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# An Outsized Reality:

*How “Magical Realism” Hijacked Modern Latin American Literature*

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**Introduction to An Outsized Reality: How “Magical Realism” Hijacked Latin American Literature**

With the publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien Anos de Soledad* in 1967, Latin American writing captured the world’s attention. Critics, readers, and imitators rushed to discuss and emulate this astounding novel. A whole genre of literature, “magical realism”, was popularized, and with it, critical discussion of its influences, history, genre limitations, and the sheer “imagination” it brought to the forefront of literary debate. In this thesis I will discuss the problems associated with “Western” critical analysis of Latin American writing, specifically as it seeks to define, without a proper context, the literature which draws life from the history and culture of Latin America and categorizes its literature without the cultural understanding required.

I am defining the term “Western” much as Edward Said defined “the Orient” in *Orientalism* (1978) by stating, “I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent...Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”” (Said 2). Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, the term “Western” is used much as Said spoke of “the Occident”, as an interrelated subject consisting of a geographical place, a mode of thought, a history, and an academic study. By “post-colonial” I refer to the popular definition of the term as a “Western” construct, meaning “following the period of colonization.” By “reality” I invoke both the literary term “realism” and that which is generally accepted to be real to the senses. By both “power” and “powerlessness” I refer to the work done by Spivak, Foucault, Said, and Freire in their work discussing power and post-colonialism. By “magical realism” I refer both to the term coined in 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh in his *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus* and also the literary devices used by Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* whereby the reader is asked to suspend his/her beliefs in “reality” and engage with characters like Jose Arcadio Buendia, the patriarch of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Jose Buendia’s sons, being taught about the metals in Jose’s make-shift laboratory, “grew enthusiastic over the flying carpet that went swiftly by the laboratory at window level carrying the gypsy who was driving it and several children from the village who were merrily waving their hands, but Jose Arcadio Buendia did not even look at it. “Let them dream,” he said” (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 32). This grim, straight-faced dismissal of the magical
by Jose, juxtaposed by the joy of his sons in the miraculous, exemplifies that strand of Márquez’s writing in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which is spoken of as “magical realism”.

The “outsized reality” of my title refers to Gabriel García Márquez’s Nobel Lecture, “The Solitude of Latin America” (1982) in which he states that “to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression... A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty.” Such an “outsized reality” exists not as “magical” but as nearly insurmountable, overwhelming odds which artists must navigate in order to create and write. It is this “outsized reality” captured by Márquez in 1967 which still confounds and delights its readers, not only, as Márquez points out, by its “literary expression”, but the brutal realities of Latin America which “determines each instant of our countless daily deaths” (“Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America”).

It is my argument that without understanding the context in which such literature is written, “Western” critical analysis seeks to define that literature by using such terms as “magical”, “imaginary”, and “fantastical” and in so doing, focuses attention on “other-worldly” stories from a “strange” land. Because the term “magical realism” is itself oxymoronic and ambiguous, and therefore limited, it is my argument that the act of definition should more properly originate from within the community which produces the literature, rather than from outside it.

In my first section I will argue that such terminology as “magical realism” diminishes this literature by the use of the term “magic”. “Western” critical analysis of “magical realism” is outside the context of Latin American life, simply by defining the literature as “magical realism”, “Western” literary critics have stolen the power of definition from those who have created the literature. By “power” I allude to the work of Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) when he postulates that because power and knowledge are always bound together, what counts as a “valid” interpretation and “correct” knowledge is “Western” and those from a subordinate position of power, such as those who write Latin American fiction, cannot “rise above” these “valid”, “correct” definitions of their own artistic endeavours. I will also be referring to Gayatri Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1998) to discuss the unique position of “post-colonial” literature’s problem of self-definition.

I will also briefly discuss the critical viewpoint surrounding the most famous work of “magical realism” to come out of the “Latin Boom” (the literature which appeared in the 1960s Latin America), *Cien Anos de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)*. The Latin
Boom writers made use of French surrealism, as well as “Western” writers who were experts of their craft, who themselves in turn made use of the vast literary traditions of the “West”, and yet the Boom writers created something previously unseen. The very act of defining the literature as “magical realism” takes the act of definition away from those who create, which I will argue is problematic. To contextualize this, I will discuss the history of the term “magical realism” from its original inception as an art term defining post-realist paintings to Latin American literature, as well as how the term “magical realism” overtook Alejo Carpentier’s term “the marvellous real”. At this point in section 2, I will discuss one “subaltern” who responds to “Western” critical analysis: Gabriel García Márquez and his Nobel Peace Prize speech.

Later, I will seek to set the literature of Latin America described as “magical realism” within a historical and statistical context, the thirty year period after Márquez’s memorable speech. This will seek to illustrate the distance from which “Western” critical analysis views the realities of Latin American life which has spawned the literature known to them as “magical”. I hope to illustrate the difficult task that Latin American writers face while writing of their “reality”. For a brief historical reference I will also be using passages from Voyage Around the World by Magellan (1521) and J.M. Roberts’s The Penguin History of the World (1976) to look at the perspective shifts that have occurred between “The West” and Latin America.

To conclude, within this thesis I will both discuss the problematic terminology which surrounds Latin American fiction, as well as look more closely at the influences such terminology has upon the writers and audience involved in the creation and dissemination of Latin American literature, as well as discuss methods by which Latin American writers can begin to define themselves and their own work.
Section 1: Definition and Conflicting Viewpoints

The wavering definitions of such abstract concepts as “post-colonial”, “magical”, “reality”, “power”, and “powerlessness” cannot be rooted in more concrete terms, especially when considering these terms’ linguistic aspects, language barriers, power structures, cultural differences and individual experience. The linguistic “slippage” discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” between the meanings/representations of these ideas can easily occur, as can misreading, misunderstanding, and most importantly, a contextual disconnection between critical reader and writer (Spivak 69). Inherently problematic is the viewpoint of much “Western” literary criticism when discussing Latin American literature as “magical”, and culture as “post-colonial”, as these terms are almost exclusively both Euro- and “Western”-centric. In this section I will discuss the need for terminology which analyses Latin American literature to generate from within Latin America, as well as discuss the systemic violence done to that literature when defined from a strictly “Western” viewpoint.

Thus I lead this discussion into the copious and bewildering critical reception of Cien Anos de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude) (1967). As there is so much analysis relating to Márquez and his work, as well as the work of other “magical realists”, for the purposes of this thesis I will only focus on “Western” critical reception and analysis of his work when translated into English. Regrettably, there is neither time nor scope in this thesis for a discussion of Spanish-language only analysis. I have, however, taken it upon myself to translate portions of Ramon Chao’s Conversaciones Con Alejo Carpentier as the dislike Carpentier, author of The Kingdom of this World (1957), expresses in these candid interviews of the term “magical realism” is of specific importance to my argument.

The bulk of “Western” criticism roams an expansive plain: from a focus on character and language to Marxist interpretations, feminist analysis, mythological interpretations, biblical analogies, New Historicism, political propaganda, to wondering, ultimately, if such a proliferation of criticism provide a coherent interpretation, a logical meaning to the events in the novel (Foster 33).

The landmark novel of Latin American fiction, One Hundred Years of Solitude, is still today, “elusive and enigmatic”, “a potential minefield” and critical approaches to it can be either politically damning or too broad, as the novel questions the nature of reality and “if all reality is fictions then how can we interpret it?” (Swanson 34). “Reality” cannot be both “real” and “magical” if the novel is to have any basis for “truth”. If the reader were to suspend the disbelief asked of him or her, as is the case in the act of reading fiction, the “interpretation” of
“reality” should not always be in the forefront of the reader’s mind. It was in answer to the difficult, albeit dazzling, world of Macondo that the term “magical realism” was re-introduced to the critical vocabulary from the study of visual art to that of literature.

“Magical realism” was originally coined in 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh in his Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus. Roh’s book applied the term “magical realist” to a certain vein of Post-Expressionist art and contrasted those he saw as truly Expressionist: Kandinsky, Carra, Delaunay, de Chirico, Citroen, Metzinger, Schrimpf, Schmidt-Rottluf, Macke, Mense, Uhden and Hause am Teich. He then went on to illustrate strictly “magical realist” painters Severini, Funi, Oppi, Raderscheidt, Davringhausen, Kanoldt, Dix, Grosz, Scholz, Spies, Metzinger, Skold, Ernst, Derain, and the beginning of Rousseaus’ work. He defines the term thus:

Magical Realism--We recognize the world, although now--not only because we have emerged from a dream--we look on it with new eyes. We are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane. This new world of objects is still alien to the current idea of Realism. It employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquillity of simple and ingenuous things. This [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, [this] means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered--albeit in new ways. For the new art it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world. (Franz Roh, Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism (1925).Magical Realism. Ed. L. P. Zamora and W. B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. p. 15-32.)

In literary analysis, the term was broadly adopted by “Western” critics to describe the curiously dreamlike One Hundred Years of Solitude – and has since come to encompass anything and everything which can be made to fit the general spirit of the term. By softening, omitting, or rewording Roh’s definition, the term has by now become so commonplace and ambiguous as to provide little insight at all. Presently, any mention of the supernatural, the religious, the mythological, folk or fairy, ghosts, the afterlife, dreams or surreal illusions when mixed with any “ethnic” elements is quickly classified, “magical realism” and inaugurated into that hazy land.
In an attempt to appropriate the term “magical realism”, critics such as William Rowe and Vivian Shelling have defined the genre of literature which came from writers during the time referred to as the “Latin Boom.” In Rowe and Shelling’s interpretation, the “magical realism” that came out of the “Latin Boom” writers can be seen as a melding of “native and popular cultures as valid forms of knowledge rather than as folklore, contrasting Western forms of rationalism and progress with other, ‘pre-modern,’ ‘magical’ ways of seeing and thinking” (Kristal 74). Thus, according to these critics, before the West, “pre-modern” cultures had no rationalism or progress. These critics go on to define:

Magical realism, in these terms, is the creative tension caused by the juxtaposition of the avant-garde and the non-modern, Western thought and popular beliefs, Borges and García Márquez’s grandmother. *Cien Anos* finds a voice to express these concerns shared by other writers of the sixties, to narrative afresh the experience of modernity, the problems of underdevelopment, the nature of heterogeneous form cultures, the tension between the written word – the novel as a “European” form – and orality (Kristal 74).

Thus, according to Rowe and Shilling, “magical realism” is the colonial acquisition of “Western thought”, the “experience of modernity,” the “European” novel as a form of expression, mixed with more “ethnic” vehicles such as “orality”, the “problems of underdevelopment”, “Popular belief,” and a grandmother.

There are several problems with Rowe and Shilling’s definition. The term “post-colonial” is problematic in that the term is Euro-centric. Within such a term there can only be three states of existence: 1. pre-colonial 2. colonial and 3. post-colonial. Terms such as “pre- and post-Columbian” (referring to Christopher Columbus’s so-called discovery of America) are similarly problematic. Inherently, the focus is on the words “colony” or “Columbian” rather than on any one specific culture or native people within Latin America.

Presently, Latin America is defined by The United Nations Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE) as “20 countries: the 10 Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of South America; the six Spanish-speaking countries of Central America; Mexico; and Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti in the Caribbean Region.” By the end of 2010, the region had 582 million inhabitants, a tenth of the world’s overall population (which in 2010 was estimated by the Population Reference Bureau at 6.9 billion.) Surely the literature which springs from such a diverse and dialectically various,
massive amount of people cannot be so easily encompassed by terms such as “post-colonial”, “pre-Columbian”, “magical”, or “pre-modern”, used so freely by critics such as Rowe and Shelling.

The term “Latin Boom” usually refers to a period in Latin American literature in the early 60s and includes writers such as Julio Cortazar, Carlos Fuentes, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa. As John King discusses in his essay, ‘The Boom of the Latin American novel’:

“Did the ‘Boom’ of the Latin American novel begin in 1958, when Carlos Fuentes (b. 1928) published his innovative, multi-layered exploration of Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s, La region mas transparente (Where the Air is Clear)? Or in 1962, when Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936) won the Biblioteca Breve Prize … for his manuscript Los impostores (‘The Impostors’) … or in 1967, when Gabriel Garcia Marquez (b. 1928) brought out Cien Anos de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude), initiating a worldwide interest in magical realism?” (King 59).

King describes the modernization of the region, the Cuban Revolution, populist regimes of the forties and fifties and “the open and aggressive policies of certain publishing houses, in Spain and throughout Latin America” (59-61) as inciting factors of the “Latin Boom” which ends, for the most part, in the 1970s. “If we talk of the end of the Boom,” he continues,

“We should be clear as to what ended. By the end of the decade [the 1960s], Latin American fiction had an established readership at home and abroad and this would increase in subsequent decades, with many other writers enjoying some of the success of the initial group of four … Perhaps what came to an end was the optimism of the sixties and the utopian project that combined literary modernism with what Perry Anderson has called the ‘imaginative proximity of social revolution’” (King 76).

However, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier asks:

What kind of a thing is a boom? What do we call the boom-towns of the United States, or the petroleum boom, or the gold boom – the rush? The boom-town is a city built haphazardly, that grows whichever way it can and dies as it was born, after a little life,
a short duration. I believe that to talk about a boom to refer to Latin American literature is actually an insult to it. There is no such *boom*, as all booms are ephemeral; passing swiftly, without soundness...I say that there is no reason to reduce Latin American literature to that rapid diffusion and translation of the works to a handful of writers, in a certain time period, by different publishing houses in Europe and America. They are valuable, those writers, without a doubt. All have contributed to what I would call the deprovincialization of Latin American literature, by their technique, their themes and their approach on the problems (Chao 66-67).

By calling the movement “a boom”, Carpentier points out the ephemeral nature of such a term, which “passing swiftly, without soundness” can be easily categorized, and then forgotten. If something is ephemeral, it is short-lived, a novelty, whereas in reality the production of this literature is continuous. This perceived “insult” to a reduced handful of Latin American writers who have done their bit to open the Latin American community to a world stage is keenly felt by Carpentier. The term he utilizes in this interview, “deprovincialization”, made of “provincial” and “to undo”, is indicative of what he means by saying the term “boom” is an insult. By undoing the provincial nature of Latin American literature, by popularizing it, and bringing it to a wider audience, indeed by “modernizing”, this handful of Latin American boom writers should be commended. It is the term “boom”, however, much like “magical realism” which Carpentier argues against:

In reality, what Franz Roh called magical realism is simply an expressionist painting, but selecting those manifestations of the expressionist painting which are alien to a concrete political intention...but there within the painting is struggle, sarcasm, social intention...Franz Roh, no, what he called magical realism was simply a painting where real forms combine together in a way that are not in accordance with everyday reality. That is magical realism because it is an image that is implausible or unlikely, impossible, but in the end, detained there (Chao 179-180).

Any magic which can be “detained”, Carpentier argues, cannot be a true representation, for “The extraordinary is not beautiful or pretty by force. It is not beautiful or ugly; it is more than anything simply astonishing for being unusual. Everything that is unusual, everything astonishing, everything that is out of what is established is marvellous” (Chao178).
As Said and Spivak have noted in their work, even to define the term “Western” is problematic, as “Western” civilization takes its identity from Greeks, Romans, Turks, Indians, and other migratory groups who traversed from East to West in search of homelands. And yet, the “West” is often used as if it were a concrete term, a fixed referent defined in and of itself, while the terminology used to discuss the literature of recent times from the region that is Latin America is, as we have seen, ambiguous, even oxymoronic. As Said and Spivak have demonstrated, these judgements are reliant on the “West’s” fixed perceptions not only of itself, but of others, viewed through the ideological lens of its own culture and experience. As Márquez points out:

Latin America neither wants, nor has any reason, to be a pawn without a will of its own; nor is it merely wishful thinking that its quest for independence and originality should become a Western aspiration. However, the navigational advances that have narrowed such distances between our Americas and Europe seem, conversely, to have accentuated our cultural remoteness ("Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America").

It is this “cultural remoteness” that cannot be easily bridged by critics so far-removed from the context in which Latin American literature is written. To be “remote” is to be far-removed, it would appear, nearly impenetrable. By using terms which rely on an understanding of another culture as the primary context, such criticism which uses “magic,” “post-” and “pre-” cannot seek to explain such literature.

Kenneth Reeds discusses the history of the term in his essay, ‘Magical Realism: A Problem of Definition’. As Reeds points out, the title of Roh’s book literally meant “new thing-ness” – “magical realism” was only the subtitle. Roh’s work centred on painting with little of the content wavering from this focus. However, Reeds notes that Roh did not see much significance to his term, invented because he “needed a name he could place next to the new movement….Other terms such as Ideal Realism, Verism, and Neoclassicism were expressions which only defined parts of the whole and therefore incomplete” (176).

Reeds cites Irene Guenther who “located magical realism as first coming from the German Romantic philosopher Novalis who Lois Parkinson Zamora pointed out used it to ‘describe an idealized philosophical protagonist capable of integrating ordinary phenomena and magical meanings’” (Reeds 177). Therefore, to Roh, “the realist component of magical realism” was “in contrast to Expressionism’s way of seeing the world” (177). Its second
component “the magic, identified it as a more complicated than traditional realism.”

According to Guenther, Roh “believed the artists used a ‘cold cerebral approach’
concentrating on objects which were shown down to their last detail as ‘strange shadows of
phantoms’ bringing to the surface their ‘inner spiritual texture’ and ‘clarity.’ The art Roh
described does not ‘reproduce’ like a photo but ‘recreates’ through a reconstruction of
‘spiritual phenomena’” (177). In this sense, it can be easily understood how such a term could
later transfer later from the description of a form of visual art to literature like One Hundred
Years of Solitude. That “inner spiritual texture” is inherently present in the novel, just as the
“clarity” Roh describes, but the “cold cerebral approach” is somewhat less difficult to
identify in Marquez’ masterpiece. If the art described by Roh as “magical realism” is really
“cold” or “cerebral” then such a term cannot readily fit literature like One Hundred Years of
Solitude, a novel which is teeming with life, sweaty in olfactory detail. Reeds continues:

Roh noted it was ‘still alien to the current idea of Realism.’ It was a movement of
‘decantation and clarification’ which endowed ‘all things with a deeper meaning and
revealed mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquillity of simple and
ingenuous things.’ Thus magical realism was a return to reality, but not simply going
back to the realism which existed before expressionism – a homecoming which
carried with it the baggage from the trip through Expressionism’s existential voyage,
a mix of wild flights and anchored reality (Chao177-178).

If the “cold, cerebral approach” that Roh describes can be set to one side, it would seem that
this “mix of wild flights and anchored reality” could easily transfer to the experience of that
new Latin American writing under scrutiny here. As with the post-Expressionist painters
Roh describes, the writers of the literature of the “Latin Boom” similarly could not go “back
to the realism which existed before expressionism” as many of them were influenced by
Surrealist movement and also carried with them the influence of their “Western” education,
and reading. There existed the need for new terminology to describe this new approach to
literature.

The term struck a chord with writers in Spain by 1927 when Roh’s work was
translated in Jose Ortega y Gasset’s Revista de Occidente (Reeds 179) and “completely
eliminated Roh’s original title and instead used the ‘Realismo Magico’ subtitle as its heading”
(180). The issue of the magazine also included works by Kafka, Valery, Jarnes, Gomez de la
Serna, and Ayala. However, as Reeds points out:
The fact that magical realism was used to describe a European novel indicates the term was not considered, in 1928, to be a Latin American phenomenon. Moving magical realism away from Europe and into a strictly Latin American context would not occur until 1949 when Arturo Uslar Pietri used it in his book *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (180-181).

It is interesting to note that here Kafka’s work was termed “magical realist” before those of the “Latin Boom”. In fact, it would be a point of distinction that Kafka was a major influence upon Gabriel García Márquez, and that the term “magical realist” would be passed to him like one marathon runner passes the baton to the next. According to Steven Boldy, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* was a revelation, “when at the age of seventeen he (Márquez) discovered that it was possible to write straightforwardly that one morning Gregory Samsa woke up to find he had been turned into an insect, he knew then that he would become a writer” (259). Márquez himself has acknowledged his love of Kafka in an interview published in the *Paris Review* in 1981. “At the university in Bogotá,” Márquez recalls:

I started making new friends and acquaintances, who introduced me to contemporary writers. One night a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read ‘The Metamorphosis’. The first line almost knocked me off the bed. I was so surprised. The first line reads, “As Gregory Samsa awoke that morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. . . .” When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago. So I immediately started writing short stories (Stone 28).

That “Western” writers such as Hemingway, Kafka, Faulkner, and Joyce influenced Latin American writers is certain; it is also evident that the term “magical realism” which preceded the movement came from a German art critic. However, to give those European writers (and the terminology used by “Western” critics to describe them) who went before the primary position by emphasising their precedence is mistaken – to give the agency of the act of creating something new to those who inspired, not to those who engineered, is a gross misrepresentation of the truth of that act of creation. Yes, “magical realism” is a descriptive
term which moved from painting to literature, but it was a Euro-centric label used to describe a very different field from what became a decidedly non-Euro-centric practice in Latin American Literature. What is added by the artists’ personal and cultural context cannot be so easily dismissed.

Cross-cultural influence can and does occur in the creative process, and is often mistaken as contrived by critics, as discussed by Márquez later in the Paris Review interview. He recalls, “When I wrote my first short stories I was told they had Joycean influences.” But when asked if he had ever read James Joyce’s work, he replied:

I had never read Joyce, so I started reading *Ulysses*. I read it in the only Spanish edition available. Since then, after having read *Ulysses* in English as well as a very good French translation, I can see that the original Spanish translation was very bad. But I did learn something that was to be very useful to me in my future writing—the technique of the interior monologue (Stone 30).

Whatever literary precursors may have existed, it was the early influences of his childhood in Atacanta, coupled with his strange homecoming later in life, which were Márquez’ most instructive teachers and the genesis for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. When Márquez and his mother arrived back at the small town in 1950:

It was at first quite shocking because I was now twenty-two and hadn’t been there since the age of eight. Nothing had really changed, but I felt that I wasn’t really looking at the village, but I was experiencing it as if I were reading it. It was as if everything I saw had already been written, and all I had to do was to sit down and copy what was already there and what I was just reading. For all practical purposes everything had evolved into literature: the houses, the people, and the memories (Stone 33).

Thus, while Márquez freely credits “Western” writers as influence, it is primarily – and most importantly, centrally – his experiences of childhood which most influenced his creation of the literature so celebrated the world over as “magical”. The passage of time for Márquez, combined with the apparent timelessness of the village when he visited it again as an adult, lends a quality of otherworldliness to his treatment of the village in *Cien Anos de Soledad*. Márquez, transcribing the experience of that feeling of time trapped in a bubble, writes as
though it had *already* been written. Thus, the act of writing one’s past becomes transcription, the creative writer as acting “scribe”. Although “Western” writers may have assisted in providing Márquez with the method, it was his own experiences which ultimately sparked life into this work. In fact, Márquez describes the act of writing as “nothing but carpentry...Both are very hard work. Writing something is almost as hard as making a table. With both you are working with reality, a material just as hard as wood. Both are full of tricks and techniques. Basically very little magic and a lot of hard work are involved” (Stone 50).

It is as if the “hard work” of Márquez mixing his journalistic background with the “brick face” his grandmother used to tell her “supernatural and fantastical” stories lends the quality seen as “magical” by critics and “western” audiences. But Márquez insists there is little “magic” and a lot of “reality”. He has no use for critics or the “intellectualism” they use to bully readers and writers into accepting their neat descriptions:

Critics for me are the biggest example of what intellectualism is. First of all, they have a theory of what a writer should be. They try to get the writer to fit their model, and if he doesn’t fit, they still try to get him in by force. I’m only answering this because you’ve asked. I really have no interest in what critics think of me; nor have I read critics in many years. They have claimed for themselves the task of being intermediaries between the author and the reader. I’ve always tried to be a very clear and precise writer, trying to reach the reader directly without having to go through the critic (Stone 87).

As the most well-known “magical realist” writer, Márquez has a certain authority when speaking about his dislike of critical analyses and their terminology, and one senses a diffident resistance in the idea that if a writer does not “fit their model” critics will “still try to get him in by force”. One must wonder if he is referring to the copious and often contradictory nature of the critical analysis surrounding his own work. When he describes his work, Márquez speaks of revealing the essential link between journalism and literature, of the precision needed to “reach the reader directly”. He defines writing as “carpentry”, which is the act of creating something from previously existent materials, and himself as primarily a journalist. As Spivak suggests, those who create must also define, give name to those methods and creations which they have originated. “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary,” he reminds the audience in Stockholm (Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture).
Márquez insists that, “For a novelist, intuition is essential” (Stone 83) and that while he does use literary tricks, they are genuine because the “truth” he is attempting to show can only be illuminated by those very tricks. “Intuition,” he continues, “which is also fundamental to writing fiction, is a special quality which helps you to decipher what is real without needing scientific knowledge, or any other special kind of learning” (Stone 83).

One kind of literary trick used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the juxtaposition of common cultural misunderstandings with supernatural consequences. For example, immediately preceding the invasion of the Banana Company and the heavenly ascension of Remedios the Beauty,

“The house was suddenly filled with unknown guests, with invincible and worldly carousers, and it became necessary to add bedrooms off the courtyard, widen the dining room, and exchange the old table for one that held sixteen people, with new china and silver, and even then they had to eat lunch in shifts. Fernanda had to swallow her scruples and treat guests of the worst sort like kings as they muddied the porch with their books, urinated in the garden, laid their mats down anywhere to take their siesta, and spoke without regard for the sensitivities of ladies or the proper behaviour of gentlemen. Amaranta was so scandalized with the plebeian invasion that she went back to eating in the kitchen as in the olden days (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* 235).

Here juxtaposed are several elements and the “tricks” Marquez had alluded to in his comment that “intuition is essential” and that building a story is like building a table. Firstly, Marquez is explicit in his details. Because of the large amount of people coming to Macondo to work for the Banana Company, “it became necessary to add bedrooms off the courtyard, widen the dining room, and exchange the old table for one that held sixteen people”. These changes would not only be difficult to imagine in a typical Latin American dwelling, but are also specific in their absurdity. A table large enough for sixteen people is akin to King Arthur’s round table. Adding bedrooms off the courtyard would involve a great deal of time and expense as most Latin American homes are built around an open courtyard with rooms that enclose the atrium. Adding rooms to this design is not only difficult but would be absurd as such additions would ruin the harmony of the home.

To then add the elements of societal embarrassment of Fernanda having to “swallow her scruples and treat guests of the worst sort like kings” as they muddy the porch and urinate
in her garden, tops off the “trick” and draws in the audience. A stranger urinating in the
garden of a respectable home or laying down his mat to sleep in an unknown house is a great
faux-pas in Latin American society, and one that would resonate with Latin American
audiences. The cultural codes in Latin America are so ingrained, so inviolable and “real” that
breaking them resembles a supernatural force. “Western” thought, unfamiliar with these
cultural codes, cannot appreciate this. In Latin American culture the home is venerated; to be
a guest in someone’s home is tantamount to going to a church service, and treated with the
same respect. What is juxtaposed here is cultural protocol being mocked, and in retaliation,
Remedios the Beauty ascends to heaven, “waving good-bye in the midst of the flapping
sheets that rose up with her” (One Hundred Years of Solitude 243). Thus, in response to
cultural norms which are broken, the reader, who must believe people capable of breaking
them, can then be asked to believe that a character can ascend to heaven still holding the
laundry she was meant to be hanging.
Section 2: “Western” perception and a speaking subaltern

2.1: Alejo Carpentier’s lo real maravilloso

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the disdain which Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier felt to be included amongst the “magical realist” writers of Latin America is well documented. His own attempt at self-definition, often dismissed by both critics and many fellow writers, is his concept of “The Marvellous Real (lo real maravilloso)” (Carpentier 2). Carpentier did not agree with the appropriation of the term “magical realist” to describe the new Latin American fiction of his era, and in his prologue to his novel El Reino de este Mundo (1949), he states that:

So many people forget, because it costs them so little to dress up as magicians, that the marvelous begins to be marvelous in an unequivocal way when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, from an unusual insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality, or from an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by means of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of "limit-state" (Carpentier 2).

A student of the surrealists, Carpentier began to reject them once he realized that “unexpected alteration of reality” was “a miracle” and not something that could simply be appropriated into a creative work without the proper frame of reference, the context of which must occur naturally to an artist to have any kind of sincerity. He describes such a naturally occurring context as, “the uncontrolled creativity of our natural formations” and suggests that the surrealists of the day imposing of cheap magician’s tricks upon their work, was “never anything but a literary trick, and a boring one at that for having been prolonged.” This form of literary magical realism Carpentier decries by saying, “the marvelous, manufactured by sleight of hand, by juxtaposing objects ordinarily never found together…The result of attempting to arouse the marvellous at all costs that the thaumaturges becomes bureaucrats. Invoked by means of clichéd formulas…”

Carpentier found the Marvelous in Haiti, although Cuban, after having experienced “the tiresome attempts to rouse the marvellous that has characterized certain European literatures for the last thirty years,” and is described by him as “miraculous” and a
“phenomenon” which “presupposed a faith” that “so many people forget because it costs them so little to dress up as magicians.”

Thus, the context in which “marvelous” literature is created becomes a central, key aspect. Márquez describes his work as “fantastical” and “supernatural” where Carpentier sees “natural formations” in his. Literature in which the writer has no faith in the events which s/he describes are, at their very inception, stillborn. It is the living, breathing, faithful rendering of a context in which the marvellous is lived in commune with the violent, the unbelievable, and the sheer brutality of life which appears to a reader outside the context of such life as “magical” rather than “marvellous”.

According to Carpentier, the problem with the term “magical realism” is that:

In the first place, here we have a linguistic dispute. The word marvellous has lost its true meaning with time and with common usage, and it has been lost to the point that to say marvellous brings a conceptual confusion as great as the words baroque or classical. The dictionaries tell us that the marvellous causes admiration for being extraordinary, excellent, admirable. And together with the notion that everything that is marvellous should be beautiful, pretty and nice, when the only thing that should be recorded in the definition in the dictionaries is that it refers to the extraordinary (Chao 178).

So, both “Euro-centric” and “Western” analysis, tinged with prior experience of the Surrealist movement, argues that this sub-genre of Latin American literature “is the creative tension caused by the juxtaposition of the avant-garde and the non-modern”, while Alejo Carpentier argues for the term “The Marvellous Real”, saying:

We should establish a definition of the marvellous where this notion is not intersected by what is admirable because it is beautiful. Everything unusual is marvellous…The Marvellous Real that I defended is what we find in a raw state, latent, omnipresent, throughout Latin America. Here what is unusual is mundane, it always has been…[For example,] one day the king, Henri Christophe of Haiti, a chef who became the emperor of an island, thought that eventually Napoleon could reconquer the island, and built this fabulous fortress, the one we were discussing earlier, where he could resist a siege of ten years with all of his dignitaries, ministers, soldiers, troops, everything and have supplies and food to exist ten years as an independent
state (I am referring to the Citadel of Laferriere.) In order for that fortress to resist a European attack he commanded the walls to be forged with the blood of thousands of bulls. That is marvellous (Chao 179-184).

His example of King Henri Christophe of Haiti, one of the characters in his book, *The Kingdom of This World* (1957) embodies what Carpentier finds “marvellous”. A larger-than-life figure, Henri Christophe reigned Haiti with a mixture of “black” cultural superstitions and the concentrated anger of the slave population of the island. *The Kingdom of this World* describes the slave uprising of Haiti from one slave’s perspective, Ti Noel, in which violent events take on a supernatural element, and in which folk heroes ride the wind as eagles to be resurrected when needed by the Rebels. Carpentier had only to look into the annals of the region’s history to find such “marvellous” events, the context being his life on Haiti itself, as he explains: “All we have to do is extend our hands to reach the marvellous real. Every day our contemporary history presents us with unusual events” (Chao 184).

However, one resistance to the primacy of Latin American critical analysis is, as Spivak notes, that “not surprisingly, some members of the indigenous dominant groups in comprador countries, members of the local bourgeoisie, find the language of alliance politics attractive” (87). That is to say, members of the middle-class identify with and emulate those in positions of power over them, are enamoured with foreign cultural influences and the rich tapestry of Western literature translated into Spanish. Thus, the primacy of Latin America’s naming of its own literature is made more complex. “Western” and “Euro-centric” criticism should listen to “those of us who feel that the ‘subject’ has a history and that the task of the first-world subject of knowledge in our historical moment is to resist and critique ‘recognition’ of the Third World through ‘assimilation’” (Spivak 88). We may note that Latin American critics fought to appropriate the Euro-centric term “magical realist” as “an expression of a particularly Latin American reality” (Reeds 183). Reeds discusses their influence in his essay, citing critic Angel Flores writing in “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” in 1955, that by appropriating the term “magical realism” “Latin America now possesses an authentic expression, one that is uniquely civilized, exciting, and, let us hope, perennial” (Reeds 182).

The distinction that the “Marvelous Real” is based in “faith” while “magical realism” is based in a perspective is important in and of itself. From the history of these related terms, one can see that “magical realism”, which started as a western construct, has now melted into a catch-all at best, a free-for-all at worst, while the “Marvelous Real”, although argued by
Leal and Vallabuena Briones as “being the same thing” (Reeds 184) as “magical realism”, “the marvellous real” took a backseat to “magical realism”. It is interesting to speculate why. Certainly, “magical realism” is a more enticing phrase – an ironic juxtaposition is more attention-grabbing than a simple, sincere rendering of “a privileged revelation of reality.” Thus, while both Latin American and “Western” critics delighted in the appropriation of a German art critic’s term newly considered “uniquely Latin American”, still Carpentier’s central idea, that “magic” is a trick and that only by “faith” can the writer find the marvelous, lingers intriguingly on.

It is interesting to note that while most critics (both Latin American and “Western”) view Carpentier as a “magical realist” writer, he differentiated himself in public from magical realism in a lecture titled ‘The Baroque and the Marvelous Real’ given in the Caracas Anthenaeum on May 22, 1975 (Reeds 186). To “Western” criticism, as Reeds points out, Carpentier did not matter much anyway. Reeds dismisses his contribution in his essay by saying, “fortunately Carpentier’s words did not have much effect, because at this point the discussion began to separate from ‘lo real maravilloso’.” Reeds cites Latin critic Emir Rodriguez Monegal who “argued that magical realism and ‘lo real maravilloso’ were different notions” (187). On the one hand, “magical realism” was interested in ‘seeing’ reality while on the other ‘lo real maravilloso’ was engaged in identifying an ontological approach. So, “magical realism” is about a perspective whilst “the marvellous real” is about living within a mind-frame which, coupled with “faith”, renders the unbelievable revelatory, or “marvellous.”

As Foucault in “The Subject and Power” (1982) has pointed out, if no one is “outside” a state of power, but constantly negotiating from within, as different structures reaffirm, restructure, and if instead, power relations “are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above “society” whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of” (343) then it seems to me that the central questions in the argument between “magical realism” and “the marvellous real” are twofold. Firstly, the term “magical” in relation to One Hundred Years of Solitude is problematic primarily to a “Western” audience because that audience lacks the context needed for interpretation, and indeed the perspective in relation to their position of power as “valid” holders of a literary tradition, required to fully view Latin American literature, which leaves them unable to “see” the “truth” behind the “magic” – which one might argue cheapens the “marvellous”, the revelatory aspect. Secondly, the term “reality” in this context is also problematic, but in a different sense. Michel Wood writes, in his book, Márquez, 100 Years of Solitude that:
Situated somewhere between thematic and formal concerns is the question of how we are to take what is offered to us as “reality” in One Hundred Years of Solitude. When Garcia Márquez insists that everything in his novel is “based on reality”, he seems in practice to mean two things, although not always both of them at once. First, that the most fantastic things have actually been believed or asserted by live people somewhere, and often in Latin America. This doesn’t make these things true but it may make them real…The fantastic thus becomes quite ordinary, what is known by everyone…and what elsewhere would be plausible becomes merely the lame recourse of ignorance. Secondly, “based on reality” means genuinely in touch with some fact of feeling, however hyperbolically or metaphorically expressed…if we put the two senses of “based in reality” together, we see that the world of One Hundred Years of Solitude is a place where beliefs and metaphors become forms of fact, where more ordinary facts become uncertain (Wood 57-58).

And yet, being “a place where beliefs and metaphors become forms of fact” is exactly how Latin American culture differs from that of “Western” viewers. This is one understanding of the “faith” of which Carpentier speaks. For within that “place where beliefs and metaphors become forms of fact” an entire culture lives their daily lives in such a way that, from the outside, looks “magical.” Wood’s observation that “this doesn’t make these things true but it may make them real” is applying the same problem of perspective. To the ordinary person, what is true is what is real. How can it be otherwise? However “genuinely in touch with some fact of feeling” the events in a work of realist literature may be, there can be no believability if there is no grip the reader can find on his or her own sense of “reality” -- that sense of “reality” found in the literature must be in line with what said reader holds to be true or it is simply a piece of unexplainable “magic.”

It is exactly this disconnection which makes critical analysis of Latin American “magical realism” so overwhelmingly difficult to navigate. To say that a piece of fiction (in the sense of myth, folklore, fantasy, etc.) is “true in a way” is problematic in that there are things that appear true on the surface and things that appear true in a deeper, more subtly ideological or genre-determined manner. Thus, questions of “truth”, “reality” (which is the individual’s perspective of truth, affected by their place in the power dynamic) and perspective splinter when confronted with such a dazzling melange of Latin culture, Western literary tradition, and individual experience.
Context, in this case, matters. To read the Latin American literature known as “magical realism”, a transformation must occur in the reader. As Carpentier discusses with Ramon Chao:

Our actual lives are situated below these signs of symbiosis, amalgamations, transmutations. Academia is characterized by these established time periods, full of themselves, sure of themselves. The baroque, in contrast, is manifested where there are transformations, mutations, innovation...America, continent of symbiosis, of mutations, vibrations, mixtures, has always been baroque (Chao 64-65).

Bias on the part of a “Western” audience coupled with its inability to access the context of the literature and its background, means “magic” stays “magical” without the ability to expose the reader to the “truth” it is seeking to reveal. And yet, while the literary interpretation of such “marvellous” work as Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* and Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is seen as only “magical” by those who write with a “Western” bias, it could also be considered “correct” and “valid” in a Latin American context as I trust the examples in the following section will show.
2.2. “Western” Bias in Reviews of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

The “Western” definition presented as “valid” and “correct” which has defined *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by using the term “magical”, cheapens the “marvelousness” of the story. As Spivak and Foucault have postulated regarding notions of power/knowledge and the power of definition, it is those in a position of authority who define “truth” and “reality”.

As Gayatri Spivak points out in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” while discussing the unaddressed silences within Foucault’s definitions of power, “such slips become the rule rather than the exception in less careful hands” (Spivak 69). Thus, “the unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage” (Spivak 69). The real danger is that these “verbal slippages” allow the group in a position of priority or power, as in the First World, to define and classify the literary identity of a subaltern in the Third World by establishing their analysis as more “valid” or “correct”. Spivak points out that “this benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other is the founding characteristic of much third-worldism in the US human sciences today” (Spivak 84, italics mine). Although Spivak is specific in her assertion of “US human sciences” much of the US human sciences is informed by a long literary list of “Euro-centric” sources.

I have italicised the words “appropriate” and “reinscription” to focus on the Western-centric view of “post-colonial” literature. Especially problematic is the term “post-colonial”, which I will discuss in greater depth later in this thesis, as it centres on the contextual reality of life and violence in Latin America which has defined the region and its literature. Simply by using “post-” to describe Latin America categorizes it as a former colony, the emphasis on “post-” marks its focal point as a rebellious mass of people pitted against those who colonized.

The danger is that by allowing one group to define another (especially one who is in a position of power, presently and historically over another) the literature which is being discussed becomes just one more way to view itself, rather than a perspective on the culture from which it comes. As Said argues in *Orientalism*, “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. To believe that the Orient was created...and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous” (Said 5). “The West” as an idea and position (or geographic location) cannot define the literature of Latin
America from its own peripheral viewpoint, as Latin America and its culture and literature were not simply “created” nor came into being as a “necessity of the imagination” of “the West”. Spivak agrees that this “western” notion occupies its own primacy in that “some of the most radical criticism coming out the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject” (Spivak 66). The act of definition is indeed so powerful that it must be reserved for those in a position of superiority, jealously guarding the barriers of identity through representation.

In order to expose the “Western” bias in readings of Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, especially in relation to the term “magical realism”, an examination of the critical responses to Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* shortly after it was translated to English may be helpful.

In a review in *Time* magazine, dated 1972, Martha Duffy commented on the “seismic literary event” which “has continued to attract not so much readers as proselytizers.” Her viewpoint is that “the chronicle of an enchanted town called Macondo…is a ‘good read’ in the Dickensian sense: it has abundant life, a tangle of characters and plots, all supported by a clear moral viewpoint” (McMurry 25). It is words such as “enchanted” and “Dickensian” which are of particular importance in this first paragraph of the review. Again, “enchanted” brings to mind the machinery of sprites and fairies, and “Dickensian” that Victorian champion of the English inner-city poor. Duffy is writing for American readers educated within “Western” ideology, and reading within a generally “Western” context. To be sure, there is an “American” viewpoint, but it has much more in common with its English counterpart than its Latin-American neighbour.

It is interesting to note that another review, this one in the *New York Times Book Review*, takes a viewpoint much closer to Carpentier’s “*lo maravilloso real*”. “I experienced it,” writes Alfred Kazin in 1972, “with the same recognition of a New World epic that one feels about *Moby Dick*…a climate of feeling…a powerful sense of wonder at how little men change even in the most bizarre moments…”

So we find *One Hundred Years of Solitude* through the perspective of Charles Dickens’ work, or the epic *Moby Dick* – comparisons which clearly illustrate the viewpoint of the reader. Charles Dickens’ work was political, realist (although perhaps exaggerated) in his portrayal of the plight of the poor in Industrial England. *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville is the epic tale of one man’s quest to hunt down his mythically proportioned adversary – an evil white whale. Surely a leviathan whale, and one man’s manic quest to avenge the loss of his leg, is more in the spirit of “*lo maravilloso real*”? There is no need for a suspension of
disbelief, for, as the central theme of the book makes clear, the journey is what is “beyond the pale”, the hunt for retribution. As in Márquez’s work, what is on the surface (the realistic portrayals of life) is juxtaposed by that which is “beyond the pale,” what Carpentier, one might argue, meant by “lo maravilloso real”.

It is this sense of enclosure which is often so difficult to understand from within “Western” constructs. Michel Wood, writing for the Colombia Forum remarks, “Perhaps Latin Americans enjoy their sense of unreality, perhaps history and geography are ultimately less to blame than they seem to be” (McMurry 38). The italics are Wood’s, and present an interesting distinction. Why would Latin Americans seem to enjoy their sense of unreality so much? The emphasis seems to make the point that such enjoyment is strange, uncommon, odd. In effect he is asking, why would anyone enjoy a sense of unreality? And also, interestingly, Wood is putting “blame” on that sense of enjoyment rather than the accidents of history and geography – as if there were some defect, crime, or fault in the mere enjoyment of a “sense of unreality.” The writer equates this sense of “unreality” with “the color and shape of Latin American despair”, praising Márquez for capturing it so well and “for the first time” in writing that is “elegant, ironic, slightly complacent.” He even admits, “surely a large part of this spectacular novel’s immense success in Latin America is the shock of recognition it provides for its readers: this is how they talk to themselves” (McMurry 38).

The idea that Latin Americans “talk to themselves” while enjoying “their sense of unreality” (and that, both the enjoyment and the “sense” Latin American readers possess is something which is inherently negative, expressed by the use of the word “blame”)) is key to understanding why “Western” and Latin American critics clung so tenaciously to the term “magical realism.” As a term, “magical realism” is a positive refrain, nebulous enough to incorporate the misunderstandings between readers of different cultures. Consequently, because of its very nature as a contradiction in terms, it is hard to argue with – simply because to juxtapose “magical” and “realism” ultimately doesn’t make sense yet sounds as though it would, if one could only grasp the “true” meaning behind it.

It is this self-effacing, grim view of sincere “unreality” which marks One Hundred Years of Solitude that has held the readers who encounter it with unwavering devotion. Márquez himself has spoken of the letters sent from readers in which they accuse him of stealing their stories, or tell him that they know someone or one of the events One Hundred Years of Solitude recounts, or that simply they are grateful to him for rendering their lives in fiction. It is precisely this recognition of personal experience that Latin-American readers encounter which has been noted by reviewers like John Leonard, writing in 1970 for The New
The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness.... What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised. In previous attempts to write, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face (Stone 42).

Márquez, it seems, could not “invent” something he himself did not believe in. With “a brick face” he had made the conscious choice to “believe in” the marvellous tales of his grandmother himself. Thus, perhaps a term more like “Quixotic realism” would be a better term, as another reviewer, Robert Keily points out:
To speak of a land of enchantment, even in reference to a contemporary novel, is to conjure up images of elves, moonbeams and slippery mountains. Along with midgets and fairies, one can expect marvellous feats and moral portents, but not much humor and almost certainly no sex. The idea, it would seem, is to forget the earth. At least that is one idea of enchantment. It is obviously not shared by the Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez who has created…an enchanted place that does everything but cloy…This is the language of a poet who knows the earth and does not fear it as the enemy of the dreamer (McMurray 42).

Don Quixote, that patriarch of Spanish literature certainly never feared the earth as an “enemy of the dreamer”. If the idea “is to forget the earth” then perhaps “Quixotic realism” is an apt fit. And yet to classify the effect thus would again be to superimpose a “Western” idea onto a Latin American landscape. Keily intuits this when he notes, “The author seems to be letting his people half-dream and half-remember their own story and, what is best, he is wise enough not to offer excuses for the way they do it. No excuse is necessary. For Macondo is no never-never land. Its inhabitants do suffer, grow old and die, but in their own way” (McMurray 44).

Spivak, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, addresses the fundamental question: can those who have been made subordinate speak for themselves? Spivak ends her essay with a resolute “The subaltern cannot speak” but continues: “The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 104). Thus, as she commands me not to “disown with a flourish”, I must then retain ownership of the task to deconstruct the meanings of the words such as, “magical”, “reality”, “power” and “powerlessness”. Spivak notes that, “immense problems are buried in the differences between the ‘same’ words” and “shifting distinctions between representations” (70). If such definitions are continually shifting, a reading of a region’s literature without contextual understanding cannot be “valid” and the understanding and discussion brought about without such contextual understanding from within these “shifting distinctions” become superimposed upon it by an outside force.

Spivak’s essay addresses, mainly, India as British colony, and the violent ways in which its laws, social structures, and cultural expectations were subverted to create a more amiable state from which to serve the British Empire, but her observations of the power relations between superior and subordinate (which then filter through the culture into the arts, and from there to literary criticism) are strikingly applicable to Latin America.
It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe. It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary (Spivak 75).

By substituting the “French intellectuals” that Spivak speaks of with “Western” literary critics, the “Other of Europe” with Latin America, we can see that, indeed, “great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could…occupy…its itinerary.” The history of the Latin American conquest and its subsequent subservience to the various colonizers of Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British design is rife with examples of this “great care.” The native pantheon of gods/goddesses became Catholic saints, and myth forcibly passed into the realm of folklore and superstition. The outcome of such “great care” is a culture both inclusive and exclusive, violent and beautiful, ignorant and wise – and only valid if modelled on “Western” precursors. Thus, the literature produced under the “epistemic violence” Spivak identifies, as she uses Foucault’s Power/Knowledge to describe “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: native knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” and has been knowingly orchestrated as “the far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (77).

If Latin American artists could create a literature so difficult to categorize, discuss, break down, and ultimately, understand without contextual reference – having either lived or known the region – who can speak for them, when they have not the platform to speak for themselves? Can the subaltern rise above the din and be heard?
2.3 Gabriel García Márquez Responds

In 1982 the Swedish Academy of Letters awarded its Nobel Prize in Literature to Gabriel García Márquez who was fifty-five years old at the time. A career journalist and part-time writer, his landmark novel One Hundred Years of Solitude had become the most famous and influential novel to come out of Latin America and enable him to travel the world, writing full-time. The Nobel Prize – and the added fame it would bring were not entirely welcome. “I was asked the other day” he admits in an interview in 1981 – the year before receiving the Prize, “if I would be interested in the Nobel Prize, but I think that for me it would be an absolute catastrophe. I would certainly be interested in deserving it, but to receive it would be terrible. It would just complicate even more the problems of fame” (Stone 119). An early and life-long admirer of William Faulkner, Márquez recalled, “I know now that only a technique like Faulkner's could have enabled me to write down what I was seeing. The atmosphere, the decadence, the heat in the village were roughly the same as what I had felt in Faulkner” (Stone 28).

Like his Faulkner before him, Gabriel García Márquez’s Peace Prize acceptance speech was more than a simple message of gratitude to the Swedish Academy of Letters. While Faulkner felt “this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work – a life’s work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit,” Márquez felt himself to be “a roving and nostalgic Columbian…singled out by fortune” ("Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America"). Faulkner denied the “doom of man”, that man would prevail against the “physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it”, because Faulkner believed that “he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance” ("William Faulkner - Banquet Speech"). Faulkner was afraid the world would turn against itself, and that the atomic bomb would end modern life.

Márquez, standing in the same place decades later, was “fully aware that the colossal tragedy he (Faulkner) refused to recognize thirty-two years ago is now…nothing more than a simple scientific possibility” ("Gabriel Garcia Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America"). Unlike the single tragedy that Faulkner decries, that of “When will I be blown up?”, Márquez enumerates the “countless daily deaths” that was the reality of Latin American life in 1982:

There have been five wars and seventeen military coups; there emerged a diabolic dictator who is carrying out, in God's name, the first Latin American ethnocide of our
time. In the meantime, twenty million Latin American children died before the age of one - more than have been born in Europe since 1970. Those missing because of repression number nearly one hundred and twenty thousand, which is as if no one could account for all the inhabitants of Uppsala. Numerous women arrested while pregnant have given birth in Argentine prisons, yet nobody knows the whereabouts and identity of their children who were furtively adopted or sent to an orphanage by order of the military authorities. Because they tried to change this state of things, nearly two hundred thousand men and women have died throughout the continent, and over one hundred thousand have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. If this had happened in the United States, the corresponding figure would be that of one million six hundred thousand violent deaths in four years ("Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America" italics mine).

These numbers are clearly shocking. Figures such as “twenty million” are hardly conceivable by the human mind, less so when assigned to a group of children dead before the age of one. One hundred and twenty thousand disappearances? The present population of Gloucestershire. And yet, the number of deaths due to violence, political oppression, military rule, malnutrition, starvation, and disease have only increased and spread to other Latin American nations which in 1982 enjoyed at least a brief era of peace.

Márquez, in spite of “oppression, plundering and abandonment…respond(s) with life.” He speaks of the talents of Latin American artists, who survive these daily horrors. These “poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality” do not, as western critics assert, plunder an immense and inexhaustible imagination, but instead, “ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable.” Thus, while Faulkner spoke of the importance of leaving fear of annihilation behind him, that a writer should return to the “old varieties and truths of the heart,” Márquez asserts that Latin American artists do not have the problem of lacking “an insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty,” for to survive against such odds calls for robust celebration, joy often to the point of exhilaration. Latin American artists live in an atmosphere of oppression, alongside ever-present fear of violence and annihilation, leave fear behind them, “will believe anything,” write of the strange reality which not only “nourishes a source of insatiable creativity,” but is, in effect, a strange reality
born of human necessity. Latin American literature springs from, is a response to, and a salve to the soul and call to the spirit of this “outsized reality.”

It is in answer to the daily struggle of the artists’ soul to survive, forgive, rejoice and ultimately create, which “lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths,” from which Latin American literature springs. The term “magical realism,” cannot fully express the seemingly incoherent and wonderfully bizarre world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* because the word “magical” has become patronizing and empty. To name something “magical” brings to mind sleight of hand and suggestive thinking, the spells and potions of a charlatan’s bag, quaint tails of witches and broomsticks, in which we remind ourselves that persecution of such creatures could never occur now.

Rather, for Márquez, by using the language and techniques of journalism, the same sources, material, resources, and language, the unbelievable is made “real” for the reader and the “unexplainable” becomes simply another layer of detail in the story. “In journalism just one fact that is false prejudices the entire work,” he continues, “In contrast, in fiction one single fact that is true gives legitimacy to the entire work. That’s the only difference, and it lies in the commitment of the writer. A novelist can do anything he wants so long as he makes people believe in it” (Stone 99). It is that “legitimacy” which is central to Márquez’s work in rendering for his readers the means to “believe” the “outsized reality” which he describes in his Nobel Lecture and demonstrates in his fiction. “It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination,” Márquez confides, “while the truth is that there’s not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality. The problem is that Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination” (Stone 36). That Márquez has a sense of humour about the critical misinterpretation of his work – of his nexus of influence (his sense of “reality” rather than either his “imagination” or “magical” tricks) is endearing. Conventional “Western” criticism, far removed from the contextual atmosphere from which such a literature cries out from the darkness of human survival – a reality of “difficulties, whose essence we share, hinder us” (Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture) in which witches do still cause harm, comets are still called from the night’s sky, and where life is not guaranteed, but something for which blood must be paid – which does not need “imagination” to describe the horrors of massacre or death, cannot understand any more than one who has never heard the mournful winds on the moors of Northern England can truly understand poor Catherine’s wails of loneliness in *Wuthering Heights*.

In divorcing Latin American literature from its context, Márquez argues that the “rational talents on this side of the world, exalted in the contemplation of their own cultures,
should have found themselves without valid means to interpret us. It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them.” He continues, if only the “West” would see Latin America through the viewpoint of its own history:

If only it recalled that London took three hundred years to build its first city wall, and three hundred years more to acquire a bishop; that Rome labored in a gloom of uncertainty for twenty centuries, until an Etruscan King anchored it in history; and that the peaceful Swiss of today, who feast us with their mild cheeses and apathetic watches, bloodied Europe as soldiers of fortune, as late as the Sixteenth Century then perhaps those clear-sighted Europeans who struggle, here as well, for a more just and humane homeland, could help us far better if they reconsidered their way of seeing us (“Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America”).

By first understanding the context of life in Latin America; the fear, oppression, survival, and constant daily stress endured by those giving such difficult birth to the creative arts so calmly contemplated in the “First World”, perhaps then might such critics, “exalted in the contemplation of their own cultures”, move away from such patronizing terms as “magical” realism, “imaginative” writing, and so on. It would be from within this context that the “rational talents” of the “West” might also consider Latin America not simply “post-colonial”, a world living on the second-hand ideas of its colonizers, but as itself – a brilliant Griffin of the “immeasurable violence and pain of our history…the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness”, like an unknown compound of familiar and unfamiliar elements which redefines the physical parameters once held as “truth”. Latin American artists, when confronted with “oppression, plundering and abandonment…respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death.”

In such a way does literature spring from the context in which artists live. When such pressing concerns are the focus of life, so does the context matter that much more. The marvellous, cheapened by the phrase “magical”, is an important response to death and suffering, uncertainty and sorrow – and ultimately, a personal one for the writer. “If I (Márquez ) had to give a young writer some advice I would say to write about something that
has happened to him; it’s always easy to tell whether a writer is writing about something that has happened to him or something he has read or been told” (Stone 34).

As a “speaking subaltern”, Gabriel García Márquez addressed a crowd of assembled fans, admirers, and the world in general in 1982. Since his acceptance speech, one wonders if anything has changed for the better; if either “Western” notions of “ethnic” literature have evolved, or if the situation in the region has improved? More data on both issues is needed. To illustrate my primary point that without a contextual understanding, critical analysis cannot adequately discuss the literature of Latin America, an updated view of the realities of life for Latin American writers and artists is necessary.

Taking the power of definition away from those who create thus makes the literature of Latin America a “Western” construct, viewed and understood through “Western” history, culture, and experience. Spivak finds “in the face of the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” and that to counteract such a violent seizure of viewpoint/identity, “one responsibility of the critic might be to read and write so that the impossibility of such interested individualistic refusals of the institutional privileges of power bestowed on the subject is taken seriously” (75). By putting the focus on the creator of literature, rather than on the influences upon the creator of the literature, as Spivak suggests, the creator and “subject is taken seriously,” and only then can the danger of “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepreresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (87) be revealed. Therefore, the primacy of Latin American critical analysis from within the culture of Latin America must be recognized, and then translated into other languages for greater accessibility to those who wish for a more Latin American centred viewpoint of its literature. Latin-American critics should work with translators to bring their work to a wider audience, one outside the strictly Spanish-speaking world, and by doing so, demand the primacy of their interpretation and analysis of Latin American literary work. However, as I will discuss later in this thesis, these goals are hampered by the history, culture, and inherence of violence in Latin American life. For now, I will rest on the assumption that being free to define what one creates would be a positive outcome for the artists of Latin America.
Section 3: The Power of Self-Definition

3.1 Creating Art Amid Violence

If “Western” definitions of Latin American fiction are unsatisfactory, rooted in the dominant position of power over Latin America both historically and culturally, and if the term “magical realism” is unsuitable for the menagerie that is the region’s fiction, those who create art and literature must themselves define their efforts. To do so, these subalterns must speak from within their experiences of their worlds and discuss their own “outsized realities”. Of course, such “realities” shift in time and context. The context Gabriel García Márquez discussed briefly in 1982 was relevant to his viewpoint and writing. The on-going situation and struggle to create art in the region must be updated to view those of other contemporary artists.

In his speech, Gabriel García Márquez discusses the “outsized” reality of 1982, but in the present time, thirty years later, the suffering has only escalated. In Mexico alone the BBC reported in January of 2012 that in the past five years there have been 47,515 violent deaths solely related to the drug trade (Mexico Drug Wars 2). This figure excludes deaths in Mexico attributable to infant mortality, malnutrition, domestic violence, police brutality, political warfare and so on, which confronts life at the most intimate and daily level. In 2002, a report by Roberto Briceño-León and Verónica Zubillaga exposed that:

At the outset of the 21st century, the countries of the region could be classified in three groups according to the magnitude of the violence they experienced. The high-homicide group, with rates exceeding 40 per 100,000 inhabitants, included El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia. Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela fell into an intermediate group, in which homicide rates varied from 10 to 39 per 100,000 inhabitants (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 19).

Thus, since Márquez’s 1982 Nobel Lecture:

Homicide rates began to rise in almost every country of the region towards the end of the 1980s, affecting both countries with a long tradition of violence such as Colombia and others which had traditionally been peaceful like Costa Rica. This trend continued
in the 1990s, to the point where the number of victims of violence increased three to four times over the course of 20 years.

Briceño-León and Zubillaga also report that since 1998, the leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 44 was violence, again, as in Márquez’s speech, numbers so staggering as to hardly be comprehended. They point out several ways to interpret the violence of Latin America. Firstly:

One school of thought asserts that the worst form of the violence prevailing in the region is the so-called “structural violence”, in reference to the social conditions of poverty and exclusion in which a large proportion of the region’s inhabitants live. In this view, violence is inflicted by the conditions prevailing in the “structures” of society, which prevent access to basic public services and to housing, education, health care, or employment. This violence operates in routine fashion, burdening people’s daily lives and, in the long run, constraining their life chances (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 20).

The “poverty and exclusion in which a large proportion of the region’s inhabitants live” can make it easier to focus on three states of being powerless: economically, historically, and en masse. The violence is directed from within as “violence is inflicted by the conditions prevailing in the ‘structures’ of society” prevent a “large proportion” of the people of the region from not only obtaining the basic necessities of life, but by keeping their lives too burdened to try. Economically disadvantaged, this “large proportion” of the population lives hand-to-mouth, diseased and malnourished. Often, diarrhoea in children under five results in their death, the same group of children Márquez referred to in his speech. As for the historical aspects of the state of powerlessness, I will address those in a following section.

Another way violence is tied to daily life in Latin America “focuses on symbolic violence among social groups. This form of violence occurs when more powerful groups impose stigmatizing labels on other, more vulnerable, groups, and deny them social recognition” (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 20). As Spivak points out, those in a state of power see it in their best interest to identify with those who control the power above them (colonizers/politicians/the wealthy and elite) to keep the masses below them; using racism, discrimination, the denial of the availability of education, the learning of skills and trades, and political power.
And of course, violence against women, children and the elderly is also noted by Briceño-León and Zubillaga:

A different approach stresses the dimension of psychological violence. This is identified as a kind of interpersonal violence which causes no physical injury but does emotional harm…it is a type of violence which has been stressed in relation to domestic violence, violence between spouses and violence towards children or the elderly. But it is also experienced by the victims of police mistreatment, who are sometimes subjected to more simulations of aggression than actual physical attack (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 20).

Because self-definition must be taken and not granted, violence in the home and against vulnerable persons is particularly important to this discussion of understanding the context of life in Latin America. Culturally, Latin American men have several institutions which uphold their positions of power within the home – the church, the history of the “West”, their own governments, and what has been viewed as “acceptable” in the culture of Latin America. When women, either artists seeking to self-define or otherwise, are threatened, those in power over them do a double injustice. By taking away their ability to define themselves as artists they are relegated to a position even below that of a subaltern which is why, as a symptom of a repression, violence against women is particularly alarming.

Luis Alberto Urrea, a Mexican-American fiction and non-fiction writer, writes about life on the US/Mexico border in which families and individuals risk their lives in the thousands, daily, for a chance to escape life in Latin America. Urrea uses anecdotal journalism in his non-fiction book, *Across the Wire* (1993), to describe the violence against one particular girl in a neighbourhood situated in the midst of a garbage dump in Tijuana: “The men’s voices were thick; they cursed and broke glass in the dark. In the shack hid Socorro, the thirteen-year-old daughter. The men wanted her. They’d come out after dark and storm the house, trying to break through the doors and walls to get her” (36). This is not merely “a kind of interpersonal violence which causes no physical injury but does emotional harm” as Briceño-León and Zubillaga suggest, but clearly intent to rape a child by forcibly breaking into the family’s home.

Violence as part of daily life in Latin America is encouraged by racism, the hording of education, interpersonal relations, even in the home. There is a Mexican proverb that says, “Cuando haces bien, nadie lo toma en cuenta, pero cuando haces mal, todo el mundo lo sabe.”
(When you do a good deed, no one notices, but when you commit a bad deed, everyone hears about it.)” And what better way to build a reputation, but by committing violence as it is done to you? For, as another proverb recounts, “Cada quien se rascal con sus unas. (Each one should scratch himself with his own fingernails)” (Ballesteros 20).

Since the 1990s, the situation has grown more dire; due to economic recession, a slow growth period, and a high unemployment rate. The standard of living only decreased in that time “the minimum wage earned by workers in 1998 was lower than that in 1980 in 13 of the region’s 18 countries, but expectations for consumption have not gone down; rather, they have risen in the urban areas, to levels comparable to those prevailing in the USA” (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 22). Combined with the masses in poverty, the economic recession hitting even the middle and upper classes, a high rate of unemployment combined with the drug trade and high consumerism can be studied on the basis of five specific and interrelated processes:

1. The changes occurring in the drug economy; 2. The massive proliferation of firearms; 3. The similarities of the cultural patterns of violence and the emergence of an actor – the young man from a marginal neighbourhood; 4. A generalized fear among the population; and 5. Citizen support for extralegal action by the police (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 23).

Who is this “young man from a marginal neighbourhood” who adds to the “generalized fear among the population”? Could he create rather than destroy? Márquez, in News of a Kidnapping, a non-fiction book which retells the harrowing experience of ten relatives of Colombian politicians who were kidnapped in 1990 and held for several months in an attempt to force the government to block its extradition laws, explains this “young man from a marginal neighbourhood”:

The boys’ common condition was absolute fatalism. They knew they were going to die young, they accepted it, and cared only about living for the moment. They made excuses to themselves for their reprehensible work: It meant helping the family, buying nice clothes, having motorcycles, and ensuring the happiness of their mothers, whom they adored above all else in the world and for whose sakes they were willing to die. They venerated the same Holy Infant and Lady of Mercy worshipped by their captives, and prayed to them every day with perverse devotion, for they implored
their protection and forgiveness and made vows and sacrifices so that their crimes would be successful. Second only to the saints, they worshipped Rohypnol, a tranquilizer that allowed them to commit movie exploits in real life. “You mix it with beer and get high right away,” explained one guard. “Then somebody lends you a good knife and you steal a car and go for a ride. The fun is how scared they look when they hand you the keys.” They despised everything else: politicians, the government, the state, the law, the police, all of society. Life, they said, was shit (News of a Kidnapping 59-60).

These young boys, having known poverty all their lives, adopted an attitude of “absolute fatalism”, accepted their own deaths, still loved their mothers and called upon the saints when needed, and got high enough to numb their own fear while committing acts of violence. It is this “perverse devotion” to religion, and an almost necessary desensitization to life (in that “they despised everything else”) that is almost understandable as a response to the upbringing such violence, poverty and hunger must have had upon them. Márquez goes on to note, however, their humanity. “At first,” he writes, “it was impossible to tell them apart because the only thing the women could see was their masks … Each mask had a different identity, its own personality, an unmistakable voice. Even more: It had a heart” (News of a Kidnapping 60). The guards felt fear of those above them, even as they exerted their own power over their captives. Perhaps it is the lingering humanity within that fear which still might produce creativity, out of the context of great suffering.

Luis Urrea’s Across the Wire also addresses these neighbourhood kids, the children of hunger and poverty, turned violent gang members. In one slum, in the neighbourhood in a garbage dump in Tijuana, the “local criminal element was a street gang called Los Satanicos” (136) who would gather “along the edge of the ball court…They’d been sniffing glue and paint thinner” (136). In his story, the gang members are trying to flush out a “terrified head-banger in a Metallica t-shirt” (137) from out of the community youth centre in the dump. The kids, all in their young teens, “at one point, they sent an expedition that clubbed him (the head-banger) over the head with a hunk of cement” (137.) As they waited to see what the head-banger would do, “A Satanico in a dusty black trench coat pulled a six-in-long switchblade from his pocket, flicked it open. They laughed. He cut the air. “How do you like it?” he said to his invisible victim. He stabbed. “Are you still alive?” he said (138). The head-banger was trying to figure out what to do when:
Four big old-timers, maybe nineteen or twenty years old, wandered into the valley outside the clubhouse. They all wore billed caps, and had long hair. Two of them had nut-brown scars on their faces, and their shoulders rocked as they walked. The *Satanicos* stowed the knife immediately, and they shuffled nervously. The four *veteranos* swaggered into the clubhouse and scanned the kids within. They gestured at the Metallica boy: come (138).

It was then that “the *Satanicos* were suddenly revealed, in the pale light of the ball court, to be boys and girls, consumed and chastened. The one with the knife was a skinny little geek with big ears and sticks for legs” (139). These gang members, feared within the garbage dump, froze in fear themselves when faced with *older* gang kids – again, still barely out of their teens. It is this upward mobility of victimization which feeds the “young man from a marginalized neighbourhood” when food is scarce and money a dream. For the residents of the city, who are themselves also hungry and poor, the choice is between keeping their own children away from the gangs (both in fear of violence and the fear that their children will join the gangs) and surviving them to scrape together a living.

This continual state of “generalized fear” of gang violence, drug cartels, police brutality, rape, theft, murder is felt even by the populace that does not live in the grips of crushing poverty:

The probability of being victimized, even if low, is never entirely absent and the possibility always exists. Hence, imagination and fear take control of people. Fear becomes uniform because the media make information on crime a daily occurrence, and the vicarious experience of victimization is emotionally stronger than the rational calculation of the odds. Fear of being a victim of violence pervades all the inhabitants of a city, but it is not equally distributed throughout the city’s geographic area. Some parts of the city provoke more fear than others, but throughout the city fear is destroying public space; though people are even afraid in their homes, their fear is much more intense in public spaces such as the streets and mass transport facilities (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 29-30).

If an artist, seeking to create art from his/her surroundings, is not even safe in their own homes, the ability, time, and mental control needed to create and examine self-definition is greatly diminished. That fear of violence, so prevalent so as to never be “entirely absent”, is
akin to living in a constant state of warfare in which the enemy is not only invisible, superior, in a state of power over you, but who also lives next door. In such a situation, where all thought focuses on the possibility of violence even in one’s own home, to define the self, to take on a position of agency over one’s art has no place to take root. Everyone is a possible threat, and no one is safe – not even in their own homes. The threat of kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery is ever present.

In Márquez’s *News of a Kidnapping*, he retells the scene in which Maruja Pachon was taken at gunpoint (her driver shot in the head) “less than two hundred meters from the unfaced brick building where Maruja lived with her husband and one of her children” (4-5). Within sight of her home, Pachon, the daughter of a former president, riding in an armoured car was kidnapped by eight men carrying “9mm Mini-Uzi (guns) equipped with a silencer and capable of firing either single shots or fifteen rounds per second” (5). That day, “Maruja’s fears had been realized” (5). The fears realized by Maruja Pachon have never been experienced by most of the “Western” world is indicative of the contextual divide present in this argument. For Maruja Pachon, this was not paranoia, but a very real fear – realized when kidnapped at gunpoint from within sight of her own home.

Even if one is not a writer, a politician, or the daughter of an ex-Columbian president (perhaps the most dangerous position in public life in Latin America), one still has “the most common … fear of being victimized when venturing into areas other than their own neighbourhoods, such as the downtown area or other parts of the city perceived as alien, and hence, frightening” (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 30). Thus, not only are you afraid while in your home, with the television blaring “headlined articles with considerable text” (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 31) but you cannot leave your home without fearing that you will become one of those targeted. The authors of the article conclude:

In Latin America, the spread of impoverishment and the exclusion from employment provoked by globalization is reinforced by the expansion of illegal economies and the growth of illegal businesses like drug and weapons trafficking. Along with the strengthening of these illegal processes, legality and the rule of law are weakened. Public security is replaced by private security, with the upper classes relying on watchmen and bodyguards, the middle classes on personal armament and the lower classes on the creation of violent gangs or mob killings of criminals. The new patterns of informal social control, in which the most powerful prevail, are the only solutions
citizens visualize at a time when the state cannot monopolize violence, and still less exercise it legitimately (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 34).

So, if you have wealth you hire “watchmen and bodyguards.” If you are middle-class you buy a gun to protect yourself, and lower classes band together in gangs. All live in a state of continual fear, surrounding themselves with barbed wire and electrified fences, with semi-automatic weapon for safety, armed watchmen at the gates of their neighborhoods (31). Alejo Carpentier agrees by saying, “It is true that in some European nations, let us say in England, or the Scandinavian countries – a novelist can live independently of any political context, in Latin America that is impossible, our lives are intertwined with political factors, for good or bad” (Chao 55).

The problem for the masses is, really, that violence is not the end of your problems. There is still malnutrition, inadequate education, infant mortality, and a host of other horrors to fear – violence is just the tip of this “outsized” reality which Márquez discusses. How can one seek to create literature from within this continuous state of mental, physical, and cultural warfare? Which are they ways to rise above it and give it artistic expression? I seek to answer those questions by discussing the historical context of the situation to help give the readers of this thesis a fuller grounding of life in Latin America – its present and its inception.
3.2 Pigafetta’s Strange Voyage

One of the difficulties that Latin American artists encounter in defining themselves as separate from “Western” influence is deeply embedded in their own culture, in the interwoven complexities of the relationship that Latin American shares with Europe. Gabriel García Márquez, in his Nobel Peace Prize speech, alludes to a book that, “Antonio Pigafetta, a Florentine navigator who went with Magellan on the first voyage around the world, wrote, upon his passage through our southern lands of America, a strictly accurate account that nonetheless resembles a venture into fantasy” (“Gabriel Garcia Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America”). This book, First Voyage Round the World by Magellan (1915-1921), was translated from the accounts of Pigafetta by Lord Stanley of Alderley and includes not only the marvels alluded to by Márquez, but also Pigafetta’s “strange” reliance upon his Catholic faith and superstitions, and his seemingly hypocritical observations of the superstitions of the people he encountered. The juxtaposition between Pigafetta’s observations of the native peoples and the viewpoint he holds of himself serves as a good example in illustrating my argument that without a contextual understanding of either the various cultures of Latin America or its history, “Western” critics fail to satisfactorily discuss Latin American culture and literature.

To place Latin American literature within a historical context will enable us to begin to explore the ways in which Latin American artists perceive their fear, involve it within their view of history, and thus, create something not previously seen. The history of colonization in Latin America has been scrutinized by a number of sources, organizations, authors, artists, historians, and so on. I will use two references in my discussion, in consideration of the brevity of time and the limited scope of this thesis: Pigafetta’s First Voyage Around the World by Magellan (1521) and The Penguin History of the World by J.M. Roberts (1976). I have chosen these texts as the basis of my arguments because, as mentioned previously, Pigafetta’s accounts are illustrative of the mid-set of 1500s “Western” thinking which has so heavily influenced Latin American history, viewpoint, and context. By contrast, Roberts’s History of the World (1976) is an example of contemporary “Western” history; writing used to form “Western” context, and which forms the rudimentary beginnings of many people’s foundational understanding of History.

I will also refer to two non-fiction books by Luis Alberto Urrea which discuss the present situation of life on the US/Mexico border; The Devil’s Highway (2004) and Across the Wire (1993). I have chosen these particular texts because they are written by someone
who is involved in both the “Western” and Latin American world. Urrea, a dual-citizen of both Mexico and the United States presents a particular viewpoint and journalistic writing style that often bridges the gap felt keenly in this argumentation between the true context and the limits of “Western” discussion of Latin American literature.

Although there are other accounts of the conquest of Latin America, as Márquez notes in his speech, “This short and fascinating book, which even then contained the seeds of our present-day novels, is by no means the most staggering account of our reality in that age. The Chronicles of the Indies left us countless others” ("Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America"). Yet this account is singular in that Pigafetta’s views and observations are so strongly Euro-centric, and beautifully rendered in their complexities. Many of Pigafetta’s most poignant descriptions are in fact a balance sheet of the Us/Other dialectic, almost comically juxtaposed. For example, the navigator recounts an episode in which:

During times of storms the body of St. Anselme appeared to us several times; amongst others, one night that it was very dark on account of the bad weather, the said saint appeared in the form of a fire lighted at the summit of the mainmast, and remained there near two hours and a half, which comforted us greatly, for we were in tears, only expecting the hour of perishing; and when that holy light was going away from us it gave out so great a brilliancy in the eyes of each, that we were near a quarter-of-an-hour like people blinded, and calling out for mercy. For without any doubt nobody hoped to escape from that storm. It is to be noted that all and as many times as that light which represents the said St. Anselme shows itself and descends upon a vessel which is in a storm at sea, that vessel never is lost. Immediately that this light had departed the sea grew calmer, and then we saw divers sorts of birds, amongst others there were some which had no fundament (Pigafetta 42).

Pigafetta mentions the phenomenon, otherwise known as St. Elmo’s fire, several times in his accounts of the voyage. Each time he credits the St. Anselme as the saviour of the ship, the sailors, and their mortal souls. The light, “holy”, “which comforted us greatly,” left the sailors “calling out for mercy.” He does not doubt that without the saint’s help “nobody hoped to escape from that storm.” Not only does the saint save the ship from the elements at sea, but according to Pigafetta, also brings sustenance in the form of “all sorts of birds, amongst others there were some which had no fundament.” Therefore, their miraculous
salvation was believed to be a gift from God, sent in the body of a saint which took on the form of a bright light.

A few pages later in his narrative, Pigafetta recounts meeting some of the natives, “these kind of people, both men and women, are not very black, but rather brown, and they openly show their shame, and have no hair on the whole of their bodies” (45) who eat “pigs which have their navel on the back, and large birds which have their beak like a spoon” (46). These people “carry their children fastened to their neck, and they are inside a thing made of cotton in the manner of a net. I omit relating many other strange things, not to be too prolix” (46). It is these strange people who, out of kindness or a sense of hospitality perhaps, “built a house for us, as they imagined that we should remain a long time with them” (46). Pigafetta, so obviously superstitious himself, writes of these people:

It is to be known that it had not rained for two months before we came there, and the day that we arrived it began to rain, on which account the people of the said place said that we came from heaven, and had brought the rain with us, which was great simplicity, and these people were easily converted to the Christian faith. Besides the above-mentioned things which were rather simple, the people of this country showed us another, very simple; for they imagined that the small ships’ boats were the children of the ships, and that the said ships brought them forth when the boats were hoisted out to send the men hither and thither; and when the boats were along-side the ship they thought that the ships were giving them suck (47).

This author, who believed St. Elmo’s fire saved their ship and crew from a watery grave, found it “great simplicity” that these people thought the European sailors “came from heaven, and had brought the rains with them”. He found these people “rather simple” for imagining that the ships had offspring which they suckled and yet he thought carrying a child in a sling made of cotton (quite a necessity for a life lived outdoors) “strange.” Having never seen a ship of that size and construction, or the smaller rowboats which accompany larger sea-faring vessels, these people may be excused for having the “simple” imaginative ability to connect the relationship to biology (it must be noted that to say a service boat “suckles” upon the mother ship is not entirely out of keeping with the personificative terminology we use for sea-faring vessels).

Pigafetta is blind to the fact that he shares the same relationship he has with his superstitions that these people have with theirs. Thus, they are “strange” because Pigafetta
does not have the experience to understand, and so he has *defined* the people by what he views as peculiar. Without letting them speak for themselves, Pigafetta is limited in his observations of them, and in his recounting of his experiences *with* them. According to Pigafetta, these people are “strange” and to them, he is “from Heaven.” Pigafetta knows he is from Florence, not Heaven. Thus, from his perspective their superstitions are wrong, but his are entirely justified. However, he does not know, as we know now, that St. Elmo’s fire is a weather phenomenon caused by electricity.

It is this kind of culturally-specific contextual disconnection which was at the heart of Latin-American colonization which has fed into the Euro-centric / Latin-American literary dialectic. Both Pigafetta and the natives he encountered in Brazil found patterns and casual connections in weather, the voyage, and their meeting. Pigafetta credits “God, of his favour, (who) aided us” and that, in thanks “before going away, the captain chose that all should confess and receive the body of our Lord like good Christians” (57). It could be argued that a religious man sees God’s hand in his life, as Pigafetta saw it in his own survival, but the sceptic only perceives random patterns and casual connections.

The real point of argument here concerns the epistemological framework, and the production of knowledge. Pigafetta, inhibiting a position of power and thus able to define these people, just as “Western” critics today are able to define Latin American literature because of their position of power, was able to define “truth” and his paradigm as “correct” and “valid”. As Michel Foucault points out in *Powers*, that position of power which Pigafetta inhibits has no one focal point, but “a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies’ (‘Powers’ 142). Pigafetta’s position of power, a power relationship he shares with his fellows on the ship, and their belief-system stems from their own history, viewpoint, and relationship to other cultures and histories. They are ideologically-bound. By forcing his own assumptions and explanations onto a civilization previously unknown to Europeans and presenting those to the reader he subverts that ‘unknown’ civilization into a definition of which they had no part.

Can critical analysis of a Euro-centric nature combine these opposites expressed clearly in Pigafetta’s accounts: a culture in which religion as a “Faith” is now often seen as out-dated versus a culture in which Christianity found a willing, welcoming population (already superstitious and religious) who not only historically, but presently, sustain themselves in absorbing and re-appropriating their beliefs within Christianity? Can both be seen as “valid”? Ultimately, can critical analysis which ignores these questions legitimately
theorize and discuss a work of fiction removed from the context in which it is enmeshed? Or is it entwined inseparably within the constraints of its culture; linguistically and historically.

In *The Penguin History of the World* (1976), J.M. Roberts dedicates only 6 scant pages in his 1109 page History to the colonization of the American continent, which includes the involvement of Conquistadors, the Church, and the exodus of resources from the Caribbean. Nevertheless, the seeds of the struggles of present-day Latin America can be deciphered from even this short inclusion. He writes: “It was soon clear that the conquest of American lands was attractively easy by comparison with the struggles to win north Africa from the Moors, which had immediately followed the fall of Granada and the completion of the Reconquest on the Spanish mainland” (Roberts 618). And he notes, “The first Spaniards in the islands were often Castilian gentry, poor, tough and ambitious,” and had several factors on their side, as “the people upon whom they advanced were technologically primitive, easily impressed by the gunpowder, steel and horses” and “very susceptible to imported diseases” (Roberts 619) not to mention ruled by the cruel Aztecs and thus “were happy to welcome the new conquerors as liberators or at least as a change of masters.” Still, Roberts goes on to say, “Nevertheless, in the end their own toughness, courage and ruthlessness were the decisive factors” (Roberts 619).

An account of the domination of Latin America could not be more Euro-centric than this. Firstly, Roberts makes it quite clear that the subjugation of these trusting Indians, who had been subjugated previously by the Aztecs (a culture who practiced blood sacrifice, and slavery) was “welcome” to them and that if their hopes of being “liberated” by the Spanish did not work out, at least they could look forward to “at least a change of masters”. It must be pointed out that these Indians are the very same who fought the dominant Aztecs to their own near extinction over land and resources, and were then killed and enslaved by them, as were their wives and children. And yet, Roberts speaks of them as though they were a mindless mass of doting children, easily impressed by gunpowder and horses. Even now, it is not hard to be “easily impressed” by gunpowder, as the crowd reaction to the One O’clock Gun from Edinburgh Castle will attest. Such reactions are trained out of soldiers, drilled even in the present day to withstand being “easily impressed” by the brutal ear-shattering force of “gunpowder.”

Secondly, what kind of alliance would it be to “accept a change of masters”? “Master” is not synonymous with “ally.” Certainly, these Indian tribes were hoping the Spanish would annihilate the Aztecs, but also they were they hoping to have a hand in that retribution. Thus, to credit the Spanish “toughness, courage and ruthlessness” as being the “decisive factors” of
the colonization of Latin America is to discount several other factors, some of which are mentioned by Pigafetta in his accounts, and is a gross misrepresentation of the situation – one more way the “West” has viewed its role in History. What of the other problems implanted by the Spanish into the heart of Latin America? Briefly, I will mention Roberts’ explanation of the situation, which has the appearance of authority, as it explains a Euro-centric phenomenon. “Centuries of Moorish occupation,” Roberts writes:

Had accustomed the Spanish and Portuguese to the idea of living in a multi-racial society. There soon emerged in Latin America a population of mixed blood…though the establishment of racially mixed societies over huge areas was one of the enduring legacies of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, these societies were stratified along racial lines. The governing classes were always the Iberian-born and the creoles, persons of European blood born in the colonies. As time passed, the latter came to feel that the former, called peninsulares, excluded them from key posts and were antagonistic towards them. From the creoles there led downwards a blurred incline of increasing gradations of blood to the poorest and most oppressed, and these were always the pure Indians (621).

Several ideas should be explored in Roberts’ sweeping explanation of the birth of class-stratified racism in Latin America. Firstly, that the establishment of “racially mixed societies” was an “enduring legacy” must be addressed. A “legacy” is generally a positive term denoting a continuing state of existence. A legacy must be protected from incursion and devaluation. Thus, by using the terminology “enduring legacy” Roberts is making clear that he views this state as positive.

Secondly, that “from the creoles there led downwards a blurred incline of increasing gradations” involves a degradation, the word “downwards”, to denote the state of creole to that of Indian. Why use this imagery to explain this state of interracial bloodlines? Again, to imply a “Western” ideal. To view a spectrum of people with mixed blood from the top (creoles) to the bottom (“pure” Indians) is to reinforce the power structure in play. Of course, Roberts isn’t alone in using the imagery to explain a state that has existed for several hundred years – he is simply repeating the status quo. That status quo that lives within the breast of every Latin American, every sale of whitening cream, every song which evokes the longing to be other than “morena (brown)” or “negrita (little black girl).” Roberts’ detachment from the Latin American situation, from within his “Western” viewpoint, makes the phrase, “these
societies were stratified along racial lines,” possible, while Latin Americans experience this stratification maintained at the point of a gun, either at the top of the stratification or the bottom.

Roberts also briefly addresses the exploitation of the native population. He mentions that:

From the start, the Spanish monarchy believed it had a moral and Christian mission in the New World. Laws were passed to protect the Indians and the advice of churchmen was sought about their rights and what could be done to secure them. But America was far away, and enforcement of laws difficult. It was all the harder to protect the native population when a catastrophic drop in its numbers created a labour shortage (622).

Roberts goes on to, even more briefly, examine the small pox epidemic that decimated the native population a short time after Spanish incursion began and the involvement of the Church in Latin America, but I think it is important that I address the ironic juxtaposition of the two ideas above. Firstly, that “from the start, the Spanish monarchy believed it had a moral and Christian mission in the New World. Laws were passed to protect the Indians and the advice of churchmen was sought about their rights and what could be done to secure them” and that “It was all the harder to protect the native population when a catastrophic drop in its numbers created a labour shortage.” In effect, the Spanish crown believed it to be on the right hand of God Almighty and therefore could be excused for its brute and overwhelming enslavement of a continent of people for its own gain, which is what Roberts’ carefully worded phrase implies. Without understanding the context, a “Western” audience is given to understand that “Western” powers are to be forgiven their incursion into Latin America as it was simply for its own good.

Within this context, a reading of Latin American literature denigrates to the use of terms such as “magical”, “imaginative”, and “ethic”. To juxtapose that obvious rationalization of violence with the difficulties the conquering force had with a labour shortage because of the epidemic of small pox is enlightening. The native population is only worth what it can produce (and by dying, causes a labour shortage) which is excusable because the Spanish monarchy was only acting in the interests of what it believed to be correct at that point in history.
The implications of what this “post-colonial” involvement has brought about for the millions living in poverty in Latin America in the present day are discussed in *Across the Wire* (1993), where Luis Urrea invites the reader to:

Imagine poverty, violence, natural disasters, or political fear driving you away from everything you know. Imagine how bad things get to make you leave behind your family, your friends, your lovers; your home, as humble as it might be; your church, say. Let’s take it further – you’ve said good-bye to the graveyard, the dog, the goat, the mountains where you first hunted, your grade school, your state, your favourite spot on the river where you fished and took time to think. Then you come hundreds – or thousands – of miles across territory utterly unknown to you... You have walked, run, hidden in the backs of trucks, spent part of your precious money on bus fare... Various features of your journey north might include police corruption; violence in the forms of beatings, rape, murder, torture, road accidents; theft; incarceration... In town, you face endless victimization if you aren’t street-wise. The police come after you, street thugs come after you, petty criminals come after you; strangers try your door at night as you sleep... You’re in the worst part of town (Tijuana), but you can comfort yourself – at least there are no death squads here. There are no torturers here, or bandit land barons riding into your house. This is the last barrier, you think, between you and the United States – *los Yunaites Estaites* (*Across the Wire* 12-14).

How can “Western” readers fully understand a people who desperately try and reach a safe haven, who think, even in Tijuana, a city which is “a city that has always thrived on taking advantage of a sucker,” that “at least there are not death squads here”? Artists, writers, musicians are amongst those Urrea writes of, who have said farewell to their “favourite spot on the river” and brave insurmountable violence and odds, to write literature, create art and yet are denied the right to define for themselves and their own work.

This is the “legacy” of “post-colonialism”. Urrea, born in Tijuana to a Mexican father and American mother, and raised between San Diego and Tijuana, writes, “Slowly, it became obvious that nobody outside the experience understood it.” As a young man, Urrea went to work in the “Borderlands” with a team of missionaries, and admits, “I never intended to be a missionary. I didn’t go to church, and I had no reason to believe I’d be involved with a bunch of Baptists” (*Across the Wire* 21). In two of his non-fiction books detailing the horrors
of life on the US/Mexico border, *The Devil’s Highway* (2004) and *Across the Wire* (1993), Urrea describes the context in which Latin American literature springs. He echoes the statistics report of Roberto Briceño-León and Verónica Zubillaga when he writes, “In many Latin American countries, too much attention can get you killed” (*Across the Wire* 169). He equates life on the US/Mexico border with war. “When I was younger,” he writes in the prologue to *Across the Wire*:

I went to war. The Mexican border was the battlefield. There are many Mexico’s…I, and the people with me, fought on a specific front. We sustained injuries and witnessed deaths. There were machine guns pointed at us, knives, pistols, clubs, even skyrockets. I caught a street-gang member trying to stuff a lit cherry bomb into our gas tank. On the same night, a drunk mariachi opened fire on the missionaries through the wall of his house. We drove five beat-up vans. We were armed with water, medicine, shampoo, food, clothes, milk, and doughnuts. At the end of a day, like returning veterans from other battles, we carried secrets in our hearts that kept some of us awake at night, gave others dreams and fits of crying. Our faith sustained us – if not in God or “good,” then in our work (*Across the Wire* 9-10).

And there it is again - a writer’s “faith.” The “secrets” carried “in our hearts” may have kept “some of us awake” but it nursed Urrea’s creative abilities as well. Luis Urrea, in addition to his non-fiction work, has also produced a work which in parts could be classified as “magical realism” but is much more like Carpentier’s “lo maravioso real”. Urrea’s novel, a historical fiction work entitled, *The Hummingbird’s Daughter*, details the emergence of a local saint over one hundred years ago on the Hacienda which the Urrea’s ancestors controlled. As a “legacy” of “Western” colonialism and by accident of birth, Luis Urrea occupies a position of privilege (as a Mexican-born American man living between two cultures) and as such cannot speak “for” the subaltern. And yet, from within his non-fiction books, by using the lens of journalism, Urrea achieves the difficult task of letting them speak for themselves. Acting as “scribe” Urrea tells the stories of families living in the garbage dumps of Tijuana. Sometimes humorous, sometimes tragic. One conversation, between Urrea and a man called Pepe, went:

As we walked, he asked, “How do you feel about smoking?”
“1 don’t do it.”
“Yes, but what do you think of it?”
“It’s bad for your health?” I offered. Exasperated, he said, “Yeah, yeah. But do you think it’s a sin?” “No…” “Good!” he sighed, pulling a pack of Camels from his pocket. (Across the Wire 101).

And other times, people tell him they’re afraid, they’re lonely, they mourn their losses.

“The baby wouldn’t come out,” she said. She looked at her feet. “The doctor got up under my chi-chis and pushed on him after I tried for a few hours.” “He sat on your abdomen?” She nodded. “Si. They got up on my chest and shoved on me. And then the doctor had to get down there and pull me open because the baby was black and we were both dying.” She swayed. I jumped up and took her arm, trying to get her into the chair. “It hurts,” she said. She smiled. “It’s hard to sit.” I got her down. “They stuck iron inside me. They pulled him out with tools, and I’m scared because I’m fat down there. I’m still all fat.” She couldn’t look at me; she bowed her head (Across the Wire 41-42).

Between the gangs roaming the dump, inadequate medical attention and poverty live the people on the border between two worlds. There is an example from Across the Wire where at a Red Cross clinic in downtown Tijuana, the medical student attending the birth of Negra’s daughter “made a mistake, and Negra was sliced deeply…she nearly bled to death on the delivery table” (Across the Wire 188-189). Between domestic violence, scabies, ringworm, dysentery, Urrea writes, “We Mexicans wake the dead” (154). “Anything can happen…Whole neighborhoods appear and disappear seemingly overnight” (20).

And yet, still, there is poetry in everything, and history to the context. “In ancient days,” Urrea reminds us, “the Rain God was fed by the tears of the innocent” (The Devil’s Highway 207.) “Tohono O’Odham poet Ofelia Zepeda has pointed out that rosaries and Hail Marys don’t work out here. “You need a new kind of prayers,” she says, “to negotiate with this land’” (The Devil’s Highway 5-6).

It is that “new kind of prayer” that is needed to allow the meaningful dialogue which must stem from both a contextual understanding of the literature of Latin American and its critical implications in the wider arena of “World” literature. Without the ability to self-define, the work of many Latin American writers can easily be dismissed as “folkloric” or
“native”, or inaugurated as “magical realism” even when clearly not representative of “the marvellous”.
3.3: Taking the Power of Self-definition.

For those within the position of power, as Spivak points out, allowing the subaltern to speak for itself, either as Urrea does by acting as “scribe” or as Márquez by retelling his own childhood, is necessary. Only those who create literature should be the ones to define what they have created. The power of self-definition, however, cannot be given, but must be taken. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Paulo Freire discusses social change through literature and other means. It is interesting that Freire uses the term “magical” to talk about the difficulty peasants had in seeking their freedom from oppression:

> As long as their ambiguity persists, the oppressed are reluctant to resist, and totally lack confidence in themselves. They have a diffuse, magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor. The magical force of the landowner’s power holds particular sway in the rural areas. A sociologist friend of mine tells of a group of armed peasants in a Latin American country who recently took over a *latifundium*. For tactical reasons, they planned to hold the landowner as hostage. But not one peasant had the courage to guard him; his very presence was terrifying. It is also possible that the act of opposing the boss provoked guilt feelings. In truth, the boss was ‘inside’ them (39-40).

Freire’s use of “magical” here is of relevance to my argument. If “Western” trained Latin American writers produce work which is analysed by “Western” literary critics by the “yardstick” of “Western” ideals, then surely, those Latin American writers seeking to break out of those constraints will find their work must “hijack” the literary scene. Those in positions of power above the “native” writer are, by their mere presence, “magical” themselves, and fearful. In Freire’s example, the Latin American peasants found the landowner’s power “magical” and their “magical belief” in his “invulnerability”, much as novice writers may feel when they read published “Western” literature. When these writers survive the odds of their situation, begin to create literature, and then go on to find that “Western” literature is in a place of prominence above their work before they have even begun to reach their potential as writers, it is only the most dedicated who will continue to create.

As Freire continues on to say, “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become ‘beings for
themselves’ (48). Freire suggests we do so by continuing the conversation as ones responsible for their own definition:

Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world; in order to name the world…Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression. If it is in speaking their word that men transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the participants in the discussion. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between men who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth. Because dialogue is an encounter among men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some men name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one man by another (61-62 Italics mine).

I have italicised certain ideas that I find most illuminating for my argument against using “Euro-centric”, “Western” terminology such as “magical realism” to describe Latin American literature. Firstly, Freire discusses the “dialogue”, which certainly applies to authentic literary endeavours, which has been denied to those who have been the subject of “dehumanizing aggression.” By reclaiming this right, “men achieve significance as men.” Secondly, this act of reclaiming their right to engage in dialogue cannot be given or “deposited”, but must be the “imposition of their own truth.” Therefore, the subaltern cannot be allowed to speak, but must demand to speak.

To define “their own truth”, the subaltern must take on the task of defining its’ own literature, and thereby engage in that “act of creation” of which Freire speaks. Until then, recalling Faulkner’s Nobel speech, the writer, “labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.” Or, as Alejo Carpentier would perhaps
urge, the writer who demands not to be heard has no “faith” in his art. And what is needed is not only the writer’s “faith” in his own art, but in himself and his culture. As Márquez observes, “What was really sad is that cultural colonialism is so bad in Latin America that it was impossible to convince the Latin Americans themselves that their own novels were good until people outside told them they were” (Stone 51).

Those who create must demand the right of self-definition, and those who create what it is impossible to define without proper context must surely be the marginalized writers’ of Latin American descent, first generation immigrants of “Western” nations and their children. As with the peasants Freire discusses, many writers find their voice through small community-based organizations and non-profit ventures such as Macondo Writer’s Foundation, established in San Antonio in 1998. Macondo seeks to work with “dedicated and compassionate writers who view their work and talents as part of a larger task of community-building and non-violent social change. We are poets, novelists, journalists, performance artists, and creative writers of all genres whose work is socially-engaged” (Macondo home page). Its mission “begun in 1998 by writer Sandra Cisneros and named after the town in Gabriel Garcia Márquez ’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, the week-long workshop transforms San Antonio, Texas - and more broadly, La Frontera - into a space of intense artistic and cultural creativity” (Macondo home page). Workshops like Macondo and the foundation that has grown from it are important steps in establishing a collective of “native” writers free to define their own literature.

However, as well-intentioned as these Workshops can be, by using “Macondo” as their touchstone, the expectation that these workshops will produce more Marquez-like writers is unfortunate. The writer-in-question, having created a sincere work of literature and proceeding to publication often finds that “magical realism” is the only space he/she is allowed to inhabit. The power of definition has been taken by publishers who know that “ethnic” literature sells, and that only “ethnic” writers with Latin American surnames will be seen as genuine purveyors of “ethnic” literature. Thus, the ability to define one’s work is curtailed in both directions. Only “Western” names may write genre fiction, and only Latin names may write “magical realism”, or other “ethnic” literature.

Therefore, Latino/a writers find their surnames to be publishing obstacles if they do not conform to the “magical realist” style. Arnaldo Lopez, Jr. is one such writer. The author of Chickenhawk (2008), a thriller involving a sexually deviant serial killer and the cops hot on his trail, Lopez changed his name to Arnold Wolf because he “had several major
publishers reject a manuscript with the advice that I should write "Magical Realism" specifically since I am a Latino” (Lopez).

His experience, while not unique, exposes the ironic difficulty Latino/a writers face after the sweeping popularity of “magical realism” when they do not write “ethnic” literature or “magical realism”. Lopez goes on to explain that,

In order to be taken seriously, most contemporary Latino writers, myself included, have had to sit through meetings or phone calls, or read emails, where the publisher/editor/agent tells you that your work is good, but, "Can you write something like Márquez?" First, it was that "Magical Realism" thing, every publisher, editor, or agent that I sent it to said they liked it but asked me if I had something in the realm of "Magical Realism" instead. It drove me nuts! Then, a MAJOR New York publisher really liked it [Chickenhawk] and was on the verge of buying it when their marketing director stated that it would be a tough book to market or sell because he couldn't tell if it was a, "Crime novel or ethnic novel." That's exactly what he said! The publishing house then politely declined any further discussion or consideration of Chickenhawk. (Lopez).

Lopez remembers one editor saying his name was "so ethnic sounding and most readers would be put off from even picking up the novel once they saw my name - they wouldn't even be able to pronounce it” (Lopez). Unable to define his own work because his last name was so “ethnic” and “unpronounceable”, Lopez approached publishers under the pseudonym Arnold Wolf and was published by PublishAmerica in 2008.

The irony that Latino/a writers, “in order to be taken seriously” are obliged by publishers to write “something like Márquez” is dispiriting. Gabriel García Márquez is a brilliant writer, but in the end, Márquez writes himself. It was his popularity, and that of other “Boom” writers, which brought such world-wide acclaim to his style and thus brought publishers sales, ensuring the future success of imitation Márquez-like tomes. To be thus trapped within this allotted definition of one’s abilities is a great disservice, a reductive measure which forces future writers to either toe the line and write “ethnic” literature, change their names as Lopez has done, or stay unpublished.
Conclusion to An Outsized Reality: How “Magical Realism” Hijacked Latin American Literature

For publishers to ask contemporary writers such as Arnaldo Lopez, Jr. to write “something like Márquez” comes at the end of a long literary history in which “Western” critics posit their observations above all else. The many years spent trying to compartmentalize and explain the “magic” of novels like One Hundred Years of Solitude has culminated in a uniquely difficult situation; asking writers to produce novels of a certain style because of their names and cultural backgrounds. The literature of Latin America is a rich and unique combination of identity, history and culture. The product of revolutions, uprisings, repressions and conquest, it is violent and beautiful, native and cosmopolitan. It is not a region that fits neatly into any one box or label, and its literature even less so.

It is often said that there are many Mexico’s. The same is true for all of Latin America; there are many perspectives within the region and due to the influx of immigration to the United States and farther north to Canada, the Latin American diaspora grows more complex. According to the US Census Bureau there are 52 million people of Latin American origin living in the United States, 16.7% of the total US population (State & Country 1). Within this complex group of people there is the yearning for home, but also the recognition that battling drug cartels and government corruption, racial inequality and violence is no way to raise a family. Many people who identify themselves within the Latin American diaspora continue to speak their native languages in their homes and to their children. Some of those children go on to attend universities and become professional writers, artists and literary critics themselves.

A new terminology is needed. Twenty-first century criticism should take into account this diaspora and its attempts at self-definition. “Western” literary criticism should allow for more than simply the term “magical realism” to dominate the discussion of Latin American literature. The literature, which springs from the diaspora of Latin America, is written with Latin American themes and cultural context, in English, for an English-speaking audience. While the literature from Latin America continues to evolve, so does the hyphenated literature of its dispersed children.

I have discussed the history and limitations of the term “magical realism”, Alejo Carpentier’s attempt at defining his work, the disconnect between “Western” perceptions and Latin American reality, both historically and presently. It is my strong conviction that when an entire body of literature is uniquely diverse it is immediately problematized and neatly
placed into a category to be discussed as though it were not a living, breathing, evolving entity. However, the fact remains that as the diaspora grows, and as the turmoil of the region intensifies, art also grows and intensifies alongside the people.

Alejo Carpentier, before his death in 1980, told Ramon Chao that;

Our lives are intertwined with political factors, for good or bad, for tragedy or moments of grandeur or grand victories, that we cannot disregard or be outside this epic context, and we cannot discuss the man, pluck him out of the political environment with tweezers and put him on a table and say, “I am going to study this man alone.” The human being must be studied in relation to his group, depending on the praxis, and from his position from within his human context. We need to see where he goes and what he wants, and when we can place a human in this context we arrive at the epic novel (55-56).

This “epic context” is the panorama of the “grandure” of Latin American history and culture. I agree that we cannot simply “pluck him out…with tweezers and put him on a table.” If we study humanity, and the literature we create, it must be studied “in relation to his group, depending on the praxis, and from his position from within his human context.” To ignore this delicate balance between us, our culture and history, and our literature is to invite the “denominating” Carpentier warned against. To overuse the term “magical realism” is reductive, and only serves to stymie a sincere discussion of contemporary Latin American literature.
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