

MAGICAL REALISM AND THE DESERT OF THE SOUTHWEST

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Magical realism seems paradoxical, implying a reality that contains a contradictory duality. This paradox is displayed in classic and recent works of fiction set in the American Southwest, notably, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Alfredo Véa, Jr.'s *La Maravilla* (1993). This duality in the texts is achieved by depicting reality not as uncanny or purely fantastic, but as being supplemented by the imagination. The magical threads of a narrative woven into the fabric of reality seem to allow the reader to suspend disbelief. By the author's infusing reality with the supernatural or fantastic, the reader is able to accept the implausibility of a work to an extent that allows a glimpse into an uncommon perspective. Magical realism is prevalent in the writing of the American Southwest because it is useful as a tool for conveying modes of thought not generally subscribed to by Western thinkers. For example, many of the indigenous peoples of the Southwest think of time as cyclical, wherein patterns repeat, while Western thinking conceives time as linear, the past is behind, never to be revisited and the future is ahead. It becomes difficult to describe these ideas in English, or Spanish for that matter, because often no terms exist for these concepts that are foreign to Western thinking. This is a primary reason that writers of the Southwest have adopted magical realism. Even more than simply a device for conveying a worldview peculiar to non-western thinking, magical realism is also a tool for subverting the assimilation of cultures outside of the western paradigm. Writing in English and in the novel form, asserting the indigenous cultures are valid modes of thought, serves to preserve the heritage of those cultures, while combating assimilation.

Magical realism as a literary movement did not spring up in the desert of the Southwest, but has its roots in Latin America. Writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges developed a technique for incorporating elements of a seemingly magical nature into the western idea of reality. It may be said that the Latin American movement sought to communicate non-western ideas about the nature of reality, and it is for this reason that writers of the Southwest have taken up magical realism. It is important to note, however, that even before magical realism became a literary movement, its elements existed in the literature of the Southwest. Willa Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) possesses qualities akin to what is now deemed magical realism. Manuel Broncano describes Cather's depiction as "the only viable representational mode for coping with the complex reality of the American Southwest" (126). This "complex reality" is twofold. First, there is something inherently magical about the landscape of the desert. The Sphinx and her riddles in the Egyptian desert and Moses's wanderings in Exodus are prime examples. Jesus was out in the desert fasting when the Devil appeared to him. The desert has always been a source of mystery and unreality and the desert of the American Southwest is no exception.

Secondly, the cultures indigenous to the Southwest understand reality as subjective. Ideas of time and the relationship of humans to the land, which do not exist in western thinking, abound in the desert of the Southwest. Life is viewed as an interconnected web, in which humans are an integral thread. Depending on one's relationships within the web, reality may take on different levels of interconnectivity. Time is relative to the individual in that one is seen to be an extension, or continuation of one's ancestors.

The purpose of conveying these perspectives is not to put on display for Western readers exotic Indian tidbits for consumption, for this would amount to little more than a form of orientalizing exploitation. What Silko and Véa are attempting is to undermine the Western mode of thinking that has been impressed upon the land. Véa, a defense attorney working with minorities, was motivated by a desire to mitigate the racism he had witnessed in the courtroom. "I had never before experienced such an openly racist judge and prosecutor. . . . I left the courtroom after telling the judge he was an honorless cretin . . . went to my hotel room and began writing my first novel [*La Maravilla*]" (qt. in Helfman 5). In a 1985 interview, Silko stated, "the most effective political statement I could make is in my artwork. I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation" (qtd. in Arnold 63). By asserting the

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validity of seemingly magical viewpoints held by the indigenous peoples of the Southwest, a resistance to western assimilation is created. The Yaqui have a long history of resistance, from fighting the Aztecs, the Spanish and the Mexican revolutionaries to their present-day struggle to remain independent of the influence of western culture. The voice Véa gives the Yaqui says, "We were not the Aztecas . . . now, we are not you" (9). The Western perspective tends to trivialize the cultures it assimilates as something that can be learned about, rather than learned from. What magical realists strive to accomplish is to preserve their culture in the midst of American colonization by bringing these ideas inside of the Western paradigm, which considers them outsiders.

The challenges that Southwest writers face are those of attempting to convey, in a European manner of thought and execution (i.e., the novel), ideas and beliefs of a people who operate within a disparate paradigm. Silko's challenge was to delineate the Laguna design of the world as an interconnected web, as well as the role oral tradition plays in Pueblo society. Indigenous peoples of North America, unburdened by the European concepts of time and religion, have developed ideas about the cycles of life and the interconnectivity of all things which are difficult to comprehend in Western thinking. For Véa, the obstacles included a notion of time outside of time and its connection to the altered states of consciousness that the Yaqui induced through the ritual use of peyote. Ruth Shonle, in "Peyote, the Giver of Visions," asserts that the "mysterious and seemingly magical vision-giving power and the curative properties which peyote is believed to possess have made it the center of elaborate religious ceremonies" (59). When asked whether the fantastic element of his writing could undermine the realism, Véa replied, "Only if [one's] cultural walls begin and end with Germanic or Anglo-Saxon religions, the Puritans, or other manifestations of ultra-linear, confirmation-biased thinking. As a matter of reality, my childhood as a Yaqui and Mexican child was even more fantastical than almost anything I have ever written" (qtd. in Helfman 5). Writers attempting to depict the mystical nature of the Southwestern desert and the web of life as envisioned by Native Americans have embraced magical realism as a tool for translating the unreality experienced in the desert into something concrete, like a novel.

In *Ceremony*, Silko fuses Native American oral traditions in the form of poetry with narrative prose in a manner that facilitates growth of understanding in both Native American and Western readers. James Ruppert asserts, "*Ceremony* must translate contemporary Western discourse into Native discourse, and vice versa," and goes on to say that

“to satisfy the discourse expectations of both audiences, Silko must restructure how each values truth, reality, and knowledge” (130). Through restructuring of reality, Silko is able to capture for the non-Indian reader the essence of the Laguna’s worldview, one in which the world is “made of stories” (Silko 95). These stories, which traditionally take the form of oral histories, serve to connect the Laguna to their history but also, as is shown by Tayo, bear relevance to individuals in the present. As William Murphy states in his analysis of oral literature, “folklore is a form of therapy serving to meet the psychological needs of individuals” (120). The interwoven creation stories initially are disjunctive and seem separate from the narrative. As the novel progresses, the old stories begin to echo events in the present and foretell possibilities for the future. Tayo’s well-being is tied up in the creation stories as they begin to reflect his story so that he can only become whole again by completing the ceremony, which had “started a long time ago” (Silko 145). In this manner, the traditional oral stories of the Laguna illustrate the repetition of time as it progresses in a cyclical manner. There are, however, variations to the patterns, for “growth keeps the ceremonies strong . . . things which don’t shift and grow are dead things” (Silko 126). Silko takes Tayo’s struggles even further saying, “his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (Silko 126), effectively linking his battle to regain sanity with the fate of his people and that of the Earth itself.

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time. (Silko 246)

Tayo’s struggles, grounded in reality, take on a magical nature as he is woven into the patterns of the Laguna stories. In this manner, magical realism is used to illustrate the beliefs of the Laguna that all things are connected, in this case by the oral traditions.

The problem faced in writing about the mystical aspects of the desert lie in relating that which, according to Walter Houston Clark, is “at its core is a perception of the world so different from what is usually called reality that mystics universally [fail] in conveying its nature to those who have not enjoyed some measure of mystical perception

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themselves" (4). Véa grounds the mystical experience in the ordinary as Beto sits at his grandfather Manuel's feet watching him, apparently napping in a rocking chair. "Yes, the old man was rocking in his chair, the furrows on his salty brow irrigated and shining; but the tension clear on the stretched eyelids indicated something else" (10). The "something else" is only understood after Beto has taken part in a coming-of-age ceremony with his Yaqui grandfather, in which peyote is used as a sacrament. Beto experiences flying as a hawk connected to his body by a "slender thread [that] could be stretched out endlessly between the shaking, shivering boy in the black desert and the hawk that now followed numberless geometrical grids" (224), an act similar to that which Manuel experienced while rocking in his chair. The visions induced by peyote are described by Véa as "the dream that connects" (222) the past, present and future. Manuel describes this notion of time's interconnectedness as being revealed by the peyote ceremony, telling Beto, "I have next to no time at all to be with you, but if you learn what we have to tell you, in a way, I will have all the time there is" (Véa 219). During the ceremony, Beto meets his grandfather as a boy and is told by the younger Manuel, "If I look forward . . . and you look backward, we can always meet right here" (227). Véa is describing a notion of time that exists outside of time, where past, present and future collide. While the perception of time may seem to move forward, there is a "place to sit and look" from which one can "see when and where [they] have been since time started out" (218). Magical realism is used here to provide a basis in which the perception of time and space is conveyed in an uncommon manner.

While Silko and Véa's novels effectively capture the essence of the Laguna and Yaqui worldview, they have varying degrees of success in their political aims. *Ceremony* closes with a fairy-tale ending. The loose ends are tied up too easily, skirting the issues based in reality, which continue to affect the land and the people on it. The final confrontation between Tayo and Emo takes place near an abandoned uranium mine, where Silko seems poised to make use of magical realism to draw attention to the U.S. Government's irresponsible handling and cleanup of radioactive material, by depicting "witchery's final ceremonial sand painting," but stops short declaring that "human beings were one clan again" (246). Tayo, after completing the ceremony, is reintegrated into Pueblo society, healthy and happy. "Every evil / which entangled him / was cut / to pieces" (258). The witchery that had threatened "the fate of all living things, and even the earth" (246) is quashed. Véa, however, ends on a much grimmer note, indicating the

need for a continuous struggle against assimilation. Beto, no longer a child, becomes Alberto as his mother returns to claim him. As they speed towards California to join the migrant work camps, his mother, spouting racial slurs, proclaims, "This is the twentieth century and this is America. Nobody believes in . . . stupid superstitions and dumb stories anymore" (293). Beto's mother, like many Americans, too readily dismisses the magical aspects of the desert and its people in favor of progress and the advancement of Western civilization. Beto's grandmother's parting advice offers a glimmer of hope, or at least a focal point for the struggle that must continue: "Keep yourself, mijo" (305).

There are limits to language, inadequacies in conveying the spiritual nature of reality, which are overcome by the use of magical realism. Eugene Arva in "Writing the Vanishing Reality" contends, "magical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death" (61). But how are these unrealities placed alongside reality in a manner that makes them believable? Arva suggests, "readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by side in a kaleidoscopic reality" (60). Perhaps magical realism is only a term used by those who do not see the magic in reality. For the Laguna and Yaqui, however, these novels might read as realism, true to life accounts of their perceptions of reality. Traditional Laguna do view all life as interconnected, a web spun by stories, while the Yaqui do see time as proceeding in nonlinear fashion. By the authors having constructed their work in a manner that allows for the willful suspension of disbelief, perhaps the reader, too, can perceive reality in these ways.

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