

THE MAGICAL SUBLIME: A NEW-OLD  
LENS ON MAGICAL  
REALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

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While magical realist critics often refer to magical realism's generic heritage of primitive cultures and indigenous mythology, Franz Roh's *magischer Realismus*, and Surrealism, I will point to the sublime as a less recognized lineage, yet one which offers equally fruitful insights. Magical realism employs many elements of the sublime, such as astonishment and the alternation between the two phases of pain and pleasure, but perhaps most valuable in this comparative analysis is the sublime's offering new perspectives which illuminate how magical realism's most distinguishing characteristic, the magic, functions. Relying mostly on the theories of Longinus, Burke, and Kant, as well as various contemporary eco-theorists, in this analysis I demonstrate how magical

realism shares the characteristics of several different historical and contemporary usages of the sublime while conflating ontological binaries, dramatizing historical horrors, engaging with issues of nationhood, and embodying a debate about sublime place.

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CHAPTER 1  
THE MAGICAL SUBLIME

1.1 Introduction

What ideas does the word *sublime* typically evoke? Scenes of primitive nature, storms, and Niagara Falls? Deities, demons, and angels? What about magical realism? While magical realist critics often refer to magical realism's generic heritage of primitive cultures and indigenous mythology, Franz Roh's *magischer realismus*, and Surrealism, I want to point to the sublime as a less recognized lineage, yet one which offers equally fruitful insights. Magical realism employs many elements of the sublime, such as astonishment and the alternation between the two phases of pain and pleasure, but perhaps most valuable in this comparative analysis is the sublime's offering new perspectives which illuminate how magical realism's most distinguishing characteristic, the magic, functions. To analyze the sublime in magical realism means to scrutinize the magic because a text's magic is involved in both the terrible and transcendent phases of the sublime. As we will see, in texts like Jorge Luis Borges' "The Aleph," both phases of the sublime are embodied in the single textual moment when the protagonist sees the magical Aleph. In other texts there is a terrifying atrocity preceding the magical moment which instigates both the materialization of the magic and transcendence. For example, in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, Beloved's tragic death is the atrocity

which effects the magical appearance of Beloved's ghost, an event which, in turn, allows Sethe to experience a sublime transcendence. A sublime lens on magical realism contributes to important meta-questions in magical realism such as what does the magic do? What does it underscore? Why does magical realism use magic? How does magical realism participate in the tradition of the aesthetics of the sublime?

Carving out new ways to analyze magical realism herself, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant points to the need for "new categories [...] to situate any contemporary magic realist text, or part of a text, more accurately in a larger conceptual and terminological constellation." She posits that Stephen Slemon's influential article on magical realism and postcolonialism was so groundbreaking that it brought a great deal of attention to magical realism as a postcolonial discourse, to the exclusion, unfortunately, of other literary and ideological connections which, if made, could increase our understanding of magical realist literature: "[...] magical realism is not exclusively a postcolonial phenomenon, but a much older one whose various offshoots require more precise and specific definitions" (251-52).<sup>1</sup> My comparative analysis offers a new look at magical realism's "offshoots," specifically its literary relative, the aesthetics of the sublime.

### 1.2 A Select, Condensed History of the Sublime

Many equate the sublime with Romanticism. While the Romantics did make a substantial contribution to this aesthetic, the sublime did not, in fact, originate there. The sublime is a discourse that has existed since at least the first-century with the classical Greeks, specifically Longinus, and has since preoccupied the minds of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Martin Heidegger, Sigmund

Freud, and Jean-François Lyotard. Quoting Harold Bloom, Richard Macksey ends Longinus' trajectory of the sublime with Freud, calling him "the last great theorist of the sublime mode." "Freud's essay on '*Das Unheimliche*' (1919)" he contends, is "the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime" (Macksey 931). On the other hand, however, James Kirwan, tracing the sublime from the Romantic era to the twentieth-century, argues that the sublime has not become obsolete: "I see no evidence that we are yet outside the moment in time in which the word is meaningful" (160). I agree with Kirwan and intend to add magical realist writers to the end of Macksey's list. As the sublime aesthetic has moved along the timeline, being cycled through different eras, it has been categorized and analyzed, shaped and re-shaped. A brief snapshot of some of the major theorists/groups who have engaged with the sublime and how they adapted it will be helpful in situating magical realism in this ancient and perpetuating discourse.<sup>2,3</sup>

Credited most often to spokesman Longinus, the sublime of classical literature is closely associated with the literary and rhetorical domains. Here the sublime deals centrally with an orator moving his audience through their emotions. According to Longinus the sublime is centrally about a type of imaginative transport, or *ekstasis* (Macksey 930), which works via people's imaginations, thoughts, and speech (Weiskel 13). After the classical era, Longinus was revived by Boileau in 1674 and then after that, the sublime made its way to Dryden and English criticism (Macksey 926-27). However, because I am limited in the size of ground I can cover, and since I am concerned to discuss more recent antecedents of the sublime as fruitful for an

understanding of magical realism, my analysis will move over the seventeenth-century and pick up again with Edmund Burke and the Romantics. The Romantics are most well known for distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime, for dealing with the transcendent in nature, and for psychologizing the sublime. According to Burke, the sublime deals with the vast, the obscure, the large, which at least partially explains why the Romantic sublime is attached to grand nature motifs such as a starry sky or, as J. M. W. Turner displays in one of his paintings (fig. 1), in extreme states of nature such as a snowstorm. The sublime experience is caused by objects that evoke terrifying and astonishing ideas in people. Wherever the sublime is encountered, it has a profound impact on the mind of a person, setting one off balance. The sublime is, explains Weiskel, the point where the mind breaks down. However, a positive aftermath follows the breakdown. That positive outcome occurs because the Romantic sublime is “rooted in an experience of transcendence which lifts man ‘far above mortal stature’ and raises humans ‘toward the spiritual greatness of god’” (Longinus qtd. in Modiano 243).

Immanuel Kant is (in)famous for his moral and humanist sublime, but generally praised for identifying how pain and pleasure are interrelated in the sublime experience. While there is a plethora of strains of the sublime, Monk calls Kant’s theorization of it in the *Critique of Judgment* “the great document that coordinates and synthesizes the aesthetic concepts which had been current throughout the eighteenth-century. It was Kant who took the isolated discoveries of earlier thinkers and welded their fragmentary aesthetic together so as to create a truly philosophical system [...]” (4). While Kant’s ethical/Christian and humanist spins on the sublime have evoked debate, his

identification of the two phases is a defining moment in sublime theory, one which seems to have “stuck” throughout later theorizations.

More recently contemporary environmental theorists in the wake of the Romantic era are reevaluating what the natural sublime means for an increasingly urban world. Some critics identify a harmful dichotomy between sacred nature and profane cities in the Romantic sublime. Because Romantics restricted the sublime experience to natural locations, they leave urbanites stranded from the possibility of transcendence in their everyday environment. Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” (1802) offers an example of the Romantics’ excluding the city from the sublime, as the poet describes the beauty, as opposed to the sublimity, of London in the morning light:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear

The beauty of the morning; [...]

Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

The river glideth at his own sweet will:

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still! (1-5, 11-14)

The city is “fair” and the morning “beaut[iful],” not overpowering or disturbing. It is a “touching” sight, not terrifying as with the sublime. Indeed, the city evokes a “deep” “calm” in the speaker. In Romanticism beauty is associated with social ties found in the

city, while the sublime is associated with nature and individuality, a distinction Wordsworth here reinforces. There is a duality, even crisis, in the Romantic aesthetic, Robert Baker explains, between a potentially anarchist individuality associated with the sublime and a reconciliation to society associated with the beautiful (56). Burke clarifies these oppositional relationships in his seminal work, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The last line of Wordsworth's poem, "And all that mighty heart is lying still," seals his depiction of the city as beautiful, and as such, the antithesis of the sublime. Here the hearts of city dwellers, the heart of the city itself is still, the reverse effect of the sublime's transport and, thus, movement. This poem thus aligns with the Romantic idea that the seeker of the sublime in nature returns to the city after his encounter with the unsettling that nature has evoked to reassimilate him/herself into society.

Finally, we arrive at the magical realists who have borrowed from traditional types of the sublime while also using it in new ways. A reading of magical realism through the lens of the sublime suggests that magical realism puts contemporary, literary skin on sublime theory, as both are intensely concerned with liminal spaces. At the same time magical realism's sublime is unique from other versions, such as the comic or urbane sublimines in, for example, its use of place in relationship to the sublime.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, woven throughout all of the various ways different groups have appropriated the sublime is the constant notion that we humans can engage in a type of transport beyond or transcendence of mortal boundaries.

Relying mostly on the theories of three of the most influential theorists of the sublime, Longinus, Burke, and Kant, as well as various contemporary eco-theorists, in this analysis I intend to demonstrate how magical realism shares the characteristics of several different historical and contemporary usages of the sublime while conflating ontological binaries, dramatizing historical horrors, and engaging with issues related to nationhood. Towards the end, I focus in on how magical realists engage the question of the sublime and place, specifically, how magical realism's sublime shares with the natural sublime, but also sacralizes urban spaces in what I call the urban sublime.

## CHAPTER 2

### ONTOLOGICAL TRANSGRESSIONS

A sublime mode in magical realism can most clearly be seen in magical realism's characteristic blurring of ontological lines. In other words, a character and/or reader may undergo a sublime experience when the ontological boundaries are transgressed which separate a Western European categorization of Manichean dichotomies, such boundaries as that between life and death (*Famished Road*, "Aura"), dream and waking ("Night Face Up," *Famished Road*), spirit and human (*Famished Road*), and past and present ("Night Face Up," "Aura"), and human and animal (*Pig Tales*).<sup>5</sup> In their ontologically transgressive acts, magical realist writers evidence a deep concern with what is at human limits, which unites them with sublime theorists. The use of magic embedded in reality foregrounds magical realists' interest in that which is, as Lois Parkinson Zamora calls it, "at the limits of the knowable" (Zamora 498) world; in fact, she sees this interest as magical realism's "most basic concern." Zamora points to the use of ghosts in magical realist literature, such as in Morrison's *Beloved* (542), as an example of their interest in liminal spaces. Their use of the ghost points to "the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honor that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define"



(298). This interest of magical realists in that which is outside traditional boundaries of reality, such as ghosts and spirits, aligns them with the sublime tradition, as the sublime, too, is centrally concerned with that which is at or exceeds the limits of mortality, such as infinity or death.

Magical realism's ontological transgressions can be seen in terms of the sublime because its occurrence, which is effected through the magical moment(s) of the text, fulfills the critical two phases of the sublime, as identified by Kant. According to Kant, pain is caused in the sublime experience when one feels she is encountering places/powers/ideas which outsize her mortal boundaries, and, therefore, threaten her. The sublime is, as Weiskel pointed out in his seminal work, "a psychology that stresses its own limits" (17); it focuses on the human encounter with that which is beyond one's mortal limitations. Two instances which can evoke a sense of threat or sublime pain are when something has the power to threaten one's life, the dynamical sublime, or when one encounters something which exceeds the mind's capability to encompass, an experience called the mathematical sublime. Importantly, though, in order for the sublime experience to occur, pleasure, or transport, must follow pain or threat. In other words, when something occurs which terrorizes a person, a person will experience the sublime, as opposed to experiencing only fear, if pleasure occurs after the feelings of pain. In the pleasure phase, man ultimately finds a way to transcend or be transported out of the material confines of his skin, his humanity, his mortality.

Julian Young praises Kant for revealing the centrality of *ekstasis*, or transport, to the sublime, an accomplishment for sublime theory because it underscores "the idea

[...] that the unpleasant part of the experience of the sublime is the bringing forth of mortality, and the joyful part is its transcendence” (136). In the midst of contemplating a danger or threat to ourselves (the dynamical sublime) or a vastness which our imaginations and senses fail to fully grasp (the mathematical sublime), we realize there is a part of us as human beings which is above nature:

This is the key to the sublime. The joyful element in the experience is, to use Longinus’s word, a kind of *ekstasis*: we discover, as Kant calls it, a ‘supersensible’ [...] side to our being, something that is ‘superior’ to our natural self. In experiencing the sublime we transcend our everyday selves, undergo a kind of ‘out-of-body’ experience. We are, says Kant (making use of the fact that the German word for the sublime, *das Erhabene*, literally means ‘the raised up’), ‘raised up above fear of [the]...operations of nature. (134)

According to Kant and Schopenhauer’s theorizations, pleasure occurs because in the face of vastness (the mathematical sublime), man’s reason proves superior to the senses, while in the face of power, her “supersensible” side, as Kant calls it, prevails over the sensible world (133-35).

As magical realist literature guides the reader through its fictional world where ontological transgressions occur, it is also simultaneously guiding the reader through the sublime experience of pain and transcendence. For example, when Grenouille uses his olfactory sense to detect beautiful virgins or to create perfumes for himself that subconsciously control people’s opinions of him, the reader is led beyond what he considers humanly possible- away from the text the reader probably limits the ability of

each of a person's five senses- and, therefore, into sublime pain. The Tate Gallery comments: "The notion that a legitimate function of art can be to produce upsetting or disturbing effects was an important element in Romantic art and remains fundamental to art today" ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)). This sublime pain from ontological transgressions is evidenced through the reader's astonishment, an emotion that is symptomatic of a person's encounter with the sublime. Indeed, magical realists' use of magic to astonish the reader with ontological transgressions makes magical realism an example of a contemporary art form which has carried on this value of Romantic sublime art. The sublime must have both phases, though. When the reader suspends her disbelief with a momentary acceptance of Grenouille's maleficent tactics in order to continue with the story, she, at least momentarily, expands the parameters that encompass her ontological allowances.<sup>6</sup>

I realize that in this discussion of ontological transgression I am traversing problematic territory. The astonishment effected by magical realism is complex. On the one hand, this category presupposes that one have certain, fixed ontological categories that separate such binaries as life and death. Otherwise, shock may not be effected by a magical realist text which uses magic to create a slippage between categories. More specifically, these categories align with a rationalist, Western European definition of reality, which my analysis here depends on. On the other hand, there are different beliefs about reality's parameters, which problematizes a critical reading of magical realism as a suspension between two ontological natures, "a battle between two oppositional systems," as Stephen Slemon proposes (409). What if a

person believes levitation is possible, as in the famous scene of Remedios the Beautiful in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*? Could the Bible be considered magical realist literature? While this question of belief, or "faith" as Carpentier called it ("Marvelous Real" 86), is a problem critics deal with in magical realist literature, critics such as Jean-Pierre Durix, Cooper, and Chanady agree that the writers of magical realist literatures write from a rationalist mindset, in contrast to the beliefs one might associate with certain regions they represent.<sup>7</sup> I am taking this stance that magical realism depends on a rationally grounded perspective which is disrupted by magic, and that the form requires a temporary suspension of disbelief regarding that magic.

Borges' short story "The Aleph" provides an example of ontological transgressions in the sublime mode. In this story, the fictional protagonist, Borges, sees a magical Aleph, a point which encompasses every point of time and space, and, thus, exceeds typical ontological boundaries of time and space. As in every magical realist text, the irreducible element in this story, the Aleph, demarcates the point of ontological transgression. The phrase *irreducible element* refers to the magic in the text; it is a term Wendy Faris borrows from Young and Hollaman to describe a magical moment in the text which cannot be explained using "the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse" (*Ordinary* 7). In this specific story, the Aleph also serves as the point of sublime pain and transcendence, providing an example of a magical realist adaptation of historical usages of the sublime. When the protagonist sees the Aleph, he is thrown into the sublime experience. The character even uses terminology related to the sublime to describe the moment he sees the object.

The Aleph is “limitless,” he explains, and he tells how his mind is devastated over the object, a mathematical sublime moment. Julian Young explains that the mathematical sublime causes pain to the individual, because his imagination and senses cannot grasp the infinite (134). Finally, that all of this pain takes place in fictional Borges’ mind, recalls the Romantic’s stress on the psychological nature of the sublime experience.<sup>8</sup>

Weiskel’s description of the breakdown and discontinuity that occurs when one encounters the sublime explains further how fictional Borges’ feeling overwhelmed upon seeing the Aleph can be understood in sublime terms. According to Weiskel, the sublime experience involves three phases, which I will here paraphrase. These phases form a pattern of the sublime experience in “The Aleph.” In phase one, a person is in a normal balance or homeostasis between inner and outer worlds. This stage is characterized by harmony, habit, and boredom. Before the protagonist sees the Aleph, his life is both habitual and mundane, as exemplified by his yearly routine of visiting the family of his deceased female acquaintance. Phase two is the stage when one encounters the sublime. Here the “habitual” relationship between inner and outer worlds “breaks down,” and the associated characteristics are astonishment and a sense of “disconcerting disproportion.” Fictional Borges is entranced by what he sees in the Aleph, and though he tries, his attempt at describing all he sees in the Aleph is futile. When he encounters this magical thing his “floundering mind can scarcely encompass” he is astonished and speechless. The Aleph is far too large for language’s referential ability; the moment he looks into it is the “ineffable” part of his story (292). The Aleph overwhelms the confines of all of human experience, as signified by the fact that Borges

cannot describe the Aleph, since human language is based on a “shared past” which the Aleph evades. Phase three is the “reactive” stage when the mind begins to try to reassimilate itself to the screeching halt it just experienced. Here the mind reasserts balance by making sense of the unknown breakdown in relating the sublime cause to a meta, transcendent order (Weiskel 23-24). As I will show, our protagonist reassimilates himself so well that he begins to forget his experience with the Aleph, a detail in the plot which carries implications regarding an interpretation of the story.

To complete the sublime experience, Borges necessarily experiences the pleasure involved in the transcendence of human limits after he is mentally decimated. The sublime involves a simultaneity of limitations and transcendence, explains Kirwan: “In the sublime the mind feels itself empowered to pass beyond the confines of sensibility, and it does so at the very moment these confines are made most apparent” (55). At the same moment he is overwhelmed, his mind surpasses human limitations of space, time, and knowledge. Fictional Borges transcends the limitations of space; in the Aleph’s one inch diameter he is able to see all points in space, “the unimaginable universe.” He exceeds the limitations of time when he sees the deceased Beatriz. The Aleph allows Borges to surpasses the limitations of human knowledge, with the result that when he gets on the subway after leaving Carlos’ home, everyone looks familiar to him and he fears “not a single thing on earth would ever again surprise” him (294).

Finally, the Aleph allows Borges to transcend the confines of individual being. This experience is what Young refers to as the “the essential character of the epiphany of the sublime,” “an expansion of the self into the vastness of being” (131). Freud

described it as an “oceanic” feeling, Schopenhauer a “oneness with the world” (qtd. in Young 140).<sup>9</sup> Fictional Borges describes experiencing this epiphany. His encounter with the Aleph evokes “infinite wonder” and “infinite pity.” He sees all eyes looking at him. He sees a woman he will never forget and the cancer in her breast. While his description of what he sees in the Aleph is inadequate, he disclaims, it does portray this “expansion” of the self “into the vastness of being,” as he is everywhere and with everyone at once, all limits of space having evaporated. At first glance, his experience alludes to an impulse towards community in this story. However, shortly after his epiphanic experience with the Aleph, he questions what he has experienced: “Incredible as it may seem, I believe that the Aleph of Garay Street was a false Aleph.” Furthermore, he hints that forgetfulness is wearing away at what he saw and experienced: “Did I see [the Aleph] there in the cellar when I saw all things, and have I now forgotten it? Our minds are porous and forgetfulness seeps in [...]” (294-95). One can only assume he returns to his pre-enlightened self, that he reassimilates himself too much into Weiskel’s third phase of the sublime. Thus, he undermines any momentary hope for the reader of the possibility of sublime oneness with fellow humanity.

From this reading of “The Aleph” through a perspective of the sublime process, one could determine that either Borges does not believe in the sustainability of a transcendent epiphany of interconnectedness among humanity- indeed, his using his own name for the protagonist who forgets this epiphany suggests he indicts even his own forgetfulness- or, one could infer that Borges does see a sustained epiphany of oneness as possible and uses his protagonist as a warning against forgetting this

important idea. Whichever interpretation one chooses, what is clear is that Borges presents an initial transcendence as possible.

Edna Aizenberg identifies specifically within Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* but also in magical realist literature in general, a "utopian impulse" (29); using Simon Gikandi, she also describes in Borges "the utopian impulse to create mythic spaces in which new societies might be articulated" (27). Using her terminology, I must clarify that within Okri's Nigeria and Borges' Buenos Aires one may find a utopian *impulse*, but not a utopia. As I will go into detail about later, *The Famished Road* does not present Nigeria in a completed process of transcendence; likewise, "The Aleph," does not sustain transcendence for even one character, fictional Borges, in the story. Nevertheless, both fictions do at least offer the hope that the epiphany is available. From this hopeful tone, we can identify this story as at least one step further than T. S. Eliot's pessimistic perception of modern man in his Prufrock character, a hopelessly isolated individual he likens to a crab scuttling across an ocean floor (6). Borges, thus, here provides an example of how magical realism begins in, but moves beyond modernist literature's existential pessimism into a postmodern establishment of new possibilities.

Magical realism's blurring of ontological opposites fulfills Barth's vision for postmodernism as a literature of replenishment, a literature able to handle paradox, able to encompass polarities: "A worthy program for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing." Barth gives Italo Calvino and García Márquez as



examples of writers who fulfill his ideal, pointing to the way each writer encompasses seeming opposites in their works. Calvino has “one foot in fantasy, one in objective reality.” García Márquez synthesizes the poles of “straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror” (70-71). Cooper evokes Barth’s vision of postmodernism in her description of magical realism’s ability to, as she calls it, “see with a third eye”:

Magical realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the pre-colonial versus the post-industrial present and life versus death. Capturing such boundaries between spaces is to exist in a third space, in the fertile interstices between these extremes of time or space. (1)

Further on in her book, Cooper relates this embracing of opposites with one of magical realism’s “fundamental aspects,” hybridity, which she explains as “a syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic, science and religion, [...] urban and rural, Western and indigenous, black, white, Mestizo” (32). Stephen Slemon points out that the very term *magical realism* speaks to its hybrid mixture of magic and reality (409).

A woman metamorphosing into a pig in *Pig Tales*, Grenouille’s superhuman olfactory sense in *Perfume*, and the poor man on his flying bucket in “The Bucket Rider” are all examples of the hybridity involved in magical realism’s ontological transgressions. Ontological transgressions, the joining together of two seeming

disparate poles, effects shock when the reader witnesses the slippage between boundaries, but also ecstasy at one's ability to transcend those boundaries. In doing the latter, magical realism evidences its characteristic utopist dreaming of a better future.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICAL HORRORS

I have already mentioned that with ontological transgressions the sublime is effected by means of the irreducible element. There does not necessarily have to be an apparent cause or instigator of the sublime, but the sublime experience occurs simply because ontological boundaries are being questioned. Therefore, in addition to being effected by the irreducible element, the sublime experience also occurs at the same time as the irreducible element. The “The Aleph” and Julio Cortázar’s “Axolotl,” in which a man becomes an axolotl, are both examples of texts which clearly use ontological transgression as the instigator of the sublime.

Though all magical realist texts use ontological transgressions and, therefore, could all be seen as effecting the sublime experience through ontological transgressions, in some magical realist texts the sublime experience can, upon closer scrutiny, be additionally traced to a specific, prior instigator. For example, in “The Night Face Up” the ontological transgression appears to be activated by a postcolonial issue, the clash between ancient myth/rituals and Westernization. After analyzing a group of magical realist texts, I have found that many of those texts could be categorized into groups that use common motifs to engender the sublime experience. This is consistent with the history of the sublime, as the sublime has, throughout the years, been tied to various

motifs. I have made three groups of common motifs magical realist texts use (which could be expanded) in addition to ontological transgressions: historical horrors, issues of nationhood, and interest in place. That reading various magical realist texts through the lens of the sublime foregrounds common sublime motifs suggests the benefit of the perspective to magical realist theory. The sublime demonstrates links between the individual texts, which might otherwise appear very different on the surface except in their simply all employing magic. Moreover, the presence of motif patterns in magical realist texts supports the legitimacy and value of reading those texts through a sublime lens. The identification of sublime elements in magical realism is not a coincidental discovery made from a single text, but the sublime is compatible with magical realism's modality.

Because the sublime deals with that which threatens a person, identifying the different motifs which engender the sublime within magical realism also illuminates what magical realists identify as threats to the contemporary person, as well as what possibilities are available for the transcendence of those threats. The historical horrors category uses an atrocious past circumstance, such as slavery and Nazism, to give rise to the irreducible element and therein opens a space for one to interact with the ineffable past. The second motif category deals with the overwhelming nature of issues related to nationhood while questioning the possibility of transcending those threat. In the place motif, the natural sublime criticizes the encroachment of the Industrialized, modernized world and uses nature as a means of escape. In reverse while the urban sublime uses the sublime experience to implicitly question the profanity of the city, and

it accomplishes a defamiliarization and sacralization of the city. I will now look at each category in detail, analyzing the motif (also called the sublime object); the irreducible element; the sublime phases of pain and pleasure (threat and transcendence) within that process; and what the sublime structure accomplishes in specific magical realist texts.

*Beloved*, *The White Hotel*, *The Shawl*, and *Imagining Argentina* are all magical realist texts that use the sublime to point to horrific historical moments. While each of these texts deals with profoundly different historical events, the texts are threaded together by the authors' use of a sublime schema in the magical realist mode to portray these tragic historical moments. Each historical horror in these texts fulfills a sublime classification first identified by Kant called the dynamical sublime, a sublime which deals with power that ultimately threatens one's life. The fear brought about by the dynamical sublime involves death, a painful awareness that, as Heidegger phrased it, we are "'running-forward (*Vorlaufen*)'" towards our death (qtd. in Young 137). In this category magical realist texts use the dynamic sublime to highlight hegemonies- white slave owners, Nazis, and an Argentinean regime- that pose a threat to the self, literally to the character and/or vicariously to the reader. Had these events never occurred outside the novels in history, these texts could still be classified as sublime; however, since these events did occur in reality the reader is more likely to vicariously experience the sublime. Because he cannot tell himself, "This is only fiction and could never really happen to me," the reader is warranted to feel a heightened level of danger, which increases the potential level of sublime pain.

In addition to the dynamical sublime, these particular events evoke the mathematical sublime, that which overwhelms due to its massive scale. The statistic, for example, engraved on a memorial at Auschwitz recording one and a half million people killed at that Nazi death camp alone (Berger 302) is so large, one has difficulty translating it from an abstract number to a meaningful fact. What does one and a half million people look like? This circumstance recalls Burke's explanation of the sublime as vast and terrifying and Weiskel's explanation of it as baffling the mind. The sublime necessitates a location beyond where the mind can go, a point of break down.

The historical horror in *Beloved* is U.S. slavery, which Morrison verbally paints in shocking detail. The crimes of torture, rape, and murder Sethe and her fellow slaves experience under slavery are so great, that after escaping, when Sethe thinks she and her children are about to be captured and returned, she kills her baby daughter, Beloved, in order to prevent her from having to be raised as she was. Here the slave masters and United States society exemplify the threatening forces in the dynamical sublime. But the crimes of slavery also fulfill the mathematical sublime for both the reader and the characters. When the narrator explains that a "Negro" being "killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated" would never have made it into the newspaper, because the newspaper required something out of the ordinary, something news-worthy (156), we here today are at a loss to make sense of that world. Of course one assumes atrocities, such as a mother feeling forced to kill her baby as an act of mercy, were also mathematically sublime for the characters themselves, not to mention the historical people they represent.

In this motif category, the historical event, which fulfills the pain phase of the sublime cycle, seems to generate the irreducible element, just as the atrocity of the institution of slavery is (literally) embodied in Beloved's ghost. In her article on the object in magical realism, Zamora investigates the role of the magical object in magical realism by contrasting Roh's theorizations with Borges'. She concludes that in reverse to "the realist" Roh, who looked to the visible object to infer the invisible behind it, Borges starts with the invisible and moves to the visible: "For the idealist Borges, ideas precede objects and *generate* them" ("Visualizing" 34). While I am discussing the generation of the irreducible element in a different context than Zamora, I see this historical horrors motif combining Roh's and Borges' methods. The historical horror motif takes a real, historical moment (evoking Roh's realism) to "generate" a magical object into the text (evoking Borges' technique).

It is fitting for an author to use magical realism's literary device, the irreducible element, to convey historical horrors that suggest the incomprehensibility associated with the mathematical sublime. Because the magic in magical realism represents that which defies reason, the use of this device is an appropriate means to dramatize events in history which also defy reason. Indeed, the term *irreducible element* itself emphasizes how magical realism's use of magic is compatible with the sublime, as the term connotes the incomprehensibility, the irreducibility of these moments being too horrible to understand. I must clarify, though, that it is magical realism's use of the irreducible element to artistically depict an horrific historical moment that I am identifying in terms of the sublime, not necessarily the historical moment in reality. For

example, slavery itself is a horror so great that it suspends the mind of comprehension; however, as I have already mentioned, the sublime requires that transcendence follow threat. While slavery is horrific, it is not sublime. It contains the potential for effecting the sublime in its threatening nature, but may only be called sublime if a person escapes that threat. It becomes sublime in Morrison's novel, because of Beloved's role in creating an opportunity for transcendence, a role dependant on magic made possible through the fictional novel.

The historical horrors motif allows the sublime experience to occur for fictional Sethe even though it deviates from one Schopenhauer's three qualifiers for the sublime experience to occur, that the sublime must be experienced from a position of safety. Echoing Kant, Schopenhauer insists: 1) The object must represent what is oppositional or "hostile" to a person's "will to live," hostile to one's self or actual body in the dynamical sublime and hostile to one's perception in the mathematical sublime. 2) There cannot be an actual threat, otherwise the subject would not be able to have the distance to contemplate the experience, and she would undergo only terror. The sublime object must be a "safe" threat. 3) There is pleasure at the realization of one's ability to go beyond the mortal (Young 136). Characters do not have to meet Schopenhauer's second requirement, while the historical people they represent may have to, precisely because the story occurs within a fictional world. The characters are able to transcend boundaries without having to remain safe. They are able to move beyond a mere experience of terror to a transcendence of mortality, such as Sethe does in *Beloved*.



Beloved's return transcends the mortal boundaries that separate the dead from the living (the ontological sublime), which, in turn, provides an opportunity for Sethe to heal from this greatest tragedy slavery inflicted on her, in forcing her into an absurd situation where killing her daughter was preferable to her daughter living in slavery. Sethe's healing allows her to reverse, to a degree, the power that slavery maintained over her even after she escaped. Indeed, one could say this story communicates how the love between a mother and daughter is stronger than, it transcends, even death. The transcendent elements of the text, then, point back to the threat of the historical horror; it indicts the historical horror in that it necessitates the victim's transcendence from it. In other words, transcendence is necessary only because of the threat which the historical horror imposed. Sethe needed her daughter to return in some form so that she could come to terms with the loss slavery inflicted on her.

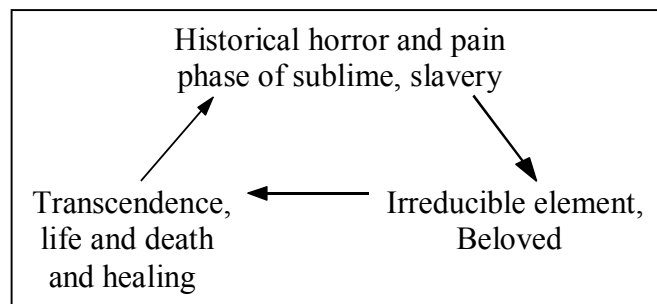


Fig. 3.1 Cycle of sublime experience applied to historical horrors motif in *Beloved*

The reader will always meet all three of Schopenhauer's criteria, as she experiences the sublime vicariously and, therefore, always from a position of safety. The text might actually play out the threat to a character's physical body, but in the process allow the reader to identify the supersensible which is above the sensible world.

This concept of the vicarious sublime, in which the witness remains safe while the character does not, is similar to the catharsis Greek playgoers experienced through tragic dramas. Schopenhauer supports this idea, identifying the tragic effect as having the “highest degree” of the sublime feeling (Young 138). Burke mentioned this parallel, too, remarking how the sublime brings pleasure in an antiquated “kind of physiological catharsis” (Weiskel 88). Magical realism’s use of the vicarious or reader’s sublime suggests it offers the same benefits of catharsis that Greek dramas have been appreciated for. In Greek dramas, the hero’s tragedy provides catharsis, a pleasure, to the audience, because by identifying with the hero while not being the hero, the audience member is allowed the pleasure of foregoing a similar fate. With magical realist literature, when the reader imagines the pain experienced by a character with whom the reader empathizes, (s)he vicariously experiences the sublime also, while still remaining not truly threatened by the pain of the sublime object.<sup>10</sup>

Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* is an example of a text that offers a sublime experience for the reader only. Like Morrison, Ozick also uses an atrocious historical situation as its sublime precipitator; though instead of slavery, she depicts the Nazi genocide. In *The Shawl*, the cruelty of the Nazis towards Rosa and her baby, Magda, are linked to the irreducible element in this text, Rosa’s ability to magically feed baby Magda with the corner of her shawl. While the magic shawl allows both mother and daughter to rise above the powers of the Nazi guards for a time, Magda, tragically, does not ultimately evade their cruelty. She is barbarically murdered. The sublime process in this story occurs strictly for the reader, and it functions precisely as Schopenhauer’s

sublime process prescribes. Paralleling the cathartic effect of Greek plays, the reader's transcendence is selfish, we might say. The reader is elated at escaping what could have been her own fate if born at a different moment/location in time. It is a moment when one fears, "there but for the grace of God, go I" and the pleasure that, nevertheless, I did not go there. But perhaps the empathy she gains for Rosa and Magda through the vicarious experience of the tragedy creates in the reader a compassion for those who suffer as well as helps prevent a repeat of this type of hate and atrocity towards other human beings.

The transcendent message within magical realism could be called escapist. However, I find the opposite to be true. Firstly, these texts do not ignore historical reality, but remind people of it. While rewriting history, they call attention to its tragic occurrence and effects. Secondly, these texts celebrate the possibility of transcendence in the face of those historical horrors. They do not ignore historical reality, but empower people through it. In *Imagining Argentina* Carlos uses his magical imagination to subvert the power of fear the regime uses to control and subdue the Argentine people. The regime is kidnapping people, and their loved ones are paralyzed from fear and lack of knowledge about what has happened to them, but Carlos' gift of "sight" empowers his porch community against the government's power to instill fear. The Argentineans' fear is a sublime fear related to obscurity and unknowing, qualities Burke insisted on for the experience of the sublime to occur (52-54). Carlos and his community internalize and make their own the power that the regime had to control them. This is seen through Carlos, who acts against the will of the regime in

empowering the people with his gift to act in their own best interests, to protest and to look for their loved ones. Moreover, Carlos himself begins to regain control over his choices, as seen through the play he creates, and over his family's circumstances, in their successful search for each other.

The sublime aesthetic has historically provided grounds for empowerment. In Burke, and especially in the humanism of Kant, the person encountering the sublime is elevated in his/her subsumption of the sublime object/situation's power. According to Weiskel's Freudian reading of Burke and Kant's Romantic sublimes, at the end of the sublime encounter, phase three, one comes to identify with, and thus internalize, the power that was a threat (93). While Burke dealt specifically with the threat of nature against the reason of man and Kant with the threat of mortality in the face of the supersensible and eternal world, in both cases transcendence occurs when a person realizes his ability to rise above what was just perceived as a threat, so he then stands as more powerful than that threat.

Not only do the texts *Beloved* and *Imagining Argentina* encourage empowerment in the face of dynamically sublime forces, but they also offer a space for positive interaction with sublime, ineffable events from the past. Transcendence is then made possible in the form of healing from crimes committed against one's self in the past. This interaction with the past is made possible because of magical realism's unique response to the mimetic recreation of the sublime moment.<sup>11</sup> Recreating the sublime moment has historically been a problem for aestheticians. If during the sublime encounter, the mind is arrested in its confrontation with an overwhelming otherness,

how does the orator/writer/artist recreate it linguistically or pictorially? David Ellison directs this question at Kant's aesthetic, noting: "The concrete problem for art, for mimesis as such, becomes: how is it possible to render, to make visible, the sublime—that which, in its very abstraction [...] can be nothing but a negative exhibition or presentation? How does one represent the unrepresentable?" (14). The sublime carries with it an aesthetic problem of mimesis, of recreating the sublime moment for the reader/audience, which visual images in magical realism provide a solution for.

Kant remained untrusting of the artifice involved in art and saw the negative command, a non-language or verbal disallowance, as the closest thing in language to the sublime. For example, he calls the first of Moses' Ten Commandments from God, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," "the most sublime passage in Jewish law" (qtd. in Ellison 14). That scriptural passage commands the anti-image; it is the refusal by God, whom Kant linked with the sublime, to recreate the sublime, which mimics the mental breakdown that occurs within the sublime experience. Ellison suggests that, according to Kant: "The 'expansion of the soul' which occurs within the sublime does so at the expense of the aesthetic" (15). Kant will theorize about the sublime, but will not allow its recreation; he allows the sublime experience to occur in the inartificial setting of nature.

On the other hand, mimesis is at the heart of the Longinian sublime. The ability to imaginatively recreate the sublime thing/event described for the audience is imperative for *ekstasis*, or transport, to occur. Longinus endowed the poet with the power to use words to "collapse the mimetic distance between the object and its

representation and between the author and his audience,” thus creating a “shared subjective experience” of the thing described (Macksey 920). However, while Longinus’ aesthetic does allow the sublime to be recreated, mimesis is limited because conditional. The orator and poet must have the five natural and literary qualities which would give him the ability to receive and transmit the sublime (Malm 3). For him, the ability to interact with and effect the sublime is the common link between all of the greatest writers, a recognition Longinus scholar William Bruce Johnson links to Longinus’ popularity among neoclassicists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Imaginative mimesis is what Longinus identifies as a text’s force to take on a quality of being living (v). The ability to recreate before the audience’s imagination the thing/occasion being described is like making those images living, it gives them life.

Magical realists respond to the issue of mimesis of the sublime by incarnating the sublime in the irreducible element. They literalize Longinus’ imagined image. However, because the irreducible element is magical, their response to the mimesis problem should be called a non-mimesis, though not in the sense of Kant’s refusal to use art (artifice) to recreate the sublime experience. Magical realists create a magical image to embody both the sublime object, or precipitator, and to signify the point of transcendence. Being magical, the form does not attempt to mirror reality, but to serve as metaphor. The magic means something. For example, from one perspective when magical realism effects the sublime through ontological transgressions, the irreducible element acts as a literary technique used to underscore the pain and pleasure involved in a postmodern hybridity. In the historical horrors motif, the irreducible element literally

gives life and form to precursory, sublime events in their texts, in order to bring them back to a place where contemporaneous interaction and, thus, transcendence is possible.

Returning to my previous point, in using an irreducible element to embody the sublime experience, magical realists not only offer a solution for artistic recreation of the sublime experience, they also provide an opportunity for people to interact with and encounter the ineffable byproducts of atrocious historical occurrences. Faris supports this idea. She suggests that magical realism might be seen “as a version of a contemporary sublime” which presents the unrepresentable in the irreducible element (346-47). Furthermore, she explains: “Magical realism not only reflects history. [...] it may also seek to change it, by addressing historical issues critically and thereby attempting to heal historical wounds” (138). Magical realism can “attempt to heal historical wounds” by creating a space at “the limits of the knowable,” at the limits of human ability to interact, where people can work through unspeakable, overwhelming events in history and location. One most often cannot confront historical horrors because they either participate in the sublime mathematically (they are beyond our minds ability to conceive), dynamically (the forces perpetrating them are too great in comparison to our strength), or simply because the events are in the irretrievable past. However, magical realism locates the historical horror in an irreducible element. In this modal process, a character (and, vicariously, the reader) is given a fictional space to interact with the crime. Remember Sethe, for example, being given the opportunity to mend with what occurred in the past, Beloved’s tragic death, by interacting with it. When history is sublime, too vast or terrible for reason, it can, in magical realist texts,

manifest visibly, as if magic becomes the only mode through which one can deal with certain horrors of the past. Like when the biblical witch of Endor brought Samuel back from the dead in human form for King Saul to plead with (*Holy Bible*, I Sam. 28), magical realism provides forms in which people may dialogue with the ineffable presence of the past via the irreducible element.



## CHAPTER 4

### ISSUES OF NATIONHOOD

I will explain this category of sublime motifs evidenced in magical realism by focusing on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, a novel positioned just before the birth of Nigerian independence (Cooper 68), which wrestles with the question of Nigeria's national survival. *The Famished Road* employs the sublime elements of pain / pleasure and obscurity, as well as the mathematical, dynamical, and ontological sublimities to communicate issues of nationhood.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the sublime, this motif of nationhood foregrounds the postcolonial and postmodern attributes of magical realism. Before I delve into how this motif functions in Okri's novel, I will first briefly address magical realism's relationship to postcolonialism, postmodernism, and the sublime as well as some of the various problems evoked by magical realist literature's interconnectedness to these theorizations.

#### 4.1 Issues in Magical Realism's use of Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and the Sublime

The motif of nationhood I identify in magical realism's use of the sublime would be difficult to discuss apart from the postcolonial issues it evokes. Indeed, postcolonialism is foundational to the genre: "Magical realism challenges socio-historical verities, punctures 'exoticisms,' projects a future, and forces the metropolis to learn from rather than to feel superior towards the 'periphery'" (Aizenberg 30). It is

magical realism's devices such as magic, the "language of narration" (Slemon 409), and the focalizer (Chanady 32-40) that have enabled it, in Aizenberg's words, to become perhaps "the first contemporary literary mode to break the hegemony of the center" (26). In addition to these tools, the sublime is an illuminating means by which to examine postcolonial concerns in magical realism, as I will soon demonstrate using *The Famished Road* and later in García Márquez's "Light is Like Water."

Theo D'haen identifies an overlapping between postmodernism, postcolonialism, and magical realism in their abilities to "decenter" hegemonies: "It is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place 'other' than 'the' or 'a' center, that seems to me an essential feature of that strain of postmodernism we call magical realism" (194). In light of these qualities, he credits magical realism for accomplishing for the marginalized a "decentering" of the center. The sublime is also a framework which can serve to "decenter" hegemonies and in this sense converges with postcolonialism and postmodernism in magical realism. This assertion may at first sound discordant, as the sublime was popularized by the British and Germans; however, the sublime's usefulness in postcolonial literature is consistent with Romanticism's historic values and role. Cathy L. Jade records how Romanticism functioned in its era to "challeng[e] the hegemony of the scientific and economic modern life." In fact, this is one aspect of Romanticism that made it attractive to Latin American *modernistas* (3).

Moreover, the basic structure of the sublime experience lends itself to postcolonial discourse. The sublime experience acts as a framework through which one

identifies an overwhelming threat as well as the avenue for transcending that threat. As we recall, threat and transcendence are the two Kantian phases of the sublime. I am not implying that all postcolonial threats are the same or issue from the same source. What I am putting forward is that while every nation and people group face unique threats, the sublime threat's generality allows it be used to describe a vast spectrum of issues. Kirwan explains: "Whatever can threaten to overwhelm, from God to Satan, from the Grand Canyon to one's sense of the historical destiny of one's nation or the butchery of war, can precipitate the sublime" (165). The sublime's generality makes it an especially useful framework to be applied to the unique circumstances the broad range of threats formerly colonized peoples face. For example, the dynamical sublime could describe the threats to the lives of postcolonial peoples from powerful forces (animate or inanimate) which occurred during colonization, such as the institution of slavery or poverty, or later in their more contemporary struggles. A mathematically sublime threat could describe a national issue associated with various epic-sized challenges postcolonial peoples face during colonization or in its aftermath, whether that be national economy or globalization. Cooper implicates the sense of the overwhelming related to the mathematical sublime as the common bond between postcolonial writers: "The search for a way to represent the enormity of colonialism and its aftermath unites postcolonial fiction writers [...]" (35). Finally, the last phase of the sublime, transcendence, can be a means by which to look beyond the threat when a person is empowered and the self is reclaimed. While the sublime has been theorized in vastly different ways in its two-thousand plus years of its theoretical circulation, both of the

sublime phases become in magical realism positive elements, specifically in this category of the sublime in magical realism as it relates to issues of nationhood.

Frank Schulze-Engler and Cooper expound on the problematic implications involved in looking at the relationships between postmodernism and postcolonialism in magical realism that I would like to briefly respond to in light of applying the sublime to magical realism. Schulze-Engler explains how postmodernist theory supports postcolonial aims, but at the same time negates them, a catch twenty-two that has and is being debated among critics. Using Helen Tiffin and Arif Dirlik, Schulze-Engler explains that while postmodernism's use of such tools of "pastiche" and "parody" are vital for postcolonialism's "destabilization" and "deconstruction" of the hegemony, postmodernism's disallowance of essentialism, "the possibility of authenticity of claims to collective identity," hurts postcolonial efforts (297).

Cooper relates other problems that arise from postmodernism's relationship with postcolonialism. Postmodernist culture has been called "the commodity worship of First World societies." Moreover, the political commitments of the "cosmopolitan" magical realist writers are unclear, not least because many who originate from Third Worlds live in First Worlds, enjoying the benefits of privileged society (28-29). Finally, she points out:

What has emerged [...] is a debate with regard to the nature of postcolonial cultural politics. Magical realists are postcolonials who avail themselves most forcefully of the devices of postmodernism, of pastiche, irony, parody and intertextuality; they are alternatively recognized as oppositional to cultural

imperialism, but also as reactionaries, who perpetuate the retention of the Western stereotype of the exotic Other. (29)

The Romantic sublime could also be criticized for implicating imperialism. Firstly, as I have already mentioned, theorizations on the sublime, while beginning in classical times, were revived by Western Europeans such as Dryden and Pope and were then popularized by British Romantics. Identifying a European generated concept in a postcolonial narrative could understandably raise the eyebrows of critics. However, I suggest that just as the influence of avant-garde forms/ideologies on magical realist writers/literature does not negate the value of these texts in working through postcolonial issues, neither does these writers' use of a sublime schema threaten the value of their texts to work through issues related to nationhood. Chanady's "Territorialization" article makes this point. Her illuminating piece of scholarship deals with the paradoxical dynamic in magical realist history in which magical realism has been both influenced by European paradigms (i.e. Surrealism and the indigenous other) while using those constructions subversively towards the Western European center.

The transcendent phase of the Romantic sublime, in its elevating a person to superiority over the threat of the sublime object he encounters, could also implicate imperialism. The sublime suggests one's domination over and appropriation of the sublime object. Additionally, the sublime has been criticized for nurturing a lack of respect for otherness, in that the sublime is a subjective experience (Simpson 256). Kirwan refers to the sublime as "that peculiar kind of intensely pleasurable, circumscribed egotism we call sublimity" (166). Baker refers to the sublime's

solipsism. However, I think we would all agree that in the context of the people groups represented by *The Famished Road* and *Beloved's* protagonists, the sublime experience's elevating the characters above the threats against them (poverty, corrupt politicians, slave masters, grief) and allowing them to appropriate power is only beneficial and clearly indicates the sublime's compatibility with postcolonial aims.

Okri makes a statement about the colonizers' ultimate impotence in their ability to dominate the colonized which provides an application of my point about the sublime schema being a positive way to imaginatively achieve transcendence of a threat related to postcolonialism:

[...] there's been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness. Too much has been given to it. We've looked too much in that direction and have forgotten about our own aesthetic frames. Even though that was there and took place and invaded our social structure, it's quite possible that it didn't invade our spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world. [...] If the perception of reality has not been fundamentally, internally altered, then the experience itself is just transitional. There are certain areas of African consciousness which will remain inviolate. (86)

Though the danger of the colonizer has been nearby, the first part of the sublime process, Okri asserts that the essential part of the Nigerian is "inviolate." There is a part of the African and his community which cannot be reached, and, importantly, that part of the person is the most crucial part.

Okri's reference to the "inviolable" part of the Nigerian recalls what Kant referred to as the "supersensible" side of ourselves which is superior to the natural, the discovery of which, brings the ecstasy which bathes a person in the aftermath of sublime impingement (Young 134). Of course, Kant and Okri are clearly using these similar concepts of being to respond to vastly different historical, political, and social circumstances, and in comparing the two, I neither want to overlook their important differences nor reduce their unique circumstances and values. Nevertheless, their common ideas about the sublime suggest a transnational and transhistorical quality of the sublime. Indeed, the sublime schema seems to evidence a kind of Jungian universal archetypal pattern within the human psyche, a general human interest in threat and transcendence. Certainly the enormous history of world religions attests to this concern as common to humanity; it evidences humankind's reaching from our mortality towards the divine beyond our constricted, mortal boundaries. Moreover, the sublime's ancient history which traverses a wide spectrum of time and geographies and predates the European revival of the aesthetic supports this idea as well.

Despite these substantial issues raised about magical realism's relationships with postmodernism, postcolonialism, and the sublime, their presence in magical realism clearly allows magical realism to act as a space where discourse about difficult, contemporary issues can occur. Magical realism has and is generating dialogue on postcolonial issues, an important step towards the betterment of these previously colonized nations. Moreover, it is precisely because these important issues are

conflicted that we need spaces to work through them and that the spaces which do allow discourse concerning them will continue to be used.

#### 4.2 The Famished Road

Okri evokes the dynamical sublime in addition to the mathematical sublime to engage with the overarching, national question of his novel, the uncertainty of Nigerians' fates, individually and collectively.<sup>13</sup> These two types of sublimities dovetail, because the complex issues Nigerians face often endanger their lives. For example, one of Nigeria's massive problems is a corrupt political system, in which there are two warring parties, though both parties use such degenerate techniques, no one can tell the difference between them. Nigeria's political system exemplifies the mathematical sublime in that Nigerian politics and the correction of it, which will be necessary if the nation is to survive and progress, will be a highly complex and difficult issue to remedy. Dad's attempts to get into politics dramatize this. Though Dad has the most noble of intentions- he wants to get into politics so that he can help the nation and its people- combined with incredible motivation, he is illiterate, poor, and the politicians at Madame Koto's bar pay not attention to him. They mock him. Even his poor fellow community members laugh at his attempts. Dad buys complex books to educate himself, but Azaro is the one who has to try to read them to him. The reader sees that Dad will likely never effect change in Nigeria, at least not by going through the existing political system. In addition to the state of politics/politicians being a mathematically sublime crisis, Nigeria's politicians terrorize the peoples' lives, becoming manifestations of the dynamic sublime.<sup>14</sup> Late one night, one party's corrupt thugs



attack Azaro's village; they came like "wild men wreaking devastation on windows, wooden doors, and human bodies" (177-83).

Okri's use of the sublime becomes most clear when analyzing the young protagonist of his novel, *Azaro*. We can discover regional threats the novel underscores, as well as what is transcended, by looking to him. *Azaro* becomes a means through which to uncover sublime elements in the novel because, as I have already mentioned, when reading magical realism for the sublime elements, one can look to the irreducible element. It is the irreducible element that foregrounds the Kantian sublime phases, what is threatening or limiting and what confines are transcended. The primary irreducible element in this novel is the overlapping of spirit and human worlds illustrated through *Azaro* as an *abiku*, or spirit, child. In fact, the novel starts by describing how all African children are embodied, *abiku* spirits. In addition to representing an African perspective on life and death as a constant flow (Wilkinson 84), the *abiku* children become a clue to the sublime object in the novel, suffering related to poverty. These spirit children rapidly cycle back and forth between the spirit world and earth because living is restrictive and painful:

In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. [...] We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing, and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity. We played much because we were free. And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the Living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had

left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all they hadn't understood [...].

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying [...]. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (3)

This passage illustrates a sublime schema that comprises both the first phase of the sublime which highlights human limitations, and the second phase which involves the transcendence of those limitations. Life is filled with boundaries: suffering, lack of understanding, the rigours of life, desires that remain unfulfilled, injustice, ignorance, death, heartlessness, and metaphorical blindness. In the spirit world, however, there is the transcendence of life's limitations: boundlessness, eternity, so much food, there is feasting (as contrast to Azaro's Nigeria), and playing, which evokes an ability to enjoy one's self in a carefree environment. The only sorrow is a derivative of the world of the Living.

In addition to simply being restrictive, living is complex and painful, especially compared to the spirit world. *Abiku* children, therefore, choose not to stay alive for very long. The narrator informs us, the readers: "There are many reasons why babies cry when they are born, and one of them is the sudden separation from the world of pure dreams, where all things are made of enchantment, and where there is no suffering" (4). This idea of children being closer to the eternal, the "world of dreams," is something

Wordsworth also writes about. In this first section of his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” he describes:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,

The earth, and every common sight,

To me did seem

Apparelled in celestial light,

The glory and the freshness of a dream.

It is not now as it hath been of yore;--

Turn wheresoe'er I may,

By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (1-9)

Here the poet laments the difficulty of seeing the world's wonders as one grows older. Baker explains: “The fear of this loss [of encounters with the strangeness without] is of course one of the primary preoccupations of Wordsworth's best poetry, his response to the waning of these encounters, to the diminishing of his powers, forming the substance not only of his great ‘crisis’ lyrics but also of large parts of *The Prelude*” (62). While Wordsworth presents age as a cause of psychic “cataracts” (106) which obstruct the imaginative vision, *The Famished Road* offers specific, material exigencies for the lament of human children. Problems such as poverty and hunger, political corruption, parents who are stressed to the breaking point, and a lack of desire and commitment for change from the African people themselves, make the world of the living difficult. Referring to the word *famished* in the title, Okri explains suffering as “one of the central

themes in the book,” and implicitly explains the role of suffering in sublime terms: “[...] It defines the boundaries of the self [...]” (85). His identifying suffering as a “boundary of the self” associates suffering with the threats or limitations the sublime experience accentuates. Weiskel defines Burke’s Romantic sublime as “a psychology that stressed its own limits” (17).

Poverty is arguably the largest cause of suffering in the novel, so I will focus on it as a sublime object in the novel.<sup>15</sup> I am analyzing poverty as the issue a postcolonial people face in their struggle towards nationally coming into being and remaining, a two-fold struggle Okri suggests when Dad calls Nigeria an *abiku* nation.<sup>16</sup> Poverty fulfills the terrible side of the dynamic sublime in *The Famished Road*, a formidable power that is hostile and antagonistic to the “will to live” (Young 136). It is a regional issue that evokes the sublime phase involving pain or the overwhelming. Azaro narrates: “It seemed our lives kept turning on the same axis of anguish” (279-80). He describes his whole community as “a world drowning in poverty” (308); “sunken in poverty” (281-82); they ate “the food of suffering” (326). He contemplates how “it seemed our lives kept turning on the same axis of anguish” (279-80). Nevertheless, Azaro’s “will to live” supercedes the threats to his life which poverty brings. Though he faces much suffering, though his spirit companions relentlessly try to bring him back, Azaro chooses to stay, even though he has never stayed before in previous lives. Indeed, his very name is reminiscent of the biblical Lazarus, the man who is brought back from the dead: “They named me Lazaro. [...] and as many were uneasy with the connection between Lazaro and Lazarus” (he had come back from the dead after being run over by

a car) “Mum shortened my name to Azaro” (8). While the “chains” associated with poverty, the restrictions and hardships it brings, are maintained in this novel (indeed, this is one point that grounds this magical realist novel in reality), Azaro, as well as his mum and dad, transcend the ultimate sting of poverty, which is death. In this light, *The Famished Road* is a story of Azaro’s and his family’s fight to stay alive. Their tenacious will to live.<sup>17</sup> In an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri explicitly emphasizes this unrelenting choice of Azaro’s to stay alive as key to the novel: “One of the central oppositions in the book is the choice between living and dying. [...] And it is part of his choice that he always has to move towards life” (84). You will recall that this opposition between living or dying is also what Kant identifies as the key threat in the dynamical sublime. And Okri’s further description of this opposition grounds Azaro’s will to live even further in sublime terms. His choice is not between living and dying only, Okri explains, but between “infinity and human life”: “Consciousness, and allowing infinity – and therefore possibilities – to grow in him. Because that’s what infinity means when it’s incarnated in the human consciousness. That’s the opposition: infinity and human life” (84). Here Okri does not mean that for Azaro to die means embracing infinity, and to live means to lack infinity. Azaro must learn to “grow” and cultivate infinity, consciousness, and possibilities within him in the midst of life. This means Azaro must experience transcendence in his earth life.

Azaro’s transcendence carries a larger importance because he is that he is metonymic of all Nigerians. We see this relationship when Okri explains that while Azaro has special qualities about him, any one of the children in *The Famished Road*

could have told a story similar to Azaro's; suffering is common to all of them: "[...] when Azaro sees Mum in all the market women, they are Mum. Any one of their children telling their stories would be telling a story just like this one, but with its own particularity. There are hundreds of variations, but there is just one god there, and that god is suffering, pain" (85). Azaro represents all Nigerians, and he also represents Nigeria, the nation.

The irreducible element, Azaro as an *abiku* child, points to the sublime question of Nigeria's national destiny. Nigeria's destiny is another sublime object in this novel. Remember, Kirwan explains that even "the historical destiny of one's nation" can evoke the sublime in a person (165). While *The Famished Road* can be identified on a micro level as the tale of an African boy, Azaro's sublime fight to stay in his human identity, it is also the story of Nigeria's sublime attempt to come into its national identity. Although there are many reasons to lose hope about Africa's current state in the novel (politicians and greedy community members), Azaro and his family overcome the major threats to them, which allows a shred of hope that perhaps Nigeria will do the same. Indeed, this entire novel could be seen as Azaro/Nigeria's struggle to remain alive. At the end of the novel, the reader discovers that not only the children are *abiku*, Africa itself is an *abiku* nation. Wrestling in the spirit world for answers to his community's suffering, Azaro's father finds:

[...] all nations are born children; it shocked him that ours too was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have

made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (494)

As Azaro had to do, if the nation is to survive, Africans as a whole must find a tenacious determination to fulfill its destiny to live, if it is going to transcend the threats against it.

Azaro's link to Nigeria's betterment is implied through his family lineage and personal destiny. In the reverse of García Márquez's doomed and devolving Buendía family line, Azaro's paternal lineage offers the reader optimism for Nigeria, as he is linked in his paternal lineage to great men who have worked to advance their communities. His great-great-great-grandfather was one of the delegates who tried to appease the King of the Road so that the people dying of famine could get food and water (258-61). His father dreams of becoming a politician to better the community and is persecuted for his refusal to side with the corrupt politicians. The reader expects Azaro will follow in his family's footsteps.

His destiny to effect positive change for Nigeria is also implied through his likeness to the spirit king, who also chose to remain living. Foreshadowing Azaro, we learn in the very beginning of the novel:

[The spirit king] had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds [...]. It never mattered into what circumstances he was born. He always lived the most extraordinary lives. [...] Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, he wrought incomparable achievements from every life. If there is anything

common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities. (3-4)

Importantly, the king, and we hope Azaro, too, is able to experience and effect transcendence “into higher realities” not only upon returning to the “aquamarine air of love” in the spirit world (4), but in life. He becomes an agent of transcendence, able to effect it. This is different than simply being the object of transcendence, experiencing it simply because he is a spirit again. This passive type of transcendence, which can only be acquired through death, is not going to help Nigeria. Contrasting himself with Ade, a spirit child who chose to die, Azaro comments: “I was a spirit child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth’s life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in *the captivity of freedom* [emphasis added].” Ade will have no choice in death but freedom, but Azaro wants to find transcendence in his human life. Cooper agrees with this point: “[...] Okri is [...] attempting to depict the necessity of breaking the *abiku* stranglehold. [...] The hope of the novel lies in Azaro successfully repudiating the *abiku* within himself [...]” (92). The hope for Azaro and for Nigeria at large will come from Azaro’s choice to remain “in the liberty of limitations” in order to have the opportunity “to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be” (*Famished* 487). Azaro must transcend the “*abiku* stranglehold,” the continual cycle of death and rebirth which means continually restarting and never forming. Our hope in Azaro is our hope for Nigeria, an *abiku* nation.



In her account of the use of the colonized figure in postcolonial literature and theory, Elleke Boehmer asserts that self-presentation of “the colonial ‘body’” is “one of the key distinguishing features of the postcolonial” (Boehmer 272). What meaning, then, can we extrapolate from Okri’s transfiguration of the colonized body as sublime in *Azaro*? In the past, the figure of the colonized body was used as metaphor and metonym by the colonizer to justify domination. Colonizers used the conflation of human body and body of land to silence and project meaning onto the colonized person in order to justify the need of colonized peoples for domination (Boehmer 270). The silent Pocahontas in Captain John Smith’s writings could be seen through the colonizer’s eyes as indicative of the New World itself submitting, even desiring, colonial husbandry. As a result of this figurative/literal exploitation of the colonized body, colonized peoples and postcolonialists have thus taken up the colonized figure as a primary means of self reclamation. In postcolonial literature and theory self (re)presentation is crucial: “[...] in postcolonial nationalist discourses of the last number of decades, images of the scrutinized, scored subject body have become the focus of attempts at symbolic reversal and transfiguration. Representing its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition” (Boehmer 272).

In *Famished Road* the postcolonial body is presented as location of the sublime experience. It is the object of the threat and the subject of transcendence. As we have seen in *Azaro*, he is the recipient of the threat of poverty, but he has agency in the opportunity to cultivate transcendence for himself, as Nigeria has this opportunity

nationally. Okri takes up both techniques Boehmer describes as “strategies for self-representation in postcolonial narrative,” literalization or defamiliarization “of the accepted status of the body as sign” and (trans)figuration, which involves creating out of the body a “self-directed system of signs” (275). By presenting Azaro’s body as a sublime conduit, a location where the sublime threat and transcendence occurs, the author both defamiliarizes and transfigures the body. Azaro’s and all the children’s bodies are defamiliarized as *abiku* children.<sup>18</sup> While one typically thinks of a person being fixedly located in his own skin, Azaro is able to move so fluidly between spirit and living worlds, he is constantly in danger. Okri also transfigures the Nigerian body, he makes his own sign system of the Nigerian, in Azaro’s will to live. Azaro’s agency evokes an eternity of possibilities coming to fruition. This is in contrast to the perspective of the Nigerian body as helpless, a perspective the political parties clearly hold of the Nigerians of Azaro’s community. When the rich party tries to win the community’s loyalty by giving them free (though rotten) milk (120-32), they imply that the poor are simply helpless objects which can be easily won by a one-time, cheap handout. Moreover, the suggestion that Azaro’s community represents merely political territory to be won, they mirror the colonizer in reducing the Nigerian body to inanimate land and silent, helpless object.

Like Nigeria’s (Boehmer 274) complex socio-political circumstances, Okri leaves *The Famished Road* unresolved. The sublime experience is not completed, but neither is it abandoned. Though transcendence is not achieved in the novel for the Africans, Okri offers hope for transcendence. This looking ahead towards

transcendence is seen in Azaro, but it is also embodied in his dreaming father, who tenaciously and unswervingly holds to his vision of a better community and a better Africa. Aizenberg links Okri with other great magical realist writers Borges, Asturias, Carpentier, García Márquez and Allende, in the elements of *Famished Road* which urge colonized peoples to “start[] redreaming postcolonial possibilities” giving Azaro’s father as an example in the text. Azaro’s father goes against the grain of the entire community when he decides to become a politician so that he can try to make their town a place that is clean, where even beggars get to go to school: “His dreamings represent magical realism’s utopian impulse, the desire for a space in which a just society might be articulated through an amalgam of old and new strengths” (29).

Okri describes the novel’s leitmotif of hope as a transcendent element that supercedes mortal boundaries: “In my last volume I wrote about visible things, visible history, objects, an assault on chaos. In this book I want to go to something more serene and therefore more hopeful. The unbreakable things in us.” The unbreakable, invisible within us precisely fits the notion of transcendence, an uplifting of the person in light of his/her ability to move beyond human, sensorial limitations. In one’s moving beyond mortality, transcendence implies permanence, an “unbreakableness.” On hope, Okri heeds the seriousness with which one must offer hope: “One should be very, very serious when one is going to talk about hope. One has to know about the very hard facts of the world and one has to look at them and know how deadly and powerful they are before one can begin to think or dream oneself into positions out of which hope and then possibilities can come” (88). The seriousness with which one must consider the

“deadly and powerful” “facts” recalls Schopenhauer’s requirement for transcendence, the presence first of a threat. The sublime object must represent a threat that is oppositional or “hostile” to a person’s “will to live,” hostile to one’s self or actual body (the dynamical sublime) and/or hostile to one’s perception (the mathematical sublime). Only then can one get to the third stage, the pleasure at the realization of one’s ability to go beyond the mortal (Young 136), something which, in *The Famished Road* as well as in Nigeria, we hope for.

## CHAPTER 5

### PLACE: THE NATURAL SUBLIME

Concern for place is the final category of sublime motifs I will analyze. This motif is especially important for situating magical realism in recent literary history, because it links magical realism with an important era of sublime theorists, the Romantics. In emphasizing the sublime in nature, the Romantics foregrounded the relationship between the sublime and place, a relationship magical realist writers adopt and also expand upon, identifying the sublime in both nature and city. In using both nature and the city to contribute to the sublime experience, the place motif in magical realism breaks into two sub-categories of the natural and urban sublimes. Not only does the issue of place link magical realists backwards in time to the Romantic sublime, it also anchors magical realism in contemporaneity. Taking up the question of sublime and place, writers of magical realism have reinterpreted the Romantic nature-only sublime, allowing the city, too, to become a sublime sanctuary. In its more inclusive stance on sublime place, magical realism participates modally in current ecotheory debates over sacred and profane place, which have resulted from the legacy of the Romantic natural sublime. Moreover, because magical realism uses urban place in addition to nature in activating the sublime experience, it contributes to the discourse on

sublime aesthetic theory which has been going on now at least since the first century with Longinus.

### 5.1 The Marvelous Sublimity of Nature: Origins of Magical Realism in Romanticism

The natural sublime ties the sublime experience to a specific location, a natural one. Within magical realism, Carpentier and García Márquez are two of the strongest links between magical realism and the natural sublime, because they have framed magical realism on Latin American topography and history, which, as I will demonstrate, is a natural sublime ideology. In the wake of the Romantic natural sublime, they use the natural sublime to argue for an exclusive Latin American marvelous reality, something Chanady terms the “territorialization of the imaginary” (“Territorialization” 131). I do not mean to imply Carpentier and García Márquez borrowed explicitly from Romanticism,<sup>19</sup> while they were most certainly familiar with it, but, firstly, that magical realism echoes Romanticism in its use of the natural sublime, and, secondly, Romanticism paved avenues of thought which bolstered these writers’ claims and can therefore be seen as contributing to the development of magical realism. By the time both these Latin American writers began publishing their works, Romanticism had already established a correlative between extreme states of nature and the sublime, a useful association for these magical realist authors. With a Romantic foundation that made primitive nature scenes the appropriate location of transcendence, Latin America’s exotic topography and bizarre history cause a marvelous reality to seem more believable than it would be in a Western European or U.S. location, where

nature was continuing to retreat over the horizon in lieu of the encroaching cement jungle and suburban sprawl.<sup>20</sup>

Within the category of the sublime, it is the Romantics who first develop the idea of a marvelous nature. They yoked extreme states of nature to potential moments for human transcendence. Christopher Thacker's exhaustive scholarship on the Romantic's attraction to wild nature in *The Wildness Pleases*, a phrase used by Shaftesbury whom Thacker calls the father of Romanticism, recounts how our post-Romantic world does not realize that our "nature worship" comes from a Romantic legacy. Before Romanticism the wilderness was thought of as a place forsaken by God; therefore, all wild land necessarily needed to be tamed. Beginning with Newton's ideas of a "logical, mathematical" world, however, people began also to see nature as part of a perfect world, allowing John Locke to proclaim: "The works of Nature everywhere sufficiently evidence a Deity" (qtd. in Thacker 12). From Locke, Thacker traces Shaftesbury's paradigm of nature: "If God is perfect, and God is good, then nature, likewise perfect, must also be good" (12). Thus, in the beginning of the Romantic movement, the idea of nature shifts from a godless place to a place evincing the fingerprint of the divine.

This shift in nature from forsaken to holy evoked interest from Romantic landscape artists, who became fascinated with representing this perspective of nature as more than beautiful and picturesque, but potentially extreme and, thus, sublime. Carpentier would later argue that it is the quality of extremeness that makes Latin American landscape and history marvelous, emulating the Romantics in constructing

nature as a vehicle of transcendence. Romantic painter Joseph Vernet depicted scenes of tumultuous storms, displaying nature's intense might. Artists Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg and Gainsborough also painted wild landscape sceneries. Around 1800 Romanticism reached the pinnacle of its landscape painting; two major groups can be classified from this time, one of which was primarily interested in the fantastic and dramatic side of nature. This particular group yielded such artists as Friedrich, Constable, Turner, and John Martin.

British painter, printmaker, and poet (Nicholson 48), Joseph Mallord William Turner, one of the most well known Romantic artists, is famous for his watercolor paintings and depiction of sublime and historical landscapes ("Turner"). Turner can be seen as an artistic predecessor to Carpentier in his linking history, landscape, and the sublime. Turner is described as being "at his best in extremes, in dramatic scenes of disasters (such as his early *Shipwreck*, 1805; London, Tate) and in quiet moments of intense lyricism" ("Romanticism" 6). Turner critic Kathleen Nicholson describes a major shift in the artist's style as he became fascinated with the grandeur of nature and the problem of how to depict it: He studied nature not only with a narrative concern, but also with the belief that nature was "a vehicle for extra-natural content" (46), a belief that summarizes the Romantic sublime and, later, *lo real maravilloso*. In his "Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps," the painter depicts the overwhelming power of a storm compared to the utter helplessness of Hannibal's army. The Tate Gallery calls this painting an example of "Turner's achievement in the Sublime." Spatially, the gray and black storm overwhelms the picture, while the people



look like ants in comparison. The perspective does not even show Hannibal, but instead “focuses [...] on the distress of Hannibal’s army” ([www.tate.org.uk/](http://www.tate.org.uk/)).



Fig. 5.1 Turner, J. M. W., “Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps,” exhibited 1812. (*Tate Online*).

### 5.2 la naturaleza maravillosa

Alejo Carpentier’s *lo real maravilloso* is a tangible link between the Romantic and magical realist natural sublimes, because of its emphasis on the relationship between nature and the extraordinary.<sup>21</sup> In his explanation of the marvelous, Carpentier implicitly links *lo real maravilloso* back to the Romantics with their ideas about the natural sublime, specifically the Romantics’ ideas about nature as a symbol of potential extremes. With *lo real maravilloso* he describes a magic which deals with a spectrum of the extreme, running from extremely beautiful to extremely terrible.

Alejo Carpentier’s *lo real maravilloso* is a defining chapter in the magical realist generic annals. His voice could be seen as creating an entire paradigm for magical realism, one that I describe as “magical realism meets the Romantic natural sublime,”

creating magical realism's version of the natural sublime. Carpentier's definition of the marvelous part of his *lo real maravilloso* helps set the framework for understanding it. He differentiates the marvelous from the beautiful using a description of medieval fairies given by Charles Perrault, author of the *Mother Goose* stories such as "Tom Thumb" and "Sleeping Beauty":

And what man has ever done more for the marvelous than the one who has overpopulated our minds since childhood with figures belonging to the world of the marvelous? [...] In the preface to his stories, Perrault says something that defines the marvelous. He speaks of fairies and tells us that fairies would just as soon spew diamonds from their mouths when they are in a good mood as reptiles, snakes, serpents, and toads when they are angered; and we mustn't forget that the most famous fairy from all the medieval tales, who led up to Perrault and whom Perrault recovers, is the fairy Melusina (what a beautiful name!) who was an abominable monster with the head of a woman and the body of a serpent, and yet she belongs to the marvelous. (101)

Carpentier here explains what the marvelous reality is by distinguishing it from what it is not; the marvelous is different than the beautiful. He explains that while many people correlate the marvelous with "beautiful, lovely," and "pleasant, [...] the only thing that should be gleaned from the dictionaries' definition is a reference to the *extraordinary*" (101). The marvelous can be both extremely terrible and extremely lovely. The extreme part is what is important to Carpentier.

Like Carpentier, Burke also contrasted the beautiful with the extreme which he calls not marvelous, but sublime. Preceding Carpentier's parallel of the marvelous with Perrault's fairies, Burke aligns "beauty with delicacy and harmony and the sublime with vastness, obscurity, and a capacity to inspire terror" ("J.M.W."). Burke identifies in untamed nature the impetus to these types of sublime ideas. Starry skies evoke ideas of magnificence and infinity (139), and the ocean strikes terror in its great dimensions and power (97). His theorizations on sublime were used by Romantics to present nature as containing a spiritual aspect, or nature as a muse of spiritual inspiration ("Romanticism" 5-7). Nature now becomes not simply a material subject, but it gained agency to transmit the divine, the supernatural.

Carpentier's likening of the marvelous real to fairies and Melusina parallels the sublime, as both are different ideas than the merely beautiful. The sublime object must evoke feelings of being overwhelmed by, for example, power or size, while the beautiful is controllable and delicate. That is why Perrault's description of the fairies works so well for Carpentier. Despite the fact that many think of fairies only in terms of beautiful, harmless, and tiny fantasy creatures, medieval fairies were a dichotomous mixture of wonderful and terrible. They have the capacity, or the power, for magic, which includes both sides of the spectrum.

While Romantics paired the sublime with nature, magical realists' natural sublime often makes a "holy trinity" of nature, myth/history, and the sublime. This trinity evokes an essentialist argument implicitly and explicitly made by writers such as Carpentier and García Márquez - magic is inherent to Latin America. Referring to the

essentialist argument, Carpentier uses nature in *lo real maravilloso* to privilege a nationalistic magic organic to Pan America's unique history and topography. He holds that the Surrealists "manufactured tricks" demonstrate a state of "imaginative poverty" (85) in Western Europe. On the other hand America promises to be "far from using up its wealth of mythologies" ("Marvelous Real" 88). García Márquez also makes an exclusivist claim in his Nobel Lecture. The very source of Latin America's creativity, he explains, is its organic "outsized reality," a reality which has outgrown the bounds of what other nations may consider reality and which, for Latin America, "nourishes a source of insatiable creativity." As "creatures of that unbridled reality," he explains, Latin Americans "have had to ask but little of imagination." Their problem is not a lack of muses, but a lack of resources with which "to render [their] lives believable" (89). Their landscape and history is so extraordinary, Latin American magical realist writers do not have to invent stories, but simply to document them. They are the scribes of their nations' marvelous reality. Carpentier had already described a similar notion: "We have forged a language appropriate to the expression of our realities, and the events that await us will find that we, the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality" ("Baroque" 107).<sup>22</sup>

Faris records that Latin American magical realism "grew out of the first wave of postcolonial Romantic primitivism" (Faris, *Ordinary* 33). When Carpentier and García Márquez claim that the Latin American landscape makes magic an authentic part of Latin America, suggesting that other parts of the world contrive their magic, they are implicitly relying on the correlation between the sublime and nature begun by the

Romantic tradition which elevated unconsumed space (Delbaere-Garant) as a place where “the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, had always seemed less certain than elsewhere” (Cronon 73).<sup>23</sup>

Seeing herself a strain in magical realist texts and theory which link magic and landscape, Delbaere-Garant coined the term “mythic realism,” to describe a subcategory within magical realism that describes Carpentier and García Márquez’s trinity of nature, history, and the extraordinary. “Mythic realism” encompasses moments in magical realist texts when “‘magic’ images are borrowed from the physical environment itself” as opposed to “being projected from the characters’ psyches” (253). Like the Carpentierian and Romantic idea of nature being endowed with power, Delbaere-Garant asserts that in areas of “unconsumed space,” or locations where there is still much untamed land, the earth itself acquires a kind of agency, as the land seems to act upon the characters. This agency, or “mythic charge,” is derived from both the space being “unconsumed” and from the cultural myths still at work in that geographical location.

Providing an example of mythic realism *lo real maravilloso*, Carpentier explains, is embedded in Latin Americans’ geographical location because of its myths: “Melgarejo, the tyrant from Bolivia, can make his horse Holofernes drink buckets of beer.” The topography itself being marvelous lends to marvelous events. Carpentier gives the example of “[...] the Promethean loneliness of Bolívar at Santa Marta, the nine-hour battles waged with bladed weapons in the lunar landscape of the Andes, the towers of Tikal, the frescoes rescued from the Bonampak jungle [...]” (82-83). Finally, Latin America’s history contributes to the marvelous reality of its writers: “Latin

Americans drag a legacy of thirty centuries behind them, but in spite of a record of absurd deeds and many sins, we must recognize that our style is reaffirmed throughout our history, even though at times this style can beget veritable monsters.”

### 5.3 Nature as Vehicle

With the natural sublime, magical realists use nature to communicate specific ideas about the world, ideas which, not surprisingly, echo the Romantics in their use of nature. Using the natural world as a trope for organic marvels growing without the need of man’s intervention, theoreticians from Romanticism and magical realism implicitly critique contrived magic as false or inferior while elevating organic magic as authentic and essential. Carpentier’s critique of Surrealism in contrast to *lo real maravilloso* echoes Franz Roh’s distaste for the “shocking exoticism” he found in Expressionism. Surrealism, Carpentier protests, manufactures the marvelous with tricks of “juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together” like “that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table that led to ermine spoons [...]” (85). While *lo real maravilloso*, on the other hand, boasts of organic, homegrown marvelousness, which stems directly from reality. Nature serves as an appropriate vehicle for communicating such a vision.

Nature’s organic quality brings legitimacy to the concept of a supra-human within a natural setting. Because no human fabricated the marvels found in the world, because it just is, the magic itself seems more real, more believable. When people formulate magic, as found in a cartoon or a nursery rhyme, it might be entertaining and

cute, but it cannot be taken seriously. Contrived magic is simply an idea, while real magic is a concrete part of the world we live in.

By using a literary framework that employs nature as a vehicle to attain the marvelous, magical realists and Romantics evidence several common values. Firstly, the natural sublime unifies one with the world around one's self, rather than removing one into a world never to be found on earth. It infuses this world with wonder. The person who entertains the possibility of fairies, lives in quite a different world than the scientist who adheres to a strict, empirically proven world. The privileging of a marvelous nature, the call to see a marvelous reality, is a call to be fascinated with the here-and-now, because through contact with the present world, one can be transported beyond. The marvelous reality means we do not have to travel to imaginary places to find a location imbued with marvels. There is a marvelous reality right here on our planet. As I will demonstrate, this value is also found in the urban sublime's use of defamiliarization, but instead of reconnecting a person to the world outside the city, the urban sublime aims to establish a connection with place to one's everyday surroundings, the city.

If the Enlightenment cleared up superstitious ideas about the nature of the world we live in, it also robbed us of a level of possibility. Romanticism's nature worship in the form of the sublime replenished the world, to a certain degree, from the Enlightenment's confining boundaries. Chanady recounts how Romantics reacted against reason's dominance: "During the Romantic period, the expression of individual subjectivity, rebellion against established society, and self-reflection accompanying the

contemplation of nature challenged this control of the imaginary” (“Territorialization” 123). Recalling the garden of the biblical Jacob, who dreamt of stairs where angels tread between heaven and earth (Gen. 28), the Romantic natural sublime constructs a location where people can interact with the divine, where they are able to step outside the realm of being in control with firm explanations and neat categories, into a place where humankind is small in their limited understanding.

Secondly, in a polarity where contrived marvels are seen as false while organic marvels ring authentic, the natural sublime claims a subversiveness with respect to realism simply in its being. Magical realism and Romanticism both subvert a limited, empirical picture of reality through a passive marvelousness. Carpentier’s marvelous reality depends on this passive intent in order to privilege his continent over others. Latin American marvelousness does not seek to subvert an existing system called reality. It is merely something that exists and can be discovered, something unconscious and ever-present in the topography and history of the land. In Zamora and Faris’s words, Carpentier’s “‘marvelous American reality’ does not imply a conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality but, rather, an amplification of perceived reality required by and inherent in Latin American nature and culture” (75).

In their emphasis on the need to retreat into the solitude of nature, the Romantics also express a view of nature as passively subversive, in that it empowered the one retreating to critique the dominant systems. Paradoxically, by retreating one is empowered. In their prescriptive, when one escapes the saturation of the existing



systems by going “outside,” (s)he becomes enabled to critique those systems. Kroeber elucidates this idea in detail:

Romantic retirement serves as a base from which to attack not just different political views but even fundamental cultural presuppositions. Retiring into solitude for the Romantics is a means of exercising profound aspirations. Providing an Archimedean ‘place to stand’ (as Wordsworth observes in his prefatory note to the *Intimations Ode*), solitude enables the Romantic to move his mind and so to move the world. (95)

The passivity of nature’s marvelousness authenticates that marvelousness. This passive/active dichotomy is used by Romantics to indict the corruption of the city and in magical realism to protest the spiritual connection lost with nature.

Thirdly, the natural sublime fetishizes primitive natural locations as exclusively sublime. Primitive nature is a motif conducive to the sublime, because it makes the extraordinary that abides there more believable. The exotic can be reached either by going back far enough in time for the world to “become” primitive again, or one could go to a part of the map where magic is still embedded in a place’s cultural reality, such as Latin America (Valdez Moses 126-27). In constructing primitive nature as an ideal location where the extraordinary would more readily exist, it inversely follows that cities are ordinary, covered in the fingerprints of humans. The Romantics use nature to indict the busyness and corruption of the metropolises. Rousseau gives great allegiance to the Romantic corollary that society is corrupt and nature is pure (90-99). He claims: “Everything is good that comes from the Creator’s hands, everything degenerates in

the hands of man”” (qtd. in Thacker, 99).<sup>24</sup> Carpentier’s marvelous real supports the argument that First world nations lack the ability to craft magical realist texts, an argument which mirrors the Romantic’s privileging a sacred nature over the profane city, only on a national/continental level. Latin America privileges its exotic continent over other industrialized nations. As a postcolonial literature, magical realism in the natural sublime mode provides not only a self-generated identity for colonized areas, but it also provides for them a unique identity, one which the former colonizing nations lack.

Magical realism and Romanticism use nature to communicate a nostalgia for the primitive, a relationship that Michael Valdez Moses criticizes in magical realism as pretentious. Valdez Moses perceives postmodern primitivism less optimistically than some of our magical realists who promote the natural sublime. He finds this reaching for the past as inauthentic, labeling it with the metaphor “tourism” to describe magical realism’s only pseudo-longing for it. Though some perceive magical realism’s elevation of the past, pre-technological world as subversive, Valdez Moses argues that magical realism really presents no subversive threat at all, because while we in our technologically saturated age enjoy the ability to travel back in time to a simpler era, neither we nor magical realist writers really wish to stay there. Recalling Cooper’s discussion on magical realist writers as “cosmopolitans,” Valdez Moses points out how Salman Rushdie spends most of his time in Europe, not India, and it was when Carpentier was visiting Haiti after spending over a decade in Paris, that the idea of the marvelous real struck him (132). In short, everyone seems quite content to visit

imaginary primitive domains while remaining with their technological luxuries of laptops, automobiles, and cell phones. Magical realist fiction provides the pleasure of a voyeuristic, tourist-like freedom of coming and going to the past as we please. Moreover, whether or not we want to stay in the past, we can not.

In a less pessimistic light, Faris calls magical realism's nostalgic element "postmodern primitivism" and sees it as a reaction to the "encroachment of contemporary culture." This nostalgia for the primordial past in nature is symbolized in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when Rebecca cannot break her addiction to eating dirt. In this tension between nostalgia for the primitive and what Delbaere-Garant might call the "consumed spaces" of the metropolises, magical realism's natural sublime carries a spiritual component, what Jung describes as an "unsatisfied yearning" for the "primordial past," for images that can articulate what the "one-sided present" cannot (qtd. in Faris 337-38). This implies that magical realism, at times, not only protests certain characteristics of contemporary culture, but it finds a solution in, and thus privileges, elements taken from the distant past. Magical realism's use of the natural sublime makes a statement about the condition of the modern world. It suggests that in our contemporary world, we have lost a spiritual energy (in the sense that spiritual is defined as that which is unseen in the material world) which we had in the past before nature was replaced by the metropolis. What technology, consumer products, and television cannot offer the contemporary man, a connection with the technologically untarnished, natural world can. After T.S. Eliot displayed the fragmented state of the modern Western world, an era when the sky itself seemed sterilized like "a patient

etherized upon a table” (3), magical realism, as a post-modern movement, is left to deal with the pieces and seems to be trying to do so. In this light, magical realism looks for a way to move beyond fragmented modernism towards a more whole future. While literatures from many different modes evidence nostalgia, when magical realism does so, as in the Carpentierian marvelous real, it does so in a unique way, using the irreducible element in a mutually inclusive relationship with nature.

When referring to this combination as a means of transcending the present as well as the corruption that comes with the present via the city and industrialization, we arrive at the heart of magical realism’s natural sublime. This becomes clear next when I apply magical realism’s natural sublime to a handful of magical realist texts, to analyze how the magical sublime functions in each. I have asserted that if one will analyze the irreducible element in magical realism, she will be able to identify what the writer is communicating as threatening and what is transcended. In *Pig Tales* and *Imagining Argentina*, magic becomes a means for characters to transcend the confines of industrial and corrupt locations.

In French writer Marie Darrieussecq’s novella, *Pig Tales*, she uses the irreducible element to create a dichotomy between the corruption within the city versus the purity of nature. The irreducible element is a woman’s vacillation between a woman and a pig, evidencing the ontological shifts typical of magical realism that effect a sublime experience. Her evolution into a pig also involves the dynamical sublime in that her morphing is arguably caused by her society’s power to dehumanize her. By treating her as an animal, only useful as far as she is able to be consumed, she begins to

change ontologically. This magical shift becomes a means of transcendence though, for it allows her to escape not only her body, but also the corruption of her society. The latter area of transcendence creates a nature as pure versus city as corrupt dichotomy. Her role in society as a woman makes it impossible for her to be aware of and true to her needs and boundaries. Numerous times, the protagonist mentions that she thinks her situation is being brought on by her not being in tune with herself in the kind of life she is living; however, in the natural world she seems most in tune and most at peace with herself and her surroundings.

While her transformation at first worries her, she finally resolves that this metamorphosis is satisfying. The interconnectedness she finds to the natural world is preferable to her participation as a woman in her uber-corrupt society. Read as a social critique on the disutopian world of the novel, the solution to this woman's maltreatment is nature. The ontological and psychological transformation she ascends to finds in the natural world a place that provides purity and peace, something her human world lacked. At the end of the novella, as the protagonist goes to her mother's farm in what will end in her peaceful life as a pig, she describes her harmony with nature:

With my entire body I felt once again the spinning of the planet. I breathed with the shifting winds, my heart beat with the surging tides, and my blood flowed like a torrent of melting snows. I flexed my muscles in communion with trees, odors, mosses, ferns, and rotting leaves. [...] A craving for life sent shivers through me, engulfed me; it was like wild boars galloping in my brain, lightning

streaking through my sinews, something that came from the depths of the wind,  
from the most ancient of bloodlines. (142-43)

Nature provides transcendence for our piggish protagonist. It precipitates her experiencing the sublime oneness with the world. She also sounds not a little like Shaftsbury, father of Romanticism, in his manifesto for man to escape the corrupted cities to find peace in the natural world: “The wildness pleases. We seem to live alone with Nature. We view her in her inmost recesses and contemplate her with more delight in these original wilds than in the artificial labyrinths and feigned wilderness of the palace” (Shaftesbury qtd. in Thacker 12). Her magical, ontological metamorphosis enables her to interact with nature in such a way that she encounters the sublime through it.

An example of the marvelous real’s trinity of the sublime, nature, and myth/history, Lawrence Thornton’s *Imagining Argentina* fits the natural sublime category in addition to the historical horrors motif category. After his wife has been kidnapped, Carlos’ experience in the exotic Latin American pampas seems to activate his gift of sight, the novel’s irreducible element. It is in the pampas that Carlos gains an affirmation of his magical gift of imagining, which helps him find the encouragement to continue his search for his wife as well as the other victims:

“Tell your stories,” Amos answered, and with that injunction Carlos rose and went to his room, feeling for the first time since he’d seen Raimundo Garcia open his eyes that someone else truly knew what he’d seen and believed in it without a moment’s hesitation.

[...] Sara stepped forward and took his face in her hands.

“Everything will come in its own time. Your gift will guide you.” (80)

Sara and Amos Sternberg and Sasha are the survivors of a concentration camp. In creating a connection between Carlos and Sara, Thornton aligns Carlos’ experience with hers, mingling the political atrocities of Argentina with those of Nazi Germany. In the safe and unconsumed space of the pampas, these two moments in history, which may have otherwise seemed disparate, converge.<sup>25</sup> Thornton seems to be trying to make sense of the senseless Argentinean political murders by positioning it back in time within Nazism, thus harshly indicting this specific Argentine situation.

Clearly magical realists have taken up a Romantic natural sublime not only to “territorialize the imaginary,” but also to make statements about the contemporary world as well as to express a nostalgia for disappearing nature. As I will demonstrate in the next section, however, magical realists have also developed another branch of the sublime as it is related to place, the urban sublime. They depict the sublime in the city as well as in nature, and in this way magical realism can be seen as generically embodying current ecocritics’ probing, as they desire to figure out if urban populations are prohibited from cultivating a sense of the sublime.

## CHAPTER 6

### PLACE: THE URBAN SUBLIME

Recently, ecocritics have begun to criticize certain elements of the natural sublime which I covered in the preceding chapter. I will summarize some of the criticisms that have been made of the natural sublimes of Romanticism and magical realism. An exclusive sacralization of unscathed nature via ancient time and/or space presents a problem for us as a postmodern people. It leaves us stranded on an island of industrialized contemporaneity, separated from the possibility of transcendence by an irretrievable past and location. Contemporary eco-theorists have recently begun challenging this divide between sacred nature and profane city left in the wake of the Romantic legacy, for that is where this divide comes from. Finis Dunaway locates the beginning of this debate in the 1990s, when “photographers, art critics, and historians all challenged” what he calls “the wilderness ideal—the notion that pure, pristine nature is a sublime realm separate from civilization” (78). In addition to Dunaway, William Cronon, Robert Rotenberg, and Peggy F. Barlett agree that the post-Romantic West has left a heritage of wilderness worship, evinced in wilderness preservation among other environmental concerns, which has created an infinitely wide gap between culture and nature. This gap depends on the construction of nature as necessarily pure, human-less,



pristine, and sacred, while making the place where most humans live, the city, profane, infested, and tainted by human interaction.

Cronon, in particular, debunks with razor precision the inherent fallacies of the wilderness myth arguing, firstly, that the entire notion of wilderness as sacred is a social construct begat by the Romantic sublime and frontier myths. Two hundred and fifty years ago, he reminds us, the wilderness was connoted with wasteland imagery (71-72). Echoing Valdez Moses, Cronon warns that the wilderness myth is a flight from history mostly perpetuated by “tourist-like,” wealthy urbanites who are ignoring the past (i.e. the American wilderness was peopled before European settlers arrived) and who ignore the fact that for their survival, people must interact with the earth (85). “If nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves,” Cronon points out. This is “the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity” (83). These scholars, among others, are currently seeking ways to rethink how our urban, post-industrialized culture can interact with the non-human world, how can we can enjoy the non-urban spaces while redeeming the cities most of us live in. They want to see how we can integrate a sublime sensibility into the places we live, that which teaches of a separate subjectivity and power in nature, beyond the tamed garden or potted plant in our suburban apartment and homes.

Enter magical realism. Magical realism evidences an interest in sublime place that embodies the wilderness ideal debate. At its core the wilderness debate is a question about the sublime and place, and magical realism uses both the natural and urban sublimines, offering constructive solutions to the problem of profane cities through

its effects of defamiliarization and sacralization of the city through the possibility of one's encounter with the sublime there.

### 6.1 Defamiliarization and Sacralization

While at times magical realism continues the Romantic natural sublime, in other instances, it implements what I will call the urban sublime, a use of magic which involves urban locations in sublime place. Urban location is not a mere coincidence in the urban sublime; the magic which effects transcendence is tied to the "consumed space." Cheever's "The Enormous Radio," Thornton's *Imagining Argentina*, Darrieussecq's *Pig Tales*, García Márquez's "Light is Like Water," Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Süskind's *Perfume*, Borges' "The Aleph," and Fuentes' "Aura" and *Distant Relations* all employ the urban sublime. These texts implicitly argue that consumed space neither snuffs out magic nor the sublime encounters that often accompany it.

Having freed the sublime from the forests, to which natural sublimists would restrict it, the urban sublime accomplishes two main objectives, defamiliarization and sacralization of the city. In his "Art as Technique" (1917) Viktor Shklovsky coins the term defamiliarization. His ideas on defamiliarization carry important implications for both the absence of the sublime in the city, as well as the value of the urban sublime in responding to those implicated problems. Shklovsky describes how familiarity breeds a void in peoples' perceptions.<sup>26</sup> When we become overly familiar with anything, from our driving route home to life itself, the "process of algebrization" takes over, when we begin to substitute symbols for objects, and, in consequence, do not even see the object

anymore: “Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (18).

This concept of the negative byproduct of habitualization supports ecotheorists’ concern over the psychological impact on people caused when the city, which is the place many people now live, is seen as incapable of housing the sublime and, therefore, is limited to being only ordinary and profane. If the city is disallowed the ability to effect the sublime, as the Romantic natural sublime insists, that person who lives in the city will not be able to move beyond phase one of Weiskel’s three phases. You will recall, in phase one, a person is in a normal balance or homeostasis characterized by harmony, habit, and boredom. These qualities are the products of over-familiarity which one would naturally experience as a result of encountering something everyday, as one would in the location where she lives. Wondering what humanity misses out on when they cannot encounter a sense of the sublime, Rotenburg poses the question, “What does it do to us when our sense of the fearsome [the sublime] is dulled?” He warns that “without [a sublime sensibility], a significant dimension of the human sensorium is disabled” (228). Echoing Peggy Barlett’s comments on the predicament of our sense of placelessness, Rotenburg identifies a general “blasé attitude” in city dwellers marked by apathy and debilitation. Cronon aligns with Rotenburg and Barlett, as he is uneasy about the way the wilderness ideal creates a kind of natural double-consciousness in urbanites, disallowing them to ever be fully present where they are (228-30).

Defamiliarization and sacralization of the city are important to the psyche of city dwellers, precisely because of the negative side effects that have resulted from the Romantics restricting the places people live from the sacred. Barlett identifies a sense of “placelessness” as one of the problems urbanites experience today. Where people used to feel anchored to place, they now feel rootless and unstable: “Modernity emphasizes the essential transferability of ideas, people, building plans, and the sacred. With the globalization of the economy has come the mobility of people, customs, languages, architecture, and food” (7). Barlett desires for people to regain a sense of connection, or being anchored to their homes and communities.

All of these concerns voiced by ecocritics’ probing questions, including Rotenburg’s question, what happens when the sublime is absent from the places we live, reinforces the need to become re-encharmed with the places where we are, something the urban sublime accomplishes through defamiliarization. This need involves not only inanimate objects, but also human interaction. Perhaps there is a means by which we might not become so familiar with people that we “algebraize,” or dehumanize, them. Shklovsky contends that the solution for over-familiarity is for artists to defamiliarize what tends to become lost to us through over-familiarity. Writers, for example, can defamiliarize ideas by “roughening” language, by making concepts difficult for people to take in and, thus, forcing readers/hearers to slow down and think about what the writer is bringing before them. As if in response to Shklovsky, magical realists do exactly this- they roughen up and slow down the process of literary

ingestion and thereby allow the reentering of ordinary objects/people/situations back into our field of vision.

The literary techniques involved in magical realism in general accomplish this impeding process. In making ordinary objects magical, magical realists ask the reader to reconsider those objects, and in so doing, they replenish the ordinary with wonder and awe. But even beyond the magic alone, the urban sublime explains how certain magical realist texts redeem those people, objects, and events that fall into the void of over-familiarity specifically because they are a part of our everyday, which for most of us involves urban place. When the city is allowed to effect the sublime experience, Weiskel's second and third phases can occur for the city dweller, defamiliarizing him from that which exists in the city and, ultimately, redeeming urban place. Weiskel's second phase is the stage when one encounters the sublime object and becomes astonished. Here, the mundane balance is no more, and we are forced to reexamine our relation to other forces in the world. When magical realists effect phase two, they accomplish what Shklovsky stresses as the importance of art "impeding" perception, whereby "the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception" (21); it forces readers to reconsider that which we may no longer "see." Phase three involves reassimilation (23-24), and in one's reassimilation of urban objects which the sublime has defamiliarized, the city is sacralized.

Sacralization of the city results from the city becoming a possible location where one can experience transcendence, a location where the supernatural can occur. When narrating how the Aleph is left hidden like a treasure chest buried in an urban ocean

underneath an ordinary business (293), fictional Borges inspires wonder in the reader about urban place. Something as marvelous as an Aleph could be anywhere! Moreover, Borges the author sacralizes the city by making it a location where the spiritual experience of transcendence can occur. The urban sublime reclaims the supernatural from being solely owned by a Romantic construction of nature and allows it to flow freely anywhere that people are, on any ordinary day. Faris shows how magical realism's use of different spaces in general calls into question historical ideas of sacred space. We wonder which spaces are sacred and which are not, she explains, when a tree grows out of a Paris automobile club's pool: "Many magical realist fictions (like their nineteenth-century Gothic predecessors) carefully delineate sacred enclosures—Aura's house, Macondo, Saleem's pickle factory and pickle jars, Branly's house (in *Distant Relations*), Baby Suggs' leafy clearing—and then allow these sacred spaces to leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the text and the world it describes" ("Scheherazade" 173-74).

Roh's explanation of *magischer realismus*, the movement most consider to be the origin of magical realism, describes a vision for art which depicts the spiritual within the ordinary. This is precisely what I am describing as the function of the urban sublime which certain magical realists employ, the sacralization and defamiliarization of the ordinary, which, for most of us, is the city. Roh describes *magischer realismus* as "representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world." *Magischer realismus* was concerned with the spirit of a thing in its "radiation of magic," "spirituality," and "throbbing lugubrious quality" (20).

Recalling a value of natural sublimists, Roh defines this art movement from the early twentieth-century in the Weimar Republic against fabrication and pretentiousness. He privileges a magic rooted in reality over the “shocking exoticism” of the Expressionists. Artists like Chagall, he explains, created gross exaggerations which distanced, instead of lessened, the proximity between one and the world (16-17). On the other hand, the new ideology of painting Roh presents in his 1925 essay, a movement he calls in German *magischer realismus*, celebrates “the magic of being” (20). Roh’s ideology can be used towards undergirding an argument for the sublime in the city, an argument which contends with a natural-only sublime, in aiming to depict the magic of being, an aim which mirrors that of defamiliarization. Roh praises *magischer realismus* for re-anchoring itself in the real world, a place where magic “palpitat[es]” right below the surface (16) of a “civil, metallic, restrained” exterior (18). Roh’s artistic vision identifies a transcendence, a realm at the limits of the knowable, not in a limited area of the world called nature, but in life itself. Since the Industrial Revolution, which brought most people to the city and out of rustic nature, if art is going to identify the magic or sublime involved in being, that latent magic right under our noses, it cannot only depict it in nature, but must also include the place where we live, the city.



Fig. 6.1 Dix, Otto, “Der Streichholzhaendler I - The Match Vendor I,” 1920. (*Art Resource*).

The *magischer realismus* artistic movement often did use the city and life associated with the city as a backdrop. It is used in all of the paintings Irene Guenther displays for examples of the movement in her “Magical Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic.” Painter Otto Dix, specifically, often depicted urban magic. The perspective of his piece “The Match Seller I” (1920) focuses on a match seller in a city street (51). While this scene sounds mundane, and, indeed, at a glance it may appear so, upon closer inspection one finds details in the painting which derealize the otherwise ordinary moment. The smoke blowing out of the match seller’s mouth has formed letters. A cartoon-like dog is urinating on the man’s prosthetic pegs coming out where his legs should be. The people going either direction of the match



seller are at an unusual angle from the ground. It almost looks as if they are flying; they are close to parallel of the ground. The viewer can see through the woman's dress, which should be opaque, to her legs and buttocks. Overexposing figures was one technique this movement used to accomplish a defamiliarizing effect (Durix 103).

Several other pieces by Otto Dix in a collection actually called "Metropolis" depict vampirish looking street people and otherworldly appearing people at a party (42). As in his "Match Seller I" these scenes could be ordinary in that they are showing ordinary moments in city life, but, upon closer inspection, the characters look uncanny. In these paintings the subjects, the prostitutes and the crippled man, are depicted through a macabre lens, evidencing Roh's explanation that artists of *magischer realismus* aim to expose a thing/person's interior figure, its spirit subtly exuding from reality. Dix's paintings here align him with the part of this artistic movement that worked to display the really real, what is under the surface. Durix records that these artists aimed to "unveil" the "'inner face,'" to show the "psyche reconstituted reality which could not be wholly accounted for through empirical means. The magic was linked with the spiritual" (103). Dix's sacralization of the city, his depicting the city as a location of magic, takes a ghastly and dark approach, but one that demonstrates, nonetheless, that the spiritual is everywhere.



Fig. 6.2 Dix, Otto, "Salon, I," 1921. (*Art Resource*).

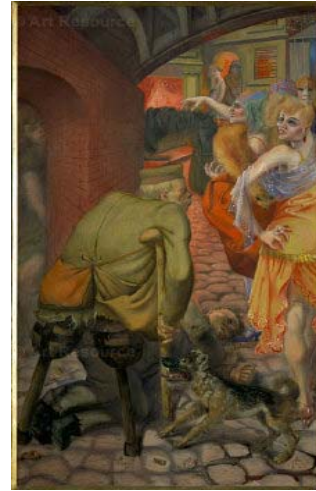


Fig. 6.3 Dix, Otto, "Big town," 1927-28. (*Art Resource*).

In "The Ecological Sublime," Finis Dunaway demonstrates how photographers Charles Pratt and Eliot Porter used their photography to bridge the divide between sacred nature and profane cities. They did this by reinterpreting the sublime. Instead of focusing on "panoramic," "pinup" nature photography," as the Sierra Club and Ansel Adams are famous for doing, Pratt and Eliot defamiliarized the familiar by focusing on the details of a place and ecological communities, by techniques such as close-up shots, rather than displaying "the hallowed perfection of distant places" (79-80). While magical realism at times employs the Burkian sublime in grandiose nature, it also uses a similar technique to that which Dunaway describes of these photographers to reinterpret the Romantic natural sublime, allowing it in to the city. Durix's description of one branch of *magischer realismus* demonstrates how, early on, magical realism even employed the same types of techniques these photographers used: "The return to everyday experience meant that the eye of the onlooker focused differently on its objects which were often seen in close-ups, overexposed, in isolation" (103). The urban

sublime, *magischer realismus*' literary descendant, causes mundane aspects of life to become strange, imbued with agency and power. In doing so, the urban sublime benefits city dwellers by causing them to rethink the spaces they live as abodes of the sublime. Taking a step back, though, magical realism's broad use of place in relation to magic and the sublime can be seen as generically bridging the chasm between sacred nature and profane city by allowing both the natural and the urban sublimes within its modal parameters.

## 6.2 "Light is Like Water"

García Márquez's short story "Light is Like Water" is an example of a text which bridges the chasm between sacred nature and profane city. Performing a reading of this story through the lens of a consciousness of the sublime, demonstrates the value of using the sublime to dissect a magical realist text and the fruitful analysis that can result. This short story is an example of an urban sublime which deserves attention in its demonstration of defamiliarization and sacralization of the city; but it is particularly provocative because of its mixing of the natural and urban sublimes to create a critique of colonialism. This story uses the sublime in an urban setting, but it is written by a Latin American writer, and not just any Latin American writer, but Gabriel García Márquez, a writer who I have already demonstrated advocates a natural sublime; he insists on linking the continent of Latin America to an organic marvelousness.

As the story begins we meet a family of four who has moved from Cartagena de Indias to an apartment, 47 Paseo de la Castellana, in Spain. Here the two sons, Totó, nine years old, and Joel, seven, have learned that if they will break open light bulbs in

their apartment, light will pour out like water, filling the apartment with its liquid brilliance. One night, the boys ask all their Spanish classmates over for a party, and while the parents are out at a movie, the boys fill the apartment almost to the ceiling with light, resulting in the drowning of all the boys except Totó and Joel. The two Latin American survivors are the only ones who had “mastered the science of navigating on light” (161).

The illuminating irreducible element exemplifies the sublime created from magical realism’s ontological transgression. It crosses beyond the limits of electricity’s usual identity, acting as both light and water, and so creates something entirely new. While I will explain shortly how this story fulfills the natural sublime, it is also clearly an example of the urban sublime, a magic tied to urban place. This is exemplified by the irreducible element being a liquid light that flows out from electricity. The irreducible element is distinctly urban and is imbued with sublime qualities. Moreover, the irreducible element defamiliarizes the ordinary objects in the boys’ apartments as well as the city itself. The narrator of the story, possibly Totó’s teacher, comments on the drowning:

This fabulous adventure was the result of a frivolous remark I made while taking part in a seminar on the poetry of household objects. Totó asked me why light went on with just the touch of a switch, and I did not have the courage to think about it twice.

“Light is like water,” I answered. “You turn the tap and out it comes.”

The teacher “did not have the courage to think about” the phenomenon of electricity “twice.” His statement clearly conveys that he regrets how electricity had become too familiar to him. He needed to experience defamiliarization. Moreover, it is important that it is after hearing a lecture on “the poetry of household objects” that the boy takes the answer to his teacher’s question literally. Totó sees the poetry of household objects, and in consequence electricity and light soon become to the boys, the community, and the readers something entirely different than that any of us are used to them being. Totó’s very question, how does flipping a switch make light come out, becomes for the reader fascinating again, perhaps as it was to her as a very young child. Indeed, electricity is a noteworthy phenomenon that has slipped into the void of familiarity for most of us. During the party, other objects, besides the light, become unfamiliar. The narrator recounts how, when the firemen came to the apartment, “household objects, in the fullness of their poetry, flew with their own wings through the kitchen sky.” As the narrator describes the piano floating with a Manila shawl looking like a “golden manta ray,” the reader can view the piano in an entirely different light than he has before. This image even evokes a near-sublime manifestation of the transcendent qualities of music (160).

García Márquez employs the urban sublime to a particular end in this story. He uses it to point to postcolonial issues. Location is crucial in “Light is Like Water,” not only in terms of the city, but in terms of nation, too. García Márquez contrasts Cartagena de Indias with Madrid, Spain, privileging the former, Latin American location. He sets the boys up as superior to their Spanish classmates. The boys from

Cartagena are the only two who survive, while the other boys, the “landbound indigenous population,” had never “mastered” this “science of navigating on light.” García Márquez here reverses the typical use of the word indigenous to refer to the Spaniards. Now the indigenous, European boys are the disadvantaged, even inferior, while the Latin American boys prove superior. Clearly their survival implies the superiority of the boys’ origins, as their home in Cartagena on the bay provided them with the skills to survive. On the other hand, “in Madrid, Spain, a remote city of burning summers and icy winds,” there was “no ocean or river” to allow the Spaniards the opportunity to acquire this skill.

It is the Columbian boys, not any others, who discover the potential of light pouring out like water. This is an important detail implying that they think in a broader type of reasoning than the Western European mindset allows, which permits them to believe that light could pour out like water. Indeed, Totó is circumstantially proven not gullible and naïve to believe his teacher, but wise. European rationality would surely never have accepted the notion that light could pour out like water from a tap. But they are not only wise in terms of mastering a non-Western type of rationality, they are also able to master European wisdom as well. Navigating on light is a “science.” Moreover, they can surpass their teachers at the European school if only given the right incentives, as their mother notices in frustration: “These kids don’t win so much as a nail when it comes to doing what they’re supposed to [...] but to get what they want they’re capable of taking it all, even the teacher’s chair” (159).

While clearly using an urban sublime, García Márquez's elevation of the Columbian boys exemplifies his characteristic privileging of Latin America as a place of supra-reality through the magical realist natural sublime. In his Nobel Lecture speech, he mentions Cartagena de Indias while cataloguing the bizarre, larger than life history of Latin America: "[...] in colonial times, hens were sold in Cartagena de Indias, that had been raised on alluvial land and whose gizzards contained tiny lumps of gold" (87). García Márquez explicitly identifies Cartagena as a part of Latin America's "outsized reality" (89) which warrants their solitude from other nations in that the non-Latino literary forms cannot suffice to communicate their unique history.

Totó and Joel's superiority creates a postcolonial message in the story. It is important that the boys from Cartagena de Indias are superior to the boys from Spain, because of Cartagena's history. Cartagena de Indias was one of the most prosperous Spanish ports in colonial South America. The port became wealthy off slave trade and the spoils the Spaniards were taking from the Amerindians, including the Incas, and then selling. Founded by Spaniard Pedro de Heredia in 1533 (Nowell), the city did not finally win independence until 1821 (Ulysses). As if recreating this historical victory in "Light is Like Water," like Heredia in Fuentes' novel *Distant Relations*, the Latin American boys acquire a late triumph over their former Spanish colonizers. The historical horrors of Spain's domination of Cartagena is relived in Spain, though this time the table has turned, and it is to the disadvantage of the Spaniards who are at the mercy of the superior knowledge of the Latin Americans.

While this example demonstrates a postcolonial impulse in the urban sublime, magical realism's use of the urban sublime can also be seen as an example of the genre's international growth. In employing the urban sublime, magical realism moves beyond unconsumed locations and allows any space, natural or urban, to become involved in magical occurrences.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The rich presence of the sublime in magical realism supports Kirwan's assertion that the sublime has not yet become an obsolete idea. Moreover, magical realism's success suggests that contemporary readers identify with, or are at least interested in, the sublime experience. From the perspective of either ecotheorists or primitivists, this could be because the contemporary urban dweller desires a spiritual element which she finds lacking in the profane city. From a trauma theory and psychological perspective, the contemporary person needs the ability to interact with the ineffable past through the irreducible element. And from a postcolonial perspective, the sublime in magical realism offers a medium through which to dialogue about the overwhelming and often life threatening issues related to nationhood as well as any hope for moving beyond those limitations.

Whatever one's paradigm, the sublime opens up new possibilities for ideas related to literature, postcolonialism, human interaction, and being. In what seems like a paradox, these possibilities stem from the sublime's relationship with the obscure in its interest in locations at and beyond the limits of mortality. Burke refers to this as the quality of eternity or infinity in the sublime, explaining that hardly anything "can strike the mind with its greatness," and thus be considered sublime, "unless it make some sort

of approach toward infinity,” unless we cannot “perceive its bounds” (52-54). Sublime aesthetics engages with that point which goes past human comprehension. One encounters something which (s)he can make no meaning of, creating the speechlessness that momentarily results.<sup>28</sup> This is the crisis fictional Borges expresses in “The Aleph.” In this place language is suspended of its ability to signify.

Stephen Slemon describes that “gaps, absences” and “silences” are symptomatic of magical realism because in this literary mode “two oppositional systems” of realism and fantasy confront each and are suspended, as no resolution occurs between them (409). The presence of the sublime experience in magical realism helps to further explain why this silence occurs. The sublime deals with locations of discontinuity; it will “always be found in the ill-defined zones of anxiety between discreet orders of meaning.”

Paradoxically, this place of obscurity and silence in magical realism is a hopeful place to be. Cooper suggests the gaps in magical realism allow for new spaces of “fertile interstices” (1). Weiskel, speaking specifically of the sublime but in terms also applicable to magical realism, explains that at the points of discontinuity in the sublime experience “we are on the verge of or in passage to a ‘higher meaning’” (21). If Brian McHale is correct that modernism was embroiled in an epistemological crisis, and postmodernism went a step further towards a complete crisis of an ontological nature, magical realism’s use of the sublime is hopeful. It can in this context be seen as fore-looking, as gazing ahead towards a constructive step beyond the deconstructive crises of

knowledge and being, “towards a passage into higher meaning.” It is questioning what is the next step.

Azaro’s Dad offers a fictional model of magical realism’s forward looking, which anticipates the passage into answers to difficult questions. After following him into the spirit world, Azaro hears Dad demanding answers to the enormous, sublime questions regarding Nigeria’s national situation:

[...] Dad’s spirit was restless for justice and more life and genuine revolution and he kept ranging farther out into other worlds where the promises of power were made before birth. And Dad traveled the spheres, seeking the restoration of our race, and the restoration of all oppressed peoples. It was as I followed Dad that I learnt that other spheres of higher energies have their justice beyond our understanding. And our sphere too. [...] he wanted justice now. He wanted truth now. He wanted world balance now. He raised the storms of demands in his dreams. He raised impenetrable questions. He kept asking: WHY? After eons he asked: WHAT MUST WE DO? And then he asked: HOW DO WE BRING IT ABOUT? Pressing on, he wanted to know: WHEN? Relentlessly, twisting and turning, he demanded: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY? And with a bit more serenity, not drawing back from the inevitable self-confrontation, he asked: WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP? His body grew. (494)

Azaro’s mention of justice in spheres beyond our understanding, Dad’s questions which are impenetrable and inscrutable, and his pressing against those walls of limitations which the sublime foregrounds all exemplify in this textual moment the sublimity which

I have extrapolated on until now. Importantly, they also demonstrate how our understanding of the elements and inner-workings of sublime theorizations can help us unpack profound moments in magical realist texts. The significance of the questions Dad raises as well as the problems Nigeria as a whole faces can be better appreciated in light of the mathematical sublime, a theory which emphasizes our inability to grasp huge issues and ideas, and the despair that joins those moments. The sublime also helps us anticipate the taste of hope that is offered the reader in this moment, as sublime pain is followed by hope for transcendence.

While magical realism will most likely not serve as a path to enlightenment, it might at least open up new discourses in the “fertile interstices” it creates between “discreet orders of meaning.” While we may not find many of the answers, perhaps it will at least prove a medium to allow us to ask, like Dad, “What is the first step?”

APPENDIX

NOTES

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Slemon, "Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 407-26.

<sup>2</sup> Especially helpful for surveying major theorists and their contributions to the discourse on the sublime was Richard Macksey's "Longinus Reconsidered," *Comparative Literature*, 108.5

(1993), 913-34. Critics unanimously praise and rely on Samuel Monk's *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-century England* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1960). James Kirwan's book is a more recent resource whose survey on the sublime includes a chapter on contributors from the twentieth-century, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

<sup>4</sup> See Raimonda Modiano and Jonathan Lamb on the comic sublime and Marshall Brown on "The Urbane Sublime." Modiano, "Humanism and the Comic Sublime: From Kant to Friedrich Theodore Vischer," *Studies in Romanticism* 26.2 (1987), 231-44. Lamb, "The Comic Sublime in Sterne's Fiction," *ELH* 48.1 (1981), 110-43. Brown, "The Urbane Sublime," *ELH* 45.2 (1978), 236-54.

<sup>5</sup> Delbaere-Garant creates a sub-category within the "constellation" of magical realist critical theory she calls "grotesque realism," which is similar to my identifying the

sublime in magical realism's ontological transgressions: "I would suggest [...] that 'grotesque realism' be used [...] for any sort of hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion or interpenetration of different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal"; "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English," eds. Zamora and Faris, 256.

<sup>6</sup> See Chanady's discussion of the implied author's guidance, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony* (New York, Garland: 1985), 32-40.

<sup>7</sup> Durix questions: "Should we then jump to the conclusion that this represents García Márquez's own personal conception and say that what the 'West' calls his magic realism is just a 'realistic' representation of his compatriots' mental vision of their surroundings?" In answer to her own question, she responds: "In an increasingly urban society where the Western logos, the cult of progress and efficiency have permeated most layers of society, it seems difficult to admit such a presupposition unreservedly. We may even wonder whether Garcia Marquez's remarks do not reflect the author's own natural adoption of the myth of the Noble Savage, a representation with clearly paternalistic implications," *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magical Realism* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), 115. This perspective which holds as suspect the belief of magical realist writers in their magic is echoed in Cooper's discussion on magical realist writers as "international cosmopolitans," who have shared the privileges of Western European and U. S. upper

classes, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London, Routledge, 1998).

This disbelief in their magic does not necessarily undercut the mode of magical realism, however. Chanady and Slemon both see the dual ontological nature of magical realism (as opposed to a single version of reality) as positive for postcolonials. Chanady explains that though magical realist writers most certainly were influenced by highbrow Western European thought, an influence that might question the authenticity or uniqueness of the theory of a marvelous reality, these writers appropriated the hegemony's tools for postcolonial purposes, "Territorialization." Magical realism's intentional generic construction of magic and realism is something Slemon identifies as "signify[ing] resistance to monumental theories of literary practice," those theories that have been forged from the "major genre systems," 408.

<sup>8</sup> Psychological pain is triggered by an object or idea, but the sublime is not contained in that object or idea. The sublime experience ultimately takes place in the mind of the person, as the Romantics stressed in their psychological sublime.

<sup>9</sup> Young posits that this is where Kant got it wrong. Instead of being a means to exalt the self as Kant insisted in his humanist sublime, the sublime is a uniting of the self with all around him/herself, "Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime," *Inquiry* 48.2 (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Young distinguishes between the sublime (a feeling), a sublime subject ((s)he who experiences sublime feelings), and the sublime object (that which stimulates those sublime feelings), "Death and Transfiguration," 133.



<sup>11</sup> See Jean-Pierre Durix on mimesis and magical realism, *Mimesis, Genres and Post-Colonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magical Realism*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Situated on the birth and beginning of the Indian democracy, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (New York: Penguin, 1980) would be another example of this type of text that uses the sublime to communicate issues related to nationhood, as it deals primarily with socio-political issues surrounding India's becoming a nation.

<sup>13</sup> One particularly sublime scene occurs when Azaro's father, the Black Tyger, fights the already deceased spirit of legendary boxer, the Yellow Jaguar. At the moment when sublime threat is most apparent, when the reader believes Azaro's Dad will be beaten by the superior power of the spirit-fighter, the Black Tyger finds a reserve of strength within himself which allows him to move beyond his ability and, ultimately, acquire victory over the Yellow Jaguar, Ben Okri, *Famished Road* (New York: Anchor, 1993), 352-64.

<sup>14</sup> In opposite to my reading, Brenda Cooper interprets the novel as Okri offering little to no hope for the nation, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London, Routledge, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> In reference to my terms, while an issue is clearly not an object in the material sense of the word, as nature is a sublime object in the Romantic sublime, in this schema issues related to nationhood instigate the sublime experience and, thus, serve the role of sublime object.

<sup>16</sup> While perhaps not directly caused by colonizers- poverty was in Nigeria before colonization- colonization did, of course, negatively affect colonized people's economic circumstances.

<sup>17</sup> Here, in Azaro's ability to transcend the boundaries between the living and the spirit world, the transcendent side of magical realism works to elevate community, as it does in general in *The Famished Road*. In this novel humans are abnormally interconnected, because the same spirit child can be born over and over again to different families. Moreover, community is elevated in the specific terms of family. Azaro chooses to stay in the world of the living for his mother and father. Finally, despite the chronic hardships his family endures, the family sticks together.

<sup>18</sup> Through the *abiku* children and the general interaction between characters and the spirit world, Okri transfigures of the Nigerian body as sublime and, in turn, underscores the postcolonial value of hybridity. In *The Famished Road*, the ontological duality of the Nigerian's hybrid state of spirit and human "exposes what [magical realist writers] see as a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would bring to view" (32) and, thus, serves to decenter a Western organization of reality. In terms of the sublime, the slippage between the boundaries of living and spirit in the novel exemplifies the ontological transgression which effects the sublime.

<sup>19</sup> Carpentier's marvelous reality was more explicitly influenced by Bretón's Surrealism. Living in France during the 1920s, Carpentier was involved with European artistic culture, specifically with French Surrealism, until he discovered what he describes as an authentic marvelousness in Latin America which he believed the

Surrealists were always trying to create. Upon discovering Haiti, he told surrealist friend, Robert Desnos: “I began to see America via the Surrealist movement. I saw that the Surrealists searched in their daily lives for marvelous things that were very hard for them to find, and that sometimes they used tricks, very often collecting different things in order to create a prefabricated marvelous reality. And there, in Paris, I realized that we really had all those marvelous things in America [...]””; quoted from Theo D’Haen, “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*, Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 204.

<sup>20</sup> Critics differ over the dominant attributes of Latin American Romanticism, but, excluding Octavio Paz, these critics below agree that European Romanticism influenced Latin America either through Latin American disciples of European Romanticism such as Esteban Echeverría, Domingo Sarmiento (47-55), and Juan Leon de Mera (Franco 85-88), or through a more indirect influence of *modernismo*. Critics agree that the Latin American appropriation of Romanticism was revolutionary and nationalist (Franco 47), though this is not a wholly different manifestation of the European strain of Romanticism. While Latin Americans used Romanticism in a unique political and social milieu, European Romanticism was also revolutionary and nationalist, which suggests why European Romanticism was attractive to Latin Americans. For more on Latin American Romanticism see Djelal Kadir and Mario Valdes, eds., *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004); Cathy L. Jrade, *Modernismo Modernity and the Development of Spanish American*

*Literature* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998); David William Foster and Daniel Altamiranda, eds., *From Romanticism to Modernismo in Latin America* (New York: Garland, 1997); Cathy L. Jrade *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1991), 3-6; Jean Franco *Spanish-American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), 46-74; In “The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms,” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* Eds. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 126-44, Amaryll Chanady cites Luiz Costa Lima’s assertion that Latin America’s Romanticism was not characterized by “self-reflection nor by the questioning of hegemonic models,” as I quote Jrade saying, but by “sentimentality and detailed observation of nature,” 124; Octavio Paz argues that Latin America and Spain had no Romantic period in *Children of the Mire*, trans. Rachel Phillips (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> With all the debate over magical realist terms, it should be noted that I will discuss *lo real maravilloso*, or the marvelous real, as a branch of magical realism, one which participates in the magical sublime by using the natural sublime motif. When I refer to the marvelous real I mean to specify Carpentier’s ideas. When, however, I refer to magical realism, I am talking about the genre as a whole, including the marvelous real. Carpentier’s *lo real maravilloso* privileges nature in a way magical realism does not necessarily do, highlighting commonalities between it and the Romantic natural sublime, which, in turn, makes the marvelous real an early pivotal moment in the magical sublime.

<sup>22</sup> In their essays and engagement with the mode of magical realism García Márquez and Carpentier evidence other aims with their writing than simply privileging Latin America. For one, at the same time that they use Latin American nature and topography to privilege Latin America, both Carpentier and García Márquez artistically wrestle with the hermeneutical issues involved in interpreting the other, as implied by this quote of Carpentier's in which he calls the novelists of Latin America the "interpreters" of their reality.

While Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso americano* undeniably favors Latin America for the marvelous real, a favoring which implicitly excludes other countries by suggesting that either their lands do not have an organic magic or that they fabricate their magic, I believe Carpentier himself allows other countries to have the marvelous. That is to say his own descriptions of the marvelous allow his term to be opened up to describe many natural locations, regardless of national boundaries. Carpentier's use of Frenchman Perrault and fairies of the medieval era, which belong to Europe, to define the marvelous implies that Carpentier admits the possibility that other nations contain marvelous elements. In "The Marvelous Real in America" Carpentier does illustrate the marvelous in non-Latino countries. He relates how, when visiting Iran, he "flew over the Aral Sea, so strange, so foreign in its forms, color, and contours, yet so similar to Baikal Lake, which amazes me with its surrounding mountains, its zoological rarities, with all that those remote places share: extension, limitlessness, repetition, the endless *taiga* exactly like that in our own jungles [...]" (78). Throughout the entire first half of "The Marvelous Real in America," Carpentier presents Peking, Prague, and Iran in the

same kind of marvelous language with which he describes his own Latin America; however, after visiting these places he expresses a profound inability to understand, because he lacks the keys to unlock those cultures, one most necessary keys being an understanding of the language and texts (77, 79). The moral of Carpentier's story here seems to be that each culture must narrate its own country's marvels, and Carpentier boasts of Latin America only because he cannot fully grasp or communicate another nation's marvelousness, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 75-88.

While describing in his Nobel Lecture the state of solitude Latin America finds itself in, García Márquez explains that Latin America is not only isolated because of its "outsized reality," nor because of a lack of forms "to render [their] lives believable," "the crux of [...] their solitude," but also because Western European forms will not be a "valid means" by which to "interpret" Latin Americans, either by non-Latinos or by Latinos themselves: "The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary" (89). Latin Americans must present themselves in a form appropriate and unique to their reality. In this light, magical realism becomes a form necessary for Latin Americans in their pursuit of a form which more accurately reflects their unique reality.

García Márquez's two short stories, "The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" are literary examples of the author's dealing with this problem of self-presentation and identity. In both these stories, the foreign others have identities projected onto them by communities that do

not understand them. While in “The Handsomest Drowned Man,” these projections, though ridiculous, are endearing, in “The Very Old Man,” the community’s attempts at interpreting the old man contribute to their negligent and, often, cruel treatment of him, *Leaf Storm and other Stories*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Amaryll Chanady reveals how Angel Flores’ contradictory arguments which aimed to “territorialize the imaginary” were arguments Carpentier had already made, “Territorialization of the Imaginary,” 130-31.

<sup>24</sup> For more recent studies in Romanticism see Mark Edmonds, “Who Said Romance is Dead?,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11.1/2 (2006), 167-88, which addresses, among other things, the Romantic tradition of privileging vision over the other senses and the yoking of location with identity. For Romanticism and place see Catherine E. Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the natural sublime, Thornton also uses the urban sublime in his text, causing him to fit into yet another category of magical realist sublime motifs, the urban sublime. This is true because Carlos exercises his gift in the city of Buenos Aires and, most likely, would never have occurred had he not been caught up in what was occurring in Buenos Aires. However, Thornton begins his novel implicitly acknowledging the power of Romanticism’s legacy, when he explains that magic is more believable out in the wild, than it is in the city:

Even now, six years after the generals loosened their hold on Argentina, after their manicured hands were pried away from the delicate white throats of the

disappeareds [...] Carlos Rueda's gift retains its mystery. If, in Buenos Aires, the supernatural were woven into the daily lives of people, as it is in the Amazon where natives believe numinous spirits invade the birds and beasts, his accomplishments would be easier to discuss. But we have long been hostile to the things of the spirit [...]. Our city is like a sophisticated dowager whose soul feeds on cynicism, a place where the mere mention of the unknown and unknowable occasions peels of bitter laughter. And yet it was here that night after night Carlos Rueda entered the darkness where our people disappeared, spinning words round ghosts and specters until sometimes the people only he could see stepped forth from his imagination into the astonished arms of loved ones. (13)

<sup>26</sup> Chanady concurs in her analysis of European influences on Latin American magical realists: "The notion of defamiliarization developed by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky is particularly relevant in the case of magical realism," "Territorialization," 129.

<sup>27</sup> Granting that a transcendence into oneness follows sublime speechlessness, the sublime theory provides a framework for encountering the other. Some critics argue that the solipsism involved in the sublime makes it a negative theorization for encountering the other, but I suggest the sublime experience of speechlessness, or an inability and/or refusal to name, offers the possibility for a profound connection with common humanity. In the sublime encounter, there is not the comprehension of and, therefore, the language to describe the foreign other, the opposite of orientalism, Weiskel, 22.



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With this paper, Kim Sasser concludes her Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Texas at Arlington. Prior to this work, Kim graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a minor in Spanish at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Kim is interested in literature of the Americas as well as circumatlantic studies, as this research on magical realism's appropriation of the sublime demonstrates. In the fall of 2007, Kim plans to pursue her PhD in these fields while further exploring the topics raised in this paper.