Question Two: Geography and Magical Realism

There is a lot of debate in the academic community about exactly how and when magical realism began to develop into its own genre, but one thing that is not debated is where this development began. Latin America is incredibly important in the formation, development, and continuation of magical realism as a genre. As a result of this, many prominent magical realist texts are written by Latinx authors. However, as the world has globalized, so has literature, and this globalization has caused magical realism to spread far beyond Latin America’s borders, into India, North America, Great Britain, and beyond. Despite this spread of the genre, magical realism’s Latin American origin still has a significant influence in the content and style of magical realism, even as non-Latinx authors include the past and present of their own geographical locations in their works.

In this essay, I will establish how Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* pushed and cemented magical realism into the Latin America literary canon, and how he used the genre to raise up marginalized voices in his novel. Then, I will demonstrate how two authors of different national origins, Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison, followed in his footsteps to do the same for their own countries. Finally, I will compare the texts between these three authors to draw out the similarities and differences between them and demonstrate why their work as magical realists is so important.

**Magical realism and Latin America**

 When discussing magical realism as a literary genre, one of the first authors to come up is always Gabriel Garcia Marquez, specifically his text *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Stephen M. Hart even claims, “Magical realism…is typically seen as achieving its canonical incarnation in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*” (A Companion, 3). Hart’s assertion means that Garcia Marquez is responsible for establishing how magic functions within magical realism, and what that means for Latin America. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* Garcia Marquez places Latin America as the main focus by making Macondo the protagonist of his novel, introducing Rebeca as an indigenous character, and retelling of a Colombian banana worker massacre from his own viewpoint.

*Macondo as Protagonist*

 After reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is hard to determine who the protagonist is. The characters in the novel come and go at a blistering pace, with some of them only being relevant for a single chapter, while others, like Colonel Aureliano Buendía, are leaned on much more heavily but still disappear from the narrative long before the end. However, there is one aspect of the story that stays consistent through the entire novel, and that is its setting of Macondo.

 Macondo is established as a character early on in the novel. The second sentence of the novel reads, “At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on a bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs” (Garcia Marquez 11). Similarly, Macondo is one of the last characters mentioned at the end of the novel, in which Garcia Marquez writes, “for it was foreseen that the city…would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments” (383). The mention of the city at the beginning and end of the novel establishes it as the major through line of the work and establishes it as the protagonist of the novel. According to Kenneth Reeds and the aforementioned Stephen Hart, “it is Macondo itself which the reader follows through its initial stages, maturity, crisis, and eventual death” (149). Since Macondo is placed in Latin America (likely as a stand in for Columbia considering some of this events that take place in the novel and Columbian history are similar), Garcia Marquez has made Latin America inseparable from his narrative and, ultimately, inseparable from the magic in that narrative. This can be seen the way Garcia Marquez introduces the character of Rebeca early on in the novel.

*Memory and magical realism: Rebeca’s indigeneity*

 Rebeca is introduced to the Buendia family in chapter three of the novel, and she arrives as an orphan, with only a small bag of clothes, a letter explaining her relation to the Buendia family, and the bones of her parents in a bag. It is clear she is indigenous from the outset, as she understands the language of the “Indians” who work for the Buendias as well as Spanish, but her relation to the family perplexes them. They have never heard of her parents and are not sure how she is related to them. This fact, combined with the magic surrounding the bones she carries in a sack, make Rebeca’s introduction to this novel an allegory for the fact that many Latinx people have forgotten their indigenous roots because of colonialism.

 The letter that Rebeca carries to Macondo directly explained how she was related to the Buendias, even including the names of the relatives involved and how those relatives were connected. However, after reading the note, “neither Jose Arcadio Buendia nor Ursula remembered having any relatives with those names” (Garcia Marquez 47). This is a direct admission that they do not remember their ancestors, of their history being erased by earlier colonization, even though Garcia Marquez never directly states that. But the situation is even more complex when the magic of the bones gets factored in. The bones, of their own fruition, make a strange “*Cloc-cloc-cloc*” sound and seem to move around the house as they please, getting “in the way everywhere and would be found where least expected, always with its clucking of a broody hen” (Garcia Marquez 47-48). Reed and Hart suggest the bones are “a representation of indigenous history before Macondo” and that the clicking is “the past calling attention to itself and making its history felt in the present” (164). This analysis is supported by the text well, as the bones do their best to be as big a nuisance to the family as they can, such as when, during the expansion of the Buendias’ house, the work men were “exasperated by the sack of bones that followed them everywhere with its dull rattle” (Garcia Marquez 60). Eventually, a cemetery is built in Macondo, and the bones are buried there and forgotten by the family.

 Based on this reading, it is clear that Garcia Marquez is making a point on the erased indigeneity of Latin America. No matter the Latinx country, there is almost always a pre and post colonial period, and the prominence of Spanish as the dominate language is a large piece of evidence in establishing this fact. In this example written by Garcia Marquez, the family at first cannot communicate with Rebeca directly because she only responds to the Indians language, which directly evokes those forgotten people. But the erasure of indigenous people is not the only history Latin American countries have in common; the invasion and brutality of their land any people by foreign countries and their corporations is also prominent in Latinx history, which Garcia Marquez includes in this novel.

*Corporate colonialism and One Hundred Years of Solitude*

 Chapter fifteen of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is focused on Jose Arcadio Segundo and a strike against a banana company that is growing bananas for the United States. The company builds its own town next to Macondo in chapter twelve and immediately begins siphoning workers from Macondo into the new town. Jose joins the workers as a prominent union leader during two strikes, the second of which ends when the government lures more than three thousand workers into a section of town on the grounds of negotiating with them. When the workers, Jose among them, arrive, the military opens fire on them, killing everyone in the square except for Jose. This event and its aftermath represents a large part of colonial history for Latin America, which Garcia Marquez fights against by retelling from a Latinx perspective through the use of magic.

 After the shooting, Jose wakes up on a train full of all the victims. He exits the train and returns to Macondo through a torrential downpour, which carries on for five years. When he returns to Macondo, he discovers that all traces of the massacre have been erased; the banana company has, far beyond what would be possible in a different setting, convinced the people of Macondo that the workers returned home after coming to an agreement with the company and that “nothing had happened in Macondo” (Garcia Marquez 258). This total erasure of the massacre, combined with the never-ending rain that disrupts all of Macondo, clearly represents the total control that corporate colonialism enforces on the Latin American region in the twentieth century. But Garcia Marquez’s retelling does not stop there; Jose is also permanently changed following this event. He is stuck in a liminal space, somewhere between dead and alive, as is represented by the novel. His family can see him, but to the rest of the town he looks like a ghost, and when the military comes to the Buendia house to look for him, they quickly found the room he was hidden in, but “the soldier was looking at [Jose] without seeing him” (Garcia Marquez 289). With this in mind, combined with the fact that even his family does not believe him about the massacre, Jose has become a vehicle for the silenced victims, whose true story will never be known.

 It is clear through these events, and other events in the novel, that Latin America’s unique history with colonialism has made it the perfect place for magical realism to flourish in. In fact, it is theorized that the above massacre is based on a real event that happened in Columbia in 1928 (Kenneth and Hart, 128). In magical realism, the surreal meets the real world, and that is exactly what Garcia Marquez has done in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, there are many forms and instances of colonialism and oppression in the world, giving other authors, such as Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison, the ability to follow in Garcia Marquez’s footsteps and retell their own history through magical means.

**Indian and American Trauma: Magical Realism and Authorial Origin**

 Since Garcia Marquez’s established a focus on retelling the real as the magical in magical realism, many authors have followed in his footsteps through their novel writing, but few are as prominent as Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Morrison’s *Beloved*. Both writers wrestle with colonial history and truth through the use of the surreal, with Rushdie employing many forms of magic to condemn the government that colonialism left behind and Morrison primarily utilizing ghosts to demonstrate the trauma that colonization inflicts on a people. Regardless of their methods, each writer employs the tradition of Garcia Marquez, taking what it real and mixing it with magic until it gains a voice of its own.

*How the Indian Emergency Stole Away Magic*

 Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* tells the history of India from colonization to independence and partition to the modern day through the character of Saleem Sinai and his family. Saleem, along with one-thousand other children in India born between midnight and one A.M. on the morning of August fifteenth, 1947 – the day of India’s independence and split from Pakistan – are each gifted with a magic ability thanks to the time of their birth. They use this magic freely until it is taken away by The Widow, a fictional portrayal of Indira Ghandi, a power-hungry politician who uses the political structure left by colonialism to assume unlimited power in India, and oppress the Indian people, which is demonstrated the most in the climax of the novel.

 In the climax of the novel, Saleem is kidnapped by Shiva – one of the one-thousand and one children of midnight, and Saleem’s archnemesis – on the order of The Widow. He is then locked in a cell as one of many political prisoners during India’s 1975 The Emergency, and tortured until he reveals the locations, names, and physical descriptions of all of the remaining “children” (they are twenty-nine at this point). Once The Widow and her government has rounded up a majority of the children who are still alive, four hundred and twenty in total, she keeps them in their cells for a while, and lets them build up hope. They build up hope that they will escape, that they will see the sun, that they will be ok, then she takes it away. She does this by sterilizing children, or, as Saleem describes it, “Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves” (Rushdie 505). At the same time, The Widow has the doctors performing these surgeries remove something unique from each midnight child, something that takes away their magic, and with it their hope.

 That loss of hope is, ultimately, what *Midnight’s Children* is about. After August fifteenth, India is a new nation, and its people were filled with optimism and hope for their newfound freedom, and the possibilities that their future holds. The magic possessed by Saleem, and the rest of the midnight’s children, is a physical manifestation of that hope. At the start of part two of the novel, the children of midnight, and especially Saleem, believe that they can impact the trajectory of their nation – that they are at the center of its history. The rest of the novel sets out to prove them wrong, taking away their optimism, their freedom, their confidence until, finally, it takes away what makes them unique as well. This idea was baked into the novel’s conception, according to Josna E. Rege, who writes, “[Rushdie’s] protagonist Saleem begins his life with supreme confidence in his centrality and agency, but his unbounded optimism is besieged and eventually destroyed by disillusionment” (261). Saleem’s tragic journey is what makes the Indian origin of this novel so necessary. The magic comes from the optimism of India itself, and the loss of magic stems from India’s own political stability; the fabric of India is woven into the core of the story.

*American Trauma: Memory and Magic*

 Morrison’s *Beloved* is a story about a mother, Sethe, who must learn to confront, and accept, her past, including the fact that she killed her own daughter to save her from being forced into slavery. A large portion of *Beloved* is focused on memory and the past, with the theme focused on the ways people tend to deny and forget unpleasant aspects of history. Morrison even insisted that *Beloved* was her least read novel, saying “it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia” (quoted in “Magical Realism in Americas”: 120). And this is where the central geographic significance from the novel comes from: how can Sethe come to terms with her trauma where she is living where she could be forced to relive that trauma?

 In Morrison’s novel, Sethe is constantly burying her memories, to the point that she does not remember what her own sons look like. She does this because she is living in a liminal space, as Hart describes it, “[the novel] is set in the mid-1800s, in a liminal zone somewhere between the Sweet Home of Kentucky and the abolitionist haven of the North” (“Magical Realism in Americas” 120). This space – somewhere between free and not free, safe and not safe – traps Sethe in a cycle of erasing her own memories. That is when the main source of magic in this story, the ghost of her slain daughter, begins to operate. The ghost of Beloved is possessing 124 from the very start of the novel, making the house “spiteful” (Morrison 3). Beloved is angry that Sethe is denying her memories and manifests, first as a ghost but later as a reborn human being, to make Sethe confront her past. An example of this is seen the first time Sethe confronts the ghost with the help of her still living daughter, Denver, in the novel’s opening scenes. Sethe and Denver are trying to communicate with the ghost in order to calm it down when Denver makes a comment on the ghost’s strength, saying that it is quite “powerful.” Sethe replies, “No more powerful than the way I loved her” (Morrison 5). This admission of love for the ghost-child, prompted by its very presence, triggers a flashback to a memory of Sethe trading ten minutes of sex to have the word “Beloved” carved on the tombstone of the very daughter she killed. Definitely a traumatic memory, and a reminder of her perpetual poverty as a result of where she lives, and the racism that filled America. There are numerous other events like this, including at the end when Sethe gets so caught up in the memory of when she killed Beloved that she almost murders an innocent white man.

 The ghost of *Beloved* is meant to serve as a reckoning for the trauma the United States placed on an entire classification of people for the sake of profit. By forcing Sethe to confront the memories she does not want to face, Morrison forces us as Americans to confront our own forgotten history, whether that be what our ancestors inflicted or what was inflicted on our ancestors. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother figure, sums this thematic choice up quite well when she, speaking about the ghost and Sethe’s suggestion that they move away from 124, says, “What’d be the point…Not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison 6). The tragedy of this story is intrinsic to its status as a United States novel, and the horror of the magic is born from that tragedy.

**Where Geography Collides**

 It is apparent from the content of these texts that there is overlap in magical realist works, in both the magic and the overall goal of the magic, even when large distances separate the geographic location of the stories, and the authors who wrote those stories. Each author, of course, has their own individual geographic viewpoints and stories, as the places they originate from are all very different. However, even with these geographic differences, there are traceable trends in the genre of magical realism that we can account for.

 The most noticeable trends in these magical realist works are trends within the magic. All three of the works discussed in this essay include the use of ghosts, though their presence is used much more heavily in *One Hundred Years* and *Beloved* than in *Midnight’s Children,* which only features a single ghost a couple of times throughout the novel. The Garcia Marquez and Rushdie novels, however, are much more similar in regard to the amount of magic they used throughout the novel, which is quite large, with each novel featuring magic that is only present once or twice before it is never seen from or heard of again. This differs a bit from Morrison’s novel, which focuses on ghosts and the reanimation of Beloved as its main form of magic. This makes *One Hundred Years* the connecting point between the other two novels. They each implement the influence of Garcia Marquez’s seminal work in different ways, but they are still connected by the same Latinx work. But the types of magic used in each novel is not the only aspect that overlaps. The goals of these novels – and the magic within – are very closely aligned, much more so than the types of magic used.

 An underlying truth to these texts is that their underlying goals is political and aimed at the country or region that they originate from. In each country, there are two narratives that exist about the events that are depicted in the novel. There is an upper narrative, pushed by the country itself, and there is a lower narrative, that tells the story of the marginalized people of that country, which the upper narrative tends to ignore. In each of these novels, the magic used is meant to disrupt the upper narrative and insert the lower narrative into the mainstream of the upper.

 When writing about *Beloved,* Reed and Hart claims, “Like Garcia Marquez and Rushdie, Morrison uses magical realism for a political end” (237). The political end that they are working towards is the preservation of the voices of the politically oppressed. For Garcia Marquez, this comes in the form of classist marginalization; he retells the story of the Columbian banana workers massacre and uses the voice of a ghost to preserve the memory of the event, even as the government tries to erase it from the record. Morrison’s focus, on the other hand, is slightly different. According to Reed and Hart, “Her fiction is directed towards passing history onto the next generation and she sees her writing as filling the void once occupied by the tellers of stories” (237). In other words, Morrison is preserving the story of racial oppression by chronicling the brutality of slavery, and the long-lasting trauma that slavery has on Black people in the United States. Rushdie’s political preservation twists away from Morrison’s and Garcia Marquez’s goals, as he instead seeks to use Saleem’s magic and the Midnight’s Children Conference (MCC) that Saleem creates to “give voice to an entire subcontinent” (Reed and Hart 204). The upper narrative that Rushdie is trying to subvert is one that tyrannical politicians like The Widow would support, which is the idea that India is politically united. Instead, through the use of the MCC and Saleem and Shiva as foils, Rushdie is demonstrating that India is politically fractured, which in his eyes is a good thing.

**Conclusion**

 It is clear, based on these texts, that the geographical location of a magical realist story – and that story’s author – is significant when it comes to the development of the text. Magical realism seeks to take what is real, be it trauma, joy, personal experience, national identity, or some combination of the four, and enhance and subvert those realities through magic. This centers geography as one of the most important aspects of the genre. Each place has its own unique history, and with that history comes a vast range of subjects to write on. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would not be the same without the Columbia based Macondo being the center of the novel; if Garcia Marquez instead made the setting a generic town, it would lose its through-line and a lot of its character. However, the geography is not the point of magical realism. Instead, the point of magical realism is giving the people of those places their rightful place in a narrative that is often denied to them, and the literary world is better that their stories are in it.

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Question Two: Magic as Fluidity

 In magical realism, there are countless forms of magic; in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* alone there are at least 581 individual forms of magic within the midnight’s children themselves, and that is not counting other magic in the novel. But, as with any other genre, there are tropes, trends, and conventions within magical realism that many of the major works of the genre fall in to. Among these tropes is an idea that I have dubbed fluidity. Fluidity within magical realism is a phenomenon in which what we in reality consider to be static and unchanging – like the flow of time, for example – becomes unstable, or changes drastically. These changes might impact only one character or chapter, or it might affect the entire landscape of the story and permeate the structure of the work throughout. But no matter how prominent the instance of fluidity is within the particular story, it is clear that fluidity is extremely important in the realm of magical realism, as it serves as a vehicle through which the most significant, and sometimes the only, magic manifests.

 In this exploration of fluidity in magical realism, I will be analyzing three texts from my reading list – Isabel Allende’s *The House of Spirits*, Carmen Maria Machado’s “Real Women have Bodies,” and Lesley Nneka Arimah’s debut collection’s titular story “What it Means when a Man Falls from the Sky” – to explain how fluidity works in magical realism. I will start by briefly explaining the types of fluidity, and then I will explain how fluidity appears within these works and impacts the characters within. Finally, I will explain the significance of this fluidity within magical realism, and why such a form of magic is essential to this literary genre.

**The Types of Fluidity**

 In magical realism, there are three major different types of fluidity: fluidity of time, fluidity of life, and fluidity of reality. When time becomes fluid in magical realism, that could mean a couple of things; in most cases, it simply means that time is repeating or that a character can somehow see through time (into past or future), but in more extreme cases, it could mean a character in the story gains the ability to travel through time. Fluidity of life means that characters who die often do not stay dead, whether that means coming back as a ghost, resurrecting as they were before death, or something in between. Fluidity of reality is a lot harder to pin down, because it is a catch all, almost miscellaneous category. Anytime the magic in a story becomes fluid, but it does not fall into the categories of time or life, it belongs here. Each of the stories examined in this paper represents one type of fluidity, starting with fluidity of time.

*Fluidity of time*

 In *The House of Sprits*, the most prominent form of magic is the fluidity of time. There are many other types of magic, of course, including spirits that control the elements, telekinesis, an always growing dog by the name of Barabbas, and others, but the fluidity of time has more meaning and impact upon the story than any other magic that appears within the text. More specifically, the fluidity of time appears solely with the character of Clara, also known as Clara the Clairvoyant or Clara the Clear, depending on the translation. Clara first obtains this ability when she is on the cusp of adult hood, and she began to see the world as “a world in which time was not marked by calendars or watches…the past and the future formed part of a single unit, and the reality of present was a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors” (Allende 82). This is an important distinction. In this case, Clara is not simply seeing into the future. Instead, time is leaving the static and converging into a single point around her, allowing her to peer into its essence like a windowpane. It is becoming fluid and changing shape.

 This development is particularly important to Clara because it empowers her. When she was ten, she “decided speaking was pointless and locked herself in silence” (Allende 73). The idea that speaking was “pointless” to Clara shows that even from a young age she realized that she did not have much power. But, thanks to time’s fluidity allowing her to see into the future, she realizes that even though she has no control over *what* happens, she has the power to decide *how* it happens. Take her marriage to Esteban Trueba, for example. Thanks to her future vision, Clara realizes that she is going to marry him no matter what, but her approach to how this marriage happens – she asks him to marry her the first time they meet – drastically changes how things happen. If she had instead remained mute, and could not see into the future, the courtship process between her and Esteban could have taken many months to years to come to fruition. Now, it only takes three months. And her future vision allows her other freedoms that might otherwise not be offered to her. After Clara marries Esteban, he quickly realizes that she “did not belong to him and that if she continued living in a world of apparitions, three-legged tables that moved of their own volition, and cards that spelled out the future, she probably never would” (Allende 96). He wants full control over her, but the way that the magical constantly surrounds her, including her ability to predict the future, prevents that. The fluidity of time gives her freedoms she otherwise might not have, giving her the room to develop as a character and make her own decisions.

 Of course, the way time wraps itself around Clara is much more nuanced than is capturable in a couple of paragraphs. Throughout the novel, time unwinds itself from around Clara and she returns to earth from the clouds. But her ability to predict the future always returns to her when she needs it. Fluidity fills an important role in the characters that it gathers around, Clara included, and, in many ways, allows them to operate on equal footing with the other characters that it surrounds, which I will get into later on in this paper. But first, I must talk about a modern-day successor to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Allende’s magical realist legacies, in the form of Carmen Maria Machado and her short story.

*The Fluidity of Life*

 Machado’s short story “Real Women Have Bodies,” which makes up the first half of the title of her debut collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, starts in media res in a generic city in the United States. The fluidity of life becomes immediately apparent in the piece, as there is a strange phenomenon spreading throughout the country – one that is slowly making the women of the country become incorporeal. That is, they still have a visible image, but light and matter passes through them. They aren’t quite dead, but they also aren’t alive. The characters in the novel are not even sure if they age. The situation is made even more tense when the unnamed protagonist’s girlfriend, Petra, starts to fade. The process is slow, taking several months. That is because, in this scenario, the boundary between living and not living has not become non-existent but has instead become thin and porous. This is demonstrated when the protagonist and Petra are at a bar playing darts, when Petra’s hand “blinks out mid-drink and the glass falls, beer and shards of glass asterisking on the wooden floorboard” (Machado 142). Petra lives her life like this for around three months before she fully fades, slipping in and out through the pores of life. She is far from the only woman to suffer this fate.

 In “Real Women Have Bodies,” the fluidity of life is achieving the opposite effect of the fluidity of time in *The House of Spirits*. In Clara’s case, fluidity serves as a source of strength for her character. In this story, however, fluidity is taking away the strength of almost everyone in the novel. The entire cast in “Real Women Have Bodies” are women, except for two characters, named Chris and Casey, who work in a photo studio across from the dress shop that the protagonist works in. About a quarter of the way through the story, after Petra reveals that the faded women have been sown into dresses by her mother (of their own volition), Casey catcalls a woman trying on a dress in the store. The woman responds by “popping her hip to the side like she’s about to balance an infant on it. Deep in the thick folds of the satin, I see lidless eyes” (Machado 137). For the women of this story, the fluidity of life is a constant reminder of their second-class citizenship, as the patriarchy built into US society is almost entirely unaffected by this plague. Instead, throughout the story, the protagonist imagines every important woman in her life as faded, including herself. At the end of the story, after Petra has entirely faded, the protagonist returns to the dress shop and tries to free the women. Machado writes, “I cut the places where one thing is stitched to another. I unlace bodices. I can see them, the women, loosened from their moorings, blinking up at me. ‘Get out,’ I tell them” (147). But the women do not leave; they just float there and stare at the protagonist while she gets arrested by security, unable to follow their own whims like the protagonist did.

 “Real Women Have Bodies” is a case of magic – and fluidity – presented as horror. The helplessness of the women in this world permeates the story, and acts as a foil for the magic in *The House of Spirits*. Here, the fluidity of life surrounds and consumes the women, until their only desire is to be objects. The protagonist knows that it is only a matter of time until she falls victim to it too, which is why she has such a vested interest in freeing the women. She does not want to be sown into a dress, but she is afraid her will to do anything else will not exist once she has faded. This dread fills the same role in the protagonist as it does in Clara, but in a separate direction. But what happens when fluidity serves both a positive and negative role in a story?

*The Fluidity of Reality*

Arimah’s short story titled “What it Means when a Man Falls from the Sky” is a blend of speculative fiction and magical realism. In the far future, and heavily implied to be because of rampant climate change, Africa and Australia are the only continents remaining on Earth. In this same reality, an African family discovered a formula that is known as Furcal’s Formula. It is in this formula that the fluidity of reality comes into play. Arimah describes this formula as supposedly-infinite, and, according to the protagonist Nneoma, “Furcal’s Formula means that the smartest people can access the very fabric of the universe,” (163). Basically, if you are born with the talent to understand the formula, you can earn the ability to take away someone’s pain or grief, fly, or even, theoretically, create life. The Formula literally gives the people who use it the power to mold reality as they see fit. In this case, Nneoma eats people grief. Despite the existence of this all-powerful formula, this magic disguised as science, there is something terribly wrong. Similarly to “Real Women Have Bodies,” “What it Means when a Man Falls from the Sky” starts in media res, with the conflict, which happens in two-fold, already started. The first part of the conflict is that Furcal’s Formula is potentially failing and caused a man to fall from the sky, and the second conflict is that Kioni, another grief worker and Nneoma’s ex-girlfriend, has gone missing. Little does Nneoma know that her life is about to change for the worst.

 In this short story, the fluidity of reality serves as an empowering force, at least at first. The best example of this empowerment can be seen in the way it has changed Nneoma’s life. After Nneoma realized she could understand the Formula at fourteen, Arimah writes, “The Center paid for the rest of her schooling, paid off the little debt her family owed, and bought them a new house. They trained her to…to go beyond merely seeing a person’s grief to mastering how to remove it” (158). Nneoma’s ability instantly increased her means of life, raising her into the upper middle class, and giving her the freedom to choose what kinds of clients she takes on and when. But all that changes, because Furcal’s Formula had begun to falter. At the end of the story, Nneka finds Kioni at the gate to her house. She has cuts and bruises and bite marks all over her body and smells like sewage; these wounds are self inflicted. As it turns out, the very magic they have been using to cure people’s grief – to eat it, as Nneoma refers to the process – had turned on Kioni. The grief was now eating her instead. Nneoma instinctively begins to calculate what is wrong with Kioni, and she too is lost. Arimah explains, “The last clear thought she would ever have was of her father, how crimson his burden had been when she’d tried to shoulder it, and how very pale it all seemed now” (174). The fluidity of reality that Nneoma used ultimately turns against her taking away the empowerment it originally gave her, and instead leaving her with less than what she started.

 This story is a case of fluidity that empowers the protagonist to the point that she becomes unable to control that power – it is a case of magic gone awry. This shift mid story creates a blend of the effects of magic from the pervious two works of fiction, Allende’s, which is entirely optimistic, and Machado’s which is entirely horrific. Arimah fuses these effects into a single optimistic-turned-horror tale, where the characters lose themselves among the magic – the fluidity of reality – they possessed and never return. Maybe they never should have been given this magic in the first place. Regardless, Arimah’s fusion of Allende and Machado’s impacts of fluidity is not the only place these stories overlap. The significance of fluidity within magical realist works – and what makes it essential to the genre – comes from an overlapping theme that all three of these works have.

**Fluidity and Otherness**

 These three authors have a lot in common between the three of them. They are all women, for starters, and they are all people of color, with two of them being Latinx. Two of them are not from the United States and one of them, Machado, is openly queer, though it is impossible to confirm or deny the queerness of the other two. And, these traits, which they share with the characters in their stories, make them inherently othered in their societies. What I mean when I say “othered” is that they in some way fall outside of the ruling class, and this classification also falls on the characters in their stories. It is from this otherness that the magic from fluidity originates. That is, the magic stems from the otherness of these characters.

 Clara the Clairvoyant, from Allende’s novel, is othered by none other than her gender. Living as a woman in Chile in the early to mid twentieth century, it is clear that her fate is to be married and have children, as Chile was just as patriarchal at that time as any other country, which is demonstrated by Esteban Treuba’s desire to “control that undefined and luminous material that lay within her” (96). Machado’s protagonist is similarly othered because of her gender, though the time and place of her otherness is quite different. But Machado’s protagonist has the added twist of being openly queer, which complicates her otherness quite a bit. Nneoma is othered more from her place of origin than her gender; Africa is inherently othered because of the fact that it is not a part of the western world, and even though it is only one of two remaining continents in Arimah’s world, it keeps that status. That is demonstrated by the fact that “The Britons preferred their service workers with names they could pronounce, and most companies obliged them” (Arimah 159). The otherness of Africa still permeates this world, and the people of the continent still have to cater to white people. This otherness creates the fluidity that these characters experience because magical realism deals with and confronts oppression.

 As I established in the answer to the previous question, magical realism is a genre that meets the realities of oppression with the surreal. With the geography question, that oppression often came in the form of colonialism. And, while that is definitely at play in this works – mostly in *The House of Spirits* and “What it Means when a Man Falls from the Sky” – there is more at work here that just colonialism. The oppression that women face in this world is almost universal, and the fluidity that surrounds these characters is either meant to combat or represent this oppression, or what I have called otherness. In *The House of Spirits*, Clara should have no power in her marriage. She is married to a powerful, rich politician who keeps strong ties to the government until the day he dies. However, as the fluidity of time surrounds her, she is given power, and he never manages to fully control her the way he wants. The magic that Clara possesses levels the playing field with her husband, and with society at large. It does not erase the oppression she faces as a woman, but it counters that oppression and makes it more bearable. In “Real Women Have Bodies,” however, the fluidity serves a different purpose. Instead of countering the oppression that the protagonist faces, it mirrors reality, and further enforces that oppression. One of the primary forms of oppression women in the United States face is objectification, which is exactly why the faded women want to be sown into dresses; it is the ultimate form of objectification, where they are literally turned into objects to be worn and used. That is why the protagonist ultimately fears becoming faded. She does not want to see herself become an object. Arimah’s fluidity of reality serves a purpose similar to Allende’s fluidity of time. Having the power of Furcal’s Formula – of the fluidity of reality – allows Nneoma to escape her oppression almost entirely, and grants her a new privileged status, as Arimah explains, “[Nneoma] was one of fifty-seven registered Mathematicians who specialized in calculating grief” (153). Being only one of fifty-seven with her ability makes her incredibly important to her society, and she is elevated as a result of this. However, that is all taken away at the end of the novel, a pessimistic reminder that we cannot escape our oppressions forever. They always catch up to us when we least expect it.

 Ultimately, this otherness that fluidity always surrounds is what makes is essential to magical realism. Magical realism serves as a way to engage with what hurts us in reality with the surreal, because the surreal makes what hurts us safe. By stepping our traumas and oppressions in the surreal, we can control it, mold its shape however we see fit, and do with it as we please. This control allows us to get past our trauma, to overcome it, and that is the final goal of magical realism. It frees us from our suppression, even if only for a little while.

**Conclusion**

 Fluidity is an important aspect of magical realism because of the way it impacts the characters. It allows them to go, do, and see what they could not usually experience under normal circumstances, and, as a result, radically changes who those characters are and what those characters do. If the characters in these stories had never been surrounded by the fluidity of their worlds, they would not have the same resolve, motivations, or that they have as they are now. The fact is, fluidity – of time, reality, life, etc. – is what allows magical realism to exist in the first place. Fluidity is what allows authors to cast away the rules and preconceived notions of the real and place their characters in a world that has never existed before they created it. Through fluidity, magical realists are free to explore, process, and counteract the oppressions that they experience in their own lives, and by doing so they are writing the blueprints for the way that we can fight oppression in reality. By telling the stories they do, magical realists loudly proclaim that there is magic in this world too, even if we cannot always see it, and they establish this belief through their use of fluidity.

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