

THE END OF THE WOR(L)D AS WE KNOW IT: TEXTUALITY, AGENCY, AND
ENDINGS IN POSTCOLONIAL MAGICAL REALISM

by

Janna Mercedes Urschel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2013

© COPYRIGHT

by

Janna Mercedes Urschel

2013

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Janna Mercedes Urschel

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citation, bibliographic style, and consistency and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

Dr. Robert Bennett

Approved for the Department of English

Dr. Philip Gaines

Approved for The Graduate School

Dr. Ronald W. Larsen

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

If I have indicated my intention to copyright this thesis by including a copyright notice page, copying is allowable only for scholarly purposes, consistent with "fair use" as prescribed in the U.S. Copyright Law. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted only by the copyright holder.

Janna Mercedes Urschel

April 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the dedicated members of my thesis committee, who stuck with me through the protracted and messy process of my thought and offered sage advice and splendid encouragement: my chair, Dr. Robert Bennett, and committee members Dr. Michael Sexson, Dr. Kirk Branch, and Dr. Lisa Eckert.

To my husband, Matthew, and daughters Rowan and Anaea, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your patience, love, and support, without which I could not have hoped to make it to “the end” of this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE TEXTS	6
<i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i>	7
<i>Beloved</i>	12
<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	20
3. THEORETICAL LENSES	28
“Writing Back”	28
Word – World	43
4. ENDS (NOT-ENDS)	58
WORKS CITED	77

ABSTRACT

The magical realist novels *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz exemplify the concerns of critical literacy theory for counter-oppressive textual agency through highlighting paradoxes in the nature of text and its relationship to agency implicit in the interaction between authors, texts, and readers. The nature of magical realism as a literary mode as it fits into postcolonial thought and engages with reader response theory allows for an analysis of the “apocalyptic” endings of these novels that shows that they engage in ontological disruption and conscientization on the part of the reader with reference to their role as reader, or consumer, of texts.

INTRODUCTION

[...] races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on this earth.

--*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez

Beloved.

--*Beloved*, Toni Morrison

“The beauty!”

--Oscar Wao in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz

The End. Last words. Let's begin with what happens at the end of a novel: the collapse of a world, the return from Wonderland, from Narnia, back through rabbit-hole and wardrobe, across the boundaries of space, time, body, and the possible. The reader who emerges is not the same reader who went in. Text, deceptively manifested as symbols lined up neatly on paper or screen, was permeable, allowed passage not to flat weave and ink, but to places richly peopled and events in motion. The reader “insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body” (de Certeau xxi). Reading is absorptive, but reading is also active, constitutive, creative. When readers “fall into a book,” like Alice down the rabbit-hole, something magical happens. The real and the imaginary get mixed up with one another. The reader brings their world in to inform and co-create the text (cf. Iser, Todorov), and carries elements from the text back out into the world, with the potential to influence action in the real world. Intertextuality crosses the borders between the physical and mental, the “real” and the “magical,” but not unproblematically as dynamics of power and politics become embroiled in the sedimentation of language in text. As Jorge Luis Borges cautions, “the world will be

Tlön” (“Tlön” 81), which is to say, texts can ontologize. Magical realist literature in particular takes up the question of ontological boundaries, especially those authors who are writing from a postcolonial position, working to “write back” to imperial ways of being and knowing (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin), as do the novels under consideration here: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. Particularly striking about these novels is their use of “apocalyptic” endings to problematize texts and reader engagement and to enact a species of counter-colonial ontological disruption. At the end of each novel, readers are ejected from the inner worlds of these novels by the sweeping of a catastrophic wind and the injunction of the narrators to forget, an impossible task, especially in the face of memorable tales and compelling last words. In order to explore this paradox, these novels leverage the properties of the literary mode of magical realism.

Magical realism does its notorious best to evade easy answers. The sheer number of attempts at definition, reframings of the concept, and rejections of any such categorization, speak to the ambivalence of its explanatory value in literary criticism, and yet, the label and the concept underlying it persist and continue to inform analysis. The covering concept of “magical realism” comes under fire from charges varying from exotic fluff (e.g. Julian Barnes, cf. Zamora and Faris 1) to an over-thinking of what is simply experience of the everyday in some cultures (e.g. Ben Okri, cf. Benito, Manzananas and Simal 112). The problematic nature of defining the mode is itself characteristic of what the mode is and does, and part of what arises in the discussion in this thesis. It is apropos that magical realism should dodge attempts at definition since what the works so

categorized explore is largely paradox and the desire to engage in “ontological disruption” (Zamora and Faris 3). For the purposes of forming a working definition, however, elements from the various theoretical formulations can be brought into a basic kind of agreement that magical realism brings together elements of the “magic” (fantastic, spiritual, mythic, “*maravilloso*” (Carpentier), empirically inexplicable) and the “real” (rational, mundane, empirically valid or verifiable). The proportions, reasons, and ways for bringing these elements together vary from text to text. However, in the face of great disparity, trends have certainly emerged, such as those identified by Wendy Faris in “Scheherazade's Children,” which include in brief: tendencies towards creating worlds that are at base realistic, but insert “magical” elements without comment; creating ambivalence or doubt in the reader; disrupting ontology; taking stances that are anti-bureaucratic; featuring metafictional devices; and repeating figures, such as mirrors. What emerges, then, is a mode that brings into contact two covering terms that represent a variety of practices and attitudes towards ontological systems that range from the “magical” to the “real,” often introducing dichotomies in order to question or otherwise problematize them. By some definitions of magical realism, these diverse elements co-exist in “unresolved antimony” (Chanady); we are called to accept seemingly antithetical systems of thought at one and the same time, to suspend the need to resolve any contradiction.

Parallel to cultural theories of hybridity, magical realism as a literary mode is also a hybrid, which positions literature written in this mode so as to problematize received ontological categories like time, space, gender, agency, and literature itself. As I will

cover further in the second chapter, postcolonial strains of magical realism seem especially concerned with the relationship between place, identity, agency, and text, as authors move to “write back” to imperial centers (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). This hybrid of the magical and the real creates a “third space,” along the lines of what Homi Bhabha theorizes, where diverse ways of lived experience come into contact. This space takes form in the novels under consideration here, linking place with text, authors, and readers, in multiply embedded spatial and discursive levels. This embeddedness points to one of Faris's main identified trends in magical realism, namely the use of metafictional devices. All of the texts presented here for analysis are profoundly metafictional, or more broadly, metatextual, making use of a story-within-a-story format. While this device manifests itself in very different ways, in each novel text is both a central theme and object, revealing an abiding concern with how language, and specifically written text, shapes history and reality. The inner story serves to delimit an inner space of action where magic is active, and specifically where the conjuring power of words act through a storyteller to influence reality. Words and the narrative they comprise are tied explicitly to the very corporeality of their teller, so that in each of these texts the fate of the narrator of the inner tale is physically bound to a textual object, and to the life-cycle of the tale, all of which are obliterated in ambiguous apocalyptic endings. The functions of these endings are the subject of the third and final chapter, which finds that readers are implicated in a transfer of responsibility, creating the hope of ending the cycle of oppression by text through a process of “detextualization,” that is, a denial, or refusal, of the text, while simultaneously acknowledging this as an impossibility. The act of pointing

to this paradox, so well enabled by the paradoxical mode of magical realism, becomes a species of counter-colonial hope.

To set the stage for further discussion, Chapter 1 will introduce each novel for analysis by identifying prominent relevant passages that illustrate the major themes taken up in this thesis, namely those of metatextuality, embodiment, and agency. Chapter 2 introduces a set of theoretical frameworks to shed light on the texts and themes identified in the first chapter. Through the lenses of postcolonial and reader response theories, the texts reveal attitudes towards the nature of textuality and agency, and their employment by oppressor and oppressed in a series of moves that problematize what it means to be an author and a reader. Chapter 3 theorizes about the ends of each of the novels, and how through them the authors of the texts may be implicating their readers in the activity of “writing back” to “the Empire” (Salman Rushdie qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 33). This activity is brought into the sphere of critical literacy in the way the novels work through readers to enact conscientization.

THE TEXTS

While most prominently associated with the Latin American mid-twentieth century literary “boom,” magical realism can characterize writing from many periods and cultures throughout the globe, and the themes I am treating here – textuality, agency, and “apocalyptic” endings – can be traced in those diverse literatures. I have chosen texts for analysis to reflect some of that geographic, chronological, and cultural diversity, though there is certainly some arbitrariness in the selection. It seems impossible to me to speak of textuality and apocalypse without “beginning at the beginning” with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece has become the *sine qua non* canonical (and I use the term with uneasy irony) text of magical realism as a mode. That said, my employment of it here is not as any species of yardstick by which I measure other texts, but as an acknowledgment simply of its powerful expression of the themes under discussion. I include *Beloved* as a very different kind of text coming from a very different cultural experience, that of slavery and post-civil war Reconstruction in the United States. It is likewise profoundly metatextual and concerned with agency, but contextualizes these concerns in a radically different way, while still speaking to a fundamental common concern. While potentially classed with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as “Latin American,” I see *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as coming from a singularly different context dealing with Dominican-American diaspora, with dictatorship, and its own relationship to text. Any text post-*One Hundred Years of Solitude* likely owes an intertextual debt to it, but its shadow is not so long that it

obscures the original engagements with particular histories and experiences evidenced in these later texts.

These texts are not chosen out of a desire to represent “Latin American” or “African American” or “Dominican American” diversity per se, but simply as exemplars of postcolonial texts that speak tellingly to textuality, agency, and apocalypse each in their own way. And while the emphasis in this thesis is on commonalities, the work left unfinished by it is precisely that of locating the texts culturally, a subject for future exploration. By finding commonalities I am not purporting to universalize or to minimize difference. As with those theorists whose work I incorporate in the following chapters, I aim to be sensitive to “avoiding separatism while at the same time respecting cultural diversity” (Zamora and Faris 4). In the following, each text is examined in order to highlight important passages and themes as they relate to the subject of this thesis, pulling out moments that speak especially well to textuality, agency, and ends.

One Hundred Years of Solitude

One Hundred Years of Solitude is permeated with textual objects and thematic treatment of the nature of writing and of history, from writing as the oft-cited attempt at a solution to the plague of insomnia, to Aureliano's writing of poetry to preserve his humanity, to José Arcadio Buendía's scolding of Don Apolinar Moscote that “In this town we do not give orders with pieces of paper” (García Márquez 61), and Arcadio's subsequent “predilection for decrees” (105). Even Amaranta's proscribed shroud, referencing Penelope's labor in *The Odyssey*, is a species of text to which her corporeality

is tied. Melquíades's manuscript, however, is the central one with which the entire fate of the town and the ultimate fate of the Buendía family line is tied. And all this is to say nothing of the profoundly intertextual nature of García Márquez's narrative, referencing as it does the Bible, Nostradamus's prophecies, stories by Jorge Luis Borges, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, etc. Text thus permeates the novel both thematically and as textual objects, rendering *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a profoundly self-conscious textual work exploring the relationships between text, history, authors, readers, and reality.

Text in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* sets up just the kind of *mise-en-abyme* Faris references as characteristic of magical realist literature (“Scheherazade's” 175), with the indecipherable manuscript set inside a room outside time inside a house fighting ruination within a town cut off from civilization. Each spatial layer of the Chinese box has its own story/history which ultimately circle back to each other as Melquíades's manuscript proves to be the history of Macondo. Macondo is a space set aside, a town founded in the middle of the jungle, isolated from the rest of civilization at the outset despite José Arcadio Buendía's best efforts to find routes to the outside world. It is a town without a history, a clean slate of sorts. José Arcadio Buendía founds the town based on egalitarian principles, with all of the houses facing the same way to receive equal sun, so that none will be hotter or cooler than another, and equidistant from the river (García Márquez 18). Magic is active in this sweltering, isolated sanctuary. From the ascension of Remedios to the trail of blood from José Arcadio to his mother, and the rain of yellow

flowers when José Arcadio Buendía dies, Macondo admits to a way of interacting with the world beyond the limits of a rational mindset.

The inner text of Melquíades's manuscript, the deciphering of which generations of Buendías labor at, ultimately proves to be a prophecy which is the history of the town of Macondo. That is to say, the manuscript seems to be what we have been reading all along, concluding with the prediction of the obliteration of the town, which transpires as Aureliano Babilonia reads it: in a sense, he reads it into reality. The inner text of Melquíades's prophecy becomes the outer story we have been reading: “it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments” (383). Fate of town, family, and text coincide.

As in all of the texts in question, the inner story actually robs its tellers of their corporeality. After a prolonged withdrawal from active life as he becomes absorbed in the text, Melquíades completes the manuscript and promptly drowns in the river. This is Macondo's first death, marking it “with a small black dot on the motley maps of death” (80), despite Melquíades's contention that he has “found immortality” (75). The text grants immortality by recording his passing through the world and giving him a role as transcriber, but at the cost of his actual presence in the world. In the same way, a Buendía from every generation, typically an Aureliano, experiences the same absorption, into which the entire space of the room containing the manuscript is swept, so that time stands still in the space of the manuscript, where it is “always March there and always Monday” (322). The decipherers of the text decay bodily in this absorption:

José Arcadio Segundo, devoured by baldness, indifferent to the air that had been sharpened by the nauseating vapors, was still reading and rereading the unintelligible parchments. He was illuminated by a seraphic glow. He scarcely raised his eyes when he heard the door open, but that look was enough for his brother to see repeated in it the irreparable fate of his great-grandfather. (290)

This absorption is an escape from history. Aureliano seeks escape from the war, José Arcadio Segundo his knowledge of the massacre, and Aureliano Babilonia the death of wife and child. They invest the text with their versions of history, and with their very corporeality, which are overwritten by official tellings of it. Hence the ultimate obliteration of town and family and manuscript is the denial and overwriting of those alternate, perhaps truer, histories. This last maneuver is itself an embedded and paradoxical comment about history. The manuscript was a history, written before the fact, showing the inescapability of fate, but it contains counter-histories to official pronouncements of the perpetual happiness and uneventfulness in Macondo: “Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen” (287). History is in some way predetermined, but at the same time the way it is told can be revolutionary (note that the very word “revolution” is ironically based on conceptual circularity). To refuse the official text, however, is to invite oblivion. Counter-discourses cannot persist. Refusal, that is, solitude, is not a road to immortality. On the other hand, perhaps the narrator's denial of a “second opportunity on this earth” is not such a bad thing (383). Stopping the wheel from turning is perhaps valuable in itself. Reading the history of the manuscript encourages readers to notice the wheel and jump clear before it makes another round.

The manuscript is a statement about history and circularity – that prediction and prophecy aren't as arcane as imagined because time repeats itself: Úrsula “shuddered with the evidence that time was not passing, as she had just admitted, but that it was turning in a circle” (310). Or as Pilar Ternera puts it, “I don't need cards to tell the future of a Buendía” (269). So attempts to buck history, as in the founding of an egalitarian Macondo or Aureliano's Liberal rebellion, seem doomed to failure. In writing, creating a text that includes the positing of alternate histories, García Márquez seems to be briefly creating the hope of change, specifically perhaps decolonization, however, in exposing Macondo to plague after plague (insomnia, revolution, banana company, red ants, wind) and ultimately wiping it out altogether, he shows this to be an impossibility.

This tension between colonization and decolonization is borne out in the tension between order and atrophy, change and stability, passion and restraint, love and nostalgia. Úrsula is the one who keeps the family in balance. It is her hundred years the book measures. Her death lets loose the floodgates of destruction. The more Fernanda attempts to rein in the household, the more it gives way to dissipation. Úrsula's advice is to “Open the windows and the doors ... that's the only way to drive off ruin” (311). In other words, inviting chaos in is the only way to manage it. Similarly, history waffles in a dialectic between love (particularly forbidden love), and nostalgia, a dangerous form of indulgence in memory. Incestuous intra-familial loves circle around a prophesied pig-tailed child. When Amaranta Úrsula and Aureliano Babilonia finally give in to their passions, they engender the last of the line, one “predisposed to begin the race again from the beginning and cleanse it of its pernicious vices and solitary calling, for he was the only one in a

century who had been engendered with love” (378). This promised child, however, is carried off by the red ants as story, town, and family all cave in when future (prophecy) meets past (history) in a present where both are deciphered simultaneously. Time itself collapses along with space when love and nostalgia catch up to each other through text.

However, despite the insistence in the final paragraph that Macondo is “wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men,” and that “everything written on [the parchments] was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more” (383), here we have, in the form of the novel we are reading, the very repetition of that history and reconstruction in text of that town. Readers do give the text a species of immortality, so that traces are preserved both of the cataclysmic end, but more importantly of the attempt. The implications of this maneuver will be discussed further in chapters 2 and 3.

Beloved

The story of the life and death of Beloved is the inner story within the outer tale of Sethe and Denver and Paul D's lives at 124 Bluestone Road. 124, as with Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is a space apart, isolated, and full of magic. As such, it figures as a microcosm where a counter-colonial experiment is undertaken. Also as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, that inner space is intimately tied to the very corporeality of its inhabitants and to texts which define their history. Text as a figure in *Beloved* is split into the two contrasting texts of schoolteacher's ledger and the story that is Beloved's death, a text that is memory made corporeal. Literacy, corresponding to the oppressors/colonizers, is placed in opposition to the body and the heart, which are the

places where the true text of slavery is written. The written ledger is the record left for official history, while the memory of the body is in danger of being forgotten with the demise of the body, so that magic is needed to keep it alive as ghosts.

These texts compete as sites of agency. Schoolteacher's ledger is an instrument of dehumanization, ontologically justifying the agency of white slave-owners, lining up “human characteristics” with “animal ones” (Morrison 193) in the dichotomization and hierarchization that are hallmarks of the empirical approach. It is this ledger that acts as a catalyst for Sethe's “refusal:” “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused – and refused still” (251). Refusing the text is refusing slavery, but Sethe sees herself as colluding in the system through the creation of the ledger itself: “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink” (271). The ink of her own agency is her milk, so that when schoolteacher's boys hold her down and take her milk forcefully, a violation beyond the dehumanization of livestock, she is robbed of the agency she felt entitled to, that of motherhood. This is a betrayal she acknowledges in her own upbringing, where she was nursed by a wet nurse rather than her own mother. When schoolteacher comes to take her and the children back from 124, she seizes the only agency she can conceive of by taking the lives of her children, the product of her milk, her own one-column ledger, her own story. She becomes author of a moment of history. Her own “pride,” her own refusal, haunts her, quite literally in the ghost of the surrendered daughter, *Beloved*.

When Paul D arrives at 124, he brings the possibility of love and happiness and thinking of the future, an escape from nostalgia even as his presence is nostalgic. In a sense, he provides the possibility of picking up where Sethe left off before schoolteacher, of bridging the unthinkable history she is dedicated to protecting Denver from: “As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (42). That past is the “rememory” and everything that Beloved represents: slavery and the corner it backed Sethe into with her insistence on taking agency. Paul D's banishment of the baby ghost is a huge relief. It clears a space for moving forward, frees her from nostalgia: “There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made” (39). Space is story. The space of the house is the tenement of the story. As Sethe says, “You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (36). It is significant that the past for Sethe is not just memory, but *rememory*, indicating the continual re-enactment of history, its abiding, repeating, presence in place. This habitual repetition is a species of magic; it gives the past an actual presence in the present as entities who are inwardly rehearsed achieve corporeality. Denver resents Paul D's clearing of space and intrusion into her world, entailing the banishment of her only company in the form of the baby ghost, as well as the threat to her place in her mother's heart. The threat to the memory of Beloved is what

causes it to make itself un-ignorable by becoming corporeal. Banished from heart and memory, the baby ghost insists on recognition.

The baby ghost has “plans” of its own, plans that are incommensurate with Sethe's to “go ahead and feel” and to “*count on* something” (38). The force of history cannot be overwritten by hope and love. Love, in fact, is dangerous: “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (45). Love and nostalgia are set in opposition in *Beloved* as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Love is the disruptive force, a catalyst; nostalgia is the weight of history, a conservative force that checks it. Love is hope and future where nostalgia is stasis and stuck-ness in time: together they drive the relentless turning of the world, engendering the trap of the cyclical. Denver clings to nostalgia in the form of the baby ghost in 124: “None could appreciate the safety of ghost company” (37). That same impulse to seek safety is what compels Sethe to flee Sweet Home, to murder her daughter, and to want to indulge in Paul D's love. But love without freedom is dangerous, not safe. Sethe strives for agency through love, both with Paul D and as a mother. She tries to thwart the pull of history and nostalgia even while acknowledging their inevitability: “Because even though it's all over – over and done with – it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what” (36). Sethe tries to fling her children clear of the turning wheel of history, first through fleeing Sweet Home to 124, and when they are found out there, escaping even farther from schoolteacher's reach beyond the doors of death itself. In fleeing Sweet Home, Sethe herself equates love with agency:

It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide ... maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (162)

Sethe's sense of her own embodiment, her physical power and size are intimately connected to her ability to love. And Paul D does know “exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that* was freedom” (162). And freedom is what history cannot have – jumping the tracks of the wheel turning round and round. That love seems to have a price, one exacted by fate – the pig-tailed child in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the sacrifice of self in place of child in *Beloved*. Love is indulgence and the children engendered by it pay the price, cannot survive.

And despite attempts to protect the children, even unto killing them to keep them from harm, the mother fights against her own obsolescence after the milk dries up. Paul D tries to help Sethe shed the role of protector, turn her children over into the world, give her children agency over their own stories. When she finally concedes, this is when *Beloved* shows up incarnate on the doorstep, freshly sopping from the Lethe, resurrected from forgetfulness. If Sethe forgets, the ledger still wins and *Beloved*'s death was in vain. *Beloved*'s arrival is very explicitly presented as a rebirth as she is depicted with “new skin, lineless and smooth” and “scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed” (50-51), and as Sethe's bladder lets loose upon seeing *Beloved* on the porch, which she links to when her water broke for Denver's

birth. This rebirth is nostalgia made corporeal, insisting on its reality, not wanting the true history to be repressed or forgotten, insisting on the continued turning of the wheel.

If Sethe was “wide” when she was full of love and agency, by book's end she is shriveled almost out of corporeality altogether, returned to a child, role-switched with Beloved, who is pregnant: “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child” (250). Beloved draws her own corporeality from Sethe's: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; ... Beloved ate up her life” (250). Beloved siphons agency as she extracts the story of her death bit by bit from Sethe, even unto co-opting Paul D and getting pregnant by him, doubling her corporeality. Thus, while Beloved's death was an attempt to rectify history by taking agency, refusing colonial domination, the attempt to repair that wrong by resurrecting Beloved is equally a colonization as the daughter overwrites the mother. Sethe in effect surrenders agency to Beloved, sacrifices herself for the daughter as she turns over the story to her. She gives the daughter ownership of the story, just as it is mother's milk that sustains the child, that takes of the mother's body. That ink, that milk, is story passed to daughter to sustain her. Sethe gives in to nostalgia by wallowing in the story. She gets stuck in time.

The effect, however, is that while dead daughter and mother are engaged in mortal transfer, removed from the exigencies of time, the live daughter grows stronger and does take agency. Denver is pushed out of the stifling womb of the house and learns to care for herself and her family. Denver is, in fact, the one trading places with her mother, and the one who is reborn. Denver picks up the thread of the story and writes it. It is she who can refuse in freedom. In coming to talk to Denver about Sethe, Paul D

says, “Well, if you want my opinion –” and Denver promptly replies, “I don't ... I have my own” (267). Sethe's sacrifice is perhaps not in vain.

That same turning of history brings a mirrored moment from the past. When Mr. Bodwin comes driving up in his cart, Sethe is carried back in time to the arrival of schoolteacher at 124, come to take her and the children back. Mr. Bodwin is, in fact, coming for Denver, but as employer. The dialectic here is perhaps more Hegelian than in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* since this is progress of some kind. For Sethe it is a fresh chance to redirect her agency. Rather than take the life of her children, she directs her action at a more appropriate target, the perceived aggressor. It is Sethe's mulligan. And while she is not successful, she experiences a moment of offensive rather than defensive agency. At the same time, she loses Beloved again. The townswomen gather to exorcise the demon at 124. This demon, who is, in essence, their story of slavery incarnate, is too troubling to live with and sucks life from among them in the form of Sethe. As story, it isn't words that are needed to exorcise Beloved, but something more elemental: “the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (261). When Beloved goes, she does not return Sethe to herself, but takes the story with her. “It was not a story to pass on. They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her” (274). The townswomen choose to forget that history because “Remembering seemed unwise” (274). It is a dangerous history where nostalgia can rob you of your very life. It is notable that the townswomen

deliberately forget. It takes an act of conscious erasure, exorcism, to put the story out of mind.

Morrison makes a rhetorical switch from referring to the inner story and its unpassability through the repeated phrase “*It* was not a story to pass on” (275, emphasis added), to tell her readers that “*This* is not a story to pass on” (275, emphasis added), referring to the novel as a whole. The inner story has entered into readers and become one with the outer story; in this way true history and received history are in danger of catching up to each other. We as readers are in the same danger, and yet we are not given the tools of exorcism, no wall of sound to wash over us. The narrator tells us that “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there” (275). By emphasizing the act of forgetting, trying to cover over the footprints with other images, it drives home the fact of the footprints and the very impossibility of forgetting now that we as audience have received, participated in, the story. The text is made explicit; we are told that we are part of the story now, and the fourth wall is broken when the narrator addresses the audience directly, breaching the wall between inner text, outer text, characters, narrator, author, and audience. The magic of magic realism mixes up our boundaries so that we know the fiction to have acted on us in some way.

The narrative becomes an object of readers' memories, our re-memories, something we are able to rehearse into existence as well, even as we are called to exorcise it. It achieves a sort of permanence in the world, a cycle that we repeat. Sethe experiences a moment parallel to Úrsula's in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, realizing

that time is not linear. With reference to time, she tells Denver, “It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay” (35). Beloved and her story, the true story of the brutalities of slavery and the denial of agency, the price of refusal, will “just stay” despite the narrator's insistence that “This is not a story to pass on” (275). What else is a story for?

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a novel likewise preoccupied with text and the agency of authorship. The outer framing tale is that of Oscar's family history and journey to manhood as narrated by Oscar's friend, Yunió. The inner story or text is that of a “ring story” for the Dominican Republic – a story to be *zafa* or “the cure to what ails us” (Díaz 333). Throughout the novel, Oscar seeks refuge in reading and writing science fiction and fantasy. Yunió comments that this is the representative genre of the Antilles, because magic and the fantastic are part of everyday life (6), echoing Carpentier. The history Yunió recounts is that of a family *fukú* or curse, itself a species of verbal magic – an incantation giving power to words, a text of its own. Yunió refers to his narrative as a species of *zafa* or counter-curse, so that his words are also incantatory and imbued with power, or at least that's the hope (7). Perhaps the genre references lacing the novel are those incantations, the invoking of powerful stories as *azabaches* (329), creating a “circle” of protective power. The degree of both genre and historical reference, especially in footnotes, makes a patchwork of the novel, stitched together from bits of other stories. In addition, the narrative voice and dramatic focus are split. While Oscar is the

eponymous protagonist, the narrative voices are those of his friend, Yuniór, and sister, Lola, and the story is as much about his mother, Beli, and grandfather, as himself. Both textual reference and the shifting of narrative focus reinforce the sense within the narration that this has all happened before, both in other stories, notably *Lord of the Rings* and Marvel comics, and within the family itself: falling in love with the wrong person, savage beatings in the cane field, visitations from the mongoose, glimpses of the man with no face, etc.

The message is certainly that truth is no stranger than fiction: Trujillo “was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2). Books make repeated cameos as objects, notably in Oscar's final vision of the mongoose and the man with no face on the bus, holding a book with blank pages (302). Hence reality and fiction are inextricably tied up, complicated by the supernatural and orchestrated through language, and specifically through text. The blank pages are especially significant. Joaquín Balaguer, a vicious tyrant and heir to Trujillo's legacy, “famously ordered the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a página en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say *impunity*?) Balaguer died in 2002. The página is still blanca” (90). Each generation of the Cabral family produces the hope for breaking the curse by taking agency, writing on the blank pages left by Balaguer, and each generation fails. That mythic book is the space about which magic circulates.

The legacy of the blank page mirrors that of Melquíades's manuscript.

Generations work at this undertaking and are engaged with the text. Instead of *decoding*, however, the fate occupying the Cabral family is to *encode*. The undertaking begins with the patriarch, Abelard, to whom is posthumously attributed a secret “true” history under the Trujillo regime. Not only does such a text not exist, as Yuniór explains, “Not one single example of his handwriting remains. I mean, OK, Trujillo was thorough. But not one scrap of paper with his handwriting? You got to fear a motherfucker or what he's writing to do something like that” (246). Oscar takes up the mantle of the blank pages. As a *mise-en-abyme* for his grandfather – “You have the same eyes as your abuelo, his Nena Inca had told him” (20) – it falls to Oscar to take agency, to own his love, and to recapitulate the family role as protector. Love of the wrong person causes downfall: Abelard marries outside his class; Beli falls in love with wrong man after wrong man, most notably “the gangster;” and Oscar repeatedly falls for unavailable women, lastly and most tragically for Ybón, an old prostitute engaged by a policeman. Ybón is perhaps a mirror for Jacquelyn, the daughter Abelard was trying to protect from Trujillo, resulting in his death. Oscar is the virgin trying to protect the whore, reflecting the impotence of what it is to be a father who cannot protect a daughter from violation, and also the degradations of time that replay the same scene with a broken-down prostitute in place of a fresh ingenue. Love and the concern for protection it entails enable textual agency, *zafa*. But trying to take agency, whether corporeal or narrative, is to court death in a regime where both are tightly controlled.

Much of the novel is concerned with attempts to mitigate Oscar's geekiness and textual-centeredness, to achieve male Dominican-ness by losing his virginity, to become like Yuniór. However, rather than Yuniór's machismo rubbing off on Oscar, the transfer happens the other way around, with Oscar essentially coming to inhabit or colonize Yuniór. It is Yuniór who becomes a professor and novelist, writing the story, trying for the *zafa*. Oscar theoretically manages to author the ultimate text, but all for naught since it never sees the light of day: in a letter, Oscar references a manuscript that will arrive with “the cure to what ails us” (333), but as Yuniór reports, “the fucking thing never arrived! Either got lost in the mail or he was slain before he put it in the mail, or whoever he trusted to deliver it forgot” (334). Oscar's manuscript dies with him. Both are corporeally wiped from history at the same time. When Oscar stumbles onto the textual key, he becomes the text, his agency becomes invested in it, so that its obliteration is also his.

This identification of body and text is reminiscent of the same thematicization in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Beloved*. Agencies are possible through the body, through sex and love, as well as through text and word. Oscar dies when he achieves the perfect triumvirate – sex, love, and text. He becomes larger than life in a very different sense than at the novel's start, when Oscar is grossly obese, wears glasses, and sports a “Puerto Rican afro” (20). This initial image is an archetype of the sci-fi or fantasy novel type: bizarre and extreme. At the novel's close, however, after he has shed weight and cut his hair, as his body becomes invested in the text and in love, it gives him an unsustainable amount of power, a largeness in a very different way, just as Sethe felt

“wide” when she had the freedom to love. It is not only Oscar whose phenotype is extreme; Beli is described as “*Black-black*” (84), and whose “tetas were globes so implausibly titanic” (92). Both bodies are intimately tied to the text which has given rise to *fukú* as mother, and later son, are taken out into the cane field and savagely beaten – disfiguring body unto the point of death – perhaps beyond and come back. Beli is urged to life by the mongoose revealing the promise of future children. She, in a sense, draws power from these future children. As in *Beloved*, corporeality and agency transfer from mother to daughter across generations: La Inca, who raises Beli, “began to diminish, like Galadriel” to heal Beli after her beating in the cane field; Beli diminishes through cancer as Lola ascends in power and agency (156). Women in this novel, then, experience agency through the corporeal authorship of motherhood. Men's agency, on the other hand, is wrapped up in text, with Abelard, Oscar, and Yunion all engaged with producing a textual *zafa*. Both men and women participate in a dialectic of love and fate. It is perhaps significant, then, that Yunion envisions the textual buck passing to Lola's daughter – site of both female and male experiences of fate. It produces hope of breaking the cycle.

Fukú is embodied as a faceless man; *zafa* is embodied as a mongoose. Glimpses of the former haunt the family throughout the novel. The man's face is blank like the pages of that elusive history. He is cast as a figure of oppression, repression, and violence, often in a suit, the one doing the kidnapping and beating in the cane field. He is an embodiment of those blank pages and the forces that would keep them so, that repress alternate tellings of history, dissension. The mongoose is connected with race, class, and

power, an emblem of the rise of the subjected: it “Accompanied humanity out of Africa ... the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies” (151). It is significant that the mongoose is black, referencing the racial discrimination against Haitians rampant in the Dominican Republic, from which Beli suffers. While cast as antagonists throughout the novel, Oscar's final vision shows that the truth is not so polarized: the mongoose rides the bus with the faceless man – the two are in collusion, driving fate.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a novel about controlling the discourse to control history:

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Deathstroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (97)

The blank pages of the family history implicate the horrors of the Trujillo regime. They reveal, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Beloved* both, a history at odds with received or official history. Yunior/Díaz calls explicit attention to this contrast using footnotes with historical asides, grounding his alternative narrative that dips into fantasy in reality so that it becomes apparent how indistinguishable the two are. By the same token, as Mahler has pointed out, writing can be an equally colonizing or tyrannical act. To seize control of the discourse is to seize power. While Oscar's obsession with story is precisely what holds him back from agency by othering him as a nerd, on the other hand,

story is his salvation and the route to his agency. For example, when he blows off his friends to write and they confront him about it, rather than feeling antagonized for it, he stands up for himself: “I’ve been working on my fifth novel, he told the boys when they asked about his absences. It’s *amazing*. ... He’d finally showed some backbone, hence some pride, and although it hurt, it also felt motherfucking *good*” (33). For Oscar, to own an identity as a narrator is to start to own the narrative. Oscar becomes competition for the decaying Trujillato. Oscar, like his mother before him, and her father before her, *refuses*. It is this first refusal, Abelard’s refusal to surrender his daughter, Jacquelyn, to Trujillo’s appetite for young women, which unleashes *fukú* upon the Cabral family. This refusal inherent in a father’s right to protect his family, his love, is set against the total control required by a dictatorship. Beli’s refusal arises as a response to the scandal caused by her high school affair with Jack Pujols: after a quarter page of Beli adamantly repeating the word “No” (102), Yuniór explains how “out of this disillusionment and turmoil sprang Beli’s first adult oath, one that would follow her into adulthood, to the States and beyond. I will not serve” (103). This “I will not serve” is reminiscent of Sethe’s refusal in *Beloved*, a refusal to be classed as lesser. It is into this legacy that Oscar is born and finds his way to his own refusal, saying “*fuck you*” to the *fukú* (304), a refusal that like his grandfather before him, and very nearly his mother, gets him killed.

As with all of the texts in question, the novel ends with the death of the storyteller of the inner story and the destruction of the text. The residual hope, however, is perhaps more explicit as Yuniór himself puts his novel forward as *zafa*, though while acknowledging that the *fukú* will catch up to Lola’s daughter. He places the burden of

responsibility for the blank pages into the next generation, drawing out the cyclicity of the dialectic. In the meantime, we have read the recounting of Oscar's story, an alternate history exposing atrocities of the Trujillo regime, so we as readers are perhaps brought into service as part of the protective circle of what a *zafa* text aims to do.

Magical realism plays with the tension of untellable tales and ambiguously apocalyptic endings, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments” (383). These stories are purportedly not to endure in memory and yet here we sit still reading them, still reproducing and passing on their histories. The authors dramatically knock down the worlds of their own creation and the narrators insist on the transitoriness of them, “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there” (Morrison 275), and yet the journey of hundreds of pages is far from forgotten. The text itself is proof of the deception. Why insist on an impossible forgetfulness? Each author insists on wiping every trace of the story and its world from history, and yet makes a point of preserving the record. Story, text, is a response to the inevitable atrophy of time. Like Scheherazade spinning yarns into the late hours to protract her life, text exists to preserve. But immortality, which is another way to say ontology, has its price. To assert categorical and enduring truth is to close off history, to oppress, and it is precisely this tendency which I will argue these novels seek to counter through the aforementioned themes and narrative strategies.

THEORETICAL LENSES

To talk about text is to talk about the power of language and issues surrounding its codification and transmission. These issues are especially relevant in postcolonial theory, which is concerned with questions of power and the need to counter oppressive imperial centers by reclaiming voice and the agency attendant upon it. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exemplify the concerns of postcolonial theory as they problematize the relationship between text and agency while “writing back” to “the Empire” (Salman Rushdie qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 33). The ontological disruption engaged in by these texts as they seek to counter-colonize reaches to the heart of the question of how word acts in the world, that is, how language interacts with reality. From a literary standpoint, this relationship between word and world, or text and reality, is implicated in the relationship between authors and readers through the text – ripe territory for exploration by reader response theory. Thus both postcolonial and reader response theories provide productive critical frameworks through which to engage the question of how the three novels might be using the thematic devices of metatextuality, embodiment, and apocalyptic endings.

“Writing Back”

While not all magical realist literature can be characterized as postcolonial, many magical realist works have been tied to postcolonialism by theorists such as Stephen Slemon, Wendy Faris, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Christopher Warnes. As Benito, Manzanar, and Simal note:

it is only recently that magical realism has come to be acknowledged – though not without ample contestation – as the postcolonial mode par excellence. In its focus on the hybridization of irreconcilable opposites, the straddling of borders between cultures, and the blurring of distinctions between opposed worldviews, magical realism easily accommodates postcolonial literatures. The coexistence, in certain magical realist texts, of a dominant rational-scientific worldview and a pre-modern mythical perspective lent itself readily to many postcolonial spaces, where it was seen to channel their oppositional stances. (106-7)

This alliance between postcolonial theory and magical realism has been so assumed, in fact, that Homi Bhabha has referred to magical realism as “the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world” (qtd. in Benito, Manzananas, and Simal 107). As fore-mentioned, the two literary categories are by no means fully coextensive, but the techniques of magical realist writing do seem remarkably well-equipped to engage with many of the prime concerns of postcolonial thought, problematizing as they do questions of the real and the fantastic, center and margin, subjective and objective, space, time, and most other fundamental categories that underlie our experiences of reality.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin maintain a broad definition of the “postcolonial” and uphold speaking of literatures separated by geographic, cultural and temporal divides under the same umbrella since they are united in having “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctly post-colonial” (2). I will operate under the same principle here, conceiving in that way of Gabriel García Márquez's response to political turmoil in Colombia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Toni Morrison's response to slavery in the United States in *Beloved*, and Junot Díaz's

exploration of the Trujillato in the Dominican Republic and New Jersey diaspora in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, all under the rubric of postcolonialism as responses to oppression by dominant cultural powers. As Benito, Manzanás, and Simal caution, it is misleadingly, or even dangerously, reductive to assume that postcolonial, or more narrowly, magical realist, literature proceeds from the same experience of colonialism or has the same object in its authorship. Though I am analyzing themes I see in common in these three novels and could bring many more texts not under consideration here under the same lens, I am certainly aware of the differences which situate these texts in their own cultural-historical moments. In the interest of focus, however, I am choosing to analyze a particular narrative strategy for its commonalities rather than its differences.

With its literary roots in Latin America, originating with authors such as Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez, magical realism emerged as a mode straddling cultural paradigms and capable of re-visioning postcolonial realities. Carpentier has famously remarked that the fantastic elements of magical realism are not imaginary or metaphorical but capture the daily fantastic of lived experience in the new world. This manner of thinking has led to characterizations of magical realism as seamlessly blending magical and real elements that are representative of scientific-rational/realist conceptual frameworks and mythical/naturalistic/fantastic ones. This can take many forms, from incorporating traditional mythic and story elements from the colonized culture to “re-writing” texts from the colonial canon through the voice and experience of the colonized, or simply metaphysically interrogating the nature of text, history, and truth (Warnes). By holding the “real” and the “magical,” two alternative

ways of engaging with experience, in “unresolved antimony” (Chanady), magical realist fiction engages with questions of the composition of reality and truth.

Like magical realism as a mixed mode itself, the aims of such writing are mixed as they seek to counter the center, as well as validate their perspectives as potentially central (D'Haen), and yet again to disrupt the very notion of centrality (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). It is a destabilizing mode that problematizes notions of colonial, colonized, hybrid, magical, real, marginal, and central. Categories become paradoxes as magical realist fiction acknowledges that decolonization is not really possible, or perhaps even desirable. Even as magical realist fiction dichotomizes the magic, the real, colonizer and colonized, good and evil, love and nostalgia, such works also assert that the dichotomies are false, imposed categories. Even as magical realist fiction enacts a dialectic, it problematizes the idea of the dialectic, both the notion of two competing forces or ideological trends and of their possible resolution. Fuentes's invocation of a Vichian spiral is perhaps an uneasy symbolic representation of how these magical realist works effect compromise in the muddy middle ground (Zamora): tensions that oppose each other to effect a circular but vaguely forward motion that nevertheless doesn't admit to a particular end point except as narratively constructed for human satisfaction. That is, these works blend notions of circular and linear time and the consequent engagement with differential theories of history. Alternately, but to much the same end, Benito, Manzanás and Simal compare this approach of problematizing realism to Adorno's “negative dialectics,” conceptualizing magical realism as “negative realism:” “In engaging and transcending realist narrativity, deliberately addressing issues of identity,

subjectivity, representation, agency, and ecology, among others, 'negative realist' fictions can offer a cultural critique of such notions from within the boundaries of realism” (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 242). That is, magical realism makes use of realist techniques in order to subvert the very concepts of realism. To upset the realist system of conceptualization, however, is not to simply replace it with an equally closed system of magical ordering of experience, but rather to problematize the whole notion of order to begin with: “The magical realist negation of the covering concepts of realism does not in itself conjure up an alternative presence to be reified; it does not end in final unity and identity and does not offer the illusion of finalized knowledge” (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 243-4). Benito, Manzanas, and Simal propose an Adornian dialectics in place of Hegelian. This is not, however, to dismantle the prospect of hope, only to assert that the hope is not for a perfect stable utopian end-state,. The ideal then becomes to hope for a disruption of the current system of conceiving of the nature of reality, which is not only defective, but dangerous, having resulted in the wrongful subjugation of whole peoples. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin have pointed out, empiricism was used as a justification for classifying peoples in rigid dichotomies of “othering” in order to assume power over them.

To controvert dichotomization is to invoke “a third element, an alternative fictive world” (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 65). This “third element” is reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's “third space,” where diverse ways of lived experience come into contact. “Magical realist writing, like postmodernist fiction, opens a third space and an alternative to the polarity of true or false by offering a mode of being between existence and non-

existence (McHale 1987: 106)” (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 56). Later in this chapter, Manzanas likens this space to Borges's “aleph” in the short story by that name, where “this unlimited space challenges traditional orderings and privileges paradox” (60). Macondo, 124 Bluestone Road, and the split space of Dominican Republic-New Jersey diaspora are alephs of just this sort: contact zones between the real and the magic, history and agency, body and text, etc. They are sites of rupture and resistance, and the texts within them are animated by the possibility of being more than objects, of acquiring the agency of their narrators in order to act and write into the world. That seam between modes of existence at these places makes that possible, posits the theoretical construct of “third space” as a real space where word can really act on world, where agency of the dispossessed can be actualized. But it is a tenuous kind of power, sustainable only in that space and only for a short time; to pass beyond the threshold of contact is to risk collapse, as when the world irrupts into Macondo in the form of the Banana Company, and word of *Beloved* gets out to the community, and Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic.

Wendy Faris notes the importance of space in magical realist texts, labeling the fictional presentations of space “near-sacred or ritual enclosures,” but also noting that they “are not watertight; they leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the texts and the worlds they describe, just as that exterior reality permeates them” (*Ordinary* 24). This permeability works both ways, with dominant culture moving into the inner space and magic moving out from the inner space. The magic of the inner space threatens to overwrite reality, as in Borges's “*Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius*” where Tlönian objects begin to appear in the narrator's reality, so that “The world will be Tlön” (81), or *Beloved*

where Sethe is overwritten by Beloved, whose presence is threatening to the cultural memory and sanity of the townswomen.

These inner spaces read as sites of experimentation and re-engagement with history with an eye to greater agency for a formerly oppressed people. Macondo is founded as an egalitarian town in the midst of virgin jungle, cut off from the rest of society. There isn't even any death until Melquíades marks it “with a small black dot on the motley maps of death” (García Márquez 80); death and bureaucracy apparently being synonymous, since this is also the point at which capitalist tendencies and government regulation come on scene through the railroad. Macondo is perhaps metonymic for new world colonization, wherein European colonizers sought a post-apocalyptic paradise in the new world (Zamora), but are unable to escape their history. In *Beloved*, like Macondo, 124 Bluestone Road is cut off from the rest of the community at large. Sethe's “refusal” ejects the house from society and subjects her and Denver to ostracization. It becomes a haunted space, a seam between the living and the dead, and, like the manuscript room in the Buendías' house, a site where past, present, and future hang in limbo. While Sethe holds onto her story, time stands still and trips over itself in the house.

While space in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Beloved* is fairly circumscribed and centered around particular rooms in particular houses in particular towns, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, place is appropriately split between Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic and Oscar's “ghetto” in New Jersey. This reinforces the sense of diaspora. While the splitting of place reflects a splitting of the

sense of identity for Beli and her children, the *fukú* she is attempting to outrun does not recognize this boundary. In fact, as Anne Garland Mahler points out, rather than escaping *fukú*, which is a curse born of imperialism, Beli runs straight into the heart of it since the United States is itself a paragon of imperialism. Relocation isn't automatically the utopia that Beli envisions for escaping *fukú*, just as it wasn't for Europeans seeking their utopia in the "new world." Culture and history are written corporeally, and so they travel with their subjects despite the attempt to make a fresh start in a new place.

Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english ... The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 9)

The links established in the first chapter between text, narrator, and place in all three novels speak precisely to this theme in magical realist literature. The fate of all three entities correspond, and the reader is led to believe that the identities of all three are likewise one and the same. For good or ill (and often both), people are conceived of as their stories, which are geoculturally situated.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the fates of the Buendías are linked bodily to the fate of the town of Macondo, as well as of the manuscript which it is their task to decipher. The various decoders give themselves over bodily to the text, exchanging reality with it, feeding it with their corporeality. The closer they come to deciphering it, the more they decay, and the more the manuscript's prophecy becomes reality. Ultimately, town, family, and text reach completion, which is also obliteration, simultaneously. *Beloved* is motivated by Sethe's refusal of the text of schoolteacher's

ledger and the slow divulgence of an inner text written bodily. The full measure of that refusal is also a sacrifice of self to story. As the story grows to completion, so Beloved, who is that story, grows, taking of Sethe's corporeality, which is invested with the story. The story is situated bodily in 124, which is described with womb and birth imagery, again linking body and place, and in a way that enacts Freire's metaphor for liberation:

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom. (50)

Freire thus brings the female into the act of embodying critical literacy, and this may be a possible explanation behind the figuring of the female legacy in each novel and the prevalence and significance of delivering, bearing, raising, and transferring agency to children.

Like Sethe, Oscar's physical self waxes and wanes in proportion to his ability to take agency through authorship, as well as in proximity to his homeland in the Dominican Republic. At the beginning of the novel, Oscar is grossly obese, fashion-inept, and completely lacking in sex appeal. Towards the close, as he is getting good writing done, he loses weight, improves his hairstyle, and finally loses his virginity after staying over in the Dominican Republic, which is also where he allegedly finally writes his masterpiece. By taking ownership of his identity and the place that nurtured him culturally, he gains power, even if briefly. The identification of self, place, and text is important for the project of reclaiming power over story, as postcolonial literatures aim to do.

As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin maintain, using Salman Rushdie's phrase, it is the project of postcolonial literatures to “write back” to “the Empire” in ways that disrupt the hold “the center” has established over discourse as a means to power (33). To “write back” in this way is to seize agency, which is envisioned as the right of oppressed peoples to author their own histories – to tell past and future stories in their own voice, from their own perspectives. This aligns with one of the secondary attributes Wendy Faris ascribes to magical realist literature, the tendency to “take a position that is anti-bureaucratic” (“Scheherazade's ” 179). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, bureaucracy intrudes in increasing measures, beginning with the appearance of Don Apolinar Moscote, through the arrival of the railroad, the American banana plantation, the increasing presence of the military, and culminating in the massacre of a great many townspeople. Bureaucracy is conceived of as destructive. In *Beloved*, received history must contend with accounts of the real horrors of slavery written into the body. The tree of Sethe's back, the drained milk from her breasts, “to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands” (Morrison 251): all of these corporeally-written experiences write back to schoolteacher's ledger. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior “writes back” to the Trujillo regime by outing stories of oppression and persecution, trying to fill the “blank pages” of the Dominican Republic's history. Each of these novels shares a preoccupation with the injustices of oppression perpetrated by a dominant social order and “writes in” histories that counter received or official history.

Textuality and its ties to identity and place are thematically important for achieving this. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reads as a cautionary tale – text is a trap:

from Melquíades's manuscript which traps past, present, and future together in a room, consuming its would-be decipherers and the objects of its history, to the official governmental edict denying the massacre, history is created and contained within words. While not putting forward an “author” to write an oppositional text, Gabriel García Márquez does theorize about the power texts hold over their subjects, and specifically the documents associated with bureaucracy, such as edicts (for which José Arcadio Segundo had a “predilection” (105)), treaties like the one Aureliano finally signs to end the war, the reimbursements the old soldiers await without hope, and the official proclamation that “Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen” to address the banana company worker massacre (García Márquez 287). The action of decoding the manuscript shows the decay inherent in passively approaching history rather than actively authoring it. Even authorship, however, which suggests a certain amount of agency, is revealed as simply repeating history. This is borne out by the revelation that Melquíades's manuscript is a prophecy that has already become history once it has been deciphered. History to come and history that has passed are essentially the same, as are encoding and decoding. Reading and authorship both participate in entropic decay as history continues turning in its circle.

Gabriel García Márquez's attitude towards authorship appears to be just as ambivalent as Morrison's and Díaz's. *Sethe* and *Oscar Wao* both engage in this “writing back” by actively seeking agency as storytellers and authors, but, in both cases, realizing the text of the past results in their demise. This is the paradox at the heart of these novels which magical realism as a mode is so well-positioned to enable: oppressed groups seek

ownership and authorship of a historical past omitted from official record, but it is a dangerous past, where dwelling in it, nostalgia, is all-consuming, literally robbing the body of its corporeality in order to grant agency through narration.

As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin show, the embroilment of language, truth, and power are of particular concern for postcolonial cultures who must wrestle with coming to voice through an appropriated discourse. By using the form of the novel or short story in the imperial literary language, each author is making use of dominant discourse to deliver a counter-hegemonic message. As Benito, Manzananas, and Simal observe:

For authors whose voices emerge from outside the cultural centers of the West, magical realism becomes a way to provide 'access to the main body of "Western" literature' and yet avoid the risk of assimilation or direct adoption of the views and values of the dominant discourses. In this light, magical realism can provide marginal and ethnic writers with adequate means to write themselves into the pages of the Book of the West without completely submitting to its central discourse. Marginalized individuals who were traditionally denied a voice in the master's discourse are thus written back in through the use of magical realist elements. (70)

The frame tale device is like a Trojan horse: within a form of dominant discourse, the Western European bourgeois high-art novel, lies a narrative that disrupts that cultural inheritance, and within that yet another form of third space in the inner text. Like Borges's "Garden of the Forking Paths," a literary and historical labyrinth of Chinese nesting boxes, the commentary of text on text and alterity within alterity can proceed virtually ad infinitum, so that even within the contact space there is always another text to write to respond to this one with another view of truth – always an oppression perpetrated against those who have been authored, committed in a particular form to paper. The "writing back" that Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin envision is thus as much a writing

against dominant discourse, as a writing *in* dominant discourse, and a writing *into* dominant discourse. The self-conscious featuring of textuality within their narratives mirrors the authors' own journeys to agency through linguistic production.

Appropriating this discourse is not without its problems, however. In using the masters' tools against them, the subjected who are attempting to rise up in this way risk becoming oppressors and perpetuating the cycle, as Paulo Freire cautions in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (46). Mahler applies this concept specifically to Junot Díaz's project in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In this latter novel, Mahler traces Díaz's preoccupation with the vocation of writers relative to that of dictators in their mirrored contests for power that in the end equate them with each other: “Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*” (Díaz 97). Díaz explicitly acknowledges the role of language, and writing in particular, in the seizure and maintenance of power by problematizing categories of good and evil, colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, writer and dictator. Hence, at the end of the novel, Yuniór describes a recurring dream of seeing Oscar holding up a book with blank pages: “Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (Díaz 325). In other words, Oscar is become “the faceless man” in Yuniór's imagination; he is equated with the forces of oppression, the *fukú*, in attempting to create *zafa*. Mahler identifies the crucial themes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* thus:

In this regard, if one conceives of the bus as the space of writing, the writer must pay the *cobrador*, must use colonial language and thus inhabit the space of the *fukú*, in order to move towards *zafa*. Both the oppressive force of colonial language and the contestatory voice of resistance exist in the same space of writing; they are on the same bus. Yunió, our super-heroic contestatory writer, confesses, 'Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco' (149). Thus, even the writer who attempts to fill in the blanks reproduces the tyrant's power to silence, leaving his own blank pages to be filled in by others. In this way, Díaz creates a novel within the superhero genre, that, much like Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, is conscious of its own intimate cohabitation with – and reproduction of – the very power it seeks to dethrone. (134)

As Zamora and Benito, Manzananas, and Simal have identified, this exemplifies the project of magical realist writing to posit hope for change in the act of pointing to the problem rather than suggesting a perfect utopia. The hope is that simply by acknowledging the problem and authors' own complicity, as Mahler states, is to “move towards *zafa*,” not to *accomplish zafa*, but to *move* in that direction. As she concludes her essay, “If victory is impossible in the anti-colonial project of writing, then the transparent rendering of colonialist mechanisms of domination – even those operative within the discourse of the self-avowed anti-colonial subject – becomes the new ethical ideal” (135).

This ambivalent awareness of the problems inherent in authorship as it relates to power also surface in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the inner utopia, which is Macondo in its founding, becomes a bureaucratic mess and then destroys itself. If the town *is* text, which it is by implication since it is written past, present, and future into Melquíades's manuscript, then text appears to be literally self-destructive. To author is to destroy the object of authorship. But at the same time, it is the telling – the pointing out of the problems with text and the problems with commitment to the abiding truth of any particular history – through which the reader gains awareness and can live outside the

text to potentially circumvent this trap. Immortality and power through text are shown to be traps of the most destructive kind.

For Sethe in *Beloved*, to refuse the dominant discourse regarding slavery, the type exemplified in schoolteacher's ledger, is to court insanity and self-annihilation. To reanimate the story of slavery and all that it robbed from her is to reenact that corporeal robbery: the shredding of her back, the stealing of her milk, the spilling of her children's blood (Beloved's and almost Denver's). The womb of 124 re-delivers Beloved, insistent that the story not be repressed. But as the child is now grown, the nourishment required to sustain her takes all of what Sethe is. To tell this story is to oppress herself under its weight, and Denver with her. That unrepressed, unrefused, story, however, spills out of 124, first co-opting Paul D from Sethe and becoming pregnant by him, and then threatening the balance of the community itself, calling upon the townswomen to erase it from memory so that others don't succumb to the grief of it. Sethe's "pride" of refusal, of narration, of corporeal authorship of the girl as text into the world, threatens the well-being of the whole community. The story itself is oppressive even as it seeks to counter the dominant oppressive system, pointing to the paradox of authorship, especially as it concerns those dealing with the fallout of the postcolonial condition.

By letting paradox lie in "unresolved antimony" (Chanady), we are called to accept seemingly antithetical systems of thought at one and the same time – to suspend the need to resolve any contradiction. In doing this, we come to think in a different way through reading in this narrative mode. As readers, we are explicitly invoked as participants in these texts about texts and textual processes. The "fourth wall" between

author and reader is blurred, or even demolished, and the line between the fictional and the real becomes very fuzzy indeed.

Word – World

Questions of representation and the relationship between sign and symbol, text and reality, are as old as language itself. As long as we have been concerned with “truth,” we have been concerned with the correspondence between word and world. Spiritual, political and economic systems depend on this interrelationship through the notion of “word as deed,” from written and verbal contracts to the invocation of higher powers through ritualized language. Language constitutes the ability to abstract the corporeal into the symbolic and thence to manipulate it and even reorder it, sending it back into the corporeal through sound and text. These abstractions thus gain power to act in the “real world.” It is not surprising, therefore, that power accrues to the manipulation of language, and that text would be such a flashpoint for postcolonial literatures. By not only straddling, but actively muddying the water in, this gulf between the real and the magic, magical realism as a literary mode is well-positioned to take on questions of how language acts in the world through text.

In “Scheherazade's Children,” Wendy Faris outlines a tendency in magical realist literature for the reader to “experience a particular kind of verbal magic – a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience” (176). In *Ordinary Enchantments*, Faris ascribes “this linguistic magic” an active role that “takes us beyond representation conceived primarily as

mimesis to re-presentation” (115), suggesting its political prospects for challenging received history. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, there is no such thing as disinterested language. By passing through a subject, language is by nature subjective and arranged into an order through the subject's consciousness. Therefore, it is impossible to divide production from producer and from the producer's life-world, i.e. their values and system of ordering their reality. “Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or 'reality'” (Bruner 132). This is, of course, reminiscent of the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. And while neither I nor the authors whose works we are examining may embrace this position per se, the idea of it is at the heart of these texts and is laid open for examination.

Embedding stories inside other stories is a technique designed precisely to interrogate this notion. Each inner narrative or text becomes a way of talking about narrative's hold on readers. John Barth, in “Tales Within Tales Within Tales,” subverts this assertion that language creates reality; rather, invoking Borges, he flips causality on its head: “stories within stories appeal to us because they disturb us metaphysically. We are by them reminded, consciously or otherwise, of the next frame out: the fiction of our own lives, of which we are both the authors and the protagonists” (235). Jorge Luis Borges's short story “Tlön, Uqbar, and Orbis Tertius,” is frequently invoked in discussions of this nature. Tlön is a fictional world created in the imaginary realm of Uqbar, and *Orbis Tertius* is a literary work from the fictional world of Tlön. “Orbis Tertius,” of course means “third world,” referring perhaps to the third world from the sun, or our reality, so when realities from Tlön start invading Borges's narrator's reality

(presumably the same as our own), we, as readers, wonder where we are situated with respect to the cycle of fictionalization. Where our worlds end and our fictions begin we can't be sure. Or, to put it more simply, does language create reality or simply reflect the fact that everything is fiction? At bottom, these two propositions are identical. Reality, being subjective and relying at least partly on mediation through language, is a fiction in the sense that it is ordered and constructed by individual human minds and experiences, including the linguistic. This is what Jerome Bruner refers to as “the narrative construction of reality.” History, which purports to capture reality as a textual narrative, is therefore just as constructed, even fictionalized. Hayden White refers to this as “emplotment,” essentially equating history with fiction in the way it is given shape for particular ends (1714). In short, history, our supposed relationship to the “reality” of the past (and by extension the sum of what we are in the present and where we project ourselves in the future) is not only as rhetorical as literature, but is equally constructed by making choices about what to put in or leave out, whom to privilege or background.

This capacity to order is precisely what makes language such a powerful political tool. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin assert: “Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established” (7). Control becomes possible through the privileging of one language or dialect and repression of others, tightly managing information flow through determining who has the right to speak/write and on what subjects, establishing the legitimacy of certain genres, etc. Language is a means to establishing and maintaining power, just as it is for subverting it, though this of

course opens up the possibility for the author/speaker to become oppressor in their own right, as the discussion in the last section showed. Thus, the preoccupation with text in these novels is a signal of ironic and paradoxical simultaneous embrace and rejection of text as a means to agency. Here again I invoke Benito, Manzanás, and Simal's discussion of "negative realism," which disrupts the totalizing conceptualizations of realism, especially with regards to the basic tenets of representation: "The hypostasization of language and thing, of word and world is one of the untruths that sustains realist literary language, and it is also one of the areas that magical realist texts interrogate most rigorously" (Benito, Manzanás, and Simal 243). In other words, magical realist literature seeks to undermine the notion that words possess any objective value, revealing them, rather, to be at the disposition of their wielders, and very much embedded in particular ideologies. To do this, magical realist authors frequently make a point of showing off their own puppeteering strings through metatextual means, embedding texts inside texts and interrogating the nature of the word and of those who seek to control it, including themselves.

One of the most-referenced examples of such metatextuality in magical realism is that of the plague of insomnia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. More than the insomnia itself, it is the accompanying verbal amnesia that threatens to destroy the town. The names of objects are forgotten and with them the memory of their uses. The written system introduced to stave off forgetfulness, however, is so cumbersome that most prefer to slip into an "imaginary reality" (García Márquez 53). Realist text – the strict association of sign with symbol – is burdensome and ultimately futile since eventually

the meaning of the symbolic order itself will also return to its essential arbitrary meaningfulness and be forgotten. The townspeople prefer living fictions, however, this dissociates them from their own lives and from each other; it is another form of solitude. Melquíades arrives in Macondo, fleeing death which is stalking him over the globe, in order to take refuge in that deathless place (55). After administering the cure to the plague of insomnia, he settles in first to daguerreotype everything in Macondo, then, abandoning that project to José Arcadio Buendía's search for God, sets in to deciphering Nostradamus's prophecies, which culminates in his witness to the future of the town and declaration that he has “found immortality” (75). This juxtaposition suggests that to capture God (i.e. in the superimpositions of the daguerreotype) is synonymous with the act of authorship (which is an act both of encoding and decoding, as in the deciphering of Nostradamus). Writing brings together past (Nostradamus's manuscript) with present (images to capture) and future (prophecy). To gather the stream of time at one point in this way grants immortality – the preservation of past self in present recollection for futurity. The reality of Macondo and its citizens is thus intrinsically tied to language, and not only language, but text, and specifically history.

Text, however, is not a panacea as the tensions between orality and textuality at stake in these novels also show. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin identify the conviction that words “embody rather than represent reality” as characteristic of oral cultures (81). In other words, oral tradition posits a closer relationship between word and world, wherein “the word can create its object lead[ing] to a sense that language possesses power over truth and reality” (81); moreover, this identification has social ramifications, creating a

more tight-knit sense of community. Literacy, defined here as command of the written word, changes that relationship, allowing for greater objectification and critical distance. History can be recorded and examined as an external object rather than remembered and reviewed subjectively, internally. Thus relationships to memory and time are altered between oral traditions and literate traditions. This is another set of categories magical realism has the power to interrogate by muddying oral and literate conceptualizations of memory and time. Orality and community-centeredness allow for greater recursiveness in approaching narrativization, reflected in a more circular conception of the passing of time, whereas literacy introduces tendencies towards linear conceptions of time as text becomes end-centered, and objectification leads to an obsession with “progress” (80-81). Both oral and literate cultures therefore share the conviction that language constitutes truth, but for oral cultures it is more of a creative power and for literate cultures tends more towards the mimetic.

As objects of cultural memory, texts are expected to endure, and are traditionally equated with immortality, as Melquíades asserts regarding his manuscript (García Márquez 75). Writing is a technology that makes the internal external and the transient more or less permanent. It is a species of magic itself that makes the barriers between the physical and abstract permeable and which overcomes the vicissitudes of time. If you can write it, it is, and it is forever. *Beloved* challenges these assumptions regarding literacy by using orality as a powerful form of discourse against text. Sethe tells Beloved's story orally, directly to Beloved herself, who gains power and corporeality from the narrative. Sethe does this to affirm her own creative power, her own agency, as against her

objectification in schoolteacher's ledger through ink and abstract symbols on paper. She invokes her legacy from Baby Suggs as preacher of “the Word” to enact this reincarnation – her own testament to the “Love” that Baby preaches (Morrison 88); only this Love, the resurrection of the past, is wholly destructive, as opposed to Baby's Love, which brought the community together. Thus, we can extend Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's “writing back” metatextually to this production of Sethe's. Note the paradox, however, that in order to confront the audience with an oral counter-discourse, it must first be encoded by Morrison in written form. Thus, *Beloved* challenges the boundary and the meaning of oral and literate by mixing the two modes and their traditional functions by making the oral inner story objective as a physical character and by making the written outer story transient by insisting we as readers neither remember it nor pass it on. At the heart of magical realism, then, is Voltaire's (and later Peter Parker's Uncle Ben's) injunction that “with great power comes great responsibility.” This is the paradox for postcolonial writing: how to use this power for good and how to write without the text being accorded ontological status.

Challenging this assumption regarding the correspondence of word and world and the sacred status accorded to certain ways of interacting with text is what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe as the project of postcolonial writing: “There is no centre of reality just as there is no pre-given unmediated reality. If language constructs the world then the margins are the centre and may reconstruct it according to a different pattern of conventions, expectations, and experiences” (91). Language is revealed as profoundly malleable and capable of renegotiating the balance of power. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and

Tiffin refer to two processes by which colonized peoples gain control of discourse: “abrogation” and “appropriation” (38). The first, “abrogation,” is conceived of as “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words” (38). Conceptualizing this move to seize agency as “a refusal” is precisely echoed in *Beloved* when Sethe is characterized by her “refusal,” which can be interpreted as a refusal of slavery, of domination, and specifically as a refusal of schoolteacher's ledger and the recording of her identity as a binary list, knowing that so inscribed in the imperial mind, writing is conferred the status of truth or of the real. Sethe “refuses” this reality because she knows another story that contradicts it.

Sethe's refusal is not *sui generis*, however, but proceeds as part of the “turning wheel” of a family legacy. Just as her mother threw overboard the babies she bore to the white crewmen on her passage to the “new world,” refusing all but Sethe, so Sethe uses her progeny for refusal, and so Denver refuses to be entombed in 124, to give herself over to her mother, Beloved, or Paul D's “opinion” (Morrison 267). The first of her family line born into freedom, namesake of the white girl who delivered her, Denver's refusal can be undertaken in freedom, can be actually agentive, as she seeks self-support through work and recognition as a full human being and the equal of a white person.

As in *Beloved*, refusal in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* also proceeds according to family legacy, keyed off by Abelard's refusal to surrender his daughter Jacquelyn to Trujillo's appetite for young women, which brings *fukú* upon the Cabral family. One by one the family members are killed, until Beli is the only one who remains,

“the literal Child of the Apocalypse” (251). Her “pride,” like Sethe’s, an assumption of the right to love, prompts her refusal and her subsequent near-death beating in the cane field for her relationship with “the Gangster.” Oscar’s refusal of *fukú* (“fuck you” (Díaz 304)) – his mirrored assumption of the right to love, even the unavailable Ybón – results in the same punishment, and finally in his death.

Refusal is also a critical moment in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when José Arcadio Segundo refuses the official version of the Banana Company massacre and insists on the truth of what he witnessed, even though he is alone in maintaining the alternate version. Repeating it ad nauseam, however, drives him insane and even places him out of time in the manuscript room, invisible to the soldiers who come for him, just as Sethe’s story of the murder of Beloved did her. To be alone in the telling of a story that lies outside official discourse is a sort of insanity, a break with received reality. As readers, however, we both participate in and relieve this burden. This will be the subject of Chapter 3. Refusal, which is passive, the denial of complicity, then, is the first step in assumption of agency; appropriation is the second, active step in taking agency.

The mode of magical realism is crucial for the appropriation phase of agency through language, since magic is the vehicle for making the imaginary appear in the real world. Magical realism is the mode of asserting that imagination is agency. Magic is frequently conceived of as making use of language for its effects. From the classic “abracadabra” to Díaz’s *fukú* and *zafa*, magic is made possible through language – the bridge between realms is constructed of words. Faris likens magical realist writing to the “performance of a shaman” who engages the audience in curative ceremonies through

words that bring magic into the real world (*Ordinary 75*). In its postcolonial sense, magical realist writing can be seen as a way to heal wounds caused by imperialism. Using magic, things travel from imagination to reality through a medium that is as abstract as it is concrete and exists in essentially the same form on both sides of the divide. Our reality is at least partially constituted by how we are able to categorize through language. Hence, authorship is a form of magic that reorders the real. I refer again to White's theory, which Zamora and Bruner also subscribe to, of how narrative exists to order history. To give this history an active, re-constitutive role, however, supernatural force may be required to set the record straight (Benito, Manzananas, and Simal). Magic is invoked as a tool for agency for the colonized.

By subverting the expected relations of signification and representation through modified discursive forms, magical realist fiction acts through the reader to subvert the received way of "doing literature." Using non-standard dialects, non-standard ontologies and chains of causality (e.g. magical, spiritual), non-standard narrative techniques (e.g. recursive and temporally disrupted plots, "defocalized" narration (Faris)), breaking the fourth wall between text and audience, and other non-standard discursive measures (mixing genres, not wrapping up endings neatly, etc.), magical realist fiction co-opts the novel and short story form in order to put language to a new use, to combat Barth's "perceived exhaustion," and to "write back." These new modalities and ways of doing literature will create changes in readers who have been inculcated by the Western canonical literary ideology.

One of the prominent strategies for this literary disruption involves the “fragmentation” (Benito, Manzananas, and Simal) or “defocalization” (Faris) of the narrative voice. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* all, the narrative voice is split or even indeterminate. Readers are denied a clear sense of who the main narrator of any of the novels is. While we are given to know at the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that the narrator is Yunior, one chapter is narrated by Lola, and the novel relates events regarding the family's history and Oscar's final moments that even Yunior could not have known, so that the overall narrative voice is still defocalized. *Beloved* includes sections that alternate between Sethe's, Denver's and Beloved's voices, so that the narration begins to feel choral or contrapuntal, like the community women who come at the end of the novel, harmonizing to find “the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (261). Faris speaks of this multiplicity of voices, or defocalization, as “curative,” likening this kind of narration to the communal involvement in a shamanic rite, thereby engaging the reader participatorily as well in the “curing ceremony” that is a “writing back” to dominant discourse (*Ordinary* 78). Just as it takes community to build the story (Sethe, Denver, and Beloved co-narrating), so it takes community to fight nostalgia.

Benito, Manzananas, and Simal tie this “fragmentation” of narrative voice to the idea of substitution, writing that “in magical realism the borders of the self become highly porous” (165). Since the very idea of self is problematized, both in characters, e.g. the generations of repeating Buendías, so does it induce in the reader a questioning of the reader's identity and role with respect to narrative, again, causing the reader to end up on

the other side of the page/glass/mirror looking out from within the text. Warnes talks about this with respect to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, referencing the bookseller's sense of being trapped by "two nostalgias facing each other like two mirrors" (325). He can be easy in neither world, just as the reader becomes dislocated from the familiar through reading the fictitious and fantastic even while the real and fictional hold mirrors up to each other, bouncing the same image back and forth. While this may seem to be a fatalistic comment about textuality being endlessly mimetic, especially in light of the apocalyptic ending of the novel, Warnes points to discussion by González Echevarría that suggests just such a reservedly optimistic reading as we have been putting forward here, namely, that through problematizing reading, readers are empowered to question the ontology of text and historicity (95).

Language enables mental abstraction to achieve corporeality, completing the circle from physical object-in-the-world, through the mind as linguistically encoded concept, and back to object-in-the-world as sound or text, now radically transformed. Thus, the reality obtained on the other side of this transformation as it enters into relations with its context is very much dependent on the minds through which it passes, which shape it, and which then come to shape others as they are concretized in particular set relations with one another. That is, as words are arranged in narratives, whether those be fictional, historical, philosophical, scientific, or mythical, and are passed between minds in set ways, they become ordering principles for those other minds. Because of the limited number of possible combinations of linguistic code, the risk of stagnation and institutionalization through language increases with time as the creative potential

becomes, as Barth famously remarked, “exhausted.” This leads to the need for “remystification” (Faris), or “replenishment” (Barth). Or, as Bruner will have it:

If there are meanings 'incarnate' in the world (or in the text with which we start) we transform them in the act of accepting them into our transformed world, and that transformed world then becomes the world with which others start, or that we then offer. ... I have used the term 'to subjunctivize,' to render the world less fixed, less banal, more susceptible to recreation. Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition. Literature, in this spirit, is an instrument of freedom, lightness, imagination, and yes, reason. It is our only hope against the long gray night. (159)

If literature in general has this potential to “make strange” and to be “an instrument of freedom” through successive ideological transformations, how much more can magical realism do so, with its radical re-visioning, or what Zamora might term “revolutionary” (182), ways of text? This aligns with optimistic and idealistic visions for what magical realism can accomplish by way of countering, or “healing” (Faris), or “positive imagined reconstruction” (Slemon), that some theorists envision. Other theorists, however, are more qualified in their visions for “writing back,” such as in Mahler's interpretation of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Zamora's discussion of Carlos Fuentes regarding the potential for dialectic, perhaps more Vichian than Hegelian, and with the conservative goals of raising awareness of the problems and the process of power and text rather than proposing any specific utopian outcome. This is reflective of the postcolonial project of reinventing reality by starting with the reinvention of what is possible through discourse.

It is significant that Bruner refers in the quote given above to meaning as “‘incarnate' in the world” (159) in describing this process of linguistic transformation,

since it aligns with a primary thematic device employed by all three novels, that of corporeally linking texts and their narrators. By positing the corporeal identification of texts and narrators within the novels, the authors implicate their readers' relationships to text as well. Just as the Buendías are physically invested in the manuscript and Oscar becomes a human sacrifice for textual *zafa*, so are we as readers called to interrogate our role and responsibility with regards to the texts we “consume.” Jon Thiem comes at this active pulling-in of the reader through the concept of “textualization,” which he refers to as “arguably the paradigmatic topos of magical realism” (244). Textualization is the interpenetration of fiction and reality through the role of the reader. In many magical realist works, a fictionalized reader is seen to enter into the world of an inner text, causing the real-world reader to inevitably become self-aware about their own reading process and textual engagement, how they might be affected or changed by the texts they read. While Thiem conceives of this largely in relation to “ludic reading,” I would argue it is not at all limited to escapist reading, but just as bound to the counter-colonial agenda of magical realist literature. Certainly, we as readers are meant to identify with Aureliano Babilonia and the generations of his forebears laboring to decipher Melquíades's manuscript as we likewise labor to figure out what Gabriel García Márquez is talking about in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and as the novel comes to a close just as Aureliano finishes reading his own history. And certainly Morrison is deliberate in addressing her reader directly at the close of *Beloved*, urging us not to pass on the story we have just read. Even as Sethe tells the story of Beloved, we as readers co-construct her into the world of the text. Thus the “fourth wall” between reader and text is smashed, and

the two are invited, even required, to interact. Thiem, in fact, proposes magical realist texts of this kind as “allegories of literary theory” (241), specifically of reader response theory, and goes on to suggest that they collapse the distinction between reader and writer: “the textualized reader encroaches on the authorial position and assumes to some extent the authorial function of producer of texts” (242). Wendy Faris notes this same theme in magical realist work, concentrating her analysis on Carlos Fuentes's *Distant Relations*. She says of the end of the novel that “Fuentes's text transfers the storyteller's task to the reader, thereby alleviating the teller's anxiety but increasing the reader's and effectively altering the status of the reader to that of creator of the text” (*Ordinary* 130). Like Cortázar's *Axolotl*, we have been body-snatched as readers into the text and beyond into authors of the text. Thus, metatextual devices serve to make readers aware of this process. As with everything in magical realism, these devices problematize the reading process to raise awareness of the power of texts themselves, even while enacting the same process. Magical realist authors put on a magic show while showing the audience the smoke and mirrors or even passing them the wand.

As the preceding discussion suggests, this move of depositing responsibility for the text in the hands of readers is very much tied up in the moves these authors make at the ends of their texts. This will be the subject of the next chapter: what the purpose is for obliterating the inner worlds of the texts along with their narrators and then insisting that readers not remember what they have just read.

ENDS (NOT-ENDS)

Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth. (García Márquez 383)

One Hundred Years of Solitude ends thus as Buendías, Macondo, and the manuscript that details the history of family and town, appear to be wiped out in a “biblical hurricane,” and the narrator seems to insist that what we have just read has already been forgotten (“exiled from the memory of men” (383)). On the other hand, despite its negation, the last image is that of a second chance. *Beloved* ends with the narrator insisting that “this is not a story to pass on” and describing the fading of memories: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. / *Beloved*” (275). As readers, we are perhaps co-opted into a shamanic rite (Faris) by this narration in order to exorcise the story we have just read, in the same way that the townswomen do for *Beloved* herself, by replacing memories with weather. And yet the name is the last thing we hear, engraved on our consciousness, the literal last word. It is as much insistence upon forgetfulness as condemnation of it. And in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, we are told that Oscar dies and subsequently appears, ghost-like, in Yunior's dreams as having no face, his manuscript is lost, and despite the

azabaches encircling the last of the Cabral family line and Yuniór's attempt at *zafa* (which we have just read), *fukú* is still at large and likely to catch up with Isis and perpetuate the cycle. The book, however, closes with a quote from Oscar's posthumously received letter regarding his triumphal loss of virginity: "So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!" (335). The last words are Oscar's, who despite his death, has not ended. In all of these ends, inner story, text, and narrator seem to be wiped out together as the story comes to a close, but on the other hand, the very last words leave the door open to hope. As readers, no sooner do we get done constructing an entire world full of bizarre, striking events and images, than we are told that we must forget, or even have already forgotten, everything we have just read. But then this is immediately followed by one last subliminal flash of the very things we are called upon to forget: "second chance," "Beloved," "The beauty!" Why? One possible interpretation lies in paradox, of course, and in the themes identified in Chapter 1 and analyzed in Chapter 2: textualization and its relationship to agency.

As Zamora asserts, stories need ends – the beauty of narrative is that it imposes order on history, enabling humans to make sense of their existence (cf. also White, Barth). In discussing Henri Bergson's theories of time, she notes: "The absence of an end does not obviate our wanting one. Or creating one. Here Bergson anticipates by more than half a century the current literary critical distinction between the lack of historical ends and the necessity of fictional endings. He recognizes that in order to act we must invent ends" (75). Magical realist fiction plays with this expectation using apparently apocalyptic endings that are nevertheless open or canonically unsatisfactory, like leaving

us to wonder at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who was left to tell the story if town and manuscript and family are all obliterated, and in *Beloved* where we don't really know what Beloved was or where she's gone, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* where Oscar's manuscript with the "answer" is lost and *fukú* still lingers (Díaz 333). As readers we cannot help but continue to feel trapped in the circle of history, perhaps with Fuentes, grabbing for the thin lifeline that intimates a Vichian dialectic spiral instead (Zamora). These counter-colonial stories are told in order to put an end to them – that is, the end is precisely the point. They are "not to be passed on" so that the cycle of oppression they detail not be perpetuated – and yet, they don't really end because, paradoxically, we continue to live in history, informed and shaped by it, and must know it, or rather "them," since we are talking about alternate tellings of history, in order to escape the "turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle" (García Márquez 364). As Mahler points out, Oscar has circled a particular passage in one of his favorite comic books, *The Watchmen*, three times, emphasizing its importance to him, and the importance we as readers should give it in interpreting his story (132). It is this: Adrian Veidt, having saved the world by destroying half of New York City, says, "It all worked out in the end," and Dr. Manhattan replies, "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (qtd. in Díaz 331). So even as the novels end, and purport to end in the most final of ways, by total annihilation, because the world that informed the stories persists, and the stories themselves persist in the readers, nothing truly ends.

End is silence. The novels take us beyond words, beyond sound, as we see in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in the cane fields. Silence creates a space for restructuring, distancing, reflecting, but it is also ominous and threatening. We hover in that anxious place inhering in the idea of an end in Scheherazade's nightly narration, which is the ultimate exemplar of nested tales. Scheherazade is perhaps the emblem of personal apocalypse and simultaneously a stand-in for text or narrative itself as her life, her very being, hang on her ability to forestall closure. She is a crucial figure for Barth, Faris, and others as they ponder the intersections of story and its construction of life. As Barth points out, Scheherazade is saved from the fate of eternal narration by her flesh and blood progeny ("Tales"). This idea is also reflected in the embodied legacy of text and generational inheritance in the novels. The next generation is a safety valve for bearing the weight of textual *zafa*, of the narration that forestalls silence and the end of life and self. In the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the story that becomes important to tell is not Scheherazade's but that of the real lives of her children, just as in *Beloved* the story that becomes important to tell is Denver's real present life and not Beloved's resurrection from history. One way or another, the story continues, through a process of transfer that prevents a true ending or enduring silence. It is against this silence that text writes. Inherent in the idea of Scheherazade is the idea of apocalypse, that annihilation waits at the end of our historical narrative.

In discussing ends, it is impossible to ignore the apocalyptic imagery permeating these novels, and especially resonant in the destructive sweeps of their conclusions. In *Beloved*, when schoolteacher comes to retrieve Sethe and her children, he and his cronies

are referred to as “the four horsemen” (148), referencing the apocalypse. Díaz makes explicit reference to the apocalypse multiple times, especially with regards to Belí's fate as “the literal Child of the Apocalypse” (251). And nothing could be more apocalyptic than the successive “plagues” (birds, insomnia, drought, rain, Banana Company, ants) that sweep through Macondo and the dramatic final obliteration by wind that concludes the novel. That wind is referenced in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as well, where during his first beating in the cane field, “a tremendous wind ripped through the cane” (300). Even *Beloved* ends with wind, ostensibly replacing the personal of breath with the impersonal of wind, “Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves” (275). Wind seems a significant image in narratives that are playing with the paradoxes of language, since air is the most insubstantial of elements, and yet, set in motion, has the power to destroy institutions that have been ontologized into what is perceived as inviolable. Associated with breath, and perhaps even thence to an oral tradition, this wind becomes even more suggestive as an imperative for new storytellers to knock down their calcified textual edifices.

Apocalypse, as Zamora points out, is implicit in the agenda for colonization of the New World. European powers saw in the “New World” precisely that, the opportunity to craft ideal societies on Earth, fresh starts. Hence the prevalence of idealistic themes and communities in magical realist literature: Macondo in its founding, a second chance with the murdered daughter resurrected, escape from an oppressive regime by moving to the United States, *zafa*. Apocalypse in its full sense is as much about beginnings as endings. Zamora also points out the close interconnection of apocalypticism and writing. In the

Book of Revelation, John is acutely aware of the power of his words. He places “seven seals” upon his manuscript, acknowledging the danger within, but also the necessity of reading if mankind is to be saved. And it is the very fate of mankind that relies on his prophecy. Zamora points out the inherent paradox of the biblical apocalypticist, who

assumes that his narration will affect his listeners' beliefs and behavior, even as he shows that it is too late, that individual and communal destinies are foretold and hence presumably final. Yet his emphasis on the reforming power of language (in Revelation, Christ is imaged *as* the Word) implies that his own verbal account may yet modify the history it foretells. (43)

People, societies, are transient, but they gain a certain measure of immortality through words: “There remains, after the end of the worlds they describe, the description itself, and the implicit sense that language is an antidote to past suffering, that a situation may be salvaged by being put into words” (Zamora 45). Apocalypse is as much about renewal and “replenishment” (to steal from Barth) as the “exhaustion” (to steal from Barth again) that precedes it: “Catastrophe contains the seeds of revitalization” (Zamora 127). As Zamora likewise points out, perfection, paradise, implies an end-point and must lie outside of time. Thus, we see that the outside-of-time-ness in Macondo gradually pulls in from the town to the house to the parchment room, which remains inviolable until the final cataclysm. And in *Beloved*, 124 is shut off from the rest of the community where a dead girl has come back to life; time is not running the same way as it does outside. Likewise, text has the power to disrupt the flow of time, to purport immortality. Not only that, but text has the power to create just such a perfect universe, first on paper, and then in readers' heads, and therein lies the terrible danger, since, as Milan Kundera points out, utopia is totalitarian: “Totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise –

the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another ... and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden” (qtd. in Zamora 91). The risk that Mahler fails to point out when discussing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is that the blank pages Oscar is trying to write on are Balaguer's, so writing on them makes him perhaps not faceless, but Balaguer, whose pen they were designed for. “In Revelation, the power of language is constantly symbolized, but so is its potential perversion. God's word is figured as a double-edged sword, both redemptive and destructive” (Zamora 81). So do our authors acknowledge their own power and its dangers, feeling the need for their stories both to end and to endure without hegemonically oppressing their readers. Zamora, by invoking God in this passage is invoking the very paradox I am pointing to, and that our magical realist authors point to, setting up authors by parallel as gods, as tyrants. There is a totalitarianism in authorship, in setting down a narrative order, a history. Hence, the need for disruptive ends, for obliteration and memory simultaneously, a third space where the two forces are suspended in conversation with one another.

Zamora's conceptualizations regarding the theme of apocalypse in magical realist fiction are revelatory, but in the case of the novels under consideration here, at least, I believe there is more going on than a call for political, anti-imperial, “revelation and revolution” as she argues for Fuentes's and Cortázar's fictions(182). The point Zamora hints at, but doesn't quite get to, is this next step that doesn't just see the re-visionary and re-creative potential of language, but problematizes language, narration, text, and authorship, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin show. But even beyond what Ashcroft,

Griffiths, and Tiffin demonstrate, I see the texts as enacting a conservative sort of solution, a qualified sort of *zafa*, through their ends which aren't really ends, or new beginnings either. The endings are apocalyptic in the sense that they obliterate the world they created and give a sense of a beyond. But the beyond is not a paradise, is not a radical re-visioning in the sense of conclusive ideological or political action, but a re-visioning in the sense of an opening of eyes and seeing in a different light.

What I see as limited in reading these novels' endings as straightforwardly apocalyptic is that, as I mentioned, the endings neither project their own ideal future nor neatly resolve the tensions of the narrative. Instead, the endings are unsatisfactory by leaving their characters hanging, even the dead ones, and allowing for a variety of interpretations. For example, another potential reading for the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is that, in fact, Aureliano Babilonia never leaves the room because he does not read the final line. We read the story related by the manuscript because, in fact, the last line remains suspended and untranslated, its events pending exile from our minds, but not yet. This reading would imply that we, as readers, are implicated in Gabriel García Márquez's one hundred years of solitude, that it is our own family legacy that we read. García Márquez hangs a sword of Damocles overhead at the conclusion, telling readers that we cannot repeat history, *or else*: we must be aware of our own hypocrisy. Thus, in this reading, readers are continuing to live in solitude, to draw out our first chance, and the final verdict is still pending. There may yet be time in the zero hour for redemption. Judgement is forestalled and hangs on our interpretive self-criticality as readers.

Unsatisfactory in *Beloved's* ending, which argue against a straight apocalyptic reading, are the uncertainty of what Beloved was and what became of her post-exorcism, as well as following the erasure of tracks in the water with an invocation of the name “Beloved,” and leaving Sethe alive, but much diminished. This last diminishment recalls the women of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* – first La Inca, who “began to diminish, like Galadriel” and then Beli who is diminished by cancer (156). Imperialism thus eats at the loves of the women, leaving unfinished their legacies of agency appropriation, belayed to the next generation, just as the task of manuscript deciphering fell to each subsequent generation of Buendías, and the encoding falls to Oscar as heir to his grandfather's legacy. The task set for each generation in each novel is perpetually shifted forward, so that while it is Sethe who seeks agency and redress through the story of Beloved, it is Denver who ultimately gains power and agency and gets thrown clear of the wheel and the destructive nostalgia of history. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, while it is Oscar's dream to be the quintessential English nerd and agentive author, it is Yunior, former too-cool playboy, who becomes a professor and authors “a zafa of sorts” (Diaz 7), but who then, seemingly just as placeholder, must put the continued attempt at *zafa* onto Isis – back in the direct family inheritance. Thus, readers, as heirs in suspension for Aureliano Babilonia's task, and Isis for hers in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Denver in *Beloved*, inherit the task of *zafa* and redemption. The novels are ambiguously inconclusive because their tasks are ambiguously uncompleted and the sphere of action must be textually transferred from narrative to new reader-narrator, with the ambiguous hope that the reader can translate that into real-world action.

The dialectic of love and nostalgia is invoked in the process of this generational transfer. As described in the first chapter, love seems equated with a disruptive, revolutionary force, and nostalgia with a conservative, entropic one. These tensions evoke Zamora's discussion of apocalyptic versus entropic visions of time and history. Apocalypse is dynamic, driven by hope for something better, forward-looking, the kind of change possible through union, through love, while entropy is decay, retrogressive; hence the temptation of engrossment with a past perfect state and yearning away from inevitable decay. Both are forms of destruction, but they move in different directions. This makes perfect sense in theorizing about paradoxes of time and tensions of balance between agency and oppression, as well as the swings of dialectic movement versus circularity of history. Our texts mash up these systems by having dynamic, boundary-shattering, convention-defying loves. Love in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* disturbs ethical mores by showing love between nephews and aunts, the unnaturally reproductive boundless carnal passion between Aureliano Segundo and Petra Cotes, and by crossing class divides with the love between Meme and Mauricio Babilonia, etc. In *Beloved* love crosses social and ontological divides, showing the difficulty of love between slaves at all, not to mention mothers and dead daughters, i.e. across the divide of death itself: "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (45). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, love crosses racial and political divides. The love of a father for his daughter – Abelard's refusal to give Jacquelyn up to Trujillo – is the catalyst for the *fukú* on his family. Beli's subsequent catastrophic loves for the wrong men, agents of the regime, enact that *fukú*

even as she flees the country. And Oscar repeats that subversive love, claiming the freedom to love a woman supposedly as free as they come, since she is a whore, but nevertheless as unavailable as possible since she is engaged by a police officer. These dangerous loves are life-robbing, but essential to claiming agency, and are equated with freedom in each case.

As Freire tells us with reference to the fight for liberation from oppression, “this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence” (47). For Freire, love is freedom, and freedom is a condition for identity and for agency: “True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free” (51). And, in true magical realist fashion, Freire points to the paradox at the heart of liberation: “Yet it is – paradoxical though it may seem – precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that a gesture of love may be found” (55). Freire's conceptions of critical literacy permeate these novels as they play with the tensions of loves which are simultaneously freeing, revolutionary, and yet simultaneously deeply nostalgic as each text yearns for a past legendary agentive state: the power of progenitors (Úrsula and José Arcadio Buendía), the ability to have made a different agentive move that would have kept the daughter alive (*Beloved*), and Abelard's legendary *zafa* text (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*).

Time moves back and forth in these novels, bumping into itself as it attempts to be both reflective and corrective with regards to history. Deep hope and deep regret

collide catastrophically. The ends are both apocalyptic and entropic, hence our confusion as readers. The worlds erected by the texts are not only dramatically wiped out, they continue at a vaguely hopeful fizzle. All of these opposing systems imply a need to reconcile opposing types of motion and their respective conceptions of history and the role of human agency in that history. The solution is Chanady's and magical realism's through her construct of "unresolved antimony," with the caveat that the irresolution is a form of Vichian forwardness – a refusal of the need to resolve. Hence our narrators in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* end with destruction, but ultimately cap their narratives by "a second opportunity on earth" (García Márquez 383), "Beloved" (Morrison 275), or "The beauty!" (Diaz 335). If there is to be any hope "in the end," it lies in what the reader does or doesn't do with the story. Thus, what I see as truly revolutionary in these novels is that breaking of the fourth wall, insisting that readers take a hard look at their relationship to text, starting with the one they just read.

Breaking the fourth wall starts a domino effect regarding Thiem's textualization and the related literary theme of corporeality in the novels. I have referred to this technique before as like Chinese nesting boxes, where each level of embeddedness draws the reader deeper in. The outer form is that of a novel, within which readers discover that the narrator is embodied with their text. This corporeal identification makes readers itchy, as Thiem discusses, by creating the impression that the narrator is ghosted in what we are reading, especially since as the text steals from its narrator, readers feel increasingly invested as co-narrators, becoming writers, as Faris identifies. Thus, even as the narrators

(Buendías, Sethe, Oscar-Yunior) are body-swapped with their text, so are readers body-swapped with the narrator. At the end readers are being addressed from within the text – the inner narrator is aware of their readers and speaking directly to us, charging readers with action of some kind: this will be forgotten, do not pass this on, help me with this *zafa*. So readers are corporeally pulled in to the fictional rabbit-hole, and, like Borges's narrator in "Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius," we must pause to ask ourselves where we stand ontologically.

These multiply embedded moves of ontologically destabilizing textualization address the tension at the heart of the postcolonial condition – that of taking agency, of the power to self-ascribe an identity, for which control of linguistic code is so important. To “write back” is to gain agency, but to really gain it is to refuse domination in all its guises, including linguistic. And yet, as these texts demonstrate, there are no true starts, no virgin territories, no paradises on the other side of apocalypse, only continued appropriation and domination in one form or another, as Mahler and Díaz make clear. The refusal is itself problematic and paradoxical because what is refused is both the colonial/central/imperial control of discourse, as well as the very notion of control through discourse. Thus, refusing is refusing any linguistic yoke even while using it to write a counter-discourse. The solution is text's problematizing of itself, as in Benito, Manzanás, and Simal's negative realism: “The magical realist negation of the covering concepts of realism does not in itself conjure up an alternative presence to be reified; it does not end in final unity and identity and does not offer the illusion of finalized knowledge” (243-4). Hence a possible reason for self-destructing stories: in order to fully

refuse linguistic domination, the authors' own narratives must be included: they must refuse their own narratives, or the narratives must refuse themselves. Because we cannot “unread” the stories, and we do not possess the magical “sound that broke the back of words” as the townswomen in *Beloved* do to exorcise the stories (261), the texts act like the classic spy show trope and self-destruct. The message becomes detextualized, that is internalized, or re-originary; in sum, the text becomes oral, even if only symbolically since the text does, in fact, persist. Thus, the full circle of interrupting the cycle of colonial textual domination is effected. Text is used to fully refuse text and return to a species of orality – the wind sweeping through. And yet, with full magical realist irony in swing, of course after we read, we still hold the book in our hands and could re-read it as many times as we want and perpetuate the cycle ad nauseam ourselves, risking, I suppose the decay and insanity that befell Buendías and Sethe alike. However, with the cautionary examples of Buendías, Sethe, and Oscar in hand, we are instructed as readers to put down the book and walk away from text – not to dwell in it nostalgically or reify it ontologically as “the solution.”

The text is instructive in that it works through the reader, walking us through the process of questioning categories and sustaining paradox. As Frances Yates explores in detail with theories of memory tracing back to the legendary Simonides, and as David Rubin confirms by modern-day cognitive science, this is enacted through striking imagery and bizarre situations which are designed to inhere in memory. Their very absurdity is what makes the novels memorable, but it is an absurdity which serves to internalize the very serious underlying counter-colonial agendas and becomes

revolutionary by enacting a different way of conceiving of ontological categories and their realization and application through politics.

So, in sum, one interpretation of what the novels do is this: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* participate in a cycle of textualization, and, in order to stay true to their counter-colonial agenda, consequently need to de-textualize (re-oralize through vivid imagery and obliterating text). They use text to counter-colonize by writing alternate histories, then refuse the text since text is imperial; but since they can't really obliterate the memory of the story or outer text, they enact the paradox of memory and agency so that readers participate in, and become vividly aware of, the problems with textual power. That is, the authors leave the stories and the tension unresolved on purpose with endings that purportedly self-destruct but are nevertheless impossible to forget, especially in the face of the last hopeful words and the undeniable persistence of the text. Therefore, even as readers counter-colonize by internally enacting the alternate history of the text, the paradox of the endings rehearses the problem of authors implicating themselves as much as the imperial powers they are writing against, pointing to their own hypocrisy and ours, which is part of what makes us so uncomfortable at the end as readers.

The saving grace in this is that the text we read is not identical to the inner text, even though it purports to relay that story, so it leaves readers wondering what is left out or otherwise altered – that is, what relation this representation has to “truth.” The text we read is not identical to, say, Melquíades's manuscript (Warnes) or, as we are given to know, Oscar's miracle *zafa* manuscript, Yunior's being a pale attempt at reconstructing it

in his own way. Our salvation as readers, then, actually depends on that level of non-identification. If we were reading Melquíades's actual manuscript, we would be wiped out along with Aureliano Babilonia (or suspended, if we take the alternate reading), and if we had really conjured Beloved by retelling the story of her death, we would also be shriveled and insane like Sethe, and if we had really filled the Trujillo regime's blank pages by reading Oscar's manuscript, we would also be taken into the cane fields and shot. This level of remove is a safety valve, a cushion between readers and the "truth." It is important for readers to be reminded that what is in hand is fiction, to throw us clear of the textualization: full absorption into the world of the novel, indulgence in nostalgia, ontologizing that inner text as we construct it as readers, is dangerous and destructive. Thus, the flip side of textualization is to emphasize the constructedness of the narrative and our situation as readers actually outside the texts, to play with the tension between involvement and distancing. This is a vaguely forward-moving cycle whose conservative attempt at "healing" is just to point to the problem, raise awareness, by involving the reader in it. The reader is implicated in the cycle of textuality and power as much as the imperial powers whose abuses are countered and the author who risks hypocritically oppressing the reader. Coming to an awareness of the potential for being ideologically conscripted textually through reading is thus a sort of *zafa*. Just by knowing we've been oppressed gives readers a level of agency. This is step one in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's counter-colonization project: "abrogation." To give readers distance, then, is to allow us the opportunity to have enough critical distance to see the mongoose on the bus, to see Beloved but not succumb with Sethe, to watch apocalypse unfold but be able to ask

why we're still standing (i.e. that the text wasn't as ontological or predictive as advertised, and that's the point) – to give us space and time to question, which we couldn't do from fully inside the narrative. So readers are involved enough to experience the problem “first-hand,” as it were, through reader response, but distanced enough, pulled back from the brink at the end, to see how we were affected, with the last hopeful words ringing in our ears on the wind.

And isn't this the project of critical literacy as described by Ira Shor: “Words rethinking worlds,” except version 2.0 with “words rethinking worlds rethinking words,” so that language disrupts ontological categories and turns back on itself to disrupt its own assumptions and reach into the minds of readers so that we self-scrutinize, self-surveil, hegemonize ourselves disruptively *à la* Foucault. As a torchbearer for the likes of Freire and Foucault in bringing critical literacy to praxis, Hilary Janks describes the objective of critical literacy as an “ongoing cycle of representation – deconstruction – redesign” (161). This conceptualization mirrors the process I see in the three novels analyzed here of textualization – ontological disruption – detextualization. Obvious parallels can be made between Janks's first two steps in the cycle and mine: representation equated with textualization as the reader seeks to identify with the action of the novel; and deconstruction identified with ontological destabilization as the author undertakes to question received ontological categories. The last step in the cycle perhaps differs between her conceptualization and what these novels appear to do, or perhaps requires some explanation to show the relationship between the two. Janks, following Freire, is concerned with ensuring that critical literacy is applied and acted upon: “Freire links

literacy – writing, reading and re-writing the world and the word – to human agency and the power to effect social transformation” (161). The nature of that ultimate social transformation is what these novels problematize, wanting to ensure that the new utopia is not as totalitarian as the system it aims to replace, thus, rather than re-visioning “social transformation” as an ideal end state, they encourage the continued disruption of that end state and critical consciousness itself as the hope. Certainly this hope is shared by theorists and practitioners such as Janks and Freire, but García Márquez, Morrison, and Díaz are perhaps more reserved in their vision of what is possible. Thus, the goal is to start “moving towards *zafa*.” “re-visioning” history is, in this sense, to see the mongoose on the bus with the faceless man and realize that it is not the mongoose that is *zafa* but the seeing. It puts faith not in reifying the object but in the capacities of the subjects of history to see their own embeddedness and complicity, and for individuals to become a community through interaction with a portal of community memory, a magical text, if you will, through which readers pass and are transformed, so that together, through this communal object, the society can be transformed and the whole fabric “re-visioned” or “re-vised.” The project of “writing back” becomes then an “un-writing” and an “un-reading.” Janks calls for both “reading *with* a text and reading *against* a text” in much the same way (96). Critical consciousness requires both identification with the world of the author/narrator and the questioning of it in the same way that I have discussed the need for the textualization of the reader as well as the critical distance afforded by the endings of the novels: “We have to do both as each on its own is a form of entrapment” (96). In

other words, read through the lens of critical theory, these works of literature put critical literacy into practice.

Janks concludes *Literacy and Power* with a call for further work to explore how to incorporate strategies for implementing critical literacy through non-rational artistic means of identification. That, I believe is part of where this thesis fits in, as an extension of Janks that begins to get at Maxine Greene's call to use art as a means of "becoming wide-awake in the world" through "a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary" (4) by using the imagination. Magical realism is a prime mode for defamiliarizing, as we have seen. Greene's injunction of "becoming wide-awake in the world" also recalls Freire's birth metaphor and the idea that re-vision of text and through text is to become a new person, and new people can make a new world. Through readers actively engaging alternate worlds imaginatively, real change in re-visionary potential is effected. Through novels like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the particular re-visioning that is effected is critical consciousness, Freire's *conscientização*, of the nature of linguistically-mediated reality, particularly as it is recorded textually as history, and the dangers of ontologizing texts, even critical texts. Through the novels' ends, readers are called to be aware of their roles as readers and how we "consume" texts.

In that spirit, then, I urge you, dear reader, to consider this part of an ongoing dialogue, a potential perspective in the problematic field of the literary, our being-in-the-world, and the praxis that lies at their intersection.

The End?

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. n.p.: Taylor & Francis Ltd / Books, 2002. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.
- Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984. 62-76. Print.
- . "The Literature of Replenishment." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. 165-176. Print.
- . "Tales Within Tales Within Tales." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984. 218-238. Print.
- Benito, Jesús, Ana M^a Manzananas, and Begoña Simal. *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures*. Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literatures No. 3. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Aleph.." *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. 274-286. Print.
- . "The Garden of Forking Paths." *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. 119-130. Print.
- . "Tlön, Uqbar, and Orbis Tertius." *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. 68-81. Print.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986. Print.
- "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1-21. Web.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 89-108. Print.
- Chanady, Amaryll. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony*. New York: Gardland, 1985. Print.

- Cortázar, Julio. "Axolotl." *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*. Eds. David Young and Keith Hollaman. New York & London: Longman, Inc., 1984. 355-359. Print.
- D'Haen, Theo L. "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 191-208. Print.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. Print.
- Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. Print.
- . "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 163-190. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000. Print.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. 1967. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Avon Books, 1971. Print.
- Greene, Maxine. *Releasing the Imagination*. (1995). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers Inc., 2000. Print.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "Interaction Between Text and Reader." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 1673-1682. Print.
- Janks, Hilary. *Literacy and Power*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Mahler, Anne Garland. "The Writer as Superhero: Fighting the Colonial Curse in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia* 19:2 (2010): 119-140. Web.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987. Print.
- Rubin, David C. *Memory in Oral Traditions: the cognitive science of epic, ballads, and counting-out rhymes*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.

- Shor, Ira. "What Is Critical Literacy?" *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. Eds. Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres. New York and London: Routledge, 2009. 282-304. Print.
- Slemon, Simon. "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995. 407-426. Print.
- Thiem, Jon. "The Textualization of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995. 235-248. Print.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Reading as Construction." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. 151-164. Print.
- Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001. 1712-1729. Print.
- Yates, Frances A. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction*. 1989. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Print.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, Eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.