is a highly performative genre as Janet Lyon exposes in *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. As Lyon points out in her initial analysis of the form, "while it may be best known as the no-nonsense genre of plain speech…it is in fact a complex, ideologically inflected genre that has helped to create modern public spheres" (2). Thus, while it may masquerade as simple because of its supposed universality and lack of jargon, the manifesto is actually a rhetorically complicated form with clearly delineated structures and roles that both the author and the reader are expected to assume—the author as an impassioned leader and the reader as an individual with democratic rights, of which he has thus far been deprived. Moreover, the genre's use of the collective "we" situates the author as a representative of a group, a performer of the group's wishes and beliefs; the use of the plural first-person positions the author as both an authority and as a common citizen. However, the *First Surrealist Manifesto* seems to have a very specific, narrower audience in mind. His target

demographic consists of artists, particularly those that are aware of Parisian Dadaism. By writing for an elite group of people within a genre that is typically targeted at large audiences, Breton undermines the accessibility of a manifesto and instead puts particular emphasis on the revolutionary intent of Surrealism. Breton's Manifesto defines surrealism thusly: "Surrealism, noun, masc., Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations" (371). In an aggressive movement away from the empiricism of the Enlightenment of the previous century, Surrealism, as defined by Breton, doesn't merely disregard reason, but actively tries to extinguish it in an effort to locate something more instinctive and pure.

This instinct to locate something essential, something primitive, once again links surrealism and magical realism. But perhaps the most startling comparison between the two genres takes place earlier in his text when Breton argues that "[i]n the guise of civilization, under the pretext of progress, we have succeeded in dismissing from our minds anything that, rightly or wrongly, could be regarded as superstition or *myth*; and we have proscribed every way of seeking the truth that does not conform to convention [emphasis added]" (365). Though not a direct call for a return to myth, Breton laments, at the very least, its absence in modern thinking. But Breton then shifts his focus and the catalyst for surrealism is cemented as the dream; "I believe in the future resolution of these two states—outwardly so contradictory—which are dream and reality, into a sort

of absolute reality, a *surreality*, so to speak" (368). Here, we see the first seeds of what will eventually be a defining difference between surrealism and magical realism—while the former wants to reach some sort of truth by consciously altering and perverting reality, the latter is more interested in recovering the lost bits of human experience that have been disguised by empiricism and logic.

To elaborate further, intrinsic to surrealism is a kind of projection. Dreamlike, irrational, sometimes supernatural elements are projected upon reality in order to distort it. Magical realism, however, seeks to uncover the supernatural and inexplicable components that already exist within everyday reality that we have relegated to the past as part of some irrational, illogical superstition. The ultimate goal of both genres is quite similar—make art that presents the audience with an experience that cuts through the logical, purely sensory, empirical reality and arrives at a long lost truth. But the genres differ in the methods they use to achieve this goal. For instance, sometimes surrealism relies on irrational compositions (emphasis on the connotation of "composite") to represent unreality. The juxtaposition of logically unrelated items—like Salvador Dali's "Aphrodisiac Telephone," which consists of a plaster lobster on top of a rotary phone—often results in something playful and provocative, if only the viewer could suspend rationality for a moment. But the meaning, if there is any, rests in its nonsense—it only means something once the viewer projects a meaning upon it. Perhaps as a remnant of the *modernismo* that preceded it, magical realism imbues objects, images, characters, and events with meaning by way of symbolism. In this regard, surrealism sees experience and perception as

operating on a spectrum, with reality on one end and unreality on the other end. We are sometimes granted access to unreality, but typically only by way of dreams and in excessively intoxicated states.[6] Magical realism, however, sees reality and unreality as being two sides of one coin. In essence, one cannot physically exist without the other; they exist simultaneously and occupy the same space, indeed the same matter.

Though perhaps only a subtle difference in some conversations, here it seems important to the really flesh out the nuances between surrealism and magical realism. Obviously, magical realism does not participate in "pure psychic automatism," nor does it relinquish all ties to an aesthetic or moral preoccupation; it is quite preoccupied, on the contrary, with what Carpentier believes is a distinctly American (Latin American, that is) aesthetic. It becomes almost difficult to believe that early scholars of the genre would mislabel it as a division of surrealism when, in fact, their motivations could hardly be more disparate. All that is left to confuse, then, are some of the formal characteristics, like the use of supernatural or irrational imagery and narratives. This is fine and well, but the impetus behind magical realism's use of odd and disconcerting, amalgamated images is not to shock the audience into another plane of reality; rather, it aims to pull them into a reality that already exists as a composite of the mythical, mystical, superstitious realities that layer on top of one another, buried and

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[6] Refer to Walter Benjamin's *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligentsia*.

compressed with each new belief, until the only recourse is to dig back down to them.

Mythmaking

As the discussion of Gaspar Ilóm and Señor Tomás Machojón will allude to in the next chapter, the process of myth-restoration and myth making is key in Asturias' conception of a unified Guatemalan identity. In this way, *Men of Maize* aligns well with European modernisms, as proponents like Yeats, Eliot, and Mann showed an interest in returning to myth as well, to cope with the fracture of modernity.

In 1947, Thomas Mann wrote his *Essays of Three Decades*, and in doing so, invoked the modernist interest in myth: "[A]lthough in the life of the human race the mythic is an early and primitive stage, in the life of the individual, it is a late and mature one." Scholar Michael Bell uses this claim to begin his book *Literature, Modernism, and Myth*, wherein he outlines how something as ancient and collective as mythology can be used to develop the modernist project, which is so often focused on the individual. We have already talked briefly about the importance of myth within magical realism—the genre often engages with myth as a way to refute the supposed superiority of Westernized empiricism that led to colonialism. By creating an entire canon of artful, stylistically impressive literature, the "periphery" communities that Spindler refers to claim authority over their own cultures and literatures.

But Bell's book helps to elucidate why modernists in general—charged with the task to "make it new"—were often so attracted to the legendary, the epic,

and the ancient process of creating myth. According to Bell, if we momentarily set aside the stories and actual content of myths and the traditional notion that myth behaves as some sort of foundational belief, the process of creating myth—mythopoeia—actually emphasizes the variability of ideology (1-2). Specifically, Bell points out that "fully conscious citizens of the twentieth century are aware that their deepest commitments and beliefs are part of a world view, whether individual or collective, which cannot be transcendentally grounded or privileged over other possible world views" (1). It becomes important to regard myth from a more critical and self-aware perspective, understanding that one particular myth or ideology is not superior or correct, but is instead a product of the self-identification of the people(s) that generated and shaped it. Recalling Spindler's claims about the successes of anthropological magical realism, we can argue that Asturias is acutely conscious of the modernist conception of mythmaking, using it to assert the legitimacy of native and Guatemalan ideologies.

The narrative of mythopoeia over millennia, as laid out by both Mann and Bell, is situated temporally and divided between belief and skepticism. Enlightenment philosophy debunked mythology, and filled the void left behind with empiricism. It seems impossible that any individual exposed to Enlightenment values could rationally believe in the fantasy of myth. So when Modernism picks mythology back up, it does so with a more critical eye and with an interest, not in the content of myth, but in its methods and its aims. Put simply, there is no going back to a mode of thinking which privileges the mythic. The mythopoeia of modernism is not a return to a belief in myth, but a reapplication of

the process of making myth as a response the chaos of world wars. Perhaps we can go even so far as to call it a healing process.

If we begin to think of mythmaking as restorative, we must consider the injury that necessitates it. In a Eurocentric understanding of Modernism, the wound that needs healing is resultant of World War I—while the intricacies of the Great War's consequences on sociocultural and national identities could fill volumes more than this thesis has room for, it is at least reasonable to mark WWI as a catalyst to the growth of Modernism, and arguably one of the most traumatic events in the development of modernity. But Latin America's literal distance from the War across the Atlantic insulated it from the majority of the carnage and fracture that redefined Europe. In fact, Brazil was the only Latin American nation that involved itself in WWI, and its activities mostly consisted of naval blockades and patrol efforts.[7] So while the Great War surely had its effects across the globe, perhaps it is more useful to think of Latin America's need for healing in a postcolonial sense.

Postcolonial Readings

As scholarship has moved away from attempting to define magical realism, it has moved toward classifying much of its work as a postcolonial text. This is hardly surprising, as most magical realist writers come from previously colonized nations, particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean, India, and Africa.

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[7] Though over one hundred Brazilian sailors died of a Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, the nation suffered no combat casualties. Moreover, they did not involve themselves until 1917 and once the Treaty of Versailles was signed, Brazil's economy flourished as a result of improved trade relations (Manuel Pelaez).

It is natural, then, to read *Men of Maize* and other novels of the genre through a postcolonial lens.

As innovations in transportation and communication connected the world, newly developing countries often felt the pressure to modernize—if the individual citizens themselves did not feel this pressure, most of their leaders certainly did. As many nations in Latin America were rich with natural resources, and had already developed systems of mass production throughout their colonized histories, economic modernization happened relatively quickly (if not easily). Argentina, for instance, had the seventh highest per capita income by 1908, surpassing some European nations, Italy and Spain among them. While this certainly was not the standard in every Latin American nation, fast economic growth was not unusual. In regards to commerce, much of Latin America met the challenge of modernization with a good deal of success, if the standard of measurement is bound up in economics. The toll of this modernization on the individual peoples of the region, however, was obviously problematic, particularly as their nations were still recovering from wars of independence.

Once this region of the world became financially competitive with long-established European nations, Latin American countries embarked on a process of self-reflection and identification. As postcolonial theory illuminates, the often-arbitrary division of lands by political, rather than cultural borders can cause crises of identity. Thus, the culturally rich region had to define and defend itself as a collection of diverse nations, each with distinctive characteristics, and each separate from European traditions that no longer served its purposes. For though

the world became increasingly interconnected, the primary conflicts of Latin America as they manifested in literature were distinctly different from those in Europe during the era of modernization.

Amaryll Chanady takes up this notion in “The Territorialization of Latin America” when she discusses the post-Enlightenment creative atmosphere of the region by arguing that, “The New World imaginary is subsequently controlled by the requirement that it express national identity in accordance with the precepts of European positivism, which stress observation and objective knowledge of the referent” (126). As was briefly mentioned earlier, artists and writers from Latin American traveled across Europe, as it burgeoned with inspiration and innovation during the height of modernism. Carpentier, for example, spent much of his early life in Europe and brought many of the foundational goals of surrealism back to Cuba, seeing the ways in which it could be repurposed and reinterpreted to capture the “marvelous real” that permeated Latin American and Caribbean life. This habit of taking European models and genres and refashioning them for the purpose of representing the cultural climate of Latin American in the first half of the 20th century would prove to be a key step in the process of the region’s literary legitimization. But this should not be reduced to mere mimicry. In order to defend this statement, however, a quick explanation of the culture atmospheres is in order.

In general, it may help to think of Latin America as comprised of primarily three different cultures and their respective combinations: (1) the indigenous tribes with their corresponding religions, such as the nahaulism in Guatemala, for

example; (2) the African peoples who brought with them Voodoo (Carpentier's Macandal), and the European colonizers who typically practiced Catholicism (Henri Christophe, for example). Of course each of these generalized cultures are comprised of smaller, more varied groups, and blended combinations of them as well (Ti Noel, for instance). Though vastly different, these cultures widely devoted themselves to religions that featured some sort of magical or supernatural element. Shapeshifting, premonitions, miracles, magic, corporeal possession, and myths of all sorts coexisted by necessity—such cultural mixture helped to define both the colonial and postcolonial atmospheres of the region. The mystical elements of the religious or mythological practices is of particular interest, however, as it arguably provides the cultural foundation upon which magical realism is built.

Religion often functions, after all, as a way to provide explanations for unnatural occurrences. Perhaps this is the potential that Latin American artists and writers saw in the impetus of movements like surrealism—a desire to represent, in some artful way, the truly bizarre components of experience. While they may have felt that surrealism and its associated acts were not precisely applicable to the cultural environment of their homelands, the likes of Carpentier, Borges, Asturias, and eventually Márquez recognized the motivation of these European avant-garde movements and could see similar experiences and spaces ready to be explored in the literature of their own nations. And so it may be argued that magical realism began as an attempt to find a lowest common denominator—some sort of common trait that the various cultures of these

regions shared that could be championed as a binding force in Latin American identity, even as each nation made other moves to distinguish itself. This common trait—mystical or magical experience as a result of living a liminal, postcolonial space—would manifest itself in different ways, not only for each nation, but for each cultural experience, as well.

CHAPTER III
HOMBRES DE MAÍZ

"Wealth of men, wealth of women, to have many children. Old folk, young folk, men and women, they all became ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize: ants, ants, ants, ants…"

Miguel Ángel Asturias, Epilogue of Men of Maize

There are, of course, characteristics of magical realism in Latin America that do not correspond well to some of the formative aspects of modernism, as it existed in Europe. In terms of determining a range of dates in which we can contain modernism, World War I is typically of great importance. It destabilized the political atmosphere and physical landscape of a continent and eradicated nearly an entire generation of men. But in Guatemala, where *Men of Maize* is presumed to take place, the modernist encounter had very little, if anything to do with a Great War.[8] The trauma, rather, is something that postcolonial theory has taken up time and again—the forced modernization of newly independent nations. Previously colonized nations are made to reinvent their traditional economic and societal systems in an effort to become cosmopolitan, and to shed the "third world" label. But as Asturias expresses in *Men of Maize*, such

[8] Asturias opens the novel on the first page by referring to "the land of Ilóm." Such a place does not exist, at least not by that name. Ilóm, instead, is the surname of the introductory mythic hero, and as such, the land is under his protection. However, Asturias does reference Guatemala specifically in the epilogue and has otherwise indicated that the story is set in Guatemala.

modernization and attempts to create a national identity often come at the price of both the individual and the indigenous community. For the *hombres de maíz*, it means the degradation of not only their sacred foodstuff, but also the very matter out of which they exist.

Though often mysterious and difficult to follow, the novel embodies some key aspects of the magical realist tradition, none more prominently than its devotion to native mythological tradition. *Men of Maize* explores the consequences of a combative relationship between native tradition and imperial structures of politics and beliefs, and ultimately, the contact zone where these separate sides must interact with one another. As part of the process, it incorporates Mayan mythology and the creation myth(s) found in the *Popol Vuh*—a collection of mythic-historical tales, and one of the only surviving Pre-Colombian texts of the Mayan peoples. The very title of the novel is taken from the Mayan belief that humans were first fashioned out of corn. In fact, much of the Popol Vuh, and thus, *Men of Maize*, operate via an extended agricultural metaphor. In the preamble to the creation myth, the text itself is referred to as an "an account of the sowing" of the world and the first people (trans. Christenson, ln 6). Establishing this allegory early is crucial, as it informs the bulk of a fair amount of criticism done on the novel.

Structurally, the novel is split into two halves, the first of which is comprised of five chapters about five separate primary characters who are only connected to one another through legend and myth. The latter half is devoted to one character—a postman—who seeks to recover his indigeneity after his wife

abandons him. Though shapeshifting occurs throughout the book, *nahualism* is particularly present in the second half, as the title “Coyote-Postman” suggests.[9] Though there are specific instances in the novel that show a human character distinctly transforming into one creature or another, oftentimes, the *nahaulism* happens associatively, in such a subtle way that the reader is not meant to distinguish whether Asturias is making use of metaphor or magic. Ultimately, however, he leaves the reader feeling as though this *nahaulism* is the only path back to an idealized native tradition, as the final line (“they all became ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize”) sees the people of Ilóm turn into ants that will be able to carry the corn to a safe space where their identity can be reclaimed. The novel ends and begins with an image of the people and the land of Ilóm; this is important for two reasons.

The first effect of beginning and ending the novel with the land and people of Ilóm will be expanded upon late, but it has to do with the concept of Ilóm itself. The word signifies both the Mayan chieftain who used it as a name and the land that he represented and tried to protect. Here, not just existence, but identity is intrinsically tied to the land itself, so much so that they are nearly synonymous.

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that the plot itself operates cyclically, and a mirrored beginning and end emphasizes this. The separate chapters develop separate stories with unrelated plots, leaving a reader to

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[9] The Mesoamerican belief that some people possess a corresponding animal spirit, whose body they can sometimes physically inhabit. Referred to in the *Popol Vuh*, regarded as Pre-Colombian, and typically associated with heightened spirituality in Mayan communities.

wonder if anything aside from place binds the novel together—the jump to a text like James Joyce's *Dubliners* is an easy one to make, if *Men of Maize* and its genre are still trying to find space within modernism. There is, however, a spiraling direction to the narrative that holds the novel together despite its first impression as being rather disjointed. The first chapter, dedicated to the premature rebellion and murder of Gaspar Ilóm lays a mythic foundation on which much of the novel's sense of legend is built. The plot of the second chapter has absolutely nothing to do with Gaspar, but instead traces the downfall of one of the men who plotted to kill him. The third chapter, having no relation in plot to its predecessors, introduces two new feuding families. There are stylistic elements that liken it to the first two chapters, but its clearest connection is a mention of a character that knew Gaspar before he was murdered (56). The progression of the chapters, as if spiraling outward, seems to distance itself from bits of the story its already told, only to return to them briefly, and then cycle back around. The fifth chapter features a character named María Tecún who runs away from her husband and supposedly toward a range of cliffs. Early in the sixth chapter, our protagonist, Nicho Aquino, condemns his own runaway wife by referring to her as a "tecuna" (168). The narrator then addresses the term as if he only knew of its meaning through legend and folklore, distancing himself from the prior narrative and muddling the reader's understanding of the timeline. Gabriel García Márquez would go on to cement this narrative tactic within magical realism in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but that would not be for another eighteen years.

In *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature*, Jean Franco discusses the illogical timeline of the novel when he points out that, in *Men of Maize*, the "time scheme is a mythic time in which many thousands of years may be compressed and seen as a single moment." Franco zooms in on novel as well, when he asserts that the book's language is "structured so as to be analogous to Indian languages" (Franco 250). Here, it is of absolute necessity to look at the novel in its original Spanish and compare it to some of the untranslated text of the *Popol Vuh* as an example of an Indian language.

The opening lines of *Men of Maize* read as follows:

> —El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le roben el sueño de los ojos.
>
> —El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le boten los párpados con hacha…
>
> —El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le chamusquen la ramazón de las pestañas con las quemas que ponen la luna color de hormiga vieja. (Asturias, untranslated 11)[10]

A quick look at the opening lines of part one of the *Popol Vuh* in its original Mayan dialect of Quiché/K'iché will show how clearly Asturias borrows from the syntactical structure of the myth.

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[10] Translation by Gerald Martin: "Gaspar Ilóm is letting them steal the sleep from the eyes of the land of Ilóm. Gaspar Ilóm is letting them hack away the eyelids of the land of Ilóm with axes…Gaspar Ilóm is letting them scorch the leafy eyelashes of the land of Ilóm with fires that turn the moon the angry brown of an old ant…" (1).

Are utzijoxik wa‘e

k‘a katz‘ininoq,

k‘a kachamamoq,

katz‘inonik,

k‘a kasilanik,

k‘a kalolinik,

katolona puch upa kaj (Colop, 1999).

Translated by Colop, these lines read in English as “This is the account of how / all was in suspense, / all calm, / in silence; / all motionless, / quiet, / and empty was the expanse of the sky.” The parallel is visually obvious on the page, but it should noted that the dashes at the beginning of each line in the Men of Maize opening are used as quotation marks, separating the preamble of the novel from the third-person omniscient narration of the rest of it. Both the beginning of Men of Maize and the Popol Vuh read like a legend, spoken not by an individual within the text, but by an outside storyteller. As one pair of critics will go on to assert, “Like a powerful god, the hand of Asturias pretends to intervene in this world from outside of history. Expressing a desire born in the heart of Europe, articulating words accumulated where wheat and maize were traded, a magical tale of resistance opens a space in history, only to place the Maya within their *milpa* on the margins of Guatemala” (Lund and Wainwright 155-56). *Milpa*, the concept of sacred land of Mayan tradition, where the maize that they live off of flourishes, remains the space for them to inhabit. Whether or not this marginalizes them, however, is open to debate.

Once the fundamental mythological motifs and the basic structure of the novel have been set up, the primary conflict can come into focus. As previously mentioned, each chapter follows separate, but delicately interconnected characters and plots. But as the primer for its canvas on which each of these plot lines will be created, *Men of Maize* tells the story of a once isolated indigenous community whose land is being overrun by maizegrowers who are looking to use the land to produce commercial amounts of corn.

The distinction between the *hombres de maíz* or “men of maize” and the *maiceros* or “maizegrowers” is not class, per se, and certainly not their nationality. The *maiceros* are not outsiders or Europeans—they are peasant class Guatemalans. The real distinction between the *hombres de maíz* and the *maiceros* is their intent. The *maiceros*, operate as part of a capitalist economy. Commercial crop growing, even if done by Guatemalans, desecrates the native belief, and this is addressed quite early in the text. “Different if it was just to eat. It’s to make money. Different, too, if it was on their own account, but they go halves with the boss, and sometimes not even halves. The maize impoverishes the earth and makes no one rich” (5). Here we see the complexity of the modern identity. The *maiceros* represent a sort of compromise between the colonized and the colonizer. Unlike a typical high modernist novel that follows the individual development of a socially isolated character, *Men of Maize* showcases a cast of archetypal figures who do not develop in the same way novelistic characters might be expected to.

Since Mayan beliefs dictate that the gods created the first men out of corn, the grain is highly sacred, thus, its exploitation by industrialization is met with both revolt and despair. The dichotomy between native tradition and invasive imperialism is set in stark relief, so much so that it seems oversimplified, at times. But Asturias tempers this bold contrast by maintaining a complicated ambivalence in regards to the mixing of races. This ambivalence reflects Asturias' early academic and literary career, wherein he advocated *ladinización*, or the assimilation of the Indian population into a preferable, mixed race. For a period of time, Asturias believed that the best way to create a cohesive Guatemalan nationality was to dilute what was often considered abrasive, even shameful native blood by encouraging them to mix and reproduce with other *mestizos*. After traveling to Great Britain to study Mayanism, Asturias eventually recognized the highly problematic nature of eugenics, but still feared that Guatemala would never find unity until the native population could be reconciled with modernization.[11]

In some ways, *Men of Maize* serves as a teasing out of these ambivalences, often providing commentary on what it means to possess Mayanness and the ultimate value of that Mayanness. Joshua Lund and Joel Wainwright discuss this very concern through a postcolonial lens, in their article "Miguel Ángel Asturias and the Aporia of Postcolonial Geography." As they outline, Asturias sets up a dichotomy between the indigenous *hombres de maíz*

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[11] For more information on Asturias' work on Mayanism in Great Britain, refer to López Alvarez (1974).

and the *maiceros* who, while also Guatemalan, represent an impure mixed community. The notion of impurity is key, as Lund and Wainwright argue that the very displacement of the *hombres de maíz* is the result of European colonialism and even seemingly minor things, like trading corn for wheat, are regarded as tainting the indigeneity of the land. This idea of colonialism tarnishing a sense of native identity and purity is not altogether novel, but Lund and Wainwright apply the process of European infiltration to agriculture and food supply, making it of particular relevance to the discussion of *Men of Maize*.

The *maiceros*, though not entirely evil, make a living by inflicting destruction on the land. They grow corn, of course, but they do so by burning fields of massive acreage, sucking the soil of its nutrients, and sometimes permanently mutilating the land. The *hombres de maíz*, in contrast, nurture the land and use it only as much as necessary to keep their families and communities fed. Though this is perhaps an over-simplified binary on the part of Asturias, this kind of abstraction of stereotypes is reminiscent of the caricaturizing nature of mythology. Moreover, as Lund and Wainwright argue, Asturias inverts the typical colonial binary (wherein the colonizer's actions are civilized and preferable, while the colonized are savage and mistaken), and chastises the *maicero* way of life, not only for depleting the land and forcing out the *hombres de maíz*, but for undermining the sacredness of the maize itself:

> Pushing this trope to its limits, the *maicero* becomes a capitalist butcher, and, in a clever reversal of colonial discourse, is negatively opposed to the organic, life-giving cannibalism of the *hombre de*

> *maíz*. Much later in the novel, Nicho Aquino, a partially *ladinizado* indigenous mail-carrier in the process of rediscovering his indigeneity, is confronted by a spirit figure, a true *hombre de maíz*, the 'old man with black hands, hands the color of maize' (192). In a tremendous three-page recapitulation of the novel' s basic existential and political arguments, the man with black hands explains that the act of eating is always an act of savagery, that civilized food does not exist, and that the cannibalism of corn-eating men of maize eat, precisely, maize—is nothing less than a payment upon man's debt to the earth. The blood of man's children must replenish the earth that sustains man. Universal law itself is a cannibal—In the old days the law authorized a father to eat his children'—but not a killer—'but it never went so far as to authorize him to murder them to sell their flesh' (192). To sell their maize is to sell their children: 'who would ever think of having children just to sell their flesh, to retail the flesh of their children in a butcher's shop' (ibid.). If the *hombre de maíz* must eat his children to ensure the survival of the tribe, then the *maicero* sells his children to turn a profit. The dramatic tension, the war, is on: the men of corn versus the profiteers of corn, precapitalist Indians against capitalist *ladinos* (147).

If the *Popol Vuh* roots all meaning and creation in the sowing of crops, specifically for nourishment, the *maiceros* (who tend to be racially, *ladinos*) are

defined by their very desecration of that belief. But not all *ladinos* participate in a *maicero* way of life. Thus, Asturias makes it more difficult to reduce the novel's system of morality to a matter of race.

But Asturias also takes time within the novel to consider what goes into the process of creating an epic hero; for Asturias, this hero is initially Gaspar Ilóm. After the death of Gaspar, the reader is more intimately introduced to (Señor) Tomás Machojón in chapter two. Tomás, along with his wife and a select few conspirators, is one of the characters responsible for the downfall of Gaspar and the exploitation of the land for crop yield. Referred to again and again by the *maiceros* that rent land from him as "the boss," Señor Tomás is a turncoat—a man native to the land, pure in his indigineity, who left his community in order to seek success and fortune amongst the industrialized ranks. Within Señor Tomás is a great sense of familial pride and most of that goes toward his son, the younger Machojón—bright, full of potential, and preparing for a journey to marry his sweetheart.

As an element of mythological practice, Señor Tomás is cursed for conspiring to kill Gaspar: his name will die out and his son will not see a life long enough to raise a family. Magical "firefly wizards" kill the younger Machojón as he is on his way to find his bride, thus manifesting the curse. The notion of firefly wizards is, of course, highly preternatural, and as a result, has been interpreted into more realistic terms, wherein the label "firefly wizard" is a figurative reference to the *hombres de maíz* who are rationally exacting revenge. But within the space of the narrative, the concept exists comfortably; that is to say, even if the

characters are frightened of such entities, it is not because they find their presence uncanny or impossible, but because they are rather threatened by their power. In the land of Ilóm, there is nothing odd about magical firefly wizards. This will eventually be discussed as an example of "ontological magical realism."

After Machojón has been killed by the curse, locals claim to see the young man at night sometimes, "through the smoke and flames, dressed all in gold," while the *maiceros* are burning down the forests to clear land (37). Señor Tomás fixates on the notion that his son has been mythologized and when the buzz surrounding his son dissipates, he dresses up as Machojón one night, lights an entire hillside on fire, and sacrifices himself to the flames. In doing so, he attempts to give locals visual, definitive proof, that the son of Señor Tomás is a fireproof hero, bound to the land even after death. Since his son and his family name are dead, this is the only way that Señor Tomás can leave anything lasting behind, even though it costs him his life.

Señor Tomás' spectacle serves as a commentary on the origins of mythology. Rationally, we understand that myths develop as a way to teach lessons and to pass down information, and as they distance themselves from their origins with time and interact with the belief systems of other cultures, they morph and take on sacred meaning. But beyond the practical communicative purpose they serve, Señor Tomás uses the power of myth as a preservative. They encapsulate within themselves a concise, condensed sample of cultural import. Perhaps this is why Asturias returns to the *Popol Vuh* in order to tell the story of the modernization of Guatemala's indigenous communities. His

ambivalence toward eugenics and his confusion regarding the future of Guatemala's national identity take solace in the de-creation of a narrative of reality corresponding with modernism and avant-garde movements, and a recreation, not exclusively of Mayan myth, but of Guatemalan myth. If Gaspar Ilóm represents Mayan indigeneity and a mythology tied closely to the land, Señor Tomás embodies an endeavor at a new mythic figure—one self-consciously constructed, who possesses both moral and immoral qualities.

As neither of these figures survives the novel, Asturias leaves us with few other options that embody some sense of hope. As Lund and Wainwright determine in their article, "Mayanness is not reducible to blood, but to a set of practices, maintained by the *mestiza* María Tecún and abandoned by the impure Indian Tomás Machojón" (149). Perhaps, then, we can look toward María Tecún for deliverance.

Originally named María Zacatónes, the young woman was the remaining member of a family who had been slaughtered in an act of vengeance by the Tecún family. When the blind man, Goyo Yic, found her as a nursing infant, he changed her name to Tecún for safety, raised her, and eventually married her. In fact, nearly everything the reader learns of María is secondhand knowledge, from either the Tecún family that appears in the third chapter, or her guardian-husband in the fifth—not until the final chapter do we hear from María herself. And yet she remains one of the more resilient characters. She personifies survival through the loss of identity (she lives as a Tecún despite coming from a rival bloodline), and yet has enough agency to leave an unhappy marriage and

keep her children in the process. Asturias leaves us with options in choosing who the hope and hero of the novel should be, but in doing so, he reiterates and ambivalence toward the ladinización that he once believed to be the solution to Guatemala's identity crisis. It is not race, but the "set of practices" of Mayanness that Lund and Wainwright point out, that determine each character's indigeneity.

For Asturias, part of elevating indigeneity to acclaimed literary status is to match form and content. As Aleskín Ortega points out in the article "El Sacrificio Mítico En 'Hombres De Maíz'," notions of traditional narration and novel structure fail to incorporate the *Men of Maize* into discussions of novel conventions:

> Nos queda entonces aceptar la opinión de Giuseppe Bellini, quien afirma que 'si nos obstinamos a considerar a Hombres de maíz bajo los esquemas tradicionales de la novela', ésta carecería de una unidad y estructura (69); consecuentemente, es menester un acercamiento al texto totalmente alejado de una óptica tradicional. Debemos fijarnos en elementos independientes de la mitología de la cual se nutre y cómo su autor intenta recrearla no solamente en la inserción de historias sino en la técnica utilizada para la construcción misma de la trama (np.).[12]

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[12] Translation: "We then accept the opinion of Giuseppe Bellini, who argues that 'if we stubbornly consider *Men of Maize* as lacking traditional structures of the novel,' in its lack of unity and structure (69); then it is necessary to approach the text from a non-traditional viewpoint. We should fix our gaze on independent elements of the mythology on which [the text] is based and which the author tries to recreate—not only in his insertion of its histories [content], but also in the technical construction of the plot [form]."

Ortega participates in a vital conversation about Asturias' attempts to merge content and form through the use of mythic. As has already been mentioned, pre-modern iterations of the novel tend to follow a linear narrative structure. And while European and high modernist novels eventually participate in a reconfiguration of novelistic conventions, *Men of Maize* does so specifically by returning to Guatemala's Mayan, mythically charged roots.

In the end, *Men of Maize* might not actually tell a singular story—at least not in the traditional sense of a narrative. As Lund and Wainwright contend, "it is striking to trace the way in which this conflict becomes a kind of frankly told morality tale, reiterated in straightforward fashion four more times" (151). It consists of various chapters that follow various characters, some of which can be associated with one another, and some of which are apparently random. Time is nonlinear, which the cyclical syntactic structure only helps to emphasize. So since the book was published, critics have tried to locate some way to connect the disparate chapters together into one cohesive work. Some have suggested the location as a binding agent: all of the stories take place in one area in Guatemala. But others have suggested that the use of myth is what ties the story together. Not only do I agree with the latter explanation, but I also think that the use of myth in this particular novel is a successful response to the high modernist call for a return to the mythic. Rather than accept the fact that the novel is disjointed on simply for the sake of being disjointed, in a style akin to surrealism, reading the use of mythos as the primary driving force in the story helps to illuminate the potential motivation behind some of the more fantastic elements of

the story, but also the cyclical form of the narrative. The effect is similar to the aim of surrealism—unlocking an alternative reality and/or nonlinear passage of time—but the resultant tone is unforced and unmanufactured, as Carpentier called for.

CHAPTER IV:
CONCLUSION

"Sown to be eaten it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize."

-Asturias, "Gaspar Ilóm" from *Men of Maize*

If we accept that modernism is, at its foundations, a push back against the realism of the Enlightenment and more generally, a movement to destabilize established ideologies and societal institutions, we cannot exclude or compromise the literature resultant from Latin American magical realism. True, the region's trauma had little to do with a Great War, as was the case in Europe, but it certainly felt the reverberations of fascist ideology, political upheaval, and lightning-fast modernization.

Certainly, early iterations of magical realism in Latin America pre-date the critically compiled amalgamation of characteristics of the movement—referring to it as "the definition" would be an oversight, as has already been established. Borges, as Flores would go on to claim, put into practice many of the forms and conventions of magical realism without labeling them as such. But as Carpentier soon pointed out, the Eurocentric model that Borges often represented to both scholars and fellow writers failed to showcase the intrinsic merit of Latin America as a literary region. And so Carpentier himself would go on to write a near-manifesto, calling for a distinctly American fiction that would more naturally accomplish so many of the goals that avant-garde movements in Europe tried to

manufacture. He himself attempted to bring out the intrinsically fantastical nature of the region and its history with *The Kingdom of this World*, but perhaps his greatest contribution to the movement was his preface to the novel, wherein he proved to be a champion of Latin American literary merits and assertively detached himself from the European tradition of modernism. This is not to say, however, the Latin America and magical realism did not participate in modernism—or rather, one of its pluralities. Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, and later writers like Márquez would prove to be modernists in their own right. If anything, this suggests that modernism, stripped of all of its critically delineated conventions, tropes, and habits, is at its core, a response to modernity. Thus, by reframing the movement in terms of global modernism, we can set aside reading international modernist texts for their generic formal conventions—though this is valuable and necessary—and instead invest effort in reading them for a better understanding of how modernity (has) impacted non-Western cultures and literary traditions.

Each distinct nation within the region presented its own literary reactions to modernity, but as is evident from *Men of Maize*, Asturias saw Guatemala's particular encounter as rife with consequences for the cultural identities of its peoples. For the *hombres de maíz* of Guatemala, humans had long been spiritually connected, not merely to the land, but to the very nourishment it provided. When modernity finally arrived, with its remnants of capitalism and social stratification, and that indescribably essential food was reconfigured as a

product—as a crop grown to feed people far removed from the land—the spiritual identity of the *hombres de maíz* is irreparably damaged.

Perhaps Asturias writes of hope that a native identity may be restored, or perhaps his proposed solution is a new blended identity. It seems that his attitude toward the future of Guatemala will continue to be reanalyzed among scholars. Whether he provides hope or a less optimistic, but nonetheless poetic ambivalence by the end of the novel, Asturias makes a move toward some sort of healing. As was the case for at least a handful of other modernists and most of the cohort of Latin American magical realist, the answer for Asturias lies in a re-mythologizing of his nation: messy, inconsistent, altogether spectacular, and yet entirely mundane, filled with modern heroes facing the reinvented conflict of self, other, and identification.

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