

MAGIC REALISM AS POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE

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THE CONCEPT OF MAGIC REALISM is a troubled one for literary theory.¹ Since Franz Roh first coined the term in 1925 in connection with Post-Expressionist art, it has been most closely associated, at least in terms of literary practice, with two major periods in Latin-American and Caribbean culture, the first being that of the 1940's and 1950's, in which the concept was closely aligned with that of the "marvellous" as something ontologically necessary to the regional population's "vision of everyday reality";² and the second being that of the "boom" period of the Latin-American novel in the late 1950's and 1960's, where the term was applied to works varying widely in genre and discursive strategy. In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvellous,³ and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether.

But the term retains enough of what Fredric Jameson calls a "strange seductiveness"⁴ to keep it in critical currency, despite the "theoretical vacuum"⁵ in which it lies. In Latin America, the badge of magic realism has signified a kind of uniqueness or difference from mainstream culture — what in another context Alejo Carpentier has called *lo real maravilloso* or "marvellous American reality"⁶ — and this gives the concept the stamp of cultural authority if not theoretical soundness. And recently, the locus for critical studies on magic realism has been broadened outward from Latin America and the Caribbean to include speculations on its place in the literatures of India, Nigeria, and English Canada,⁷ this last being perhaps the most startling development for magic realism in recent years, since Canada, unlike these other regions, is not part of the third world, a condition long thought necessary to the currency of the term in regard to literature, though not to art. Further, critics until very recently have been singularly uninterested in applying the concept of magic realism to texts written in English.⁸

The incompatibility of magic realism with the more established genre systems becomes itself interesting, itself a focus for critical attention, when one considers

the fact that it seems, in a literary context, to be most obviously operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions. As Robert Kroetsch and Linda Kenyon observe, magic realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of “living on the margins,”⁹ encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems. The established systems of generic classification are themselves, in my view, examples of these centralized totalizing systems, for they have been constructed through readings of texts almost exclusively of European or United States provenance. The use of the concept of magic realism, then, can itself signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems and more monumental theories of literary practice, a way of suggesting that there is something in the nature of the literature it identifies that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with it.

What I want to do in this paper is employ a little of the liberty provided by magic realism’s lack of theoretical specificity and, rather than attempt to define the concept in terms of genre, attempt instead to place the concept within the context of post-colonial cultures as a distinct and recognizable kind of literary discourse. To this end, I plan to focus on two magic realist texts from within a single post-colonial culture — English Canada — and attempt to show the ways in which these texts recapitulate, in both their narrative discourse and their thematic content, the real social and historical relations that obtain within the post-colonial culture in which they are set. I have chosen to work with Jack Hodgins’ *The Invention of the World* and Robert Kroetsch’s *What the Crow Said*, but I should add that other texts set in English Canada could also carry the argument, Susan Kerslake’s *Middlewatch*, for example, or Keith Maillard’s *Two-Strand River*. My focus will be on elements in these texts that help us work toward a clearer concept of magic realism in a post-colonial context, and so I will be concentrating on aspects of these two novels that share characteristics with prevalent concerns in other post-colonial literatures. Behind this project is the belief that, in the first place, the concept of magic realism can provide us with a way of effecting important comparative analyses between separate post-colonial cultures, and secondly, that it can enable us to recognize continuities within individual cultures that the established genre systems might blind us to: continuities, that is, between present-day magic realist texts and apparently very different texts written at earlier stages of a culture’s literary history.

THE TERM “MAGIC REALISM” is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle

between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other," a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences.¹⁰

In *The Invention of the World*, Hodgins achieves this effect through a process of undercutting. His formal beginning to the novel (following a brief prologue) declares the work to be clearly within the conventions of realism:

On the day of the Loggers' Sports, on that day in July, a mighty uproar broke out in the beer parlour of the Coal-Tyee Hotel, which is an old but respectable five-story building directly above the harbour and only a block or two from the main shopping area of town.¹¹

But soon a fantastic element enters the text, appearing first in the second-degree or intradiegetic level of narration told by Strabo Becker, the historian/taleteller figure, and soon beginning to appear in the extradiegetic narration — Horseman's miraculous escape from Wade's fort, for example (162). As the novel progresses toward the status of a twice-told tale, the motif with which it ends, the reader is pulled away from a tendency to neutralize the fantastic elements of the story within the general code of narrative realism and begins to read the work as being more closely aligned with the fantastic. Yet a complete transference from one mode to the other never takes place, and the novel remains suspended between the two.

The progress of narration in *What the Crow Said* is the opposite of that in Hodgins' book. Kroetsch's novel opens in pure fantasy or myth: a description of the impregnation of Vera Lang on a spring afternoon by a swarm of bees. But at the close of the novel, the past-tense narration that has prevailed throughout the work is replaced by a present-tense realism describing Tiddy Lang and Liebhaber rising from their bed into a new morning; and here, for the first time in the novel, the crow will caw, not speak. The fantastic element in the novel never quite manages to dominate an undercurrent of realism; as Kroetsch says elsewhere, we are "always in the world,"¹² despite the lighthouse made of ice, the war with the sky, and the ghostly image of dead Martin Lang perpetually present, ploughing the snow.

Although most works of fiction are generically mixed in mode,¹³ the characteristic manoeuvre of magic realist fiction is that its two separate narrative modes never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy. In Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation, the novel is the site of a "diversity of social speech types"¹⁴ in which a battle takes place "in discourse and among discourses to become 'the language of truth,' a battle for what Foucault has called power knowledge."¹⁵

In magic realism this battle is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other. This sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation.

This use of language has important consequences in the context of post-colonial cultures. One of the most common assumptions operating in the small, but rapidly growing, body of theory that undertakes comparative analysis across post-colonial cultures is that the act of colonization, whatever its precise form, initiates a kind of double vision or “metaphysical clash”¹⁶ within the colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population. “Our way of seeing,” as Coral Ann Howells puts it, “is structured by the forms in which our language enables us to ‘see’,”¹⁷ and only through a long process of transmutation through time can this language, and the cognitive system it carries, express local reality. In a post-colonial context, then, the magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle within the culture’s language, a dialectic between “codes of recognition”¹⁸ inherent within the inherited language and those imagined codes — perhaps utopian or future-oriented — that characterize a culture’s “original relations”¹⁹ with the world. In other words, the magic realist text reflects in its language of narration real conditions of speech and cognition within the actual social relations of a post-colonial culture, a reflection García Márquez thematizes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a “speaking mirror.”²⁰

THE “SPEAKING MIRROR” of the language of narration in magic realist texts, however, does not only reflect in an outward direction toward post-colonial cultural relations. It also sustains an inward reflection into the work’s thematic content, initiating a fascinating interplay between language and thematic network similar to that which Michael Holquist, in another context, describes as a “templating of what is enunciated with the act of enunciation.”²¹ In other words, the real social relations of post-colonial cultures appear, through the mediation of the text’s language of narration, in the thematic dimension of the post-colonial magic realist work. These social relations tend to be expressed thematically in three separate but related ways. The first involves the representation of a kind of transcendent or transformational regionalism²² so that the site of the text, though described in familiar and local terms, becomes a metonymy of the post-colonial culture as a whole. The second is the foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of

colonization and its aftermath. And the third involves the thematic foregrounding of those gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the text's disjunctive language of narration. On this third level, the magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centres, and to work toward destabilizing their fixity.²³

In *The Invention of the World*, Hodgins' portrayal of the Vancouver Island community, and especially the Revelations Colony of Truth, now renamed the Revelations Trailer Park, always remains grounded in the real world of known and familiar space. The realism of the site is destabilized, however, by the condensed historical re-enactment that transpires within it,²⁴ a metaphorical representation of the process of colonization which serves to transform the novel's regional setting into a metonymic focal point for English-Canadian culture, and finally for post-colonial culture as a whole.²⁵ This historical re-enactment reaches back from the present-tense setting to the near-mythic, and now vanished, Irish village of Carrigdhoun, the point of origin for the Revelation colonists' flight from history²⁶ to the New World. Even before Donal Keneally arrives in Carrigdhoun and brings to the isolated villagers their first experience of fear, the village is already the emblem of colonized space. An English bailiff owns all property, and his dogs are the agents of his administration of law. Keneally delivers the villagers from the first phase of colonialism only to initiate a second phase in which he employs the authority of Celtic legend and Prospero magic to establish a system of absolute patriarchal domination over them. Still "slaves to history" (99), the villagers are brought to the New World and another kind of isolation in the Revelations Colony of Truth where, in what Cecilia Coulas Fink calls a "replay of history,"²⁷ Keneally becomes the figure who releases his dogs on them. As the agent of a neo-colonial domination, Keneally "represents what most of the world believed anyhow" (257), and when he dies, he never quite disappears: he is buried underground in a collapsed tunnel whose entrance is never found, and his ghost appears at the close of the novel at Maggie and Wade's carnivalesque wedding celebration. The legacy he leaves is a paralysis in regard to history and a preference for fabricated historical monuments such as Wade's phony Hudson's Bay Company fort, a dysfunctional "umbilical chord to the past" (223) except to the American tourists who can't tell the difference between it and the real thing, anyway. Given the very unappealing nature of real history, this preference for fabrication is entirely understandable. But it is an evasion, not a creative response, and at the end of the novel, Maggie, the symbolic heiress of the process of colonization, achieves her longed-for liberation from colonialism's foreclosure of the imagination precisely by going back into history to where the Keneally legend and the process of New World domination began: a mountain top in Ireland upon which a circle of standing stones exercises "dominion" (315) over the landscape.

The novel recapitulates a process, then, of psychic liberation from Old World domination and its cognitive codes. But a fascinating aspect of Hodgins' treatment of this theme is that this re-enactment process seems to energize a release from historical domination that those who do not undergo do not achieve. Nowhere in the novel is the colonial encounter depicted more violently than in the Revelations Colony of Truth, and those characters who come later to inhabit its site eventually attain new conditions of liberation and community. But those not in or heir to this community, those who have historically opposed its presence among them, remain caught in inherited ways of seeing that blind them to new imaginative possibilities and seal them off from significant communal participation. The statement of Coleman Steele, one of the excluded, and now living on Hospital Road, makes this clear:

This is an English town, mister. Or was. The people who settled here knew what kind of life they were building, they had fine models at Home they could follow. But do you think that bunch paid any attention? The Indians went along with it. Why shouldn't they? And all those Chinamen they brought over to work in the mines went with it, some of them turned into the best Englishmen of all. And there were other Irishmen who came over and weren't afraid to fit in with the scheme of things, doing the things that Irishmen are meant to do. But not old Whozzit, Keneally! He comes over here with his pack of sheep-people and sets up his own world like the rest of us don't exist, see, like the world stopped and started at the edge of his property. He was a King in there, like something out of the Dark Ages, and the fact that the rest of us out here were busy building a modern civilized society with decent values never occurred to him. And you may not agree with me on this, but I'm entitled to my opinion as they say, I think that's when everything started to go wrong. First thing we knew you have people pouring in from all over the world, your Belgians and your Italians and your Ukrainians, pouring in from all over the place, which is just fine with me, but when they get here do they fit themselves in? No sir. They look around and they see this one bunch that isn't paying any attention to the rest of us and so they think it's all right for them to do what they want, too. So I blame him for that, mister, and it's no small matter. I blame that Keneally for throwing it all off the track. Just look around at what's happened to this town and blame him for that. Drugs and sex and socialism. None of it would've happened. You can't tell me they have things like that in England. (174-75)

What we have at the thematic level of Hodgins' magic realist text, then, is a fairly direct portrayal of the process of colonization, one that recapitulates problems of historical consciousness in post-colonial cultures. This focus on the problem of history is shared by the body of theoretical criticism in post-colonial cultural studies which argues that people in post-colonial cultures engage in a special "dialogue with history."²⁸ Here, the double vision or metaphysical clash takes place between inherited notions of imperial history as "the few privileged monuments"²⁹ of achievement, and a cluster of opposing views that tend to see history

more as a kind of alchemical process, somewhat analogous to a way of seeing, in which the silenced, marginalized, or dispossessed voices within the colonial encounter themselves form the record of “true” history. The “re-visioning” of history, then, takes place when the voices or visions — what J. Michael Dash calls “the counter-culture of the imagination”³⁰ — come into dialectical play with the inherited, dominant modes of discourse and cognition in colonialism’s “phenomenal legacy”³¹ and work towards transmuting perception into new “codes of recognition.”

It is this framework that provides a way of observing how *What the Crow Said* functions on its thematic level as a “speaking mirror” of post-colonial culture. Kroetsch’s novel is set in a region lying “ambiguously on the border between the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan,”³² and in it people enjoy absolute control over the horizontal dimension. The “vertical world” is “all a mystery” (158) to them, however, and in a series of motifs such as the stranding of the dying Martin Lang “between sky and earth” (26), JG’s fatal fall from the tree, Jerry Lapanne’s, or Joe Lightning’s, fall from the sky, or the townsfolk’s war against the sky, Kroetsch establishes that human control in this second dimension represents an impossible goal. This constriction within distorted binary oppositions such as that between horizontal control and vertical incompetence is a constraining one, as is shown by Isadore Heck’s transference, in pure either/or fashion, from the relative security of believing in nothing that can’t be seen, to the opposite position of believing that everything that can be imagined exists. This second position eventually kills him, for it lies behind his decision to shoot himself out of a cannon into the air in a futile attempt to end the war with the sky.

The text also presents a range of similar binary constrictions in parallel to this spatial one — two conflicting time schemes, for example, so that the passage of only a few seasons contains several years of calendar time, and all of colonial history from the horse-and-buggy period to the appearance of oil derricks on the Canadian prairies. Binary constriction, in fact, represents a key principle in the book, and it provides the vehicle for reading the site of the novel as a metonym for post-colonial space. In *What the Crow Said*, the binary opposition between control in one dimension and incompetence or bewilderment in the other reflects the dialectic operative in post-colonial cultures between inherited, sure, and constraining codes of imperial order and the imagined, precarious, and liberating codes of post-colonial “original relations.” At the close of his novel, Kroetsch employs the image of Tiddy and Liebhaber coming together in the “naked circle of everything” (215) to posit a point beyond binary constriction. In post-colonial terms, this represents an imaginative projection into the future, where the fractures of colonialism heal in the “re-visioning” process that produces a “positive imaginative reconstruction of reality.”³³

THIS IMAGINATIVE RECONSTRUCTION in post-colonial cultures requires the recuperation of lost voices and discarded fragments, those elements pushed to the margins of consciousness by imperialism's centralizing cognitive structures, and both Hodgins and Kroetsch share an interest in thematically decentring images of fixity while at the same time foregrounding the gaps and absences those fixed and monumental structures produce.³⁴ In *The Invention of the World*, Hodgins raises images of fixity and centre in "a certain piece of this world" (viii) — "certain" here carrying a dual meaning — only to work toward undermining them. The central house of Keneally's Revelations Colony conceals a subterranean tunnel whose entrance is never found, an absence in the monolith of his legend evocative of his mother's loss of all memory at the time of his conception and of the Carrigdhoun villagers' absence of fear. In Keneally's death, absences become ghostly presences, as Strabo Becker begins to sift through the "shreds and fragments" (69) of events, and to comb the beaches for "the debris of history" (viii), that will form the base elements for his story. Through the agency of Becker's tape recorder, a plurality of voices joins in the narration; and through the ruminations of the characters, history's dispossessed "voices" are drawn into the novel. Julius Champney's reflections on landscape, for example, conjure the presence of two Indians from the early colonial period who were tried and subsequently hanged for a murder they did not commit:

The trial is in English. Though an attempt is made to provide an adequate translation, the long exchange of foreign mouth-sounds could be the yattering of squirrels to the ears of Siam-a-sit. . . .

On the platform, beneath the nooses, the flat chocolate eyes shift to the hangman, whose hands could be made of old rope. Throats, dry with fear, can only whisper. Cannot refuse to whisper.

You could tell us, first, what we done.

There was no record, anywhere that he had seen, which ever hinted that the two condemned men, or one of them, said those words before the ropes snapped their necks. Nor was there anything in official records or in the newspaper reports to indicate that they said anything at all, or if they did, anything that could be understood by the white men who were witnesses. . . .

And the voices existed out of time, anyway . . ." (240-41)

These official records, like all monuments to fixity, omit what they cannot hear. Hodgins likens them to maps, projections of line and order that do not correspond to the "real island," which defies geometry (229) and whose landscape is "ungovernable" (223). Keneally's life, symbol of high colonialism, is planned at birth like a "map of roads" (90); but for Maggie, his symbolic heir, maps only block the guiding capacities of her instinct and memory, and they can't help her find her way home. But for her to realize this, to finally discard them, she has

to encounter directly the fixed spaces of alien order, and this process is an important one in *The Invention of the World*. Seen from within new “codes of recognition,” fixed systems betray the presence of their own “otherness” hidden within them, as is symbolized by Donal Keneally’s brief fragmentation into identical twins, one of them the opposite of the tyrannical self that will finally own him. The absence of this missing self in the New World is his legacy to Wade, who sees himself mirrored in Horseman only to be told that he has buried his own hidden twin within him (307). Through images such as these, Hodgins’ text conveys that the silencing of otherness is inscribed into the colonial encounter. But it also suggests that awareness of this can provoke the imagination into recovering lost aspects of self, habitual absences in the post-colonial consciousness.

It is obsession with fixity that betrays, then, and Hodgins’ most sustained approach to undermining it is his destabilization of the fixity of origins. Critics of the novel have noted the astonishing number of mythic and historical origins upon which the imagery of the text seems to be based.³⁵ These range through classical origins (Taurus-Europa, Lycaon, Charon), Celtic origins (the *Táin bó Cúailnge*, the war between the Fomorians and the Tuatha de Dannan), Christian origins (Genesis, Exodus), and historical origins (the Aquarian Foundation of Brother XII). This wide pluralizing of origins annihilates the privileging or monumentalizing of any one of them and suggests that the “shreds and fragments” that come down from them in distorted form are our real historical legacy. Madmother Thomas, a direct victim of colonialism’s violence through her childhood trauma under Keneally’s patriarchal order, must learn this. For most of the novel, she wanders in the margins of the text, searching obsessively for her birthplace, but finally, she relinquishes her need for fixed and known origins and returns to the uncertain centre of the Revelations Trailer Park, thus becoming at last a sustaining presence in the community. The operative process of cognition here is one of *imaginative*, not factual, recovery and at the novel’s close Hodgins releases it into full play on the metafictional level in the parodic carnivalization of the wedding ceremony, where he summons into presence all those figures made absent from the text by the formal system of writing itself:

The mayors of several towns on the island, with their wives, and more than one elected MLA and several judges, lawyers, doctors, and businessmen had come. . . . Mainlanders had come across, and sat silently along the wall benches, wondering what to expect. Victoria people had driven up, and sat together near the punch bowl, with their backs to everyone else. The premier of the province, who was unable to attend, sent a representative, a little freckle-faced man who shook hands, before the evening was through, with every person in the hall, including the lieutenant-governor of an eastern province who had flown in at the last minute and had to leave for his plane as soon as the cake was cut. The Prime Minister of Canada was rumoured to be in the crowd somewhere, but the Queen of England had disappointed everyone by accepting an invitation elsewhere. (346)

Kroetsch's technique for foregrounding the gaps and silences of the dispossessed in *What the Crow Said* differs from Hodgins' in that Kroetsch works less with the material of history in this thematic level and more with the portrayal of constricting binaries, a thematic equivalent to the dialectic operative in the language of narration. From a post-colonial critical perspective, these binaries can be seen as legacies of the colonial encounter: a condition of being both tyrannized by history yet paradoxically cut off from it, caught between absolute systems of blind cognition and projected realms of imaginative revision in which people have no control. In Kroetsch's handling, these binary constrictions undergo a process of dialectical interplay between opposing terms which undermines the fixity of borders between them. Each term invades the other, eroding its absolute nature and addressing the gaps or absences, the distanced elements of "otherness," that fixed systems inevitably create.

Liebhaber, for example, editor and printer of the local newspaper in the town of Big Indian, has forgotten the past but three times in the course of the novel remembers the future. At the root of this loss of memory is an obsession with print: Gutenberg, he feels, has "made all memory of the past irrelevant" and "only the future" is free from his "vast design" (116). Print, in obliterating the need for memory, inevitably contains and fixes the past as dead record of the monuments of achievement, but it also creates marginal spaces in which the silenced voices of totalizing system can speak. The prisoner Jerry Lapanne, an emblem of incarcerated desire, is one of Kroetsch's images of such a voice. He repeatedly tries to escape *into* the site of the text toward Rita Lang, sender of erotic love notes to prisoners all over the country. It is print, then, that motivates him, and his movement is always toward it, his action one of struggle to inhabit the locus of textuality. But the police are always there on the borders of municipality to stop him; and his one breakthrough results in his death. Through this image, Kroetsch foregrounds the absence on the other side of writing, a human equivalent to suppressed memory that Gutenberg's print seemingly makes obsolete. A corresponding image is that of the cattle-buyer who makes a brief appearance in the text to court Tiddy Lang and then vanishes "like a character gently removed from the vast novel that all the printers in the world were gallantly writing for Gutenberg's ghost" (73). In thematizing print in this manner, Kroetsch portrays the process by which a totalizing system can initiate its own dialectic with its "other." Print excludes, but it also energizes. It is like the "phenomenal legacy" of post-colonial history: it silences, but within it lies the possibility of voice, a dialectic that can produce a "positive imaginative reconstruction of reality."

Binary constriction is also thematized in the novel's representation of race and gender. Both are seriously imbalanced, dominated by one pole of the binary in such a way as to produce a paralyzing separation between terms. For example, the

name of the town of Big Indian resonates against the almost complete absence of native peoples from its site. The only exception is Joe Lightning, and he lives in a car, not a house. The "Indian list" (115), a racist term for the list of those proscribed from being served alcohol, contains the complete register of "every white male over the age of twenty in the Municipality of Bigknife" (114), but no Indian names appear on it. These patterns of exclusion seem to be intricately tied to the process of language, where "Gutenberg's curse" (163) links the presence of print to the condition of becoming "anonymous, almost not invented in [one's] own story" (73). Being caught between presence and absence, however, is also a way of mediating between binary terms, of crossing the borders between them and thus beginning the process of breaking them down. Except for Liebhaber, Joe is the only adult male in the district who is *not* at war with the sky, and thus his ambiguous status in one binary constriction enables him to mediate in another: that of the division of male and female modes of activity.

An interesting thematization of the way in which binary terms themselves energize a crossing over between poles, and the creation of gaps within each of them, lies in Kroetsch's presentation of the black crow and the character JG. The crow, whose gender is ambiguous (97) and who thus mediates in another context the polarization in male and female power relations, speaks on JG's behalf in the human world. JG, on the other hand, is for most of the novel silent, "forever innocent" (62), and able to walk only in a figure-eight, the symbol of infinity. John Thieme writes of the way animals in some Canadian texts stand for

a world which may exist before Western rationalist thought imposes dualistic modes of description. They represent life before discourse, before history, and before gender stereotyping.³⁶

Something of the same process of signification is operative in this text, but it requires both terms of the JG-black crow binary to produce it. The crow's ambiguous gender combines with JG's silence, innocence, and association with infinity to suggest all that is opposed to Liebhaber's word-centred rationality. But at the same time, the JG-black crow binary works toward deconstruction of this pre-rational signification when JG begins to speak pig-Latin and we recognize that what the crow usually says are judgmental, arbitrary pronouncements on human behaviour that seem to issue from the parodic mask of an omniscient, patriarchal God.

The novel closes on an image of resolution in binary separation, a symbolic drawing together of the oppositions of male and female, past and present, absence and presence, and silence and voice in a suspended moment that requires both terms of the text's narrational mode — realism and fantasy — to sustain it. Throughout the novel, Liebhaber and Tiddy Lang, opposite poles in a binary system, have been held apart, the dead Martin Lang, who represents absence to

Liebhaber but presence to Tiddy, throwing up an uncrossable barrier between them. But at the novel's close, Liebhaber, whose obsession with words has been at the root of his loss of memory, and Tiddy, who had "meant to make a few notes, but hadn't," and who now "remember[s] everything" (214), are brought together, he "the first and final male" and she the world-dreamer, "dreaming the world" and unable to "tell her memory from the moment" (214, 216). As each of them embraces otherness, the crows, outside, "are cawing" (218) in the infinitely suspended moment that fuses the real with the numinous in the actuating imagination.

BOTH *The Invention of the World* and *What the Crow Said*, then, thematize a kind of post-colonial discourse involving the recuperation of silenced voices as axial to a "positive imagined reconstruction of reality." Both texts foreground plurality and gaps — those produced by the colonial encounter and those produced by the system of writing itself; and in both texts, marginalized presences press in toward the centre. The site of each text is a localized region that is metonymic of the post-colonial culture as a whole. And in each text, history is foreshortened so that the forces operating in the real social relations of the culture are brought metaphorically into play. The metaphysical clash or double vision inherent in colonial history and language is recapitulated in transmuted form in the text's oppositional language of narration and mirrored in its thematic level. This mode of narration requires the reader to read the novel in a dialectical manner, forestalling the collapse of either one of the two narrational modes into the other, but recognizing the erosion in massive and totalizing system that the dialectic effects in each. The texts thus demand a kind of reading process in which the imagination becomes stimulated into summoning into being new and liberating "codes of recognition." These elements, I argue, are characteristic of post-colonial magic realist texts.

If magic realism is read as a post-colonial discourse in this way, a framework for reading texts across post-colonial cultures can be established not merely on the basis of shared conditions of marginality in relation to metropolitan cultures, but also on the basis of shared literary response to post-colonial conditions. This may correspond to what E. D. Blodgett has in mind when he speculates on the possibility that Spanish-American literature provides a matrix for "dialogue between deaf Canadians,"³⁷ English and French — García Márquez mediating, as it were, between Aquin and Miron, on the one hand, and Hodgins, Kroetsch, and Ondaatje on the other. Such a matrix can provide a basis for comparing works differing widely in genre, and against it a comparative reading of Salman Rushdie and Rodney Hall, for example, might prove fruitful, though at first sight odd. Radical modes of reading post-colonial texts are constantly coming into

being, challenging the fixed certainty of traditional generic systems, so that when Wilson Harris, in his groundbreaking critical work *The Womb of Space*, notes that within the “so-called realism” of Patrick White’s *Voss* there exists a “curiously subversive fantasy,” he proposes not just a new strategy of interpretation for the text itself, but also a way of reading the text back into the cross-cultural imagination that post-colonial studies, at their best, promote. The text of *Voss*, he argues, can allow us

to perceive *realism and fantasy* as a threshold into *evolution and alchemy*. That threshold is a component of the “mental bridge” within and across cultures. . . .³⁸

Within the separate post-colonial cultures themselves, this approach to magic realism can operate in such a way that this seemingly new mode of fiction can be recognized as continuous with apparently dissimilar works of fiction in which an oppositional style, and a consequent privileging of pluralism, also echoes against the post-colonial legacy: Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel* is one example; Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook* is another. As W. H. New notes in *Articulating West*, an opposition between a need to formalize experience and a realization that the Canadian wilderness is “formless” creates “a tension at the heart of the Canadian experience,”³⁹ one which lies at the centre of the language of narration in present-day magic realist texts. This suggests that the critical position that would see the Canadian, or for that matter any post-colonial culture’s, literary tradition as “discontinuous,” one in which writers find no “usable past”⁴⁰ in the apparently colonized literary productions of earlier times, may itself be blind to modes of continuity that can prevail beneath the surface of established generic classifications.

Read as post-colonial discourse, then, magic realism can be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity. By conveying the binary, and often dominating, oppositions of real social conditions through the “speaking mirror” of their literary language, magic realist texts implicitly suggest that enabling strategies for the future require revisioning the seemingly tyrannical units of the past in a complex and imaginative double-think of “remembering the future.” This process, they tell us, can transmute the “shreds and fragments” of colonial violence and otherness into new “codes of recognition” in which the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized of our own dominating systems can again find voice, and enter into the dialectic continuity of on-going community and place that is our “real” cultural heritage.

NOTES

¹ Surveys of the critical use of the term appear in Amaryll Chanady, “The Origins and Development of Magic Realism in Latin American Fiction,” in *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature*, ed. Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski (Waterloo: Univ.

- of Waterloo Press, 1986), 49-60; Roberto Gonzáles Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 108-29; Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1986), 301-03; Jean Weisgerber, "Le Réalisme Magique: la locution et la concept," *Rivista di letteratura moderne e comparate*, 35, Fasc. 1 (1982), 27-53; and Robert Wilson, Review of Geoff Hancock, ed. *Magic Realism in Quarry*, 32, No. 2 (Spring 1983), 84-91. Important distinctions in the term's use are also pointed out by Susan Beckmann, "The Place of Experiment," *Canadian Literature*, 89 (Summer 1981), 152-55; Enrique Anderson Imbert, "'Magical Realism' in Spanish-American Fiction," *International Fiction Review*, 2, No. 1 (Jan. 1975), 1-8; James Irish, "Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin-American Roots," *Literary Half-Yearly*, 11, No. 2 (July 1970), 127-39; and Seymour Menton, "Jorge Luis Borges, Magic Realism," *Hispanic Review*, 50 (1982), 411-26.
- ² Jacques Stéphen Aléxis, "Of the Marvellous Realism of the Haitians," *Présence Africaine*, Nos. 8-10 (June-Nov. 1956), 269. For discussions of the "marvellous," see also M. Ian Adams, *Three Authors of Alienation: Bomba, Onetti, Carpentier* (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), p. 82; and J. Michael Dash, "Marvellous Realism — The Way Out of Negritude," *Caribbean Studies*, 13, No. 4 (1973), 57-70 and *Literature and Ideology in Haiti: 1915-1961* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 190-202.
- ³ The term, writes Echevarría, pp. 111-12, 116, has "neither the specificity nor the theoretical foundation to be convincing or useful," since "... the relationship between the three moments when magical realism appears are not continuous enough for it to be considered a literary or even a critical concept with historical validity." In regards to the novels of the Latin-American "boom," critical use of the concept has "rarely gone beyond 'discovering' the most salient characteristics of avant-garde literature in general."
- ⁴ Jameson, p. 302.
- ⁵ Echevarría, p. 108.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ⁷ Jean-Pierre Durix, in "Magic Realism in *Midnight's Children*," *Commonwealth*, 8, No. 1 (Autumn 1985), 57-63, applies the concept to Salman Rushdie's work, while Jameson, p. 302, mentions it in reference to Amos Tutuola. The discussion of magic realism in the context of English-Canadian fiction was initiated by Geoff Hancock in "Magic Realism, or, the Future of Fiction," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 24-25 (Spring/Summer 1977), 4-6 and followed up in his introduction to his anthology *Magic Realism* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1980), 7-15. Since then, numerous critical works have continued this trend. See, for example, Beckmann, pp. 152-55; Cecelia Coulas Fink, "'If Words Won't Do, and Symbols Fail': Hodgins' Magic Reality," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 20, No. 2 (Summer 1985), 118-31; Geoff Hancock, "Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction," *The Canadian Forum* (March 1986), 23-35; Keith Maillard, "'Middlewatch' as Magic Realism," *Canadian Literature*, 92 (Spring 1982), 10-21; Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982); Uma Parameswaran and G. Sekhar, "Canadian Gothic," *CRNLE Reviews Journal* (May 1982), 65-67; and Robert Wilson, Review of Hancock, ed., *Magic Realism*, pp. 84-91, and "On the Boundary of The Magic and The Real: Notes on Inter-American Fiction," *The Compass*, 6 (1979), 37-53.
- ⁸ See Weisgerber, p. 45.

- ⁹ Linda Kenyon, "A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch," *The New Quarterly*, V, No. 1 (Spring 1985), 15. See also Stanley McMullin, "'Adams Mad in Eden': Magic Realism as Hinterland Experience" (in Hinchcliffe, pp. 13-22), who reads magic realism as implicitly "ex-centric."
- ¹⁰ This reading of magic realism's mode of narration takes issue with those approaches that suggest a seamless interweaving of, or synthesis between, the magic and the real: see, for example, Maillard, p. 12, and Fink, p. 119.
- ¹¹ Jack Hodgins, *The Invention of the World* (1977; rpt. Scarborough: Signet, 1978), p. 3. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
- ¹² Robert Kroetsch, *The Crow Journals* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980), p. 23.
- ¹³ See Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 108.
- ¹⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 263.
- ¹⁵ David Carroll, "The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M. M. Bakhtin," *Diacritics*, 13, No. 2 (Summer 1983), 77.
- ¹⁶ Helen Tiffin, "Commonwealth Literature: Comparison and Judgement," in *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*, ed. Dieter Riemschneider (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1983), p. 32.
- ¹⁷ Coral Ann Howells, "Re-visions of Prairie Indian History in Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear and My Lovely Enemy*," in *Revisions of Canadian Literature*, ed. Shirley Chew (Leeds: Univ. of Leeds, Institute of Bibliography and Textual Criticism, 1984), p. 61. For detailed discussions of this process within the languages of post-colonial cultures, see David T. Habery, "The Search for a National Language: A Problem in the Comparative History of Post-Colonial Literatures," *Studies in Comparative Literature*, 11, No. 1 (1974), 85-97; D. E. S. Maxwell, "Landscape and Theme," *Commonwealth Literature*, ed. John Press (London: Heinemann, 1965), 82-89; W. H. New, "New Language, New World," in *Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*, ed. C. D. Narasimhaiah (New Delhi: Sterling, 1978), 360-77; Uma Parameswaran, "Amid the Alien Corn: Biculturalism and the Challenge of Commonwealth Literary Criticism," *WLWE* 21, No. 1 (Spring 1982), 240-53; and Helen Tiffin, "Commonwealth Literature: Comparison and Judgement," pp. 19-35 and "Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Methodology," *WLWE* 23, No. 1 (Winter 1984), 26-30.
- ¹⁸ Howells, p. 62.
- ¹⁹ See R. E. Watters, "Original Relations," *Canadian Literature*, 7 (Winter 1961), 6-17.
- ²⁰ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (1967; rpt. New York: Avon, 1971), p. 383.
- ²¹ Michael Holquist, Introduction to Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. xxviii.
- ²² John S. Brushwood, *The Spanish American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey* (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), 282-84, notes a link between a "telescoping of time" and the use of "transcendent regionalism" in novels that employ abstract narrative techniques in depicting seemingly "real" people attached to a familiar world. W. H. New's observation in "Beyond Nationalism: On Regionalism," *WLWE* 23, No. 1 (Winter 1984), 17, that the region in post-colonial

cultures can stand for the "social variations within the society" suggests that this approach to regionalism is not restricted to works of magic realism in the "new" literatures.

- ²³ Robert R. Wilson, in "The Metamorphoses of Space: Magic Realism" (in Hinchcliffe, pp. 61-74), conceives of magic realism as a "fictional space created by the dual inscription of incompatible geometries." Wilson's "principle of spatial folding" could provide yet another means of envisioning magic realism's thematic level as a "template" of what I read as the oppositional system of incompatible discursive modes in magic realism's language of narration.
- ²⁴ See David L. Jeffrey, "Jack Hodgins and the Island Mind," *Book Forum*, 4, No. 1 (1978), 72.
- ²⁵ In an interview with Alan Twigg in *For Openers* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 192, Hodgins notes: "It's possible to see the history of Vancouver Island as the history of failed colonies. So I chose [the title] *The Invention of the World* because it implies that the different levels of the novel are allegorical. . . ."
- ²⁶ See Jeffrey, p. 75.
- ²⁷ Fink, p. 125.
- ²⁸ Dash, "Marvellous Realism — The Way Out of Negritude," p. 65.
- ²⁹ Echevarría, p. 259.
- ³⁰ Dash, "Marvellous Realism — The Way Out of Negritude," p. 66.
- ³¹ See Wilson Harris, "The Phenomenal Legacy," *The Literary Half-Yearly*, 11, No. 2 (July 1970), 1-6.
- ³² Robert Kroetsch, *What the Crow Said* (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1978), p. 36. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
- ³³ Dash, "Marvellous Realism — The Way Out of Negritude," p. 66.
- ³⁴ Jameson, pp. 303, 311, notes that Latin-American magic realist films depict history as "history with holes, perforated history," and he advances ". . . the very provisional hypothesis that the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present. . . ." This observation helps explain why magic realism may be especially viable as a mode of discourse in post-colonial cultures.
- ³⁵ See Fink, p. 122; Jan C. Horner, "Irish and Biblical Myth in Jack Hodgins' 'The Invention of the World'," *Canadian Literature*, 99 (Winter 1983), 11; Jeffrey, p. 75; Robert Lecker, "Haunted by a Glut of Ghosts: Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 20 (Winter 1980-81), 85, 95; and Joann McCaig, "Brother XII and *The Invention of the World*," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 28 (Spring 1984), 128-40.
- ³⁶ John Thieme, "Beyond History: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*," in *Re-visions of Canadian Literature*, p. 74.
- ³⁷ E. D. Blodgett, *Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures* (Downsview: ECW Press, 1982), p. 34.
- ³⁸ Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1983), pp. 69-70.
- ³⁹ W. H. New, *Articulating West* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. xxv.
- ⁴⁰ Diane Bessai, "Counterfeiting Hindsight," *WLWE*, 23, No. 2 (Spring 1984), 359.