

PRACTICAL MAGIC: MAGICAL REALISM  
AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF REPRESENTATION  
IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
FICTION AND FILM

by

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT:

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Reflecting the paradoxical nature of its title, magical realism is a complicated term to define and to apply to works of art. Some writers and critics argue that classifying texts as magical realism essentializes and exoticizes works by marginalized authors from the latter part of the twentieth-century, particularly Latin American and postcolonial writers, while others consider magical realism to be nothing more than a marketing label used by publishers. These criticisms along with conflicting definitions of the term have made classifying contemporary works that employ techniques of magical realism a challenge. My dissertation counters these criticisms by elucidating the value of magical realism as a narrative mode in the twenty-first century and underlining how magical realism has become an appealing means for representing contemporary anxieties in popular culture. To this end, I analyze how the characteristics of magical realism are used in a select group of novels and films in order to demonstrate the continued significance of the genre in modern art. I compare works from Tea Obreht and Haruki Murakami, examine the depiction of adolescent females in young adult literature, and discuss the environmental and apocalyptic anxieties portrayed in the films *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Take*

*Shelter*, and *Melancholia*. I argue that the definition of magical realism must expand beyond the canonical works of the twentieth century, like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight's Children*, and *Beloved*, to name a few, to include twenty-first century texts that are addressing current issues and anxieties.

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## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER 1

NECESSARY MAGIC: EVALUATING THE FUNCTION OF MAGICAL REALISM IN THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I am sure there is Magic in everything, only we have not sense enough to get a hold of it and make it do things for us.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

I shot the Narrator of the Latin American Boom, who kept rewriting my diary. Always telling me what to think, what to do, what to write! He was such a nuisance. Once he was out of the way, my thoughts flowed freely onto the pages.

Tess O'Dwyer, "Translator's Notes" in *Empire of Dreams*

The lateral thinking of magical realism expands our perceptions of what on earth reality is about.

Gary McMahon

According to Frederic Jameson in his 1986 essay "On Magical Realism and Film," the appeal of magical realism is derived from a "strange seductiveness" that is maintained through a combination of realism and the fantastic—a combination of which the audience may or may not be aware (129). Nearly twenty years later, in the prologue to her book *Magical Realism and Deleuze*, Eva Aldea affirms that the "strange seductiveness" Jameson identified continues to fascinate readers:

Since being introduced to magical realism through the short stories of Julio Cortazar, many years ago, I have always wanted to know why magical realism has been so fascinating and tantalizing a genre for me and so many other readers. What exactly is it that makes the appearance of the unusual, strange, and supernatural so alluring when it is described in that deadpan, matter-of-fact voice we have all become so familiar with since the Latin American literary boom reached the Anglo-Saxon readership in the 70s?

Both Jameson and Aldea identify a basic query that underlies many critical considerations of the genre, namely, why are works of magical realism so appealing to readers? I believe part of the appeal is the conjunction of the realistic and irreducible elements that constitute a fruitful mode for questioning paradigms, and one that is flexible enough to be used in a variety of cultural situations. While most critics pondering the question of magical realism's appeal focus on twentieth century magical realist works, which makes sense since the majority of scholarship in this field situates magical realism as a significant literary phenomenon of the latter half of the twentieth-century, I intend to show the significant function of magical realism in the twenty-first century.

The purpose of this project is to analyze the ways magical realism continues to be a significant and useful mode in twenty-first century literature and film, by examining a select group of critically and commercially successful contemporary magical realist texts; among other objectives, these works underscores the global appeal of the genre. While the evolution of magical realism in the twentieth century from artistic category to specifically Latin American literary phenomenon to its alignment with postcolonial works has been mined extensively, less attention has been paid to the role of magical realism in twenty-first century literature and film. There are several reasons for this, which I address later in this chapter. I believe the parameters of magical realism should be broadened to include texts produced by artists whose background and focus capture experiences outside our customary expectations for magical realist works, i.e., works from Third-World or postcolonial authors that deal specifically with colonization or forced marginalization due to race or gender. Developing magical realism's framework to include twenty-first century texts highlights the globalized stature of magical realism and expands the discourse about magical realism beyond postcolonial literature. Additionally,

magical realism in the twenty-first century provides a framework for understanding the continuity between seemingly disparate experiences of culturally diverse artists. Writers, filmmakers, singers, and other artists have embraced magical realism across the globe as a means of representing issues and anxieties related to environmental disasters, government surveillance, religious fundamentalism, urban alienation, and fears about the end of the world. The growing corpus of artists who incorporate magical realism in their work highlights the fact that the appeal of this narrative mode extends “beyond the postcolonial and Latin American literatures” (Upstone 156). Whereas in twentieth-century works magic most often manifested as a form of *resistance* by the marginalized to undermine those in positions of political and economic privilege, the texts I am analyzing use magic as a means of *representing* contemporaneous issues and anxieties that cannot, perhaps, be as effectively portrayed in other genres. At least, the writers and filmmakers who create these texts demonstrate that incorporating irreducible elements of magic underlines and strengthens discussions of present fears and experiences.

In his discussion of how magical realism became an important genre in world literature in the twentieth century, Mariano Siskind credits

the historical determinations that framed the efficacy of magical realism to forge a sense, shared by writers and readers across the world, of the genre’s potential create the necessary conditions to repair historical harms produced by different forms of oppression and exclusion. (85)

I contend that the same sense of this potential exists in this century for artists who use elements of magical realism in their works as a means of addressing current social, cultural, and political issues as well as resonate with their desire to make sense of historical trauma. I intend to show that magical realism is still a vital mode of storytelling and that critical scholarship should

expand to address contemporary works that are using the characteristics of magical realism to investigate issues important in our present moment. Moreover, though magical realism is still used in texts endeavoring to “repair historical harms” through their narratives, contemporary magical realism is also used as a broader cultural critique to address recent political, cultural, and environmental problems, among other issues. Maggie Ann Bowers claims that a “characteristic of magical realism which makes it such a frequently adopted narrative mode is its inherent transgressive and subversive qualities. It is this feature that has led many postcolonial, feminist and cross-cultural writers to embrace it as a means of expressing their ideas” (66). The artists I discuss embrace the potential magical realism offers through its “transgressive and subversive qualities” for renegotiating representations of history and culture and examining contemporary anxieties, and they recognize that the combination of realism and the fantastic is especially adept at exploring these issues. The move by twenty-first century artists away from a focus on the postcolonial issues that are central in twentieth century texts and towards a representation of current events and concerns marks a shift in how we think about the function of magical realism for contemporary artists. Irmtraud Huber points out that in twentieth century works,

The combination of the marvelous and the realist mimesis in magical realism has frequently been interpreted as a combination of the rationality of the colonizer and the magical beliefs of the colonized or, alternatively, as the restricted logic of patriarchy and the deviant illogic of the feminine. (213)

While this interpretation clearly works for postcolonial magical realist works of the previous century, what explanation should we give for twenty-first century writers like Tea Obreht and Haruki Murakami, or filmmakers like Jeff Nichols and Lars Von Trier, who are not postcolonial artists, but who are using magical realism as the best means for translating experiences, raising

awareness, or confronting trauma? As I will establish through my dissertation, these writers and filmmakers show that magical realism reframes our understanding of events and allows us to (re)discover moments of truth. In their texts, ultimately, magic serves as a means of redirecting, liberating, and softening discussions of truth in our current time period when we seem to privilege the hard facts of empirical truth. In doing that, this culturally critical capability of magical realism expands from the twentieth to the twenty-first century.

In doing that, this culturally critical capability of magical realism expands from the twentieth to the twenty-first century in significant and profound ways.

One approach to considering how magical realism enables representations of moments of truth in fiction is to examine how an established work of magical realism accomplishes this. In an interview with *Big Think*, Salman Rushdie claims that what we often consider to be “true stories” don’t always reveal the whole truth about the situation or events being depicted. This is why, according to Rushdie, a story that includes an element of the fantastic, the mythological, or the fairytale is valuable because it “gives us another door into the truth,” and another way of portraying the reality of a cultural, political, or historical moment (Rushdie, “True Stories”). Or, as the title of his *New York Times* tribute to Gabriel Garcia Marquez indicates, in magical realist texts, the magic is “in service of truth.” For social or political events, magical realism may enable representations of horror, trauma, tragedy, or resilience to be understood in a way that is closer to the actual experience than strictly realistic descriptions allow.<sup>1</sup> A well-known example of this is Toni Morrison’s portrayal of slavery in the novel *Beloved*. Morrison uses elements of magical realism in *Beloved* in order to highlight the horrific nature of slavery and its lasting

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<sup>1</sup> I am not claiming that magical realism is the *only* means for this type of representation, or that *all* works of realism are incapable of this kind of representation. For the purpose of this chapter, I am applying and expanding Rushdie’s claim that works imbued with a magical element may, in some cases, be better equipped to translate the “truth” of a historical or cultural experience.

effects on those who survived. The particular form of magic used serves to emphasize the importance of keeping cultural memory alive and helps renegotiate established ideas of what it means to be enslaved. She addresses the cultural anxieties that stem from the subjective nature by which the slave experience is portrayed in many slave narratives through the implementation of the ghostly character of Beloved, who is positioned as a liminal figure because of her race and otherworldly abilities, and whose function in the text underscores for readers the enduring traumatic effects of slavery. The inclusion of the ghostly presence of Beloved is what guides the trajectory of the novel's protagonists, Sethe and Paul D., in their confrontations with their pasts. The encounter with Beloved reveals that even though one may be physically free from slavery, the psychological acceptance of that freedom is not easy. Beloved, as a physical embodiment and reminder of the horrific nature of slavery, provides another means of representing a traumatic period in American history. The idea that historical, political, or cultural events and issues may be (re)presented through the inclusion of magical elements within a narrative in order to illuminate the "truth" of these issues is central to magical realism's twentieth-century roots and its continued development in the twenty-first century. Magical realism in the twenty-first century continues to be a means to un-/recover historical, political, and/or cultural events and truths, and "to reinscribe justice and solidarity into the aseptic reality of an unjust world" (Benito 79). Like *Beloved*, which both addresses the historical trauma of slavery and reflects cultural issues experienced by African-Americans in the 1980s, the novels and films examined in this dissertation embrace magical realism in their narratives because the genre enables a unique exploration of how we deal with contemporary traumas.

This endeavor, though complicated by the position magical realism holds in



contemporary academia and popular culture, illuminates the continuing appeal of and need for narratives “in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence” (Warnes 3).<sup>2</sup> In a 2015 interview about his most recent novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, Salman Rushdie spoke of the continuing relevance and fascination of magical realism:

Magical realism isn't just a fad... The fable, the surreal story, is just another way of getting at the truth, and if it has good, deep roots in the real—the ‘realism’ part of magic realism—then it can intensify a reader’s experience of the truth, crystallize it in to words and images that stay with one. That is the appeal. (3)

Rushdie underscores the point that magical realism, often dismissed as a Latin American/postcolonial/twentieth-century phenomenon whose germaneness has diminished in the twenty-first century, is still important for artists who want to present the reality of the world in which we live. More to the point, as Rushdie emphasizes, magical realism continues to be a potent, popular, and perspicacious narrative mode that is able (in Rushdie’s words) to “intensify a reader’s experience of the truth,” a truth that in the twenty-first century is almost always multifaceted, multivocal, and multicultural because of continued globalization. With this argument, Rushdie continues to emphasize a point he made in 1985 (which is even more appropriate today): “Realism can no longer express or account for the absurd reality of the world we live in—a world which has the capability of destroying itself at any moment” (qtd. in Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 88). In magical realist works, Wendy B. Faris writes, “the reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss some of these complications in this chapter; however, since it is not the subject of this dissertation, I mention only those that are related to in some way to my project or provide clarification necessary for understanding the field of magical realism studies. For a more in-depth summary see Maggie Ann Bowers book *Magic(al) Realism* or Christopher Warnes work *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*.

hence experiences some unsettling doubts” and a questioning of habitual ideas regarding time, space, and identity (“Scheherazade” 171).<sup>3</sup> This hesitation and questioning make magical realism a viable genre for dealing with twenty-first century issues because it creates a mental attitude in readers that opens them to questioning dominant paradigms.<sup>4</sup> Questioning, and often undermining, ethnic, cultural, and gender paradigms is a hallmark of magical realist works, which is one reason magical realism is so appealing to both the creators and the audience. In the realm of academia, magical realism “continues to prove its usefulness in both literary scholarship and the wider dissemination of that scholarship to students and a more expansive intellectual community” (Upstone 154). Academia, as well as mainstream popular culture, recognizes the veracity of Gary McMahon’s claim that one cause of the popularity of magical realism is that it fulfills a cultural need “for eccentric perspectives that could match society’s and reality’s eccentricities” (19).

The appeal of magical realism for popular culture that McMahon identifies is in some measure reinforced by the fact that Rushdie’s 2015 interview was not presented in an academic journal or even a highbrow literary publication like *The New Yorker*; rather, it was published in the online blog *The Huffington Post*, and thus illustrates the popularity and potency of magical

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<sup>3</sup> In her article, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” Faris outlines five primary characteristics and nine secondary characteristics of magical realism. Reader hesitation and the questioning of ideas related to time, space, and identity are number three and number five respectively on her list of primary characteristics.

<sup>4</sup> Fantasy genres can certainly be used to question dominant paradigms in various ways by narrating alternative scenarios that question such paradigms. The difference between them and magical realism is, again, as Rushdie notes, the higher quotient of realism in magical realism, which dis allows readers to dismiss a text as purely imaginary. Additionally distinguishing magical realism from fantasy genres is that hesitation as to whether a particular phenomenon is actual or imaginary, and indeed works to erode such distinctions.

realism to a more mainstream audience.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the significance of these comments by arguably the most famous writer, after Gabriel Garcia Marquez, of magical realism in the twentieth and now twenty-first-century is apropos to my dissertation, since Rushdie's emphasis on magical realism's enduring popularity and ability to present the "truth" evidences this project's goal of highlighting the significance of magical realism in the twenty-first century. Indeed, as my dissertation establishes, the use of characteristics of magical realism in both fiction and film in this century affirms its rich capacity for creating inimitable representations of cultural, historical, and political issues on a global scale. The characteristics that define magical realism, just like those of fantasy and fairy tales,<sup>6</sup> are applicable to a variety of texts that span cultures and artistic mediums.

### **"The Graveyards of Magical Realism"**

My purpose in examining contemporary texts through the critical lens of magical realism derives from a desire similar to that of Rushdie, namely, to position magical realism as both a significant and enduring form of storytelling that has expanded beyond its Latin American roots and postcolonial history, a point that I will pursue in more detail shortly. After recognizing the importance of situating magical realism as an ever-evolving genre, such an investigation is

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<sup>5</sup> Rushdie also appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* to promote his novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*. I mention this because he is one of the few novelists to appear on the popular show and be interviewed about a book of fiction.

<sup>6</sup> I reference fantasy and fairy tales because of the vast amount of fiction and films in these fields that have permeated the pop cultural landscape in the past two decades is similar to that of magical realism. The most prominent examples would fall under what we classify as young adult literature—The fantastical *Harry Potter* Series (1997-2007), the supernatural vampire storyline in the *Twilight* books (2005-08), and the preternatural elements presented in the futuristic dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* (2008-10). Each of these series also transitioned into successful film franchises. Reimagined fairy tales that incorporate magic include everything from Disney's *Enchanted* (2007) to the film version of Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (2007) to Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* (2009). My point is that elements that would fall under the heading of "magical" are making an appearance in a wide array of contemporary texts.

double: we need to understand both how magical realism reflects twenty-first century reality and what its particular techniques allow writers and filmmakers to accomplish. This is not without its complications. One reason, perhaps, Rushdie feels compelled to defend magical realism is because arguments that it no longer exists abound. As recent as 2015, Jeronimo Arellano claimed

Because while magical realism itself may have come to its end, an interest in the marvelous and the fantastic persists in literary fiction written in the aftermath of the Boom's magical realism, but it is at this point where these forms also undergo a radical transformation... The new articulations of the marvelous in these narratives are forms grown out of the graveyards of magical realism. (170)

Arellano's argument underscores the significant work of magical realism in the last century, which he credits with influencing new iterations of magical narratives, while also dismissing efforts to include contemporary texts in the magical realist canon. Arellano's belief that works using "the marvelous and the fantastic" should no longer be considered magical realism because they have undergone "a radical transformation" is reflective of current critical debate over magical realism, and supports my point that the problems of classifying contemporary works of magical realism extend beyond the claim that magical realism itself has "come to its end."

### **Criticisms and Complications**

Magical Realism is a term that has been contested by both writers and critics for essentializing and exoticizing of works by marginalized authors in the latter part of the twentieth-century, particularly those from Latin America in the nineteen-sixties and seventies and postcolonial writers from other continents in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. One oft-cited criticism of magical realism is made by Liam Connell, who argues that applying the term magical realism to non-Western works "codif[ies] a set of prejudices about Western European

and non-Western societies and their respective modes of thinking” (95). His claim is that labeling works by third world or marginalized authors as magical realism is a way of demoting these writers from the literary sphere of their Western counterparts by labeling their works as magical realism. Connell argues that too often the works of Woolf, Joyce, Proust and other modernists are defined as highbrow literature that focuses on “a rationalist epistemology that is radically different from modes of thinking that retain a belief in magic” (107). Additionally, he, like others, also believes that placing texts under the label of magical realism is more a marketing strategy than a way to focus on the cultural work that magical realist texts are doing. In the introduction to the *New Critical Idiom* book on magical realism, Maggie Ann Bowers affirms that while the popularity of magical realism with audiences “has never been higher...writers and critics are concerned that the terms are being reduced to vague clichés. Writers have been distancing themselves from the term whilst their publishers have increasingly used the terms to describe their works for marketing purposes” (1). Bowers also underscores the point Connell and other critics make about the danger of magical realism: “the objection that many critics raise against magical realism is that it is a very popular fictional form among western reader who are not familiar with the world which it depicts” (126). While this is not necessarily a negative thing everyone, it is a common argument used by those who are against applying the label of magical realism to works of fiction.

These accusations do problematize the claim that magical realism is still a valuable classification for works of art, and I am aware of the questions that my topic raises: is there a significant theoretical purpose in classifying contemporary works as magical realism? Does the fact that first-world writers and filmmakers create some of the works I am studying help in expanding the critical discourse or does it reinforce Arellano’s claim that “new articulations of

the marvelous in these narratives are forms grown out of the graveyards of magical realism” (170)? Does my classifying these diverse texts under the umbrella of magical realism feed into the criticisms that magical realism is merely a marketing term?

Because the historical background of both the term and the evolution of the genre are fraught with tension, these kinds of questions must be considered in any study that seeks to apply the label of magical realism to works of art. I intend to address these questions and deconstruct the criticisms leveled at the term by examining how these works inform our understanding of significant social and historical issues, and establishing parameters by which works of magical realism should be classified. In the introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, their landmark collection of critical essays on the genre, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris write:

Magical realism also functions ideologically [and] less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity. In magical realism, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation. (3)

The function of magical realism in contemporary texts is similar: the magic unsettles our preconceived ideas about history, culture, and reality and provides a means for confronting or resolving the issues raised by these texts. Furthermore, the texts that may be characterized as magical realism are not limited to artists from specific locations or situated on prescribed margins; rather, it includes a broad cross-section of them. I refer to artists rather than writers, because artists across multiple mediums use magical realism. Magical realism’s popularity has

expanded into other artistic<sup>7</sup> realms and this is why I examine how the characteristics of magical realism are employed in both fiction and film. I believe the variety of contemporary fiction and film that employs elements of magical realism to address current traumas shows that it remains a compelling mode of storytelling in the twenty-first century.

### **Previous and Current Considerations**

I am not the first to emphasize the value of examining magical realist works beyond the sphere of twentieth century Latin American and postcolonial works. Sara Upstone argues that the geographical boundaries that once positioned magical realism as a postcolonial mode have expanded, as magical realism became a mainstream genre (her word). She asserts “there is now a growing literature that reads magical realism explicitly beyond postcolonial and Latin American literatures,” a point my selection of texts is intended to demonstrate (156). Furthermore, she underscores the value of investigating new and different uses of magical realism:

The issues central to magical realist texts—space, time, history, selfhood, knowledge production—might form the basis for more complex studies. This, along with more focus on emerging magical realist geographies...offers fruitful possibilities for the continuance of scholarship into magical realist writing. (162)

Christopher Warnes makes a similar claim about the merit of recognizing and situating magical realism in works outside the sphere of postcolonial application. In his view, “for too long...in the study of magical realism, the term [was] simply a drudge for a postmodernist postcolonialism obsessed with hybridity [and] liminality” (6-7). His 2009 book, *Magical Realism and the*

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<sup>7</sup> This also includes photography and painting, even though these are outside the scope of my project. For the current trend in magical realist photography, see Houston Center for Photography’s exhibition “Magical Realism in Photography” and the work of Uruguayan photographer Lucia Ferreira Litowtschenk. Gloria Jeanne Bodtorf Clark discusses photography (along with literature and film) in her article “Big Mama in Postmodern Society: Tracing Magical Realism in Popular Culture.” Other works that show the broad scope of magical realism include the daytime soap opera *Passions* and Beyonce’s *Lemonade*, the latter of which I briefly discuss in chapter four.

*Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, attempts to “shift thinking about magical realism from programmatic responses to more nuanced conceptions of the origins, nature, and function of the mode” (7). He identifies two different strains in magical realist texts: faith-based magical realism, which functions on a metonymic level; and irreverent magical realism, which “operates metaphorically” (14). By reassessing the origins of magical realism and situating seminal texts of the field in the faith/irreverence paradigm, Warnes attempts to “extend the critical vocabulary for discussing magical realism” and to enable more sophisticated critical discussion of its varieties and subtleties (153). This study leads him to a conclusion similar to mine that magical realism creates a questioning attitude in readers because those two mentalities—faith and irreverence—are polar opposites. Though Warnes, like Aldea and other critics, focuses primarily on rethinking how we understand magical realism by examining what are considered canonical texts in the field, his point that we need to broaden the critical discussion of magical realism has propelled my interest in examining current works of magical realism.

This examination demonstrates that even though the circumstances under which magical realism flourished in the last century have changed, the need for forms of representation that are helpful for both privileged and marginalized authors still exists. Because magical realism, as Mariano Siskind writes,

was born unbound by specific social relations; it was a discourse whose universality was determined by an epochal antipositivist exploration of the limits of rational approaches to the “real” it is able to transcend cultural and critical limitations and function as an essential twenty-first century storytelling mode.  
(65)



Surveying different manifestations of magical realism in fiction and film produced in this century elucidates the way this form of storytelling allows writers and filmmakers to confront twenty-first century anxieties and underscores the ever-expanding possibilities for representations of present issues in magical realist texts. As I have already suggested, the diversity of authors/filmmakers and subjects I study, such as Yugoslavian immigrant Tea Obreht's novel about the Balkan Wars, Japan's Haruki Murakami's representation of the dangers of religious fundamentalism in the metropolitan center of Tokyo, or the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s portrayal of race, poverty, and natural disasters, demonstrate the breadth of modern magical realist texts. These and the other works I discuss expand the scope of magical realism through the particular ways the authors and filmmakers create a "commingling of the improbable and the mundane" in order to present modern truths about subjects as diverse (and urgent) as poverty, environmental destruction, war, sexual abuse, and navigating the isolating effects of modernity (Rushdie 9).

### **Why Discuss Magical Realism Now?**

The global recognition and tributes following Gabriel Garcia Marquez's death in April 2014 underscored the critical and commercial success of his writing and cast a spotlight the popularity of and problems associated with magical realism, which became an international literary phenomenon with the publication of his magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Nearly sixty years after *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published, magical realism—the term and its characteristics—retains an elusive quality that makes it, arguably, the most indefinable narrative style in the sphere of postmodern fiction. In his *New York Times* tribute to Garcia Marquez, entitled "Magic in the Search of Truth," Salman Rushdie explains why defining magical realism is problematic:

The trouble with the term “magic realism,” *el realismo mágico*, is that when people say or hear it they are really hearing or saying only half of it, “magic,” without paying attention to the other half, “realism.” But if magic realism were just magic, it wouldn’t matter. It would be mere whimsy — writing in which, because anything can happen, nothing has effect. It’s because the magic in magic realism has deep roots in the real, because it grows out of the real and illuminates it in beautiful and unexpected ways.

As Rushdie points out, it is the blending of the magical and the real, not the privileging of one over the other, that makes magical realism such an effective mode of representation. Additionally, because the magic has “deep roots in the real,” it serves to heighten the reality of the historical, political, or cultural issue being portrayed. For example: Carlos’s magical imagination in *Imagining Argentina* both reveals and is a form of resistance against the brutal political regime of 1970s Argentina; in *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo elucidates the Chicano/a experience through the portrayal of a mother and her four daughters—two with magical abilities—who must deal with poverty, racism, and, ultimately, death because of the intrusion of Anglo society. These texts exemplify the function of the “realism” in magical realism to portray the world in a way that enables readers to identify with the struggles and anxieties experienced by the characters and recognize the social realities being depicted. On the other hand, the “magic” engages the audience by enriching and underlining the real and representing the complexities that shape our postmodern world.

Rushdie’s analysis also highlights some of the challenges associated with magical realism. Besides the difficulty of definition, the immense influence and popularity of magical realist writers and texts in the twentieth century has created something of a backlash against applying the term to artists and texts in the twenty-first century. Many writers objected to the term being used to describe their works, in part because they consider it a marketing label that does not take into account the

unique cultural representations of their texts. Perhaps the most well known example of this is Toni Morrison's initial objection to being labeled a magical realist writer on the grounds that the magic in her texts is rooted in the African American tradition of embracing superstition and magic and is not manufactured by her for entertainment. Another example is that of Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gomez, who titled their 1996 contemporary Latin American fiction anthology *McOndo*, which Faris calls an "implicit protest against the commercial imposition of magical realism on a new generation of Spanish American writers" ("The Question of the Other" 105). According to Fuguet and Gomez, moving "away from the rural, magical, and isolated space of Macondo...the writers of their generation find new roots for their narrative universes in Latin American urban centers" (Arellano 166).<sup>8</sup> Many critics and writers claim that magical realism is time-and-location specific to twentieth-century texts from the emerging third-world and/or postcolonial/ marginalized perspective, making any examination of contemporary, first world texts irrelevant. My dissertation attempts to rectify these misconceptions by considering how magic realist fiction and film produced this century illuminates the issues and anxieties associated with living in the twenty-first century across a spectrum of places and cultures, thereby emphasizing the important function of magical realism for writers and filmmakers from a variety of different backgrounds.

### **Magical Realism: A Brief History**

To provide a definition of what constitutes a magical realist text, I am borrowing David Young and Keith Hollaman's often cited statement that "in a magical realist story there must be an irreducible element, something that cannot be explained by logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief" (4).

While there are numerous characteristics that may be assigned to works of magical realism, there must always be an irreducible element present in a realistic setting in order for the text to be considered

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<sup>8</sup> For other examples of the "resistance" of some Latin American authors towards magical realism, see the chapter titled "In the Graveyards of Magical Realism," in Jeronimo Arellano's book *Magical Realism and the History of Emotions in Latin America*.

magical realism. Some primary<sup>9</sup> examples that exemplify this include: Jose Arcadio's blood which travels from his home to his birthplace and alerts Ursula of his death and Remedios the Beauty's ascension towards heaven in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Carlos's magical imagination that allows him to envision the fates of "the disappeared" in *Imagining Argentina*; and the psychic powers that connect Saleem the other one thousand children in *Midnight's Children*. In these texts, like those I will discuss in the following chapters, "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing" (Zamora and Faris 3). The possibilities for representation under these guidelines are limitless for those whose stories reflect Gary McMahon's point, that "the lateral thinking of magical realism expands our perceptions of what on earth reality is about" (23).

The popularity of magical realist works over the last sixty years or so is evidence that the blending of an irreducible element (or elements) within a realistic story is a form of storytelling that audiences are receptive to. In 2001, Michael Valdez Moses claimed "the magical realist novel has arguably become the preeminent form of fiction in the contemporary world" (105). A year later, Wendy B. Faris declared, "it may not be too much to say that magical realism constitutes the most important trend in international contemporary fiction" ("The Question of the Other" 101). While these statements reflect the significant impact of magical realism on both writers and readers during the twentieth century, classifying contemporary texts of magical realism has posed a challenge for scholars because of the genre's complex history and close association with postcolonial fiction. In her 2011 article "Magical Realism and Postcolonial Studies," Sara Upstone posits that "magical realism appears to be as slippery, as contested, as problematic, and yet as popular a term as ever" (154). Her

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<sup>9</sup> By "primary" I am referring to texts that are considered established or canonical works in the field of magical realism.

claim indicates magical realism's complicated position in the realm of literary scholarship, both as a term and as a narrative mode, and highlights how the dispute over the concept of magical realism has escalated since Valdez Moses and Faris proclaimed its global importance.

One reason for this dispute is the mutability of the term, which can be traced to magical realism's evolution from a visual to literary category. Indeed, Mariano Siskind stresses that conflict over magical realism usually involves the term itself, though not because of it is oxymoron but, as I will show, because of its history.

Debates and divergence about the ways in which to characterize the term seem to be a central part of the aesthetic and critical tradition of magical realism. The proliferation of conflicting definitions does not have to do with the apparent oxymoron implied in the articulation of the realms of the marvelous and extraordinary within a conventionally conceived reality. Almost without exception, critics agree that magical realist narratives attempt to bridge the contradiction between its two terms—to depict magic and other phenomena that ordinary common sense cannot explain as naturally intervening in reality.

(Siskind 62)

The term was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe Post-Expressionist painting, an aesthetic style that moved away from Expressionism's "fantastic dreamscapes" and focused instead on "the reality of the object and of space" (Roh 17, 23).<sup>10</sup> Roh's other great contribution to magical realist scholarship is his descriptions of art that hints at the potential that

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<sup>10</sup> Even this is a questionable point in magical realist history. According to Christopher Warnes, the term "magical realist" was actually coined by the German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis (pen name). In 1798, he started formulating the idea of a kind prophet "who might live outside the boundaries of enlightened discourse without losing touch with the real" (488). He thought such prophets should be called a magical idealist or a magical realist. However, he never used the term "magical realist," preferring instead the term magical idealist.

is to come for magical realist literature. He writes, “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*” (17). The possibilities for representation that magical realism as a storytelling mode presents are reflective of Roh’s enthusiasm for the style he noticed emerging in Post-Expressionist art. Shifting from its painterly origins, magical realism then became synonymous with works produced during what became known as the Latin American boom. During this literary movement of the 1960s and 70s, texts by writers such as Columbia’s Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Argentina’s Julio Cortazar, Mexico’s Carlos Fuentes, and others achieved global fame for their unique blending of realism and the fantastic. During this period, magical realism geographically “had left Europe and crossed the Atlantic and artistically it had been transferred from painting to literature” (Reeds 180).

This migration caused even the term magical realism to be contested and then altered by Alejo Carpentier. He defined the works of writers in Latin America who combined realism and the fantastic as *lo real maravilloso* or the marvelous real and defend this style in the introduction to his first novel, 1949’s *The Kingdom of This World*, as uniquely Latin American. “The marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace” (Zamora and Faris 104). Though the Latin American writers whose works fall under the umbrella of the marvelous real are also considered magical realist writers, it is worth noting that critics find it necessary to try to distinguish these terms from each other.

Maggie Ann Bowers writes:

The distinguishing feature of ‘marvelous realism,’ for instance is that its fiction brings together the seemingly opposed perspective of a pragmatic, practical and

tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition in the context of the same novel. ‘Magical realism’ ...relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings. (3)

For Bowers, the marvelous real incorporates irreducible elements that exist within a particular culture rather than manufacturing them for the sake of entertainment or to underscore a cultural or historical point.<sup>11</sup> In her view, it is the presentation of magic that is slightly different in magical realism versus *lo real maravilloso*, though it should be noted that she is trying to make a distinction between magical realism and the marvelous real in order to discuss their separate critical histories. For the purpose of my project, I think understanding that the history of magical realism is intertwined with that of the history of the marvelous real reinforces the fraught nature of situating texts as works of magical realism.

Expanding beyond paintings and Latin American fiction during the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the scope of magical realism broadened as it became aligned with postcolonial fiction from authors such as Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie. The extent to which the characteristics of magical realism were associated with postcolonial literature was such that Homi Bhabha decreed, “Magical realism’ after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world” (*Nation and Narration* 7). He further remarks: “As evidenced by its ubiquity in syllabi, anthologies, and *corpora*, it is the most established and stable world literary genre, the world literary genre par excellence, indeed, a global form” (*Nation and Narration* 7). Because of its association with postcolonial texts, as well as with works of the Latin American boom, magical realism became a significant literary movement in the second

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<sup>11</sup> I think Carpentier’s point about the marvelous real being geographically and culturally located in Latin American is similar to that of Toni Morrison’s claim that her work showcases superstitions and beliefs in the supernatural that already exist within African-American culture. They are both resistant to a western label being applied to their works or works by other Latin American/postcolonial authors.

half of the twentieth century, one that has produced a substantial amount of scholarship within and outside academia.

Understandably, then (as I have mentioned briefly above), for some critics magical realism as a literary mode is inextricably linked with Latin American and postcolonial authors who infuse their works with elements of fantasy, endemic to pre-industrialized indigenous cultures, while also portraying the atrocities perpetrated by colonization, appropriation, and marginalization. Critics like Stephen Slemon and Theo D’Haen believe that writers use elements of magical realism because it is a genre that allows “access to the main body of ‘Western’ literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender” (D’Haen 195). The proliferation of works on a global scale that may be defined as magical realist certainly underscores the genre’s significance in the realm of international literature and its appeal to writers who come from various social, economic and gender positions. Since, according to D’Haen, the “essential feature of magical realism” is that the writing is generated “from the margin, from a place ‘other’ than ‘the’ or ‘a’ center,” magical realism is a genre that provides a space for minority writers to explore issues outside of what has been, traditionally, a predominately white and western privileged center of discourse (194). While this is true, it also suggests that magical realism is both time and location specific to twentieth-century works produced by marginalized or third world authors, an association with postcolonial theory that I argue is conceptually limiting.

This geographic and conceptual limitation is one reason why classifying contemporary texts, those produced in the past fifteen years, as works of magical realism is not a simple task. This is further underscored by the perception of some in both academia and popular culture that the genre is no longer relevant. Christopher Warnes offers examples from 2002 of newspaper headlines that asked



whether or not magical realism was still relevant.<sup>12</sup> In discussing these two articles, Christopher Warnes points out that “few other literary critical categories can claim the dubious honour of having been awarded so many inches of print in the commercial press” (“Hermeneutics of Vagueness” 2). This is due in part to the global popularity and curiosity about magical realist works, which Valdez Moses and Faris point out; however, it also reflects the debate about the value of magical realism that shadows commercial and critical discourse about the genre.

In fact, magical realism, perhaps more than any other storytelling mode, holds a tenuous position in academia because of critical concerns that range from how it is defined to why many authors reject applying the term magical realism to their works. In the introduction to *Lies that Tell the Truth*, her 2005 book about British magical realist fiction, Anne C. Hegerfeldt notes that despite its “literary stardom, magical realism has also consistently faced severe points of critique” (1). She writes:

[Magical Realism] has been condemned as escapist literature, as exoticist and commercialized kitsch. It has been pigeonholed as a typically Latin American phenomenon. More fundamentally, the concept of magic realism has been found too vague to be legitimately treated as a separate literary mode at all. (1-2)

Hegerfeldt’s succinct explanation of the chief allegations against magical realism identifies both the problems with classifying works as magical realist and the need for a study like this one that situates newer texts in this field. I recognize that it is a challenge to justify continued use of the term. Certain scholars, like Liam Connell whom I have already mentioned, believe classifying texts as magical realism is a way of demoting non-Western authors from the literary sphere of their Western counterparts by characterizing non-Western societies as primitive in contrast to the

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<sup>12</sup> *Newsweek International* ran the headline “Is Magical Realism Dead?” A week later a headline in London’s *The Observer* asked “Has Magic Realism Run Its Course?”

enlightened Western world. Michael Taussig, author of *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, voices a similar concern that magical realist novelists “fare poorly” in terms of literary regard. He maintains that Alejo Carpentier, Garcia Marquez, and others are not infusing their stories with manufactured magic but with important cultural representations:

The wonder that sustains their stories is represented in accord with a long-standing tradition of folklore, the exotic, and indigenism... [It] is little more than the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy lives. (201)

Arguing that the label “magical realist” is not appropriate for Carpentier and Garcia Marquez—two authors who define the field—creates uncertainty over which authors should be considered magical realist writers, or if the label should be applied to any writers at all.

Another criticism is that the term has been appropriated by popular culture to produce interest in or market products that have few or none of the defining characteristics of magical realism. The “strange seductiveness” of magical realism has made it something of a convenient catch phrase to describe anything ethereal or fantastical in fiction, cinema, or art. William Spindler attributes this to “the lack of an agreed definition and the proliferation of its use in various contexts [which have] resulted in confusion. This, in turn, has led to the indiscriminate use of the term to describe almost any work of literature or art that somehow departs from the established canons of realism” (75). For example, a discussion of how the second President Bush handled immigration during his presidency was framed by the term “magical realism” in a 2005 article titled “Border Update: Magical Realism the American Way.” Writer Teddy Cruz uses the term magical realism to describe the “unprecedented blurring of fiction and reality in the public sphere” controversies about the U.S./Mexican border, citing reality television and the media as

fueling the boundary transgression between fiction and reality. He questions whether “magical realism is no longer culturally specific or geographically exclusively as it has spread from Macondo to Washington D.C., and California” (51). Garcia Marquez’s Macondo is used to represent the blurred line between a fictional and real space, and it is a reference the author assumes his audience will recognize. Another example of an appropriation of magical realism is the popular Netflix series *Narcos*, which documents the rise of Pablo Escobar and his drug trade in Colombia. The show is violent and graphic and as immersed in realism (with absolutely no hint of irreducible magic) as any show on television. However, the opening frame of the first episode is a dark backdrop with the words: “Magical realism is defined as what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. There’s a reason magical realism was born in Columbia.”<sup>13</sup> Even a popular culture item as seemingly unrelated to magical realist fiction as a fashion magazine has used the term as a marketing label. A story in the January 14 edition of *Elle* magazine about the work of film and television casting director Jennifer Euston was titled “The Magical Realist.” The implication was that Euston had a preternatural ability to identify and cast rising stars that others may have overlooked. I include these examples of how magical realism has been applied to people or issues unrelated to academia or serious literary criticism, and lacking characteristics of the mode, in order to highlight the pervasiveness of the term in popular culture.

### **Magical Realism: Current Context**

Despite the objections from some critics, however, magical realism is, as Stephen M.

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<sup>13</sup> Writing about this interesting start to a show that is not magical realist in any way, Liana Maeby comments: “it’s a nice way to start, especially coupled with beautiful aerial shots of Bogotá, but the sentiment is ultimately a bit confusing as it sets up a tone that isn’t actually realized by the show. However, speaking as someone who stopped reading “One Hundred Years of Solitude” halfway through because I couldn’t keep track of the horde of characters who all have the same three names, I’ll concede that confusion might be a key aspect of what magical realism’s all about.”

Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang write in their 2005<sup>14</sup> *Companion to Magical Realism* that “a complex, global literary phenomenon and there is little indication that it has run out of steam” (6). As my project will establish, when considered in the context of the characteristics of magical realism as outlined by Wendy B. Faris, Maggie Bowers, Eugene L. Arva, Anne C. Hegerfeldt, Jeanne Delbaerae-Garant and others, contemporary writers and filmmakers are creating magical realist texts that address and reflect present anxieties associated with living in our ever shifting postmodern age. I also analyze contemporary magical realism as a mode of storytelling that enables artistic comparisons across continents and languages, in line with Warnes’ point that “the facilitation of comparative analysis is probably magical realism’s most persuasive claim to usefulness” (7). Similar to Warnes, Ralph Pordzik suggests, “the concept of magical realism offers a method of effecting important comparative analyses between culturally different writings” (509). But comparative analysis is not the only convincing claim for magical realism’s value as literary and cinematic narrative mode. What is most significant is how magical realism gives voice to current traumatic experiences from artists whose perspectives are informed by their experiences on the margins of mainstream cultures, fields, or of the subjects they depict.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, I will show that despite the fact that the initial conditions under which magical realism thrived may have changed, the proliferation of magical realist books and films in this century underscores its continuing relevance for contemporary writers and filmmakers around the world. And like their postcolonial predecessors, these works address sensitive

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that all of the texts under discussion in this dissertation were written/created post-2005. This underscores that magical realism continues to be employed by artists after the early declarations of the mode’s popularity in the early 2000’s.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the filmmakers I discuss—Jeff Nichols, Lars Von Trier, and Ben Zeitlin—though white males, are independent directors working outside the studio system and examining dire social, economic, and racial issues, while Nichols and Von Trier tackle the challenging and often stigmatized issue of mental illness.

traumas and fears through their portrayals of current problems, proving that magical realism has transcended conceptual and geographical limitations. Moreover, contrary to Connell's assertion that using the term magical realism reduces postcolonial texts to a lesser status than texts by Western writers, it is in effect doing the opposite: it is one of the few terms that because of its masterful deployment in Latin American texts which have provided influential paradigms for other postcolonial literary cultures, has in effect migrated from the peripheries back to the center after having been validated on those very peripheries.<sup>16</sup>

In formulating my thesis arguing for the recognition of magical realism as an important contemporary aesthetic mode, I recognize the need to explain how magical realism is an appropriate classification for the distinct works I discuss. I am mindful of claims like Mariano Siskind's that

magical realism should not be considered an aesthetic form that can be forged anywhere, under any sociocultural conditions, but rather as a discourse that emerges from cultural formations marked by the perception of a lack (in the Lacanian sense) and the registration of emancipatory desires that dislocate and reconfigure hegemonic mappings of world literature. (84)

The texts I include in my study typify the challenges associated with specific sociocultural spheres in the twenty-first century and their changing political and cultural landscapes. The works I analyze confront issues ranging from the oppression of religious fundamentalism, the trauma of war, the repercussions of gender and economic inequality, the tragedy of environmental disintegration, and the psychological effects of anticipating a global disaster. The writers and filmmakers whose works I discuss address real world problems using the

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<sup>16</sup> Initially, it might seem as if what Connell says was the case when mostly first world critics were labeling largely third world texts; but now, as I am positing, the international postcolonial literary culture has changed.

conventions of magical realism because, according to Eugene Arva, magical realism, expects the reader [or viewer] to keep aware of its textual constructs and accept them as part of his or her 'real' reality, as unreal as they may seem. Although realistic details may render images believable to readers, traditional realism usually stumbles at their transmissions as reflections of rational understandable experiences. (9)

Arva's examples of reality that seems unreal include historical horrors like slavery and the Holocaust. I posit that in this century the technological advances and the shift in worldview that occurred because of global disasters are two of the factors contributing to the artistic need to incorporate irreducible elements in their works. The abundance of speculative fiction, including fantasy, science-fiction, and dystopian works that have proliferated in the marketplace, along with magical realism, substantiates Arva's claim that traditional realism often needs assistance in the form of the fantastic or magical to translate actual experiences to an audience. In the novels and films I discuss, this assistance is provided by the irreducible elements incorporated within the recognizable renderings of our real world.

### **Necessary Magic**

Though I am studying a selection of films and novels with geographic and subject variances, my dissertation is by no means an exhaustive study. The fact that works employing characteristics of magical realism are being produced and marketed continually would make any comprehensive study nearly impossible, so I have endeavored to provide a broad sample of the contribution of magical realism in the current literary and cinematic landscapes. To this end, I chose texts that have achieved some measure of both critical and commercial success; represent a wide range of backgrounds from the authors/filmmakers; and deal with a spectrum of social and

cultural issues (e.g., natural disasters and religious extremism, the trauma of war and its aftermath, apocalyptic fears and anxiety, etc.). I also chose texts by writers and directors situated on the margins of a culture or subculture not usually associated with magical realism: a Yugoslavian immigrant, a popular Japanese writer, female authors exploring the development of marginalized adolescents, independent filmmakers, and an artist who struggles with depression. The writers and filmmakers I discuss “include magical occurrences in texts that essentially and primarily mirror daily existence, or present recognizable human experience, no matter how seemingly extraordinary” (Clark 76). The works in this study illuminate the multifaceted nature of magical realism and its capacity to represent many different types of experiences.

Because films in the mode of magical realism have not received the rich critical consideration that literature has enjoyed, I would like to briefly explain why I think it is imperative to include them in my study. In *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers discusses classic and modern films that use features of magical realism, from Frank Capra’s *It’s A Wonderful Life* to Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich*. Her central claim is that the magic enables filmmakers to explore ontological questions in ways that go past the normal scope of filmmaking.

The common aspect of all these films...is that the magical realist element of the film acts as a means of initiating questions concerning philosophical issues such as the existence of God, the role of fate, and the idea of the self that extend beyond the film’s capacity to divert and entertain. (114-15)

Her point that the magic in the movies permits “questions concerning philosophical issues” is central to my analysis of magical realist films. Like their literary counterparts, magical realist films present our physical world in a realistic way; however, in contrast to those verbal texts, the

manifestation of an irreducible element in the film's realistic depiction of the world is amplified through the imagery in the film. The magic can be as overt as mythical creatures emerging from the imagination of a soon-to-be six-year-old orphan in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, or it can be as subtle as the interior breakdown of characters as they witness the end of the world in *Take Shelter* or *Melancholia*. Besides being an influential artistic medium, examining films through the lens of magical realism reinforces both the importance of magical realism to contemporary art and the expanding scope of the mode in the twenty-first century.

As indicated previously, the texts discussed here illustrate the diverse range of works that are employing magical realism to evaluate issues related to war, sexual abuse, poverty, race, environmental disasters, and religious fundamentalism. I explore the ways these artists are “practitioners of magical realism, and how...they intervene in, and expand on, past and current debates that have shaped this [narrative] mode” (Giffard-Foret 676). Sharon Sieber writes: “magical realist narratives...comprise a process of magical thinking, on the part of not only the author, but an entire community—a community of writers resonating on many continents, crossing temporal borders and always creating new literary events” (177). The texts I analyze illuminate Sieber's point that magical realist texts resonate across a global community, displaying the need to embrace the “process of magical thinking” to *re-present* our current reality in order to question it and, in some cases, provide solutions to the problems under investigation.

Following my consideration of these general concerns in twenty-first century magical realism, my second chapter highlights the global appeal of magical realism through an examination of two popular novels that incorporate similar elements of magic as a way of addressing specific traumatic experiences. The re-imagined world of Tokyo in Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2010) reflects twenty-first century ontological anxieties wrought by



urbanization, violence, and religious fundamentalism—anxieties that cannot be resolved but which, in Murakami’s world, may be alleviated through the magic of love and the power of writing. Also in this chapter, I discuss how the literal remapping of the unnamed Balkan country in *The Tiger’s Wife* (2011) serves as the foundation for the novel’s protagonist to remake her grandfather’s (and therefore her own) history through storytelling. Though seemingly dissimilar, analyzing Murakami and Obrecht together highlights the broad appeal of magical realism to writers from different locations and backgrounds and illuminates the possibilities for healing and connection that may be found through the magic of metafiction.

In chapter three, I expand on Wendy B. Faris’s suggestion that within magical realism “it may be possible to locate a female spirit characterized by structures of diffusion, polyvocality, and attention to issues of embodiment, to an earth-centered world, and to collectivity, among other things, that is active in magical realism generally” (*Enchantment* 170). While she notes that the “feminine thread” exists regardless of the author’s gender, my focus in this chapter is on texts written by women. Magic becomes a tool of empowerment for women who are marginalized because of gender, age, and economic status. Aimee Bender’s *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010) Meg Medina’s *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* (2012), and Leslye Walton’s *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* (2014), feature adolescent heroines whose encounters with the magical significantly alter their family life and shape their development. These three American novels “explore the use of the supernatural to create women’s stories that challenge scripts, literary and social, of their larger cultures (Jenkins 62). By addressing and reclaiming the literary and social scripts that govern the lives of their protagonists, Bender, Medina, and Walton align themselves with a rich tradition of female writers—like Isabel Allende, Ana Castillo, Toni Morrison, etc.—whose use of magical realism undermines

traditional patriarchal authority.

In chapter four and five, I investigate how filmmakers are utilizing characteristics of magical realism in films that directly address contemporaneous catastrophes and future fears. Chapter four looks at two films that address a more recent anxiety, perpetuated by the start of a new millennium: how do people handle or come to terms with the threat of the world ending? I focus on directors Lars Von Trier's and Jeff Nichols' visions of apocalyptic fears and the trauma these fears engender in individuals in the films *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*, respectively. Ultimately, I believe, the visual conception of the psychic abilities of the protagonists in these two films, as well as their interaction with nature, or nature's interaction with them and the other characters in these films, returns magical realism to its visual roots, while also revealing how characteristics of the mode provide expand our capacity for understanding a potential future threat. In my final chapter, the tragic effect of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, as portrayed in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, activates the magical imagination of the film's six-year-old heroine, Hushpuppy, who finds comfort and strength in the myths that permeate her world. Director Benh Zeitlin creates an environmental dystopia that shows what happens to the poorest of the poor when a natural disaster strikes, and finds that sometimes all it takes is a belief in the power of myth and magic that can help the inhabitants of this film survive their dire circumstances.

### **A Shift in Storytelling**

One point I would like to make clear is that I recognize that artists "do not as a rule think of themselves as magic realists or write exclusively magic realist works; if the label fits some of their novels or stories it is usually because what they had to say in them required that particular form of expression" (Delbaere-Garant 98). This is one of the connecting threads of the seemingly disparate texts I am examining: that magical realism is employed in each work because it is a

mode uniquely suited for the vision and story that is being told. What links these different works is certainly the fact that critics have classified them as belonging to or at least utilizing elements of magical realism as the form of expression best suited to telling their stories. The multitudinous amount of twenty-first century works that use magic, is reflective of the need for ways of representing experiences beyond traditional realism.<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary writers and filmmakers employing characteristics of magical realism in their works are reacting to extreme historical events and using magical realism's non-realistic resources to re-present this outrageous world to their readers. While the events of 9/11 are not the specific impetus for artists to use characteristics of magical realism in their works, two writers from opposite sides of the globe have made it a kind of emblem for how magical realism is using its resources to depict such contemporary enormities. In an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, Haruki Murakami writes that the event that demarcates the spirit of the twenty-first century from the twentieth-century, and which storytellers from all artistic avenues are reacting to, is the destruction of the World Trade Center. This singular event, according to Murakami, created a shift in the way that storytellers approached creating stories.

It would seem that the interface between us and the stories we encounter underwent a greater change than ever before at some point when the world crossed (or began to cross) the millennial threshold. Whether this was a change for the good or a less welcome change, I am in no position to judge. About all I can say is that we can probably never go back to where we started.

As Murakami notes, our reality has undergone a transformation, and the other writers and

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to imply that works of speculative fiction such as fantasy, science fiction, dystopian, and other genres of literature are not also being used for the same reasons as magical realism. On the contrary, my point is that some of the most popular works, both critically and commercially, produced in the last fifteen years have had some element of magic, which [referent?] includes magical realism at the forefront of these fictional genres that confront 21<sup>st</sup> century problems with post-realistic techniques.

filmmakers whose work I am discussing validate magical realism's evolving effort in the twenty-first century to embrace this storytelling transformation. Similarly, from a different part of the world, Gary MacMahon could almost be describing magical realism as a response to our times: "after the impossible happened on 9/11, rivaling Hollywood's apocalyptic futures for the capital of the world, realism would have to expand to stay real" (19). While I recognize these events are Americentric in nature, I include them as a prime example of the altered state of global affairs in the twenty-first century.

In the introduction to his 2009 book *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, Christopher Warnes discusses the central questions that critics of magical realism grapple with: "Is magical realism simply a mode of narration that may be sporadically engaged by an author; is it a literary movement with a specific agenda and defined geographical and cultural boundaries; or is it a genre fiction that can be compared across continents and languages" (2)? These questions reinforce why defining and classifying works of magical realism is challenging. I agree with Gloria Jeanne Bodtorf Clark's argument that, "although often showcased as an exclusively Latin American literary technique, [magical realism] is, in fact, found in the literature of many countries, and has developed and changed as new generations of writers have molded it to their fictions" (76). Though limited by length constraints, my study includes texts that span several continents, historical periods, and artistic mediums, and I believe this sample contributes to the ever-growing canon of magical realism. More specifically, my work "exemplif[ies] texts which focus on the magical realist mode moving beyond the need to define its parameters and into the complexities of how specific issues are developed in unique ways via this narrative mode" (Upstone 162). The increasing popularity and globalization of magical realism in the twenty-first century is expanding our understanding of the issues and anxieties that for so long were

considered localized problems. The continuity of magical realism as genre that gives voice to those speaking from or representing the margins, regardless of the circumstances that have created this marginalization, extends its usefulness to artists in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, this project will demonstrate that the allure of magical realism in the twenty-first century is directly related to our desire to find innovative ways to represent reality, illuminate the unfathomable, and affirm the presence of the irreducible in our world. As my examination of contemporary texts will demonstrate, the parameters of magical realism as a genre are fluid and continuously evolving as the need for unique representations of extreme global issues inspires artists around the world to include the fantastical or miraculous as embodiments of such extremity in otherwise realistic representations of our world.

## CHAPTER 2

TRAUMATIC MAGIC: LOVE, LOSS, AND WRITING THE WORLD IN *THE TIGER'S**WIFE AND 1Q84*

Her story was bearable because it was his as well - to tell, to refine and tell again.

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The story appealed to him...for its technical beauty, the way the stories were enfolded within other stories and contained, folded within themselves, yet other stories, so that the story became a true mirror of life...in which all our stories contain the stories of others and are themselves contained within larger, grander narratives, the histories of our families, or homelands, or beliefs.

Salman Rushdie, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*

What I imagine is important - even for the entire world.

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

The texts I discuss in this chapter and, to an extent, in this project as a whole, are created by artists whose background and focus capture experiences outside our customary expectations for magical realist works. They move the reader beyond the first wave of global magical realist texts from Third-World or postcolonial writers that dealt with problems like colonization or marginalization because of race, class, or gender,<sup>18</sup> and hence, they highlight the more general global status of magical realism and expand the discourse beyond postcolonial literature. The current trend in globalizing magical realism, which I am contributing to, extends the critique of “colonialism” (or systems of oppression) beyond a few localized communities or states. The twenty-first century use of magical realism in the texts discussed in this chapter, Yugoslavian born writer Téa Obreht’s 2010 novel *The Tiger’s Wife* and Japanese author Haruki Murakami’s

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<sup>18</sup> What I am referencing here is the fact that the texts most people associate with magical realism are those that deal with these issues and are written by Latin American or postcolonial authors, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Beloved*, *Midnight’s Children*, *The Famished Road*, *Kingdom of this World*, etc.

*IQ84* (published in Japan between 2009-2010<sup>19</sup> and released in English in the United States in 2011), helps us read experiences (in this case Eastern European and Japanese) in conversation with postcolonial/marginalized experiences—in other words, the expansion of magical realism in our current century seems to help us rethink our notions of privilege that have been central in postcolonial studies because of the events and experiences portrayed in these modern magical realist works. Furthermore, as this chapter demonstrates, magical realism in the twenty-first century provides a framework for understanding the continuity between seemingly disparate experiences from culturally diverse artists, which is evidenced by my analysis of *The Tiger's Wife* and *IQ84*; this diversity underscores Christopher Warnes's argument that “the facilitation of comparative analysis is probably magical realism’s most persuasive claim to usefulness” (“The Hermeneutics of Vagueness” 7). Though, as I point out in my previous chapter, comparative analysis is not the only reason for examining texts using magical realism, my examination of *The Tiger's Wife* and *IQ84* shows it is a valuable starting point. While these two novels may be dissimilar in subject matter and geographic setting, their use of magical realism is analogous: the irreducible element manifests in both novels as a supernatural figure or figures whose inclusion in the lives of the protagonists forces them to confront traumatic memories and experiences, and storytelling is the mechanism used to resolve or heal this trauma. That both novels were published post-2005, are set in regions not commonly associated with magical realist works (the former Yugoslavia and Tokyo), and focus mainly on issues and events affecting the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of twenty-first century—the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and the 1995 terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway system—helps to broaden the scope of contemporary magical realism.

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<sup>19</sup> *IQ84* was released in Japan in three volumes over the course of 2009-2010. The initial English language publication released all three volumes together.

Magical realism has evolved in the twenty-first century to become a narrative mode embraced on a global scale by a diverse group of artists as a means of representation rather than resistance<sup>20</sup> and whose depictions of trauma are rooted in both the historical and the contemporary, a point illustrated by *The Tiger's Wife* and *IQ84*. Both texts attempt to provide understanding of or closure for recent historical tragedies while simultaneously addressing present-day traumatic experiences, and they do so by incorporating similar irreducible elements of magic into their narratives. These novels underscore how magical realism is particularly adept at portraying historical, political, and cultural issues that occur outside conventional Western subject matter and disseminating the reality of these issues to readers. The texts accomplish this dissemination through the presence of individuals whose preternatural abilities undermine personal and institutional systems of belief combined with the magical status conferred on both writing and storytelling in the novels. As my analysis will show, this combination of irreducible elements elucidates the efficacy of contemporary magical realism to illuminate and, in some instances, alleviate the sorrow caused by both individual and communal trauma.

### **Pervasive Magic**

On the surface it would appear these two works, which are quite different in style and setting, have little in common. *IQ84*, set in the sprawling metropolis of Tokyo, is widely considered Murakami's magnum opus after the international success of previous novels like *Kafka at the Shore*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *Hardboiled Wonderland at the End of the World*. As in many of his other works, here Murakami explores how people function in the postmodern space of a cosmopolitan city center where "greater terrors lurk behind the clean façade of megalopolitan Tokyo...[His] sinister characterization of the city...underscores the

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<sup>20</sup> What I am referring to here is the idea, which I discussed in my previous chapter, that magical realism in the twentieth century, in Gloria Jeanne Bodterf Clark's words, functioned as a form of "postcolonial resistance."



notion that the evil lurking in society is not isolated psychopathy, but an endemic feature of the [postmodern] social structure” (Strecher, ““Pure” Literature” 362). *1Q84* investigates issues and anxieties linked to urbanization and religious fundamentalism, particularly after the events of 9/11<sup>21</sup>—subject matter that is reflective of global modernization, industrialization, and rural migration to urban centers. For Murakami, inclusions of magical elements in the space of modern day Tokyo enables an examination of problems associated with “the complex systems of communication, transportation, and commerce [related to urbanization]. However, because the city also harbors ignorance, disease, poverty, and violence, it may stand as the epitome of human fallibility and malevolence” (Stewart 478). This plays out in a number of ways in the novel, but most pointedly, and disturbingly, with the graphic details of sexual abuse and domestic violence experienced by several of the peripheral female characters.

While Murakami is certainly not the only author to employ magical realism in a metropolitan center, setting *1Q84* in the most densely populated city in the world does shape the contribution magical realism makes in the narrative. The high-rise buildings, hotels, apartments, housing enclaves, transportation by congested highway or subway, and bars that provide the main backdrop for the action of the novel paint a picture of a complex concrete labyrinth that both encourages horrific acts and provides the atmosphere of secrecy and fear necessary to hide them. The irreducible elements of magic in the novel—supernaturally gifted Little People, two moons appearing in the sky, reality mimicking fiction—are, like the instances of violence, not observed by a large community of people; instead, these moments of magic are limited to a few individuals in the center of the city, both heightening the urban isolation these characters feel and driving them to discover a way to elude this sense of isolation. The weight of loneliness and

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<sup>21</sup> While the events of 9/11 are not a focus of this dissertation, that moment in history had a profound effect on Murakami’s perception of writing. I will discuss this in more depth later in relation to his ideas about how storytelling changed (at least for him) after 9/11.

alienation felt by those attempting to navigate the modern, crowded urban landscape is reflected in Tengu's statement late in the novel that his reunion with Aomame took twenty years because they had "to understand how lonely we really were" (Murakami 924). The loneliness and isolation incurred by living in the metropolitan center is juxtaposed with life at the farming community turned religious cult site, Sakigake. That setting, and the sparse descriptions we are given about life there, offers a contrast to the many descriptions of the miraculous and the mundane parts of life in Tokyo. Daily life in Sakigake revolves around a tight-knit, albeit cultish, community of like-minded people who work to foster a sense of mystery about themselves to the outside world. It is in this secretive place that the magical Little People first exert their influence over the Leader of Sakigake, which eventually leads to the systematic rape of the adolescent girls who live there. By limiting his descriptions of Sakigake, Murakami underscores the importance of secrecy to this group and further suggests that secrecy in religion or religious groups is dangerous. Too often groups like this have become infamous for committing mass murders or manipulating their members into committing mass suicide in anticipation of the world ending, e.g., Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Branch Davidians, and, specifically for Murakami, the Japanese cult of Aum Shinrikyo. So, while on the surface it would appear the communal bond at Sakigake is preferable to the solitary, isolated existence that defines life for many of the characters living alone in Tokyo, as the novel unfolds it becomes apparent that Sakigake is a violent and oppressive place.

Murakami's interest in how fears about the end of the world (or the end of the world as we know it), which manifested post-Y2K and post-9/11, are represented in his focus on the evolution of Sakigake: its beginning as a peaceful farming commune, its split into two separate<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Aum Shinrikyo was a millennialist cult that also split into different factions.

factions that ended in a violent gun battle, and its final metamorphosis into a rigid and secretive place that is under a despotic leadership. “In its layered doubling of the spaces of the political enclave, the commune, and the religious cult, *IQ84* asks the reader to consider the utopian and dystopian features of closed-off forms of society in the contemporary moment,” particularly when that society chooses to reject acceptable norms of behavior and engage in taboo sexual practices (Selisker 443). With the clashing perspectives of Sakigake’s Leader and his followers and those who see the physical damage<sup>23</sup> done to the prepubescent girls who are the Leader’s sexual victims, “Murakami demonstrates that one person’s utopia can be another’s dystopian nightmare” (Welch 56). Similar to the films I discuss in chapter four, *IQ84* demonstrates the concerns about the future that is present in many contemporary magical realist works that employ magic to confront dystopian fears concerning apocalyptic events, illegal surveillance, religious fundamentalism, and breakdowns in communication and social norms. My analysis of *IQ84* shows that though the issues inherent to living under these various conditions may be challenging and not easy to resolve, magic, in this case the (literal) magical power of writing does provide a type of solution for the protagonists of the novel.

In *The Tiger’s Wife*, Obreht’s debut novel, the irreducible elements are tied to the culture of myths that surround the Eastern European region where the novel takes place and flourish in the rural villages and small cities that the central characters traverse. “The country in question is not named, nor real-life people explicitly identified,” but Obreht herself admits that she is drawing from her Yugoslavian heritage.<sup>24</sup> The setting of the novel shifts between an average sized City (City is capitalized in the novel) and smaller villages and towns; the further a location is from the City the stronger the belief in the supernatural or miraculous becomes. This is an

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<sup>23</sup> Like the magical removal of their uteruses

<sup>24</sup> I discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

interesting contrast to Murakami's narrative, which suggests the opposite: it is in the heart of the city itself that superstition and the phantasmal exists. Read together, the two texts suggest that, contrary to the belief of much of civilization, magic and superstition are not just the realms of the primitive or less civilized, but are pervasive and all encompassing. Magic, miracles, the supernatural may be just as useful elements for those who are trying to navigate the dangers of a modern city as for those who live in more rural areas. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these two works support my argument that magical realism provides continuity between culturally diverse texts.

In *The Tiger's Wife*, the lingering effects of two wars—WWII and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s—are the impetus for Obrecht's weaving together a history of conflict and cultural myths to illustrate the grief engendered by loss on a personal and communal scale. As the protagonist of her novel, Natalia Stefanovic, crosses the border from her homeland into a place that was once a part of her country before civil war divided it, she must confront the loss of her grandfather while also considering the loss that has consumed her country in the aftermath of war. Obrecht enacts this dilemma by infusing the novel with cultural myths—like that of the deathless man, who “appears in Slavic and German myth, where he functions as an articulation of mortality”—and the ineffable figures who populate her grandfather's childhood, like the titular tiger's wife (McCormack). As in *IQ84*, it is the power of the indeterminate, the magical, that allows healing and closure for Natalia's heartbreaking loss of her beloved grandfather. It is a loss that, as I will discuss later in this chapter, is the guiding force of the narrative.

However, unlike in *IQ84*, in *The Tiger's Wife* there is an acceptance that the communal rituals and cultural myths that inform the relationships between family and community members are central to sustaining the bonds between people in both the City and the rural areas of the text.

This is because these rituals—like Natalia and her grandfather visiting the tigers at the zoo every week or the children in Fra Antun’s village painting pictures of Bis, his dead brother’s dog—and myths, like that of the *mora*, draw families and communities together even as clashing ethnic groups and war are tearing their country apart. Instead of isolated individuals observing something miraculous, there is a group of people whose belief in the supernatural or the ineffable strengthens relationships and provides a measure of comfort or healing after traumatic experiences. In *The Tiger’s Wife*, it is both the overarching losses experienced by a country divided by war and the mysterious circumstances surrounding her grandfather’s death that motivate Natalia to investigate the stories of his childhood and to seek out the deathless man.

### **Crossing Boundaries**

Despite the setting and plot differences between *The Tiger’s Wife* and *IQ84*, the central themes in both works—the traumatic effects of loss<sup>25</sup> and the healing potential that storytelling offers<sup>26</sup>—are remarkably similar, as is Obrecht and Murakami’s approach to portraying the complexity of these experiences in a world populated by the supernatural. These “magical realist narratives attempt to bridge the contradiction between its two terms—to depict magic and other phenomena that ordinary common sense cannot explain as naturally intervening in reality” (Siskind 62). Both novels begin with the belief that the boundaries between worlds—life and death, fiction and reality, the past and the present, natural and supernatural—are fluid and often must be transgressed.

In *Postmodern Fiction*, Brian McHale poses questions helpful when considering the tensions wrought by the fluid boundaries in *The Tiger’s Wife* and *IQ84*. McHale, who aligns

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<sup>25</sup> This point will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>26</sup> I am not arguing that these themes are found solely in twenty-first century texts. I am merely identifying similar themes that are found in the texts under examination in this chapter.

magical realism with the characteristics of postmodernism, posits that the guiding questions about the ontological work of postmodern texts are:

What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (10)

These questions offer a compelling context for the trajectory of the stories I am discussing because each of the main characters is attempting to learn to exist in a world where all of their preconceived notions about who/what/where they are have been shattered. In *The Tiger's Wife*, the boundaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead are frequently crossed, while generational differences between Natalia and her grandfather often position the world of his past in confrontation with the present. Natalia and her grandfather's profession as doctors forces the world of science and rational thought into conflict with their supernatural experiences which are not explainable according to the laws of the physical universe. In both novels, though it is more obvious in *IQ84*, the mode of existence of the text is unsettled by the world the text projects, a point that will be made clearer when I discuss the metafictional aspects of these novels later in this chapter.

One paramount example of a character questioning her ontological status is Aomame's refrain throughout *IQ84* that she is no longer in the world she once knew to be 1984:

It's not me but the world that's deranged....At some point in time, the world I knew either vanished or withdrew, and another world came to take its place. Like the switching of a track. In other words, my mind, here and now, belongs to the

world that was, but the world itself has already changed into something else. So far, the actual changes carried out in that process are limited in number. Most of the new world has been retained from the world I knew. (106)

She deduces, albeit reluctantly, that she is somehow in a parallel world, which she names 1Q84: “Q is for ‘question mark.’ A world that bears a question” (110). In this parallel world of 1Q84, it is possible for Little People<sup>27</sup> to create an Air Chrysalis out of single thread and provide guidance for the leader of a religious cult; for a woman to be impregnated by a man she has not seen in twenty years; and for reality to mimic the fictional world of a novel. Once Aomame, and later Tengo, realize there is a rupture in the fabric of the world they thought was 1984, each sets out on a quest to find their way through the world of 1Q84 that Tengo and Fuka-Eri brought into existence through their collaboration and back to the world of 1984.

In the opening chapter of *1Q84*, Murakami uses a stairwell to represent how the transgression of boundaries can effect changes in our understanding of time, space, and identity. As Homi Bhabha’s explains the stairwell metaphor in *The Location of Culture*:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower...The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (4)

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<sup>27</sup> In *1Q84*, Little People are about two inches tall when “born” and often emerge from the mouth of a sleeping or dead person. “When needed, they could adjust their size, but they never grew taller than a yard or shorter than an inch” (Murakami 904).

Aomame's choice to get out of her cab on a congested freeway and climb down the Metropolitan Expressway staircase in the middle of the day, signals a departure from the norm for a Japanese citizen, especially a Japanese female. As she prepares to exit the cab, Aomame is cautioned by the cabdriver to remember, "things are not what they seem (9)." For "you're about to do something *out of the ordinary*. Am I right? People do not ordinarily climb down the emergency stairs of the Metropolitan Expressway in the middle of the day—especially women" (9). This one moment hints at the unsettling nature of events that the novel portrays and underscores Wendy B. Faris's point about an aspect of magical realism:

In magical realism, reality's outrageousness is often underscored because ordinary people react to magical events in recognizable and sometimes also disturbing ways, a circumstance that normalizes the magical event but also defamiliarizes, underlines, or critiques the extraordinary aspect of the real. ("Scherherazade"13)

Climbing down emergency stairs becomes an extraordinary act partially because it seems normal, yet, it is so out of the ordinary that one mother in a car covers her child's eyes so she will not watch Aomame. Through this act of stepping outside the bounds of normality, Aomame puts into motion the events that not only alter her understanding of what is possible in reality—that she could carry the baby of a man she has never slept with—but also allow for the magical relocation of her and Tengo from 1984 into the world of 1Q84 that Tengo creates through his writing.<sup>28</sup>

In *The Tiger's Wife*, the transgression of boundaries between the worlds of the living and of the dead that forges the conditions propels Natalia to reconstruct her grandfather's childhood and his encounters with the mysterious tiger's wife. The belief that the line between life and

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<sup>28</sup> This magical transportation between world's is confirmed for Aomame when the Leader tells her she was transported into this other world of 1Q84 by Tengo's storytelling ability" (468).



death may sometimes blur is quite evident in the repeated mentions of the *mora*, a spirit who collects the dead at the crossroads between life and death as well as the presents left at their graves by grieving family members, and the appearances of a deathless man who has been condemned to wander the world for eternity and whose friendship with Natalia's grandfather is one of the central narratives of the novel. Even the human/animal binary becomes blurred in *The Tiger's Wife*: first with the peculiar relationship between the tiger and Luka's mute wife and then with the tale of Darisa the bear, a hunter who some believed had the ability to turn into a bear. As these and other examples show, the underlying question in both *IQ84* and *The Tiger's Wife* is how do we make sense of our 'real' experiences, especially those that are traumatic, when the boundaries between worlds are repeatedly being transgressed? One answer that both Obrecht and Murakami offer is that telling stories may provide the avenue necessary for healing or resolution.

### **Stories and Storytelling**

In *The Tiger's Wife*, the shift in values that often exists between different generations is visible in the different perspectives on war that exist between Natalia and her grandfather during and after the Balkan conflicts, leading them to confront the loss of their national identity in different ways: her grandfather clings to the rituals and traditions that he has followed for decades like visiting the tigers at the zoo, while Natalia, who refuses to continue the ritual zoo visits, participates in protests and dates a boy who sells contraband. However, Natalia's guilt over her dismissive treatment of her grandfather when she was a teenager impels her towards a career as a doctor, as *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani observes:

Natalia's decision to become a doctor was shaped partly by her love for her grandfather and partly by her complex feelings about the war—her desire to help casualties, her guilt at having passed the war relatively unscathed in 'The City'

and a determination shared with friends to “defeat emerging newspaper projections that declared the City’s postwar generation destined for failure.”

Knowing her grandfather agrees with the newspapers claims about her generation, Natalia works to disprove this theory. As Lucy Daniel posits, once he passes away,

a superstition kept by her grandmother – ‘the 40 days of the soul’ during which the dead person’s soul revisits the places of its life before returning home—is the cue for a sure-footed hop between Natalia’s question to interpret a lifetime of conflict and her grandfather’s half-told stories.

It is his stories, Natalia tells us “one which I learned after his death [...] the story of how my grandfather become a man; the other, which he told to me [...] of how he became a child again,” that she pieces together enabling her to find solace after his death (Obreht 32). As I will discuss at greater length later in this chapter, the ability of the act of writing to assuage traumatic experiences and painful memories is central to both Obreht and Murakami’s narratives. In both novels, the power of writing is underlined because the moments of metafictional magic “stresses the magic *of* fiction rather than the magic *in* it” (Faris, “Scheherazade” 173). Ultimately, these works come to the conclusion that the trauma engendered by loss or isolation may be lessened through the transformative power of stories.

Further demonstrating the value that Obreht and Murakami place on storytelling are the intertextual references that permeate these novels, emphasizing significant themes, providing an immediate frame of reference for readers, and, most importantly, keeping their focus on storytelling itself. Specifically, both novels are informed by canonical literary works —*IQ84* is, of course, an homage to George Orwell’s 1984, while Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* is interwoven throughout *The Tiger’s Wife*. Clearly the title indicates an immediate and obvious

relationship between *IQ84* and *1984*; furthermore, like *1984*, *IQ84* is focused on a particularly grim social and political climate that exists when dystopian visions are being realized and extremism, whether religious or political, is allowed to flourish. According to Scott Selisker, “*IQ84* itself suggests some of the contours of post-World War II political representation that the topos of the cult throws into relief: 1948, the year George Orwell wrote *1984* and the era during which the concepts of totalitarianism and ‘brainwashing’ were forged,” and which Murakami portrays two separate religious extremist groups (444). In a reversal of the presence of Big Brother, Murakami gives us the Little People whose destructive influence over others is so devastating that one character chooses death over being used by them further. While Big Brother represents the abuse of power by the government, particularly in regards to mass surveillance, the Little People are, in a way, more slippery than Big Brother because they are “magical.” They are able to inflict physical damage—the removal of young girls’ uteruses, the chronic and excruciating pain they force the Leader of Sakigake to endure—and they attempt, sometimes successfully as in the case of Sakigake, to create violent environments ruled by fear and abuse.

While there are clear literary and historical allusions to the themes and title of *1984* in *IQ84*, there is more of a personal connection to *The Jungle book* that is portrayed throughout *The Tiger’s Wife*. Natalia’s grandfather loved the book from the time he was a child and carried it with him everyday of his life. The novel initiates a connection between himself, the tiger, and the tiger’s wife when he is young and becomes the wager in a bet between himself and the deathless man when he is an adult. It is also the artifact that Natalia is most keen to find after his death, because she knows how much her grandfather treasured the book. But the significance of the novel is more profound than its role as an important artifact for Natalia after her grandfather’s death or a story her grandfather loved. After reading about Mowgli and Shere

Khan as a child, Natalia's grandfather shares the story with the so-called tiger's wife so she understands that he, too, wants to protect the tiger after it is spotted in the village of Galina; in doing so, an unspoken promise is formed between them that they will not allow anyone to harm the tiger. Elisha Cohn claims that his infatuation with the tiger from *The Jungle Book*, shapes how he portrays the animal/human interactions in the text: "when [he] retells *The Jungle book*, he refuses to comply with Kipling's narrative of domination... Instead, he keeps the conflict vibrant, portraying an agonistic but ongoing relationship between the tiger and the boy, a relationship less legible in terms of domination" (594). The simple retelling of the relationships between man and animal reflects "the shared affectivity that binds animals and people together," which Obrecht elucidates in multiple ways throughout *The Tiger's Wife* (Cohn 594). Like the grandfather, Obrecht is unwilling to create a "narrative of domination" over the tiger by telling his story in precise terms. Instead, as Cohn points out, Natalia tells the story of the tiger's life as he would have experienced it. What kind of sensory overload would a tiger that had escaped captivity experience once he was free? Obrecht describes the sights and sounds and tastes that he might have experienced from his perspective as he traveled from the city to the small village of Galina. She imagines why a lonely, half-tamed tiger might forge a bond with the lonely mute/deaf girl who stole meat from her butcher husband's shed to feed him. Through the course of the story, the tiger transforms from just a tiger into a mythical creature that the villagers of Galina still fear, even sixty years after his disappearance. To them, he still walks in the hills above the village waiting for the tiger's wife to come. The reason Natalia's grandfather did not share the same fear of the tiger as the other villagers is because he was already enchanted by the idea of tigers from reading about them in *The Jungle Book* before the tiger ever came to Galina. The stories of Shere Khan that Natalia's grandfather passed down to her and their weekly visits

to the zoo to see the tigers underscore the influence of *The Jungle Book* were on her grandfather's life. These intertextual allusions in both novels not only call attention to the influence that stories have in our lives, but they provide commentary on the prevailing "social establishment, and on the political canon" through the powerful thematic associations they provide readers (Arva 111).

Another way these texts are analogous as narrative is through their non-linear structure, which serves to accentuate the unsettled nature of the world that the central characters inhabit for readers who must make sense of the many stories that weave the past and the present together in a kaleidoscope of intertwining narratives. *The Tiger's Wife* shifts between several different time periods as Natalia recounts the story of her adolescence, her grandfather's childhood,<sup>29</sup> and the history of the otherworldly characters that inhabit his past. All of these tales are grounded by Natalia's experience working at a small coastal orphanage as part of a humanitarian mission to the Balkans. Like the diggers in the vineyard searching for the bones of a cousin in order to lift the curse that has followed their family for twelve years, Natalia must also dig into her grandfather's past to affirm the existence of the deathless man and piece together the story of the tiger's wife in order to make sense of her relationship with him. As she goes more deeply into the mystery of her grandfather's death and the stories that influenced his life, she, like those reading her story, must contend with the frustrations that come when only pieces of someone's story are available and the truth of history must be constructed through the (partial) memories of others. Furthermore, the narrative alternates between multiple stories, which do not come together until Natalia reveals at the end of the novel that she is the one who has told us the story of the tiger's wife, Darisa the Bear, and the Apothecary.

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<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the narrative is told from her grandfather's point of view or in his own words. In this way, Natalia allows him to tell his own story, to a certain extent. She is concerned with finding the "truth" of his life and his experiences with unexplainable elements of the supernatural.

Murakami's approach in regards to the arrangement of *1Q84* is also structured around multiple stories and several narrative threads:

The chapters here alternate between two story lines that slowly converge like parallel lines on the horizon. In one [Aomame] works as a kind of demure assassin, taking revenge on men who have physically abused their wives. The other features Tengo, a former judo wrestler who teaches math... We move gracefully between their two stories, and soon see that Aomame and Tengo knew each other as children. Their eventual reunion begins to feel inevitable but, in Murakami's hands, never contrived. (Ervin)

Embedded in these alternating chapters are descriptions of Sakigake and the direct impact it and people from it have on Aomame and Tengo. We are also privy to a third perspective in the final section of the novel: that of a private eye hired to track Aomame after she has murdered the Leader of Sakigake. Murakami includes the perspective of this Ushikawa in the latter part of the book to stress how improbable the relationship between Tengo and Aomame is and to underline that role fiction and writing play in their reunion. Their brief interactions with each other as ten-year-olds realistically should not have been enough to forge the connection that would draw them together twenty years later. Ushikawa's investigation into their lives in the hopes that he will find the missing Aomame reveals how improbable it is that a math teacher/fiction writer and fitness instructor/assassin would feel a mystical connection with each other across the space and time of twenty years. Yet, because the memory of holding hands when they were children is stronger than mere nostalgia, both of them search the labyrinth of Tokyo at the same time in the hopes of finding one another. They are ultimately brought together because Tengo's rewriting of *Air Chrysalis* creates a parallel world where it is possible for them to reconnect, an occurrence I will

discuss with more depth later in the chapter. The way events in both novels are recounted in alternating stories serves to emphasize how the characters are negotiating the complex and narratively confusing trauma and loss they have experienced and to provide readers with the same kind of confusingly multiple perspectives experienced by these characters themselves.

In a *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled “Reality A and Reality B,” written shortly after *1Q84* was published in Japan, Murakami discusses how the act of storytelling has changed from the twentieth to the twenty-first century and how this affected his writing of *1Q84*. According to Murakami, the events that “demarcate the spirit of the 21<sup>st</sup> century from that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...from a global perspective, are the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent rapid end of the Cold War order, and second, the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings on Sept. 11, 2001.” Understanding this shift in the way narrative is approached for Murakami is critical not only for examining magical realism in his work, but also for analyzing the use of magical realist characteristics in other contemporary texts I discuss here. If the act of storytelling underwent a perceptible transformation in a short space of time, then it raises the questions of what precipitated this transformation and how have writers responded to it? For Murakami:

The first act of destruction was one filled with bright hopes, while the one that followed it was an overwhelming tragedy. The widespread conviction in the first case that ‘the world will be better than ever’ was totally shattered by the disaster of 9/11...These acts of destruction, which played out on either side of the millennial turning point with such vastly different momentum in each case, appear to have combined into a single pair that greatly transformed our mentality.

The fiction he is writing in this post-9/11 landscape is, in his words, “undergoing a perceptible transformation. The stories inside me are steadily changing form as they inhale a new atmosphere” (2). *IQ84* focused in part on the idea that there is a perceptible evolution occurring in the way we tell and receive stories in the new millennium. While I can’t speak to all the various ways stories are told or received in the twenty-first century, I do think Murakami’s argument that there is a “perceptible evolution” in storytelling is reflective of Gary McMahon’s belief that one reason magical realism remains a popular narrative mode in the twenty-first century because it fulfills a cultural need “for eccentric perspectives that could match society’s and reality’s eccentricities” (19). When events occur that affect people on a global scale, e.g. the turn of the millenium, 9/11 and its aftermath, natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, there is often an accompanying shift in the way people create or handle trauma. Murakami’s statement alludes to how narrative forms often go through transformations when being used to represent trauma.

In *The Tiger’s Wife*, the representation of trauma is directly tied to the stories that shape the relationship between Natalia and her grandfather and shows that part of the goal of telling a story is providing or bearing witness to a significant event, whether it is personal or has larger historical connotations (Arva). In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub discuss the challenge of representing a traumatic event that takes place “outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality...the survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped to both” (69). They posit:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, of



reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event* – has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim (Felman and Laub 69).

So, the reconfigurations permitted and (necessitated) by the (re)telling of a story are consistent with this idea that “constructing a narrative [and] reconstructing a history” is a significant part of the healing process. When Natalia’s grandfather, Leandro, discloses the story of his encounter with the deathless man to his granddaughter it is, in part, a way of processing the horrors of war, death, and prejudice he observed during his long career as a doctor.

Early in the novel, Natalia relays the significance stories play in her relationship with her grandfather and foreshadows what is to come in the novel:

Everything necessary to understanding my grandfather lies between two stories: the story of the tiger’s wife, and the story of the deathless man. These stories run like secret rivers through all the other stories of his life—of my grandfather’s days in the army; his great love for my grandmother; the years he spent as a surgeon and a tyrant of the University. One, which I learned after his death, is the story of how my grandfather became a man; the other, which he told me, is of how he became a child again. (32)

Her grandfather’s encounters with individuals possessing preternatural abilities—a man who could not die, a girl who could commune with a tiger—profoundly changed how he approached life and death. His encounter with the tiger’s wife not only shaped his life-long love of tigers,

that he passed on to Natalia, but it also influenced his belief that there are some stories that are too special or private to be shared with others. In the case of the deathless man, instead of fearing death after his cancer diagnosis, Leandro traveled in search of his deathless friend in order to make the journey to the crossroads with someone who had been in his life longer than any of his family members. His decision to share the story of the deathless man with Natalia and let her discover the tale of the tiger's wife on her own transformed her perspective on her grandfather's life and death. Knowing her grandfather traveled to Zdrekov not to die alone but to find the deathless man helped her believe that it is possible to die with hope and not in fear, which, as I discuss later, provided her with a measure of comfort after his death. Piecing together everything she learned about the tiger, the tiger's wife, and the people of Galina who were a part of her grandfather's childhood provided Natalia with a deeper understanding of the importance rituals—like visiting the tigers at the zoo—were to her Grandfather and why he felt it was necessary to travel far from home to seek the deathless man.

### **Framing Trauma**

Since the first major wave of focus on magical realist works in the 1970s, critical discourse on magical realism has observed its capacity to represent trauma, often historical or political in nature. In her discussion of the intersections between magical realism and Jewish literature, Irmtraud Huber affirms this unique ability to address traumatic events: “Magical realism's circular and cyclical narratives, its inexplicable events, uncertainties and ambiguities, its affinities with myth and mysticism, with alterity and knowledge beyond logic and reason seem singularly well suited to address the difficulties of trauma narratives” (219-20). Examples of this in the magical realist canon are as varied as D.M. Thomas's Holocaust novel *The White Hotel*, Lawrence Thornton's imaginative telling of the political horrors in 1970s Argentina in

*Imagining Argentina*, and Toni Morrison's slavery narrative, *Beloved*. As these texts demonstrate, the range of trauma investigated by magical realism encompasses a variety of sensitive subject matters set in diverse locations, which speaks to the mode's utility for works that are multifaceted and multicultural. "In other words, magic is structurally determined: the community where these events occur is politically mediated by the traumatic experience of the clash between modernization and tradition, between oppression and a demand for justice" (Siskind 88). This structural determination operates in different types of trauma representations: Obrecht deals with effects and aftermath of war, the loss of family members, the splitting apart of a country; Murakami focuses on sexual abuse, religious fundamentalism, and violence against women. However, in both texts, magical realism "responds to trauma in a distinct manner...turning traumatic memory into narrative memory" (Sandin 24). If the idea that writing becomes a form of witnessing and preserving the memory and translating the experience of a traumatic event, then because it aids in imagining beyond the ordinary, magical realism is uniquely suited to addressing these experiences because the blending of realism and the fantastic enables prolific representations of situations that, in Lyotard's words, are often "unrepresentable" because the subject matter is too traumatic.<sup>30</sup>

In his 2011 book *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction*, Eugene Arva writes: "Establishing a nexus between magical realist writing (viewed primarily as a postmodern literary phenomenon) and trauma (understood as an individual and as an often invisible cultural dominant) requires an interdisciplinary tool," which he calls the

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<sup>30</sup> I am not arguing that magical realism is the only genre capable of representing trauma. However, I think historically it has been especially successful in depicting violent and traumatic events.

“traumatic imagination”<sup>31</sup>(5). He examines how magical realism is specifically suited to rendering what he calls “four violent historical events—slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, and war” (5). *The Traumatic Imagination* explores how trauma narratives functioned in seminal magical realist texts like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight’s Children*, and Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*. I mention Arva because his study underlines the important connection between representations of trauma and magical realism, which is significant to my focus on how Obrecht and Murakami incorporate magical moments and preternatural characters in their representations of traumatic events. In depicting situations that require us to be, in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s words, “witnesses to the unrepresentable,” Obrecht and Murakami engage with the magical or irreducible in order to emphasize both the tragedy and, at times, the absurdity of what people are forced to endure during times of social or political changes (81).

Additionally, Arva addresses the usability of magical realist texts to depict traumatic events, making the crucial point that:

Magical realist writings should be regarded not as an escape from horrific historical ‘facts’ or as a distortion meant to make them more cognitively or emotionally palatable but rather as one of the most effective means of re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with painful traumatic memories. In such a context, the re-presented or reconstructed truth will *not* be of what actually happened but of what was *experienced* as happening. (6)

This is in one way a response to those critics who disparage magical realism for being escapist or minimizing the atrocities committed during times of political and cultural upheaval, which I discussed in my first chapter. However, Arva is also making a point similar to Rushdie’s that

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<sup>31</sup> Arva “proposed the term ‘traumatic imagination’ in order to delimit its specific constructs (magical realist imagery based on extreme events) and to emphasize its important role in the re-affirmation of the traumatized (and vicariously traumatized) self” (57).

magical realism provides an approach or “door” to the truth of an experience, especially traumatic experiences that need

The ‘magical’ perspective [to] show that there is a point of view different from and oppositional to realism; however, both these perspectives exist in an uneasy relationship and, taken together, often reflect the experience of... those who have had experiences that seem to put them beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ reality.

(Sandin 24)

Arva’s approach is also valuable in considering how contemporary authors approach current and historical traumas. My analysis of Obrecht and Murakami’s engagement with these issues underscores Arva’s point that, “writing, in trauma literature and in magical realist fiction, may be both an unconscious way of acting out trauma as well as a conscious struggle to work through it” (32). For Obrecht, infusing her text with myths and magic is both a way of working through the trauma of war experienced by the people of the Balkans and the personal loss she experienced when her grandfather died. Murakami deals in broader strokes as he examines more universal experiences of trauma engendered by violence and loss.

### **History and Community**

In *The Tiger’s Wife*, the scope of trauma encompasses the personal loss of a family’s patriarch and communal upheaval that occurs around times of war, severing people from their past and reshaping their future. The effects and aftermath of war are represented in the multi-generational stories depicted in the novel. Written in the aftermath of her own Grandfather’s death, which she states influenced her writing because she was “trying to come to terms with the idea of death,” Obrecht combines the history of war with the importance of cultural myths and superstitions in her novel (McCormack 2). For Obrecht, portraying the traumatic experience of

loss occurs through imagining the harrowing effects of war and its aftermath—in her case WWII and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Though the novel is set in an unnamed Balkan country, Obreht's conscious choice in order to make the novel's themes more universal, the background is the Third Balkan War that lasted from 1991 to 2001 and included several different conflicts across the region. The specter of ethnic tension created by these events hangs heavily over the story and plays a role in Natalia's search to find the truth about her grandfather. This resonates with how historical representations are often presented in magical realism: "in many cases, in magical realist fiction, we witness an idiosyncratic recreation of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities— often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (Faris, "Scheherazade" 170). And it also reflects Obreht's position that she "didn't want to get bogged down in specifics because I didn't feel the story was about politics. My intention was to distill the essence of Yugoslavia without privileging one side over another" (McCormack 2). Magical realism is one way of emphasizing horrors that are so extreme as to seem unreal, which is similar to other works dealing with historical traumas, such as Morrison's *Beloved* or Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The horrors of WWII and the many conflicts in the Balkans over the latter half of the twentieth-century are magnified through the magical and mythical inclusions in Natalia and her grandfather's lives. Like these authors, Obreht decides to emphasize the extreme nature of this cultural trauma by using the irreducible elements in magical realism in order to both illuminate the extremity of personal and communal loss experienced by those who survived the war and to provide an avenue for healing that requires extraordinary efforts, efforts that in overcoming such trauma seem almost magical.

The trauma of losing a beloved family member amidst mysterious circumstances reflects the communal sorrow and confusion about the losses incurred as a result of the ethnic differences

that consumed Natalia's country before, during, and after the war. Like many countries torn apart by civil wars, what Obrecht describes is the way the identity of a country and its inhabitants are permanently altered when one group of people decides that it no longer wants to share space or identity with another group:

Once separate, the pieces that made up our old country no longer carried the same characteristics that had formerly represented their respective parts of the whole. Previously shared things—landmarks, writers, scientists, histories—had to be doled out according to their new owners. That Nobel Prize-winner was no longer ours, but theirs; we named our airport after our crazy inventor, who was no longer a communal figure. And all the while we told ourselves that everything would eventually return to normal. (161)

In effect, Natalia's story is a microcosmic representation of her country's search for a sense of normalcy, a tale that traces how social traumas bleed into personal lives, and how individuals attempt to rediscover and recapture a sense of normalcy after such traumatic upheavals. While these changes affect the country as a whole, we also see the ramifications for Natalia's individual family. For example, throughout the novel there are references to a tragic occurrence happening in the city of Sarobar, and we eventually learn that the city is razed to the ground by bombs during the war. After the conflicts have ended, a government official suggests that Natalia's family, particularly her grandfather, may have political leanings that are not favorable to the current administration because her grandmother was born in Sarobar. Normal life, like it was before the war, does not return to their family after the conflict has ended. Rather, her grandfather loses his job as a doctor at the city hospital and must create a new normal in his

routines, which include visits to the tigers at the zoo. He also finds a sense of comfort by starting to share with Natalia the stories of the enigmatic figures that dominate his history:

The deathless man, who turns up wherever mass death is imminent and drinks coffee with those about to die...the deaf, mute, battered wife of the local butcher, the eponymous tiger's wife...a shape-shifting bear hunter converted to taxidermy while escorting his epileptic sister to a hall of mirrors in the pasha's palace.

(Daniel)

Whether told to her by her grandfather or discovered through her own research, these stories create a haunting and mythic representation of both her country and her grandfather's history and shape our understanding of the important role that myth and magic play in her grandfather's life.

### **The Deathless Man**

One such element of magic, the figure of Gavren Gaile, the deathless man, casts a long shadow across the events of the text and connects the central characters in complex web across both space and time. He is inadvertently responsible for the tiger's wife's journey to the village of Galina, where she encounters both the tiger and Natalia's grandfather, and he is the catalyst that sends Natalia on her quest to follow the *Mora*. He is the symbol of the unknowable and the miraculous to Dr. Leandro who, as a man of science and medicine, initially believes only in what exists in the pragmatic world around him. Most significantly, the trajectory of his relationship with Natalia's grandfather parallels the tragedies experienced by the Balkan region. The circumstances surrounding the three meetings between Dr. Leandro and Gaile are similar—death is visiting or is about to visit a specific town, and this draws both men to that location. Dr. Leandro comes to give medical aid and Gaile “the nephew of Death himself, who [comes] originally to heal but eventually to carry the souls of the deceased to the other side” (Charles).



Leandro's interactions with Gavren grow from one of fear and disbelief to a genuine, albeit peculiar, friendship. Gavren's claim that he is not allowed to die because he angered his uncle (Death) seems preposterous at first to Leandro, but he eventually accepts that some version of this must be true based on the unchanging physical appearance of the deathless man and his ability to survive violent experiences like being shot in the head or drowning. The three meetings between Leandro and Gaile mark significant milestones in Leandro's lifetime and serve as reminders to him (and then to Natalia) of the transitory nature of life, and in all three the miraculous is tied to loss or death. Because the story of their third meeting is the most germane to my discussion of the proficiency of magical realism to both portray and work through traumatic events, the focus of my analysis will be on that encounter. However, to provide context for our understanding of that proficiency, I will briefly summarize the progression of their relationship.

Their first meeting occurs in a small village when Leandro is a young, unmarried doctor. He is called to the town because officials fear there is an outbreak of tuberculosis; however, upon his arrival, Leandro learns that Gaile was mistaken for dead by the townspeople and at his funeral, after sitting up in his coffin and asking for water, he was shot twice in the head then nailed up inside a coffin and placed in the village church. Through the course of the evening Leandro's preconceived beliefs about the natural and supernatural world are challenged as he converses on the nature of life and death with this man who should be dead. We recognize in this first encounter that Leandro, a man defined by his scientific and pragmatic mind, is forced to open his mind to the possibility that there are supernatural powers at work in the world.

Their second meeting happens at the site of an alleged miracle. In a small, nameless town, a few children claim they see the image of the Virgin Mary in the waters of a local lake.

Immediately sick and lame people from outlying areas journey to the “miraculous” waters seeking healing. Fearful there may be an outbreak of disease, government officials send Leandro and a team of nurses to monitor the area. Leandro encounters Gaile during his nightly rounds of the church where patients (and those who need to sleep off their drunkenness) are housed each night. Mistaken for a drunk, Gaile is placed in the crematorium of the church for the night when Leandro meets him while doing rounds. The implausibility of Gaile’s stories about his inability to die still make Leandro suspicious, but we can tell in the undercurrent of their conversation that he is starting to believe the deathless man’s strange tale of being cursed to live forever by his Uncle because he tried to cheat death and save the life of the dying woman he loved.

The third encounter happens at a restaurant in Sarobor the night before the city is destroyed by bombs because, as a general tells Leandro, “the Muslims want access to the sea, so we’ll send them to it, downriver, one by one” (Obreht 284). Earlier in the novel we learn that the bombing of Sarobor was a defining moment in the outset of the conflicts that ensued between Muslims and Christians in that area:

The war started quietly, its beginning subdued by the decade we had spent on the precipice waiting for it to come. Kids at school would say ‘any day now’ without knowing what they were talking about, repeating what they had been hearing for years at home. First came the election and then the riots, the assassination of a minister, the massacre at the delta, and then came Sarobor—and after Sarobor, it was like something loosening, a release. (Obreht 32)

Leandro travels to Sarobor, after treating wounded soldiers in a nearby town, because that is where he met his wife, who is a Muslim, where they had their daughter, and because, as he tells Gaile “I have loved it all my life. My finest memories are here” (Obreht 300). The significance

Leandro places on Sarobor reverberates through the all intertwining narratives; besides Leandro, Gaile and Luka, who is tricked into marrying the tiger's wife, all find their greatest joys and their beginning of their greatest tragedies in this town.

This third encounter carries weight because it is the moment that Leandro admits (to himself and to Natalia) that he was finally convinced the deathless man possessed supernatural power. I would argue that this acknowledgement is what allows Natalia to open her mind to the idea that her grandfather did not just die in a random location. She realizes that her grandfather sought out the deathless man when his time to die was nearing and purposely went to Zedrov seeking his friend to take him to the crossroads between life and death.

Like his cancer diagnosis, which they keep secret, the story of the deathless man is something Leandro only shares with Natalia. One can deduce that a part of the reason is because the tale is such a strange one that it would be difficult for anyone to believe. Another reason is seen in the emphasis Leandro places on the importance of with whom one chooses to share the significant events he or she has witnessed. After witnessing the extraordinary sight of an elephant slowly being led away from an abandoned circus and towards its new home at the still closed zoo one night, Leandro tells Natalia:

The story of this war—dates, names, who started it, why—that belongs to everyone. Not just the people involved in it, but the people who write newspapers, politicians thousands of miles away, people who've never even been here or heard of it before. But something like this—this is yours. It belongs only to you. And me. Only to us... You have to think carefully about where you tell it, and to whom. Who deserves to hear it? (56).

He tells Natalia about his first meeting with Gaile immediately following this statement in order to stress the idea that certain moments are not for everyone to know, especially those that entail the miraculous. To witness the rescue of an elephant from certain death and to watch his journey towards his new home in the middle of the night is the catalyst for Leandro to pass on to Natalia the importance of both sharing and guarding the significant stories in one's life. The inexplicableness of the Elephant incident help to foster Leandro's desire to share his encounter with a man who could not die.

The fourth and final story of the deathless man is conjured up by Natalia as a way of coming to terms with her grandfather's death and assuaging her guilt for keeping his cancer a secret from her mother and grandmother. After finding and retrieving her grandfather's belongings, which had not been sent home with his body from the small town near Brejevina where he died, Natalia waits for the *Mora* to visit the small edifice where the families of the dead leave coins and flowers. While the *Mora* of Brejevina turns out to be Barba Ivan, Natalia and Zora's host, and not the deathless man, Natalia follows him to the small house in the mountains where he keeps the gifts given for the dead. There, despite her grandmother's admonishment not to open her grandfather's bag, Natalia, "kneeling to open the bag in secret, absolved by a room which, for the rest of the world did not exist. In the bag I found his wallet and his hat, his gloves. I found his doctor's coat, folded neatly in half. But I did not find *The Jungle Book*, for which I searched, mourned in that hot little room" (334). The missing *The Jungle Book* instigates Natalia's reconstruction of the fourth and final meeting between her grandfather and the deathless man because she finally understands why her grandfather traveled so far from home when he was sick. This reunion, which she believes her grandfather sought out because he knew he was near death, confirmed for Natalia,

That my grandfather did not die as he had once told me men die—in fear—but hope, like a child: knowing he would meet the deathless man again, certain he would pay his debt. Knowing, above all, that I would come looking, and find what he had left for me, all that remained of *The Jungle Book* in his doctor's coat, that folded-up, yellow page torn from the back of the book, with a bristle of thick coarse hairs clenched inside. (335)

The deathless man, then, becomes a symbol of comfort for Natalia. She believes the extraordinary stories her grandfather told her about him and recognizes the undercurrent of the supernatural that exists in the world. It is also because of the deathless man that she is motivated to reconstruct her grandfather's childhood; by doing this, she learns the story of the indomitable tiger and the young girl who villagers would label as his wife. These stories, the importance of tigers and *The Jungle Book*, all become clear to Natalia as a result of her knowledge of the deathless man and the role he played in her grandfather's life.

### **The Little People**

Because both the Deathless Man and the Little People are irreducible elements in these works, understanding their roles is crucial to understanding the uses of magic in the novels. While we are given a partial biography of the deathless man and description of his conversations with Leandro in *The Tiger's Wife*, the preternatural beings at the center of *IQ84*, identified only as the "Little People," are described in much more enigmatic terms. First introduced as characters in Fuka-Eri's novel, the Little People are symbols of what can happen when a society gives itself over to unrestricted authority. Fuka-Eri's caretaker, the Professor, makes this symbolism clear when he relates the role of the Little People to that of Big Brother in Orwell's *1984*:

The term 'Big Brother' has functioned as a social icon. That was Orwell's great accomplishment. But now, in the real year 1984, Big Brother is all too famous, and all too obvious. If Big Brother were to appear before us now, we'd point to him and say, 'Watch out! He's Big Brother!' There's no longer any place for a Big Brother in this real world of ours. Instead, these so-called Little People have come on the scene. Interesting verbal contrast...The Little People are an invisible presence. We can't even tell whether they are good or evil, or whether they have any substance or not. But they seem to be steadily undermining us. (236)

We witness the destabilizing force of the Little People in Fuka-Eri's insistence that they are the ones responsible for her traumatization at the hands of her father. This is further supported by the account of Tsubasa, a ten-year-old rape survivor, whose uterus was destroyed by the Little People after her sexual encounter with Fuka-Eri's father, the Leader of Sagikake.

It is not only prepubescent girls whose experiences with the Little People are traumatizing. Before she assassinates the Leader, Aomame learns that his body is slowly being destroyed from the inside by the Little People as they seek to keep their control over him and Sakigake. Leading up to Aomame's encounter with the Leader in his hotel room everything we know about him is filtered through the Professor and the Dowager's perspective. As his former friend and now caretaker of his daughter, Fuka-Eri, the Professor relates to Tengo that Sakigake was founded because the Leader, his wife, and some of his students sought to create an agrarian utopia. The secrecy surrounding their group and the violence that became associated with them was startling to the Professor, and he had a difficult time reconciling his friend with the person who was responsible (at least partially) for Fuka-Eri's traumatization. The Dowager's description of the Leader and Sakigake focuses almost solely on how the cult, particularly its leader, is

sexually abusing and traumatizing the adolescent girls in their care. Though it is impossible to feel sympathy for a man who encourages “congress” with the young girls in his care, the Leader does make it clear that he was under the direction of the Little People. The chronic, excruciating pain the Little People inflict on him so that he continues to obey them and act as their conduit underlines the physical and emotional trauma wrought by religious fundamentalism and sexual abuse. Like the miniaturized people from his 1989 short story “The T.V. People,” these “unearthly others” do not discriminate in their treatment of people; rather, they demonstrate that anyone is susceptible to damaging control (Napier 472).

### **Followers and Fighters**

While the narrative of *The Tiger's Wife* plays off against a backdrop of war, in a similar fashion, *1Q84* is directly influenced by a domestic terrorist act: the 1995 Sarin gas attack by AUM Shinrikyo cult on the Tokyo subway system that killed thirteen people and injured five hundred others. This event inspired Murakami to write *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (1998), a nonfiction book made up of interviews with the survivors of the attack and Murakami's personal examination into the national psyche of Japan. Part of what made this attack so disconcerting to the people of Japan is that “most cult members were not typical ‘outsiders’ but Japan's ‘best and brightest’ young, middle-class men and women educated at top universities who felt completely alienated from Japanese society” (Welch 57). In the book's final essay “Blind Nightmare: Where are We Japanese Going” Murakami poses the questions: “Haven't you offered part of your self to someone (or something) and received a ‘narrative’ in return?” Haven't we entrusted some part of our personality to some greater system or order...Is the narrative you possess really and truly your own? Are your dreams *really* your own dreams” (233)? *1Q84* is his attempt to answer these questions about the intersection

between public and private narrativizing, in its dissection of the effects of two cults on their members. Still reeling from the aftermath of AUM Shinrikyo's attack, Murakami attempts to understand why some people are attracted to organizations that force them to live in violence or oppression and to discover whether there exist people who have the ability to form their own narrative in the face of overwhelming social pressure. "In *1Q84* Murakami has added a more global perspective to the central thesis of *Underground*, namely, that it is both dangerous and self-delusional to view terrorism and religious fanaticism in the simplistic terms of 'evil people doing bad things to good people'" (Strecher 865). This is evident in the Leader of Sakigake's decision to allow Aomame to end his life, which will bring an end to the systematic rape of the commune's young girls reduce the power of the Little People, for without him they will no longer have an "agent" (Murakami 465). Their power and influence over Sakigake will end, he hopes, with his death.

One of the central conflicts in the novel is the extreme damage that religious cults can inflict on their members, which is an issue that is emblematic of Murakami's interest in understanding how people can allow their lives to be dictated by others and to participate in violent and/or abusive behavior towards those under their care. This also stems from his interest in the psychological mindset of those who carried out the Tokyo subway attacks and those who survived. Marc Yamada confirms, "Murakami's writing has shown a concern for individuals who struggle to form a sense of self in the face of larger homogenizing forces that surround and threaten to envelop them in the discursive systems of contemporary social, political, and, most recently, religious institutions" (21). This interest manifests in the novel's focus on two women who survived being raised in religious cults.



The first cult, Sakigake, which I have already mentioned, is a secretive religious commune from which Fuka-Eri, the teenage daughter of its leader, escapes. We learn early in the novel that Sakigake, which began as an organic farming community run by Fuka-Eri's father, a college professor, and some of his students, has become an officially sanctioned religious community, making it immune to any police or judicial interference and eligible for "preferential tax treatment and special legal protections" (*IQ84* 147). Because the cult has no outside accountability, the Leader is able to rape the adolescent girls at the commune—an act that is sanctioned by all cult members because they believe that he must do this in order to keep open his communication with the Little People open. Cult members of Sakigake consider the Little People divine messengers sent to impart wisdom and instructions to the leader. Fuka-Eri's rape by her own father when she is ten renders her speechless for several years until she is able to write her experiences in a book she titles *Air Chrysalis*. The Professor who takes in Fuka-Eri and cares for her tells Tengo "drawing distinctions between religions and cults has always been a delicate business. There's no hard and fast definition. Interpretation is everything. And where there is room for interpretation, there is always room for political persuasion" (147). In this case, the power Sakigake exerts over the government enables them to cover up crimes ranging from the sexual abuse of young girls to murder.

The second religious organization in the novel is The Society of Witnesses. "A Christian sect, the Witnesses preached the coming of the end of the world. They were fervent proselytizers and lived their lives by the Bible. They would not condone the transfusion of blood, for example" (150). From the time they can walk, children in The Society of Witnesses are expected to accompany their parents every weekend and proselytize door to door. Their simple attire and lack of nutritious foods makes their membership in this group visible to others. Raised in the

Society of Witnesses, Aomame is shunned by her classmates and spends most of her time isolated from her schoolmates. The one exception is her unusual friendship with Tengo when they are fifth graders. The Leader tells her “people can never fully divorce themselves from the images implanted during early childhood” (419). For Aomame, this means always functioning with a sense of loneliness that started in her childhood and continues into adulthood.

To provide a counterpoint to the blind obedience of the cult members, Murakami gives both Aomame and Fuka-Eri the agency not only to escape from these cults, but also to retribution on those who would use their power to dominate and abuse others. In both their lives, this applies to exclusively men who, as Tamaru tells Aomame early in the novel, “still have the upper hand in Japanese society” (84). Aomame, along with her wealthy employer, the dowager, seeks to rectify this by killing wealthy men who abuse their wives but are not held accountable by the court system or their families. “Aomame’s organized slaughter of abusive husbands suggests an objection,” on the part of Murakami, “to the silent witness of female victimization” (Hansen 236). After girls close to them took their own lives (the dowager’s daughter and Aomame’s high school best friend) because of violent beatings by their spouses, Aomame and the dowager forge a partnership to usher out of this world any man who is violent towards women. Aomame’s skills as an assassin eventually lead her to Sakigake’s leader, who she plans to murder because of his systematic rapes (or so she believes) of the prepubescent girls at commune. During the course of their conversation, the Leader confirms for Aomame that she is in the parallel world of 1Q84 and that Tengo has also been looking for her, just as she has been searching for him. This information strengthens Aomame’s resolve to save Tengo’s life and help

him out 1Q84 any way she can.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Irreducible Power of Stories**

One way issues pursuant to the traumatic episodes in the novels are addressed and resolved is by the author's use of metafiction as a narrative strategy to explore issues associated with loss and isolation in twenty-first century society and the way these issues are often reconciled through the medium of storytelling. Jesus Benito writes,

Postmodern metafiction revels in the permanent failure of representation to offer access to the real thing, recurrently exposing the human urge to reach after systems to order experience; on the other hand, even at their most fantastic, magical realist texts strive to retain a sense of the real and to reconstruct a feeling of order by filling in the gaps with magic. (74)

Writing or storytelling, while initially unsettling the world of the protagonists, becomes the conduit for re-establishing order in their lives by either aiding Tengo and Aomame to find each other or filling in the gaps of Leandro's life for Natalia. Ultimately, these moments of metafiction provide resolution or healing for the loss and isolation the characters have had to contend with for most of their stories.

Because of the unsettling nature of the blending of the real and the fantastic in magical realist texts, there is, according to Irlemar Chiampi, "a systematic questioning of the narrative

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<sup>32</sup> In powerful moment of magic during her time with the Leader, Aomame becomes pregnant by Tengo through transference, as the sperm he produces during sex with Fuka-Eri supernaturally transfers to Aomame and impregnates her. This occurrence is parallel to the way the Little People function by having a receiver they can transfer their will onto, like the Leader who is positioned as the receiver for the Little People at Sakigake must do their bidding. Once Fuka-Eri and Tengo collaborate on *Air Chrysalis*, events are set into motion that will undermine the control of the Little People. I recognize this is an important moment of magic in the novel; however, I am only briefly mentioning it because it is not central to my discussion of the traumatic manifested through the writing and the encounters with the Little People in the novel.

process” inherent to the reading experience in *The Tiger’s Wife* and *IQ84* (qtd. in *Ordinary Enchantments* 236). This is even more pronounced in these texts because the narrative is also an element of the magic in the story. As Wendy B. Faris argues, “metafictional dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves... Thus the magical power of fiction itself, the capacities of mind—signs, images, metaphors, narrators, narrates—may be foregrounded,” as these examples show (Faris, “Scheherazade” 175). In this departure from normal realistic storytelling expectations, as the writing or telling of a story within the central narrative of the novel becomes a generative force that effectively writes (or rewrites) the world of the novel. Metafiction can also become an irreducible element of magic that causes us to question the fundamental reality of the world we are reading about. “If we consider that the inclusion of magical realism itself in a text provokes the reader to reflect on what they are willing to believe and on their own assumption about reality” (Bowers 75), then a part of the reading experience with magical realist works is that readers will “hesitate between two contradictory understandings of an event. The reader’s primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an event as a character’s hallucination or as a miracle” (Faris, “Scheherazade” 171). The example Faris uses, and to which I have already referred, is that of “the mysterious character Beloved, in Toni Morrison’s novel of the same name, who slithers provokingly between these two options, playing with our rationalist tendencies to recuperate, to co-opt the marvelous” (“Scheherazade” 171). Yet, what happens when the basic narrative structure is de-constructed, then reconstructed and rewritten and reality (re) presented in such a way that the characters themselves must become detectives in their own novel—whether to find the truth behind the death of a beloved grandparent in *The Tiger’s Wife*, or to make their way out of an alternate world and reunite with their true love in *IQ84*? It is in these situations that

language and stories take on “magical properties” that resist normal expectations because the story does not end when a writer has finished writing or a reader has finished reading; rather, in these texts, writing and storytelling prompt action on the part of Tengo and Natalia to find the answers to the mystery of the past of a loved one. They are given the fortitude to confront the loss, trauma, and isolation that defined their lives for years, especially in Tengo’s case, and ultimately find a resolution.

In *The Tiger’s Wife*, Natalia emphasizes that the key to her grandfather’s life and death “lies between two stories: the story of the tiger’s wife, and the story of the deathless man” (32). Similar to Murakami, Obrecht is questioning what power do the stories we tell about ourselves have to shape our identity and help us understand our lives. The stories her grandfather told her about his encounters with the deathless man reveal what shaped his approach to life (and death) as an adult, while the tiger and the tiger’s wife tale that Natalia uncovers provides her with a glimpse of what shaped her grandfather as a person earlier, in his childhood. The only hint of this story she hears as a child was during their weekly trips to visit the tigers at the zoo:

My grandfather never refers to the tiger’s wife by name. His arm is around me and my feet are on the handrail, and my grandfather might say, “I once knew a girl who loved tigers so much she almost become one herself.” Because I am little, and my love of tigers comes directly from him, I believe he is talking about me, offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself—and will, for years and years. (4)

The connotation of Natalia’s belief that she is the girl her grandfather is creating a fairytale about highlights the importance that Obrecht places on the continuity of stories, which is evident later

when Natalia searches through her grandfather's belongings in the hope of finding his copy of *The Jungle Book*. What she found instead was:

What he had left for me, all that remained of *The Jungle Book* in the pocket of his doctor's coat, that folded-up, yellowed page torn from the back of the book, with a bristle of thick, coarse hairs clenched inside. *Galina*, says my grandfather's handwriting, above and below a child's drawing of the tiger, who is curved like the blade of a scimitar across the page. *Galina*, it says, and that is how I know how to find him again, in *Galina*, in the story he hadn't told me but perhaps wished he had. (335)

The story of the tiger's wife, and of her husband, Luka, and the apothecary who tried to help her until he murdered her, are the stories of Leandro's childhood that Natalia uncovers in order to learn who her grandfather was and why *The Jungle Book* was so important to him. The novel inspired his life-long love of tigers and forged his connections with both tiger's wife and the apothecary. Learning of the tiger-related trauma her grandfather observed as a child—Luka sadistically beating the tiger's wife, the villagers relentless pursuit to kill the tiger until the only remains of Darisa the Bear they find is his skin, the poisoning of the pregnant tiger's wife by the apothecary—and his bravery in trying to protect the tiger and the tiger's wife, elucidate for Natalia how courageous and caring her grandfather was and how important the belief in the miraculous was to him, because it helped him see that the world was bigger than *Galina* and more accepting of the differences that eventually killed the tiger's wife and the apothecary.

### **Writing the World**

When trying to write traumatic experiences, Arva affirms that “writing, in trauma literature and in magical realist fiction, may be both an unconscious way of acting out trauma as

well as a conscious struggle to work through it” (32). Fuka-Eri’s description in *Air Chrysalis* of the traumatic events she experienced at Sakigake are the only means at her disposal for giving voice to the horrors happening in that closed-off community. Her telling of this story, along with Tabasa’s recounting of a similar story to the dowager, is the beginning of the downfall of the cult, which will no longer have the leadership of the Little People after Aomame kills their leader and reunites with Tengo. Murakami not only gives voice to marginalized by giving the power of telling the story to Fuka-Eri and Tabasa, he also gives them agency by allowing them to be the one’s who ultimately bring down the cult through their associations with Aomame and Tengo.

In *IQ84*, metafiction is endowed with the power to reinscribe the world of the text. This begins when Tengo starts rewriting Fuka-Eri’s story, *Air Chrysalis*. The plot of the *Air Chrysalis* is fairly simple. A ten-year-old girl, “probably Fuka-Eri herself in the past” is given the job of taking care of a blind goat in the mountain commune where she lives (*IQ84* 70). When the goat dies because of her negligence, she is “put in total isolation for ten days, locked in an old storehouse with the goat’s corpse,” and at night, “the Little People would enter this world through the corpse, and they would go back to the other side when dawn broke” (70). The central part of the story is that an Air Chrysalis is like a cocoon, and every time a new Air Chrysalis is created a second moon appears in the sky. Tengo, before he rewrites it, describes the story of *Air Chrysalis* in magical realist terms:

The overall plot is a fantasy, but the descriptive detail is incredibly real. The balance between the two is excellent. I don’t know if words like ‘originality’ or ‘inevitability’ fit here...but finally, after you work your way through the thing, with all its faults, it leaves a real impression—it *gets* to you in some strange, inexplicable way that may be a little disturbing. (16)

Commissioned by his editor to rewrite the text so it is readable for a general audience, Tengo finds himself creating a work that is as much original to him as it the structure of *Air Chrysalis* is to Fuka-Eri. The more he works on the novel, the more the world of the book he is writing becomes the world he, Aomame, and the rest of the characters we meet inhabit, as fiction begins to mimic reality. This reverberates with Faris's point that in magical realist works "the magical realist vision thus exists at the intersection of two worlds...and we experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms" (21), which in this case are the worlds of fiction and reality. Not only does this create one of the most magical moments of the novel, which is when Tengo realizes the world he is writing is literally coming into being, it also reflects the unstable environment of this that Aomame identified as "world that bears a question," which is the contemporary world Murakami is portraying. The intense isolation experienced by both Tengo and his counterpart, Aomame, is only broken through the conflation of the fiction and reality that occurs as Tengo writes the novel: he writes the world that comes into being and ultimately leads him to Aomame.

Tengo's reworking of *Air Chrysalis* works to conflate reality and fiction. Once Tengo observes a second moon in the sky—this one described as greenish, somewhat lopsided in shape, and much less bright than our normal moon—he is astonished to discover that the new moon is a visual twin to the one he described in his rewrite of *Air Chrysalis*: "*This can't be*, Tengo thought. *What kind of reality mimics fictional creations?*" (548). He questions whether or not, "*like Alice falling down the rabbit hole*," he has now entered the world of *Air Chrysalis*. Eventually, like Aomame, who noticed the presence of the second moon earlier in the novel, he accepts that he is somehow in a parallel world to 1984, one which he somehow brought into existence by rewriting Fuka-Eri's story. As soon as he recognizes the new world as 1Q84, the world he wrote in *Air*



*Chrysalis*, he is able to continue working towards making his way to Aomame. He and Aomame come to the realization that if they find each other they may be able to find a space to create their own reality and escape the shadowy world of 1Q84. Once they are reunited, they recognize the mutual feelings they share are enough for them to start a new life together: “Tengo could hardly believe it—that in this frantic, labyrinth-like world, two people’s hearts—a boy’s and a girl’s—could be connected, unchanged, even though they hadn’t seen each other for twenty years” (890). The metafictional magic he is experiencing convinces him that their connection is strong enough to change the physical world around them.

The layering of stories in both Obreht’s and Murakami’s texts raises the question of what happens when the stories one creates or unearths takes one further down the rabbit hole of an alternative universe, as seems to be the case with their magical realism? Can the metafictional element in these novels be the means for the protagonists to move out of loss—or would it be more accurate to describe it as a way of moving deeper into the loss itself, working through the loss rather than trying to climb out of it? As my reading of these novels shows, the turn towards the magic of metafiction seems to suggest, to use a postcolonial phrase, “there is no return.” In other words, the turn to magic implies that all we can do is accept that the world will not be the same after a traumatic event or experience. Ideally, despite this, the outcome will be as hopeful as those presented in *The Tiger’s Wife* and *1Q84*, though it is more hopeful in Murakami’s novel. Natalia is able to reconstruct the story of her grandfather’s childhood and his connection to the tiger’s wife and *The Jungle Book*, which provides a measure of comfort for her after his death because now she understands why tigers and *The Jungle Book* were so important to him and she recognizes that the great love he had for her and her mother and grandmother stemmed from his desire to protect them in the way he was not able to protect the tiger’s wife. This understanding

Tengo and Aomame literally and figuratively climb their way out of the world of 1Q84 and back to 1984 by climbing up the same Metro Expressway stairs Aomame climbed down at the beginning of the novel. Just as Tengo's writing created a world where it was possible for he and Aomame to meet, the reversal of Aomame's journey down the staircase at the beginning of the novel brings her journey full circle, only this time she does not have to travel alone. The act of walking up a flight of stairs hand-in-hand signals the end of their journey through the unsettling and yet possibility-filled world of two-moons and malevolent Little People and the start of their new life together. This moment completes the healing that the metafictional magic created by Tengo began in their lives.

### **Conclusion: This Eccentric World**

In the introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang posit, "the question inevitably arises: how is it that magical realism has been so successful migrating to various cultural shores? Why has it seemed able to offer a vehicle for the expression of the tensions within different societal frameworks?"(6). My analysis of *The Tiger's Wife* and *1Q84* shows that magical realism flourishes in diverse and, at times, unexpected places because of its capacity to reframe our understanding of particular events and experiences in the world by blending realism and an irreducible element of magic, and, ultimately, through such a reimagining of the world, to suggest a way out of the impasses it presents. We observe that when dealing with traumatic experiences—whether in an active metropolitan center like Tokyo, a more rural area like the village of Galina, or a space in between these like the City where Natalia is raised—the means of understanding and overcoming trauma lies in the acceptance of the miraculous and embracing the potential stories and storytelling offer for easing loss. On a more universal scale, Obrecht and Murakami embrace the possibility magical realism offers for

re(presenting) historical occurrences and cultural anxieties in an age when, “after the impossible happened on 9/11, rivaling Hollywood’s apocalyptic futures for the capital of the world, realism would have to expand to stay real...Magical realism went mainstream in a market for eccentric perspectives that could match society’s and reality’s eccentricities” (McMahon 19). What I suggest, through my analysis of these novels, is that the way magical realism’s creating layered narratives gives shape to that which is amorphous or unrepresentable and through the alternative fictional possibilities it embodies offers the tools for dealing with our often traumatic and eccentric contemporary world.

## CHAPTER 3

## INESCAPABLE MAGIC: THE LUMINOUS LIVES OF FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

## IN THE WORKS OF AIMEE BENDER, MEG MEDINA AND LESLYE WALTON

Ever since the song began she had felt that this whole world was filled with a magic different from hers, and stronger.

C.S. Lewis, *The Magicians Nephew*

It's not very pleasant for women to find out how they are represented in the world.

Angela Carter

Oh I'm just a girl, guess I'm some kind of freak  
 'Cause they all sit and stare with their eyes  
 Oh I'm just a girl, take a good look at me  
 Just your typical prototype

No Doubt, "Just a Girl"

While the irreducible elements of magic encountered by Natalia and her grandfather in *The Tiger's Wife* and Tengo and Aomame in *1Q84* enable them to confront individual, communal, and global traumatic events, the manifestation of the magical in Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010), Meg Medina's *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* (2012), and Leslye Walton's *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* illuminates the effect difference or otherness may have specifically on adolescent females. These works, along with others by North American female writers like *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, *A Snicker of Magic* by Natalie Lloyd, and *Swamplandia* by Karen Russell, to name a few, demonstrate the proliferation in the past fifteen years of young adult magical realist novels, or novels featuring young adult protagonists, and provide another example of the expansion of

magical realism beyond Latin American and postcolonial fiction.<sup>33</sup> These texts underline the influence of magical realism and its appeal to a broadening audience, as the focus on adolescent anxieties and occurrences written for teenagers, or addressing the adolescent experience for a broader audience of readers, is the central concern of these novels. Moreover, these texts show an emerging trend for magical realist works written by women to focus specifically on the female adolescent experience, and the magic usually functions to underscore a particular challenge or injustice that occurs because of the gender of the protagonist.<sup>34</sup> The focus on a female thread of magical realism resonates with Wendy B. Faris's claim that I mention in my first chapter:

It may be possible to locate a female spirit characterized by structures of diffusion, polyvocality, and attention to issues of embodiment, to an earth-centered spirit world, and to collectivity among other things... Magical realism has affinities with and exemplifies certain aspects of the experience of women that have been delineated by certain strains of feminist thought. (*Ordinary Enchantments* 170)

Similar issues to what she describes are present in the fiction I discuss in this chapter where the protagonists are further alienated from their peers or marginalized by the adults around them (within the particular world presented in each novel) because they are the embodiment of the magical or miraculous.

As young women who are in some way marked as “other” because of their skills or physical appearance, Rose, Sonia, and Ava, the heroines of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon*

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<sup>33</sup> One novel I discuss in this chapter, Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, is not classified as young adult literature. However, I include it in this chapter because it features a young adult female protagonist and presents similar encounters with magic as the other works I discuss.

<sup>34</sup> I am emphasizing gender because the focus of the novels I am discussing center on adolescent females.

*Cake*, *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind*, and *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender*, respectively, must learn how to function in a world that is not always sympathetic to their abilities, appearance, or plight as females trying to survive adolescence. Confronting the challenges of young adulthood as a female, including shifting roles vis-a-vis parents, wanted and unwanted attention from men, and the sometimes-awkward maturation through puberty to adulthood is already fraught with tension without the added complication of being endowed with an otherworldly ability or look. The manifestation of an irreducible element of magic in their lives initially complicates their home lives, isolates them from their peers, and engenders the belief that normalcy is unachievable, at least in their present circumstances. The desire for normalcy prompts each girl to search outside the confines of her home for experiences that would help normalize her in some way, though as I discuss later, the results of these experiments are not all positive. Though the events presented in these works are not on the same scale as the violent history of slavery, the holocaust, war, and colonialism that Eugene Arva claims necessitates the need for a “traumatic imagination” that is realized in twentieth century magical realist texts, these novels demonstrate that magical realism is also adept at portraying traumatic experiences related to gender and age. Bender, Medina, and Walton are proposing symbolically that to be young and female is traumatic, as evidenced by the outrageous things that happen to Rose, Sonia, and Ava, and that therefore the events they experience could be compared to the more historical traumas Arva discusses and that that’s why the employment of magic is appropriate. Furthermore, Bender, Medina, and Walton emphasize that it is because of their embodiment of magic that these women are able to offset or endure the challenges they and their families encounter.

The cultural interest in strong, well-developed heroines in young adult literature is

especially timely given the rise in the past twenty years of fantasy or dystopian series written by women—like the Harry Potter, Hunger Games, and Twilight series<sup>35</sup>—that have garnered immense popularity, been turned into financially successful film adaptations, and produced a plethora of similar works. In the three novels I discuss, the irreducible element or elements of magic are centered in the female protagonists, although other peripheral characters also possess or exhibit supernatural gifts. Like Hermione Granger (Harry Potter), Katniss Everdeen (The Hunger Games), and Bella Swan (The Twilight Series), Bender, Medina, and Walton’s protagonists are introduced as possessing supernatural or superhuman traits; however, unlike these popular series set in the world of wizards, a dystopian future, or populated by mythical creatures who possess magical abilities, the worlds of Rose, Sonia, and Ava are firmly grounded in the reality of life in urban Los Angeles, an impoverished mountain village in Latin America, or the suburbs of Seattle. Dealing with a parent’s infidelity, a dire economic situation, or family members whose strangeness further insulates them from the outside world are problems that arise in many young adult texts, but Rose, Sonia, and Ava have the added burden of trying to navigate these and other challenges inherent in adolescence while also trying to withstand the pressure—both internal and external— of the irreducible elements of magic they embody.

### **Literary Legacy**

Another similarity among these three novels is that canonical works of magical realism inform the manifestation of the irreducible, which, among other things, highlights the influence of twentieth century magical realism on contemporary literature. The most potent form of magic in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* is Rose’s ability to taste the feelings of whoever has cooked her food, which is a reversal of Tita’s power in *Like Water for Chocolate* to cook her

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<sup>35</sup> I reference these three series because of their overwhelming commercial success and because of the pop cultural impact of the female protagonists from these books and films.

feelings into the food she makes. Ava's wings in *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows* are reminiscent of Garcia Marquez's "The Very Old Man with Wings"; notably, even her wings are brown like those of the very old man. Finally, ghosts in some form play a significant role in two of the novels: the ghost of Sonia's Abuela appears to her multiple times, and Ava's grandmother is followed around her house by the ghosts of her dead siblings.<sup>36</sup> In her essay "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction," Lois Parkinson Zamora writes:

Ghosts in their many guises abound in magical realist fiction...and they are crucial to any definition of magical realism as a literary mode. Because ghosts make absence present, they foreground magical realism's most basic concern—the nature and limits of the knowable—and they facilitate magical realism's critique of modernity. (498)

The repeated intrusions into the world of the living by dead relatives are reminders of the past and guiding forces in times of trouble in the present. For example, Sonia's Abuela provides comfort for the family, even when she appears to escort the dying Rafael to other side, while Emilienne's dead brother informs her of the assault on Ava, which helps to save Ava's life. These appearances resonate with the function of ghosts in classic magical realist texts like *Beloved* and *The House of Spirits*. By engaging with themes and images from previous works of magical realism and reshaping them in order to portray the struggles of navigating present-day adolescence, these writers employ techniques that are identified with the genre, like the ghostly

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<sup>36</sup> Rose's brother begins to dematerialize over the course of the text until he becomes a part of the objects around him, which, though magical, is not the same as the specific ghosts in Medina and Walton's novels.



or preternatural figures that appear in all three novels.<sup>37</sup> In my previous chapter, I point out that *The Tiger's Wife* and *1Q84* are influenced by and reference the classic texts *The Jungle Book* and *1984*, which provides an immediate frame of reference for readers who are familiar with those seminal works. That Bender, Medina, and Walton clearly draw from the legacy of magical realism to create their works further stresses the persistence of magical realism in the twenty-first century.

### **Magical Realist Focalizers**

While there are other irreducible elements of magic in all three novels that I examine later in this chapter, a central element of magic exists in the narrative perspective given to the characters of Rose, Sonia, and Ava. They are what Anne C. Hegerfeldt describes in her book, *Lies That Tell the Truth*, as magical realist focalizers:

The artlessness with which magic realist fiction manages to portray a magical world is largely due to its unfazed manner of narration...the matter-of-fact tone results from the fact that implausible or fantastic events are reflected through characters whose world-view quite naturally affords room for the extraordinary, the fabulous or the marvelous. Frequently these focalizers are characters who can be considered in some way other. (117)

With her idea of “othered” focalized characters, Hegerfeldt is expanding Theo D’Haen’s argument, which I mention in chapter one, that magical realism is appealing to “authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender” (195). In the case of Bender, Medina, and Walton, the appeal of using magical realism is in the basic depiction of the challenges of being young and

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<sup>37</sup> Though I do not provide direct quotes from the authors that indicate they were influenced by magical realist works, it is impossible not to make the connection if one is at all familiar with the field.

female, which already has connotations of being an “other.” Gender studies show that by virtue of being female one may experience marginalization at school, in sports, and in regards to idealized representations of beauty and the body on social media.<sup>38</sup> Hegerfeldt posits, “Although the mode’s effective presentation of a non-dominant worldview is clearly connected to the question of perspective, it is not the ex-centricity of the author that is instrumental, but the marginalized position of the characters from whose perspective the narrative is told” (116). Besides their age and gender, Rose, Sonia, and Ava also must contend with supernatural elements they embody or are projected onto them by others, which further supports Hegerfeldt’s claim that it is the “ex-centric” position of the narrator or protagonist that positions them as a magical realist focalizer.<sup>39</sup>

The liminal position of each character is accentuated by the supernatural or magical power that Rose, Sonia, and Ava possess (or that other people believe she possesses). The degree to which this affects each woman is related to the particular manifestation of magic that is ascribed to her. For example, Rose’s physical appearance does not change, but her ability to interact with her family and friends is unsettled by her anxiety about tasting the emotions of the cook in the food she eats. Like Rose, Sonia is not marked by a physical aberration; however, because of the timing of her birth, her community believes she has the power to heal or that her intercession on the behalf of others will work miracles. The weight of responsibility on Sonia to be the figure of faith and hope her community believes she is, and needs her to be because of the physical and economic hardships they live with daily, makes her feel “as if suffering itself were chasing her” (6). After enduring the tragic loss of her family, Ava’s grandmother, Emilienne,

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<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that other genders do not experience marginalization or discrimination. I am focusing solely on the experience of the females in the texts I discuss in this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Rose and Ava are also the narrators in their novels. *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* is told in third-person narration.

also believes suffering is chasing her, so she travels across the country from New York to Seattle to try to find a place where she is not haunted by the deaths of her siblings.<sup>40</sup> By the time Ava is born with wings, along with her twin, Henry, who does have wings but possesses his own set of eccentricities, their community already considers her family peculiar. After the religious fervor over her wings subsides when she is five, Ava's mother tries to keep her confined to their home and away from the curious and judgmental members of their community. Stressing the difficulty of learning how to function and interact in the world with, or in spite of, their unusual skills or gifts elucidates the challenges of being a young female in a culture or society that often marginalizes or objectifies women.

### **Magical Women**

Focusing the magic, or part of the magic, of the text in a female character is common in magical realist texts by women writers. Examples include the characters of Clara in Isabelle Allende's *The House of Spirits*, Fleur Pillager in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, La Loca and her sister Caridad in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*, Tita in *Like Water for Chocolate*, and of course Beloved in Morrison's novel of the same name.<sup>41</sup> They are so dominant that Hegerfeldt asserts that such female focalizers "bear other social stigmata which relegate them to the margins of society, thereby literally and metaphorically underlining the position of powerlessness and subordination women have been, and still are, forced to occupy" (126). The most palpable

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<sup>40</sup> Her sister, Margaux, killed herself by carving out her own heart after giving birth to a child by Emilienne's fiancé. His lover shot her brother, René, in the face. And her younger sister turned herself into a canary in order to win the love of an ornithologist. I mention these family members to show the history of strangeness and sorrow that Ava's family has experienced, which are a part of the challenges she faces along with her physical appearance.

<sup>41</sup> Female magical realist focalizers are also prominent in novels by male writers. However, for the purposes of my argument, I am focusing only on works by women. For a more in-depth discussion of works featuring magical women by both male as well as female writers, see Wendy B. Faris's chapter "Women and Women and Women" in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*.

example of this in the novels I discuss is the brutal physical and sexual assault Ava survives; though Sonia too is threatened with a sexual assault from which she barely, and luckily, escapes. In both instances, these teenage girls became objects of obsession by adult men who live near them and who use their position and physical strength to overpower the girls. As an economically disadvantaged maid in the home of the wealthiest widow in the city, and without much protection since her father and brother live far away in their isolated mountain village, Sonia is not in a position to thwart the aggressive physical advances of the widow's nephew. It is only through the intervention of other employees at the estate where she works that the nephew's assault is prevented. Ava, on the other hand, barely survives after her neighbor's nephew—a devout man of faith who becomes possessed by the idea that she is an angel—rapes her and then hacks off her wings with an ax after realizing she is nothing more than a young girl with enormous wings.<sup>42</sup> These occurrences show that to be a girl is to be vulnerable and susceptible to the brutality of others. As with all the magical realist females I mention, being endowed or associated with the supernatural does not provide the same positive outcome that women in fantasy novels experience, like Hermione's talent for performing difficult spells or Bella's strength as newborn vampire, which enables them to save the lives of their loved ones and help defeat their enemies. Rose, Sonia, and Ava are struggling to survive their childhoods with the added weight of magic that is woven into their lives.

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<sup>42</sup> Ava's mistreatment by Nathaniel Sorrows after he realizes she is not an angel resonates with how the community in "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" treats the title character after concluding that it is unlikely that he is an angel. He is relegated to living in the chicken coop where people throw food and dirt at him. No attempt is made to clean him or provide him with comfortable accommodations. Eventually, people forget he exists. Clearly Ava experiences a more traumatic moment than the Very Old Man, but the notion that embodying a mythical or heavenly vision may engender fear, disappointment, apathy, or rage in others when one cannot live up to the desires projected onto them is similar.

Beyond the fantasy and twentieth century magical realist females I mention, the magic associated with Rose, Sonia, and Ava also links them with, or offers comparisons to, Aomame and Fuka-Eri in *1Q84*. After surviving abusive childhoods, Aomame and Fuka-Eri reclaim their story or life in ways that demonstrate their almost uncanny strength, both physical and mental: Aomame chooses to kill men who inflict unimaginable abuses on women; Fuka-Eri defies her father and the Little People by telling their story and allowing Tengo to rewrite *Air Chrysalis*. Their actions put into motion a chain of events that eventually rids the world of the Little People (at least temporarily) and restores Tengo and Aomame's relationship. Though the vision of women with magical powers in *1Q84* is, in a way, articulated against the one I am discussing in this chapter, it is also related to it. Aomame and Fuka-Eri may not possess the explicit irreducible element of magic that we recognize in Rose and Ava, but their choices and their actions indicate they do possess some type of supernatural ability or sight. Fuka-Eri's initiation of sex with Tengo facilitates the magical moment transmission across space and time of that causes Aomame to be impregnated by Tengo, while Aomame's acceptance of this miraculous conception further illustrates her capacity to embrace the ineffable, which she first demonstrates when she sees the two moons in the sky and decides she is in a parallel world to 1984. These examples of magical females from canonical and contemporary works accentuate the need for representations of women that enable an investigation of the "possibilities for transgressing boundaries and limits, including, especially, the opposition between selves and others, and with questioning dualistic modes of thought" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 171).

In the case of Rose, Sonia, and Ava, the concentration of the miraculous or supernatural in all three girls illuminates the difficulty of growing up in a world that often defines women by their physical appearance or reduces their existence to what they can do for others rather than

who they are, aligning magical realism with “newer [ideas] concerning attention to the body” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 171). What does it mean that Rose inexplicably begins to taste the sadness, joy, or guilt her mother feels through the food she cooks and then this ability spreads to any food Rose eats? Is it to show the particular strangeness of her family lineage—her grandfather who had to wear a strap because his sense of smell was overwhelming, her father’s avoidance of hospitals because he believes that “if I went into a hospital something might come up, some skill... better not to find out,” or her brother’s transformation from human to object<sup>43</sup> (261)? Or, does it underscore how difference of any kind, but especially physical difference, can inhibit the formation of normal relationships with family and friends? Though Sonia does not have the same physical manifestation of magic on her body as Rose and Ava, she is held up by her community as possessing the ability to produce miracles because at the moment of her birth a miracle occurred that saved her village. So while the irreducible element of magic exists within a part of Rose’s body, Sonia is a bodily representation of the magical or miraculous to her entire community, and this situates her in a liminal position between normal girl and supernatural being. Ava also begins her life with many believing she is a supernatural being, or at least a medical marvel, and her sheltered childhood stems from Vivianne’s fears that the world might damage her daughter because she is physically different. This plan, of course, backfires, and Ava is susceptible to her neighbor’s advances because her limited interaction with men does not provide her with the knowledge to recognize the danger he poses until it almost too late. In the lives of all three girls, the magic underlines how common it is for the beliefs or projections of others onto the bodies or identities of young, impressionable women can shape or distort their reality.

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<sup>43</sup> I will discuss Rose’s brother in more detail later in this chapter.

The idea that others may project their hopes, dreams, desires onto the body of someone they deem to possess magical ability or power is central to how the manifestation of magic informs the lives of Rose, Sonia, and especially Ava. Damien W. Riggs writes,

The hegemonic forms that bodies take achieve their semblance of normality only through the reiteration within the framework of particular power relations. This does not, however, prevent these relations from being reinscribed in ways that challenge or undermine their authority. As such, bodies understood *as discursive practices* may be conceptualised as very real sites through which borders can be crossed or overwritten. (72)

Sonia and Ava engender the belief in others that they are physical manifestations of the miraculous, which causes those around them to project onto them abilities and identities that they did not ask for and sometimes reject. Sonia does not want to be viewed as a living shrine and intermediary for God, while Ava's foremost wish is for others to see her as just a girl and not to project their desires to know a living angel onto her. Though less affected by people's assumptions about her ability to taste feelings in food, Rose also experiences a form of objectification. She first gets the attention of her brother Joseph's best friend George when she tells him about her tasting skills and the two boys test her at a bakery one day. They treat her like she is a science experiment, and once they are done, they move onto their next scientific interest without finding a useful solution to help Rose figure out how to counteract this ability so she can eat food without being burdened by the emotions she tastes. When she forms a friendship with a new girl in her high school, the girl only wants Rose to eat food she prepares so Rose will predict her feelings. Like Sonia and Ava, Rose is reduced to what her body can do for others and not who she is, at least in these instances.

### Let Them (Not) Eat Cake

Cooking, eating, describing food often takes on magical properties in magical realist works, such as *Like Water for Chocolate*, which I have mentioned, or *Chocolat* (especially the film version with its beautiful images of Juliette Binoche making desserts). In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, as I have explained, the food Rose eats reveals to her the mood and feelings of whoever cooked it, and she eventually becomes so sensitive that she can even pinpoint the region where the food is produced. Her first experience with this phenomenon occurs the night before her ninth birthday when she tastes a piece of lemon cake with chocolate icing her mother makes:

I could absolutely taste the chocolate, but in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening, it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother...I could almost taste the grit in her jaw that had created the headache that meant she had to take as many aspirins as were necessary...there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness. (10)

Rose begins to fear food because she cannot handle the depth of emotion she tastes every time she eats. For a period of time, she only eats, or tries to eat, highly processed food because at factories there is less human interaction with the food, though completely avoiding foods cooked by people she knows is impossible. Even more unsettling for Rose, this irreducible magical ability allows her glimpses into the secret reality of life for her family; for example, while eating one of her mother's meals, she discovers her mother is having an affair. Possessing a magical skill, as these novels reveal, can be more oppressive than delightful.



One example of the negatives magic brings into her life is the loneliness and sense of isolation Rose experiences because of her unusual relationship with food—she can't eat normal meals at her school's cafeteria, she tries to avoid her mother's cooking, there are restaurants she is unable to dine in, all of which begins to affect her relationship with the people around her. The reality of what happens to a teenager when she cannot participate in the rites of passage that are a part of growing up underscores how awkward and disconnected adolescence girlhood can be, particularly someone who is further alienated from her peers because of her uncanny ability to taste feelings in food.

### **Just a Girl**

Both *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* and *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* begin with a prologue informing readers of the type of “magic” that defines Sonia and Ava's lives. The narrator of *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* makes it clear that Sonia's fate was not a blessing: “The curse on Sonia Ocampo's life came without warning before she was even born, cleverly disguised as good luck.” Born at the exact moment that a cataclysmic storm, which nearly destroys the village of Tres Montes, ends, Sonia becomes a symbol to the entire village of the miraculous power of God that they believe saved their village. The villagers pin metal charms to the shawl Sonia has worn since birth every time they ask her to intercede on their behalf for healing, money, a job, a spouse, etc., to the point that by the time she is sixteen “she roamed like a living altar in the mountains. Every step she took jangled with the wishes and hopes of the people who feared what the world had in store for humble ones like them. She was their best hope” (10-11). The weight of the unshakable faith the villagers have in Sonia's skills becomes increasingly unbearable, especially after a friend she prays for suffers a brutal death. Once this occurs, Sonia's insistence that she possesses no real supernatural power becomes

stronger, and she seeks a way out of the village where she is forever positioned as a living temple.

Despite Sonia's belief that she does not possess miraculous powers, Medina's description of Sonia's influence in her village stresses that her prayers and actions on behalf of others do produce miracles. Barbara Bennett claims,

From the storytelling of Scheherazade to the tales men tell about bewitching women, myths can help to create and exaggerate the mystical power of spiritual women, women who may just be more in touch with themselves and their environment than the men around them or who may have more compassion for the oppressed. (167)

The myth that Sonia's birth saved her village from total destruction is, perhaps, nothing more than a coincidence of time. However, Sonia's physical and spiritual vigils on behalf of her community are acts she performs because she recognizes the hope it brings people, and she feels the weight of responsibility for those who have faith in her. Therefore, the belief by others that she is an embodiment of the miraculous influences her actions to the point that her prayers and physical presence do bring comfort and hope to others.

### **Myth Incarnate**

Unlike Sonia, whose characterization makes her magical ability indeterminate, Ava Lavender physically embodies an irreducible element of magic with the brown wings that support her entire skeletal and nervous system, making them impossible to remove. She is marked as "other" from the moment she enters the world. Hegerfeldt points out that "physical abnormality is used to make marginality more immediate and concrete," so Ava's status as a marginalized figure in society is established by her wings, and underscores the other

characteristics—her gender, her family’s history of strangeness—that identify her as different to most and dangerous to a few (128).<sup>44</sup> She is considered by many to be a medical marvel and a religious miracle; for the first five years of her life, doctors obsess over her case and the spiritually devout make pilgrimages to her home. Once the fascination with her physical aberration subsides, Ava tries to figure out how to be a normal girl in a world that often rejects or disparages difference. She finds moments of normality in her friendship with her neighbors, Cardigan and Rowe, and their insistence that she leaves the safety of her home and socialize with other teenagers.

The opening lines of the prologue to Ava’s story presents the complexity of her existence and her need to formulate her own identity beyond what is assigned to her by others because of her wings:

To many, I was myth incarnate, the embodiment of a most superb legend, a fairy tale. Some considered me a monster, a mutation. To my great misfortune, I was once mistaken for angel...but I knew the truth—deep down, I always did. I was just a girl.

Similar to Rose and Sonia, Ava’s magical appearance initially does more damage to her, than helps her, indicating that in these young women’s worlds being defined, venerated, or situated as different in some way may engender emotional and physical trauma. Her rape and the mutilation of her wings nearly kill her and push her into a suicidal depression for months. However, this tragic event also generates positive changes in behavior for her mother, gets rid of the ghosts that have haunted her grandmother, and heals the fractures in her family’s relationships. In all three novels, the irreducible element of magic that is focalized through the female protagonists

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<sup>44</sup> This is not even taking into account the strange and peculiar characteristics that define her family lineage, from a great-aunt who turns herself into bird to a great-uncle who is so beautiful he caused a public panic similar (though not as extreme) as the one Grenouille causes at the end of the novel *Perfume*.

elucidates magical realism's capacity to represent and find closure for the experiences, both traumatic and miraculous, that define the adolescent experiences of Rose, Sonia, and Ava.

### **Inescapable Magic**

Though this chapter focuses on how magic materializes in the female adolescent protagonists I discuss, there are also significant irreducible elements of magic that exist in and around Rose, Sonia, and Ava, and these encounters with otherworldly aspects outside themselves aid their development and acceptance of their own gifts, as well as promote the general attitude of questioning existing beliefs that I have maintained characterizes magical realism generally. As with their own irreducible elements of magic, the degree of magicalness that is imbued in other characters varies. Ava traces the strange and uncanny elements that define generations of her family, from her great-grandmother dematerializing until she physically ceases to exist to her twin brother's prophetic knowledge that their neighbor will harm Ava, revealing that her traumatic attack is what begins to undo the isolated existence that Vivienne thought was necessary to protect herself and her children. The ghost of Sonia's Abuela helps Sonia find the strength (and the reason) necessary for leaving Tres Montes for the city. And, like the *Mora* in *The Tiger's Wife*, Abuela is there to gently usher Rafael to the otherside of the crossroads between life and death.

Perhaps the most compelling example of how an irreducible element of magic in another character changes the life of a female adolescent protagonist is that of Rose's brother, Joseph, whose ability manifests in his ability to morph into objects around him, like a bed or chair. Rose struggles for most of the novel to form a connection with Joseph, whose strangeness isolates him from most of his peers and creates some tension within their family. His frequent disappearances, Rose discovers, are not to other places but within objects. Looking for him at his apartment at the

request of her mother, Rose sees him “sitting in the chair, the way a normal person sits in a chair, but...it seemed like the chair leg vanished right into his shoe. That the chair legs went inside both legs of his pants...he had actually cut holes of the correct size of his in his pants to place the chair legs through the pant legs” (188). Eventually, Joseph becomes more comfortable being an object than human, and he disappears forever. Because her ability to taste feelings in food affects her life and her interactions with others and forces her to find alternative ways to form healthy relationships, Rose is able to understand and accept Joseph’s difference. In fact, she becomes more sensitive to what he had to endure, to how he never felt comfortable in the world to which he was born, because her struggles with eating often affected her interactions with other people. She acknowledges that, though challenging at times, her tasting skills led her to the culinary world where her ability could become an asset rather than a burden; likewise, while recognizing that Joseph’s magic was not so different from hers, except that she “could stay in the world” and he could not (292). Like Sonia and Ava, Rose is more sensitive to the strange or supernatural in others because of what she has experienced, and this enables her to offer empathy and kindness to others who do not fit into cultural standards of normalcy, and consequently models such revision of ideas for readers.

By creating magical women whose lives are anchored in the real, Bender, Medina, and Walton illustrate the multifaceted challenges faced by adolescent females and emphasize that it is the tenacity these characters exhibit in the face of unimaginable circumstances that enables their survival. Overcoming the obstacles created by the magic in their lives develops a fortitude in them that, though not irreducible magic, is unusual for women their age and in their particular circumstances where they have or are expected to possess supernatural ability. The magic surrounding all three girls both complicates their lives but also enables them to survive traumatic

experiences like losing a family member, watching a brother dematerialize, and enduring a violent, unspeakable assault. Bender, Medina, and Walton write magical women as a way of subverting dominant social ideas that seek to subjugate women, particularly adolescent women, and the magical surrounding all three girls engenders both complications and liberation in their lives.

## CHAPTER 4

PROPHETIC MAGIC: MAGICAL REALISM AND VISUALIZING THE END OF THE  
 WORLD IN *TAKE SHELTER* AND *MELANCHOLIA*

There is a question in the air, more sensed than seen, like the invisible approach of a distant storm, a question that I would hesitate to ask aloud did I not believe it existed unvoiced in the minds of many: “Is there hope for man?”

Robert Heilbroner

I’m convinced that our presence on this planet is not sustainable, so we will be extinct fairly soon.

Werner Herzog

Everyone, deep in their hearts, is waiting for the end of the world to come.

Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*

The films *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* illustrate how magical realism in contemporary popular culture may effectively address anxieties regarding an uncertain future as effectively as portraying a traumatic past. In “Magical Realism at World’s End,” published in 2001, Michael Valdez Moses credits the appeal of twentieth century magical realist literature to “an ever widening international audience” because “magical realism expresses the nostalgia of global modernity for the traditional worlds it has vanquished or subsumed” (105). Ten years later, nostalgia in magical realist texts has been replaced, or at least supplemented in some cases, by fears about the future in a world where the possibility of human obliteration by any number of causes—terrorism, gun violence, climate changes, global resource shortages—is very real. The depiction of these frightening realities is addressed by a variety of narrative modes as artists across creative mediums try to envision what the end of life might look like. The proclivity towards examining how the end of the world may materialize is a subject appearing with more frequency in popular culture in this millennium, and nowhere is this more visible than in cinema.

The focus on end-of-days topics is endemic and influenced by heightened global tensions, as David Edelstein posits:

It makes sense that the Book of Revelation has entered mainstream politics when each year brings a new prediction of the exact date the world will end, when hurricanes and floods and earthquakes and heat waves and melting ice caps and industrial accidents and no jobs and Michele Bachmann's crazy eyes are fixtures of our conscious and possibly unconscious lives.

The cinematic preoccupation with “Book of Revelation” inspired works seems to have hit its peak in 2011, the year *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* were released. Perhaps because it was the year preceding the Mayan calendar prediction of the end of the world,<sup>45</sup> or perhaps it was that a decade had passed since 9/11, but, beyond just these two films, in 2011, as several critics point out, cinema seemed more obsessed with endings than ever before, particularly end-of-the-world scenarios.

Some argue that in the ten years since 9/11, many storytellers were still trying to make sense of the clear and present dangers throughout the world that were more perceptible in the decade following those events. In films, portraying the end of a series, an era, or the earth was a thematic focus for 2011 releases—from the literal end of the *Harry Potter* series with the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows pt. 2* (the highest grossing film of 2011) to the end of the silent film era with films like Academy Award nominee, *Hugo* and Oscar winner, *The Artist*. Then there is the trifecta of end-of-the-world films, *Take Shelter*, *Melancholia*, and *The Tree of Life* that together signal a growing concern with the state of humanity in a period that so far has been defined by uncertainty (Erickson 84). In his article “The Dark Age,” Steve Erickson

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<sup>45</sup> I reference this because of the global attention this date received. There is even an action film based on the prediction the world end in 2012 called, not surprisingly, *2012*.



discusses his choices for the best films of 2011 and how a common theme amongst all of them is how they address the topic of endings. He claims:

The true picture of the year is a trilogy, seven hours long and made unwittingly by its three directors. *The Tree of Life*, *Take Shelter*, and *Melancholia* are a biographical triptych of not just the species or the planet but of existence, ending not in mere death, which is survived by memory, but the void, which is survived by nothing. (85)

While the idea that all of life is destroyed along with any chance for the memory of earth to be preserved, particularly in *Melancholia*, seems bleak, Erickson's point underscores why these films appear to display the same singular and ethereal vision of the world's end by asking us to consider what it is we truly know about how the world might end. It seems obvious that, on the one hand, the potential end of man is an accepted, though usually ignored, fact of life for most people; on the other hand, exactly how this end will come about is unknowable for anyone. The marketing tagline for *Melancholia* that calls the film, "a beautiful movie about the end of the world," could be applied to all three works because the stunning, romanticized images of nature in these movies combined with the forbearance displayed by the film's main characters towards the potential apocalypse make these renditions of future annihilation visually and narratively spectacular.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> While the focus of this chapter is on how magical realism manifests in the apocalyptic visions presented in *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia*, I mention *The Tree of Life* as it is frequently discussed in conjunction with the other two films because of the similar subject matter and ephemeral imagery that all three movies use. However, while *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* utilize elements I would identify as magical realist, *The Tree of Life* transcends genre classification, which I would not classify as magical realism, and so I do not analyze it here. The imaginative moments focused on the solar system, the evolution of the world, and visions of the future and a type of afterlife are more surreal than magical realism. As Roger Ebert writes, it is "a film of vast ambition and deep humility, attempting no less than to encompass all of existence and view it through the prism of a few infinitesimal lives."

*Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* portray the anxiety of an unknown future in relation to fears about how the world might end by representing these fears through characters whose preternatural abilities situate them on the margins of their particular community or family. Curtis and Justine, the protagonists of *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* respectively, exhibit what I am calling prophetic magic in their realization and acceptance that a force of nature—whether it is a storm or another planet—is going to hit or collide with earth and wreak devastation. Similar to Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the subject of my next chapter, Curtis and Justine’s interactions with nature, which are heightened by the cinematographic focus on hyperbolic images of rogue planets, storms, or elements of nature reclaiming or overtaking developed spaces, and their insistence that they have a premonition about what will happen in the future, allows for them to experience epiphanic moments of clarity. According to Thomas Elsaesser, these two films “represent the very epitome of the unrepresentable: the extinction of the planet itself,” and, in the case of *Melancholia*, “any possible subject that could witness or observe it.” These cataclysmic events, especially when presented as occurring in our present world, force both the creator and the spectator to place themselves within a future they would otherwise not desire to see. The production of these end-of-life narratives demand creative means of representing both the ambivalence towards the imagined end of man and the anxiety over actually living to “see” that end come to fruition. Imbuing the protagonists with the psychic capacity to imagine a catastrophic future like Curtis and Justine possess provides an effective depiction of how the trauma of facing the end of humanity might affect people.

The director’s of these films, Jeff Nichols (*Take Shelter*) and Lars Von Trier (*Melancholia*), confront anxieties or fears about the world ending by combining haunting visuals and characters with prophetic powers to imagine the end of life, which demonstrate “cinema’s

ability to give visual form to latent fears about the future” in these magical realist visions of humanity at world’s end (Woolley 180). Nichols and von Trier underline the fixation of many on the question of whether or not humanity has the wherewithal to survive both the manmade and natural problems we are facing with their focus on characters whose premonitions accurately envisage the end of days. Underlining their portrayals of how the world might potentially end are depictions of current fears about economic, environmental, and mental health issues that have become, perhaps, more pronounced in the wake of banking system failures, advancing climate change, and continuing stigmas about mental illness. In highlighting these issues while creating an overarching vision of what it would be like to anticipate or fear the earth’s demise, the magical elements rest in the fractures between the knowledge that man will, in fact, one day end and the lack of knowledge of when and how this ending will happen.

### **Apocalypse Now**

Robert Heilbroner’s question, “is there hope for man,” is one raised with more and more frequency in recent films. Whether the threat of humanity’s annihilation manifests as attacks by zombies in films like *Zombieland* or *World War Z*, global warming in *Day After Tomorrow*, crop blight in *Interstellar*, a meteor in *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, global infertility in *Children of Men*, or the world has already succumbed to a nuclear disaster and humanity is fighting for survival in films like *The Book of Eli* or *Mad Max: Fury Road*, there are many examples of how filmmakers have addressed the potential end of the world, or at least our world as we currently recognize it. 2011 had versions of these also with films like *Super 8* and *Contagion*, which depicted aliens and a global medical calamity, respectively. In most of these films, a group of people—sometimes depicted as heroes and sometimes anti-heroes who because of dire circumstances were compelled to help others—fight for survival against seemingly

unbeatable odds; usually, with the exception of *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, the film leaves viewers with the hope that the world, though forever changed, will continue on and humanity will survive. Despite the heaviness of the subject matter, the endings of these films are optimistic about humanity's chances to endure and even thrive in whatever new world rises from the ashes of the one that has been destroyed. Even in *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, though there is no possibility of stopping the meteor that will destroy earth, the fact that Keira Knightley and Steve Carrell meet and fall in love because of the impending global disaster still offers viewers a satisfying conclusion to the film's version of the world's end. Situating *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* in the context of the end-of-the-world, disaster genre is appropriate because they feature the ultimate disaster, or potential disaster, especially in *Melancholia*, that our planet could experience.

All of these films elucidate the contemporary concerns of a global audience about the end—of lifestyle, resources, economic stability, and life itself—which the success of these diverse productions indicate. Herbert H. Stein claims: “Each generation chooses its favorite myths and images. Listening to patients and acquaintances and following the news, I have the sense that our own culture and folklore includes a fascination with apocalyptic predictions and prophecies” (4). Usually, however, what occurs in these texts is that someone, or a group of people, is able to thwart whatever threat is facing the planet and ensure the continuation of life. Or, As Christopher Peterson points out, “a fundamental, repetitive characteristic of the [disaster] film genre is its preoccupation with *survival*, the continued existence of at least one person beyond the scene of devastation” (401). Where *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* diverge from this path is that they “give us little hope of a remnant surviving” (Stein). Like Macondo “wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men” as Aureliano Babilonia reads Melquíades's

parchments in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the possibility (in *Take Shelter*) and the certainty (in *Melancholia*) that Earth will be “exiled” from all memory is unsettling (417).

*Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* present a vision of a world on the brink of potential global annihilation, offering less-than-optimistic endings to the question “is there hope for man”? Earth is completely obliterated by a collision with another planet in *Melancholia* while *Take Shelter*’s final scene indicates that the dreams of an apocalyptic storm that haunted the protagonist, Curtis, the entire film were really prophetic visions of the world’s future. These two films further separate themselves from traditional disaster films because they are less interested in the survival of the human race than they are with dissecting how we deal with crisis, both internal and external, leading up to possible catastrophic events. Eugene Arva claims that “events characterized by extreme violence and/or extended states of fear and anxiety tend to resist rationalization and interpretation in a narrative form because of their powerful and lasting impact on the human psyche” (1). But as these films inquire, what about events that, though they have not yet been experienced, produce these same “extended states of fear and anxiety?” How do we confront something we have not yet experienced, though trepidation about the possibility for this experience looms over us?

Nichols and von Trier address these questions in similar ways in their films. First, both focus on characters who struggle with psychiatric problems: in *Take Shelter*, Curtis fears he is suffering from schizophrenia, the same mental illness his mother was institutionalized for, and his nightmares about a catastrophic storm begin to draw him into a depressive state; in *Melancholia*, Justine suffers from a severe and debilitating depression that destroys her less-than-a-day-old marriage, causes her to lose her job, and forces her to seek help and care from her more practical, less emotional sister. Because those around them consider Curtis and Justine

mentally ill, their claims that they have knowledge about the future are easy to dismiss for their families and for viewers. Curtis and Justine's families struggle to find a way to support them through their breakdowns, even as they are dealing with challenging economic and environmental problems, which I will discuss later in the chapter. Most significantly, and similar to the magically real adolescent females I discuss in my previous chapter, the irreducible element in both films manifest in the prophetic knowledge that Curtis and Justine possess.

While the grand estate that is the setting for the events in *Melancholia* might seem worlds away from the rural Ohio town in *Take Shelter*, there is a common thread that is woven through both locations. Both are isolated places that seem removed from any urban or other outside forces, while the psychological trauma experienced by Curtis and Justine is reflected in the landscape and how nature reveals its power. There are a few characters that circle the central family members, though their significance is only means to further bind the central characters together. Instead of showing how large portion of the population would respond to apocalyptic events, these filmmakers focus on the intimate through their portrayals of the effect of mental illness on one member of each family. As these two stories make clear, there is no Will Smith or Bruce Willis action figure-type that is willing to make a sacrifice for humanity, because humanity is already lost in Nichols and Von Trier's visions of the world, which they emphasize by concentrating the intensity of their films on this more limited focus. Thus, the focus of the films shifts to the individual and familial relations that surround how apocalyptic fears-both real and imagined-affect the family dynamic.

The directors also share similar approaches in their narrative styles, which Briohny Doyle, in her article "Prognosis End-Times: Madness and Prophecy in *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*, takes note of:

From a cinematic perspective, both films can reasonably be described as in their genre-blending presentation of realistic family drama narratives, intersected by the devices of horror...fantastic sequences and special effects as well as dream sequences that fit uncannily within the naturalist style of the film. So too, they both appropriate biblical advertising and art imagery. While neither film presents an alternate world, there are elements in the portrayal of their present-day, North American setting, which evokes, if not dystopian tradition, then at least the seeming impossibility, for the present moment, of using the apocalyptic arc to get to a utopia. (23)

Doyle's point about the impossibility "of using the apocalyptic arc to get to a utopia" resonates with my previous assertion that *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* deviate from the conventional representations of the apocalypse in film because they do not provide viewers with much hope that the environmental circumstances the characters experience will alter for the better. Most of the apocalyptic films I listed offer a sliver of faith that a means to rebuild the world exists, but that hope is not offered in these endings. While *Take Shelter* does not have the same finality as *Melancholia*, and while we know earth has been destroyed in the latter and it is only hinted at in *Take Shelter*, there is a sense in both that this is the end for humanity; there is no force in the universe, superhero, or ordinary heroic person who has the power to save the world in a Nichols or von Trier's world.

### **Pretrauma Manifestation**

In my previous chapter, I addressed the connection between trauma and magical realism, which is observable in the canonical works of magical realism from the twentieth-century, especially those that use irreducible elements of magic to confront social and political problems.

In fact, many critics have pointed out that the effective portrayal of traumatic events is one of the most significant uses for magical realism. Certainly the previously discussed texts, *The Tiger's Wife* and *1Q84*, illustrate the continuing legacy of magical realism to portray traumatic events in our current age. Traumatic events that have not yet occurred, however, may also be effectively portrayed using the combination of realism and the interspersion of irreducible elements, as *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* successfully address what E. Ann Kaplan describes as anticipatory “fears about the total collapse of natural and social environments” (2). She argues that this is an “anxiety that warrants the term *pretrauma*” (1). In her book, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*, Kaplan claims:

Cultures may now be entering a new era in which pretrauma is pervasive in the public sphere. In this new era, media of all kinds –journalism, the Internet, television, film, and literature—offer catastrophic futurist scenarios. In these scenarios, audiences are invited to identify with future selves in uncertain, dangerous, and ultimately unsustainable worlds. Such identifications result in a pretraumatized population, living with a sense of an uncertain future and an unreliable natural environment. (xix)

The “catastrophic futurist scenarios” she identifies often appear in texts where space and time have already entered an alternate reality or dystopian climate. What makes the events of *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* unsettling is that they take place in a world that we easily identify with (or, at least, recognize). In both films, it could be argued that pretrauma is responsible for the actions (or inaction, in the case of Claire) that drive the central characters to make the self-destructive choices that momentarily bring ruin to their lives. The yellow rain that falls on Curtis at the beginning of *Take Shelter* could be a part of the waking dreams he is experiencing, or it



could be the result of the gas drilling that his company is doing and that is one cause of concern for environmentalists. The unrelenting nightmares he experiences may be related to his deteriorating mental state or they may symbolize of his fears about being able to provide and protect his family. While we recognize that Justine's mental breakdown in Part One of *Melancholia* is due to her already depressive state, we have to consider that Claire's unraveling in the second part of the film is due to the pretrauma she is experiencing as the melancholia (the planet) gets closer to earth. She obsessively researches and checks the progress of the melancholia, attempts to leave the estate in the middle of a cataclysmic storm with her son in tow, and psychologically begins to break down in a manner reminiscent of Justine's manic behavior during her wedding reception. Pretrauma fears and anxieties are responsible for Curtis' initial mental breakdown *Take Shelter* and Claire's mental collapse as she becomes obsessed with melancholia's potential collision with earth. In both films, pretrauma also creates fissures in their families and creates a pervasive feeling of despair, at least for some of the characters, about their family and the world's future.

### **Psychic Realism**

As environmental, economic, and mental problems engender the breakdown of the protagonists in these films, the psychic aptitude to predict future tragedies manifests in the same characters that visibly struggle with mental illness, which situates these films as works of a variation of magical realism defined as psychic realism. In her article, "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English," Jeanne Delbaere-Garant contends, as I and others I discuss in my first chapter do, that "magical realism is not exclusively a postcolonial phenomenon, but a much older one whose various offshoots require more precise and specific definitions" (249). Because of this, she

believes “it was becoming urgent to think out new categories that would leave more room for border cases and help to situate any contemporary magic realist text, or part of a text, more accurately in a larger conceptual and terminological constellation” (250). After reviewing some of these “border cases,” she identifies three subcategories of magical realism: psychic, mythic, and grotesque realism. These categories help expand our understanding of the different manifestations of magical realist works, particularly those that differ from classic magical realist texts like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Midnight’s Children*. *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* fall under Delbaere-Garant’s definition of border cases.

The most apparent element of magic in *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* emerges from the protagonists and may be attributed by some to the psychological issues that haunt Curtis and Justine, which can be analyzed through Delbaere-Garant’s concept of Psychic Realism, which she claims, “is generated from inside the psyche” (251). Texts that employ psychic realism “usually center on an individual whose fissured self renders him or her particularly sensitive to the manifestations of an otherwise invisible reality and whose visionary power can be induced” by a number of different factors, but “the ‘magic’ is almost always a reification of the hero’s inner conflicts” (Delbaere-Garant 251). Both Curtis and Justine are diagnosed with some form of mental illness—Curtis with schizophrenia and Justine with depression—and they and those around them attribute their erratic actions to these illnesses.

However, it is their struggles with mental illness that allows Curtis and Justine to experience profound moments of prophetic sight; this, in turn, enables them to visualize or conceptualize the ending of earth, either by a storm or an interplanetary collision, and to pass this knowledge on to their loved ones. For example, the planet *Melancholia*’s imminent impact with earth is “the cosmic correlative of wealthy protagonist Justine’s battle with depression” (Doyle

23). The closer the planet comes to Earth, the better Justine feels and the calmer she behaves because she does not ever fool herself into believing that the Earth will be spared. The character of Justine grew out of von Trier's own experiences in therapy for his depression: "My analyst told me that melancholiacs will usually be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, partly because they can say: 'what did I tell you'" (qtd. in "The Magic Cave" 401). Since she is depressed anyway, possibly to the point of wanting to take her own life she is able to face the end of the world with more equanimity than others who are more "normal." Her calmness allows her to create a safe space for her nephew and to alleviate his fears as the Melancholia moves closer to earth, which is a stark contrast to Claire's frantic response to try to get to the village in the middle of an apocalyptic storm and John's choice to commit suicide instead of remaining with his wife and son. *Take Shelter*, on the other hand,

links apocalyptic visions and prophecy with schizophrenia and presents an atheistic, working class prophet...whose vision of storms reveal not only a catastrophic future but also the sense of being at breaking point experienced by many living in rural North America in the mid 2000s. (Doyle 23)

Though building the shelter in his backyard in anticipation of the storm turns out to be not only premature, but also forces his family into an even more dire economic situation, we see later that Curtis was right about the storm all along.

We perceive at the end of the films, after spending nearly two hours watching Curtis and Justine breakdown and then find their way back to recovery, that their prophetic abilities are what empower them and/or their family members to accept the end without trepidation. Steve Erickson claims the "best last line of any movie" in 2011 is "spoken by Jessica Chastain in *Take Shelter*. The line is: 'OK.' It's not just as big as the word 'OK' can be—it's bigger than you

thought ‘OK’ could ever be; in Chastain’s ‘OK’ lies the end of the world” (82). The image preceding her “OK” is of a looming and, as we know from the nightmares and waking dreams experienced by Chastain’s onscreen husband Curtis (played by Michael Shannon), potentially apocalyptic storm. Her “OK” signals an acceptance that this storm may bring about the end-of-the-world and affirms she understands her husband’s dreams were prophetic and not the sign of mental illness.

OK, says Chastain on her back porch in *Take Shelter*’s final scene, to both the End of the World and her husband’s second sight that she doubted. OK, says Dunst’s eyes in *Melancholia* to both the End of the World and her sister’s desolation over her young son’s deliverance not to death but to oblivion.  
(Erickson 85)

The central question these films ask, then, in regard to the psychic premonitions Curtis and Justine experience is “Does knowing what the future holds automatically change it” (Friedman 6). Nichols and von Trier’s answer through these movies is a resounding no; however, knowing the future does change how the characters respond to stressors in the present, how they prepare their families, and the calm manner in which they are able to accept the end of life.

An analogous example to the psychic ability Curtis and Justine exhibit are the Pre-Cogs in Steven Spielberg’s 2002 film *Minority Report* (based on the 1956 Philip K. Dick short story). In a futuristic world, crime is virtually non-existent because the government has figured out a way to use technology to harness the visionary capability of three young people who possess the power of precognition. Kept immersed in a watery prison where they are hooked up to machines, the Pre-Cogs visions of potential future crimes play out on large computer screens where a pre-crime unit watches and then arrests the potential criminals that appear in these visions. The film

does not reveal whether or not the Pre-Cogs visions are wrong—indeed, Tom Cruise’s character is able to escape with one of the Pre-Cogs because of her ability to predict the future—but, rather, that “all mechanisms, however sophisticated and refined, remain open to human interpretation and, by virtue of that fact, such devices are inherently susceptible to corruption and misuse” (Friedman 1). The Pre-Cogs visions may be infallible, but the people exploiting them for their visionary capabilities are not, and they keep the Pre-Cogs in a pseudo-comatose state in order to manipulate their abilities. Similarly, Curtis and Justine’s psychic power enables accurate depictions of the future, but the refusal by those around them to accept this initially reduces this ability to nothing more than the ranting of the mentally disturbed. In all three films, however, those who possess precognition skills are able to ascertain a sense of peace despite the horrific experiences they have endured or know they are about to experience.

### **A Slow Build**

*Take Shelter* builds slowly and precisely towards its denouement, because Nichols wants viewers to appreciate the economic and familial pressures that a low-income family in the Midwest, who are under extreme financial stress as they fight with their health insurance over the cochlear implants needed for their deaf daughter, Hannah, experience. “There’s a specificity to his film that roots it in the here and now, acknowledging not just free-floating unease but everyday fears over the price of gas and insurance co-pays” (Linden). Curtis works in construction and “is a dependable, emotionally muted family man” and his wife, Samantha, is a stay-at-home mom who sews and is saving for a beach vacation for the family (Woolley 175). Nichols emphasizes early in the film that despite their economic struggles this is a happy family. Dewart, Curtis’s best friend and co-worker tells him at one point: “You’ve got a good life, Curtis. I think that’s the best compliment you can give a man: take a look at his life and say,

‘That’s good.’” This good life, this happiness they have as a family, however, starts to haunt Curtis, who begins to fear that he might lose everything he loves. This fear manifests “as he gradually succumbs either to mental illness or to prophetic dreams” predicting “a coming storm of apocalyptic proportions” (Kilbournn 32). In his review of the film, Roger Ebert wrote:

Here is a frightening thriller based not on special effects gimmicks but on a dread that seems quietly spreading in the land: that the good days are ending, and climate changes or other sinister forces will sweep away our safety. *Take Shelter* unfolds in a quiet Ohio countryside with big skies and flat horizons, and involves a happy family whose life seems contented.

As Ebert points out, this is where the intelligence of Nichol’s examination of the realities of life in America’s heartland lie: it is too often when we feel a measure of security in our lives that something traumatic, whether it is economic, environmental, psychological or, in Curtis’s case, all three, may upend our entire lives. Sheri Linden writes that *Take Shelter* is “a film very much about this moment in time,” while Tim Robey posits that at the end of the film, “Nichols and Shannon burrow further into the darkness, leading us to wonder how we’re ever going to emerge. That *Take Shelter* eventually finds an exit without short-changing either its scenario or its audience makes it one of 2011’s great cinematic achievements.” Few films have so accurately expressed the concerns of the lower middle class in regards to how climate changes and/or mental illness might affect the economic stability of an already financially burdened population. The magical realist moments that manifest in Curtis’s nightmares, and that cause multiple physical ailments from wetting the bed to increasing paranoid behavior, are emblematic of what may happen when a person feels he is under constant threat of losing everything because events or circumstances beyond his control.

Curtis and Samantha are driven first and foremost by their concern for their daughter's well being and central to this is affording the cochlear implant surgery that will help her hear and strengthen the communication between them all. Relating to the concept of pretrauma I previously discussed, E. Ann Kaplan contends:

Curtis's anxiety about Hannah is a central part of nearly all the pretraumatic hallucinations. More than just showing Curtis's love for his child, which is important in developing his character as a complex postfeminist masculine figure, depicting a child in such tremendous danger hits right at the heart of unconscious anticipatory anxiety about climate change. (44)

If we believe that children are our future, then the fear of there being no hope or no future, especially if one is a parent, can be devastating. Initially, it seems that the desire to protect his wife and child from the catastrophic future he keeps envisioning motivates him to risk his job and his family's financial stability in the hopes of saving their lives. However, like many who have preternatural abilities, Curtis's vision of an apocalyptic storm and his warnings to his community to prepare for this cataclysmic event are ignored or laughed at by those around him.

When [Curtis] begins to have vivid dreams of apocalyptic storms, he assumes they are a symptom of the same mental illness that institutionalized his mother when he was a child. Indeed, as Curtis's behavior becomes increasingly erratic, his friends and family dismiss his visions as the product of inherited schizophrenia, and in doing so safely annex the apocryphal storm as a symptom of his psychological turmoil. (Wooley 176-7)

After Samantha forces Curtis to step out of the storm shelter, where he insisted they and Hannah wait out one storm, and he sees that the world did not end the way his visions had depicted, he

decides to get professional help. If the film were to end in the therapist's office where Curtis and Samantha seek advice on how to deal with what have become debilitating and destructive dreams, then we would accept that everything was a figment of Curtis's spiraling mental state. However, our uncertainty about whether or not Curtis's dreams are prophetic or the manifestation of a mentally unstable individual, mirrors the precariousness and uncertainty that many people who are in similar economic circumstances to Curtis and Justine's experience.

One reason the portrayal of Curtis's breakdown is so effective is because of the feeling of uncertainty that it engenders in viewers. "It is a source of doubt whether Curtis's experiences of unusual weather in his waking life are confined to his own head, or whether it is his friends and family who are failing to register the growing threat" (Woolley 180). One of the characteristics of magical realism is that the audience "may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts...this hesitation disturbs the irreducible element, which is not always so easily perceived as such" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 171). *Take Shelter's* storyline hinges on this hesitation, as viewers are not sure what to make of Curtis's nightmares, and Nichols is not content to give us the easy explanation that it is mental illness or a psychotic break that happened to Curtis. At the end of the film, "the final twist, then, is that Curtis—diagnosed as schizophrenic, which stabilizes his condition—is happily on vacation when his deep knowledge of the coming of a genuine end-of-the-world storm turns out to be true" (Kaplan 53). The frantic warnings that Curtis unleashed on his neighbors and the storm shelter he went into debt to build are no longer attributed to a mentally unbalanced man but one who exhibits authentic prophetic insight.

### **A Rapid Breakdown**

While the majority of most audiences would not consider a film about the annihilation of



earth to be hopeful or uplifting, after considering his previous film's focus,<sup>47</sup> it is understandable why some critics would posit "compared with his past grisly creations, *Melancholia* is a rite of spring" (Figlerowicz 21). Thomas Elsaesser writes, "As reviewers have also noted, there is something unsettlingly cheerful and serene about von Trier's apocalypse" (1). Peter Bradshaw, a resolute cynic of most of von Trier's work, echoing many critics, comments:

The film is entirely ridiculous, often quite boring, with a script showing worrying signs of being cobbled together. But even as a longtime von Trier doubter, I now have to admit it grows on you; there's a mawkish fascination and flashes of real visual brilliance.

Judit Pinter points out that "Mr. von Trier has become such a gourmand of sacrifice that he can only be satisfied by the immolation of the entire world." The review that is the most accurate description of audience reaction would have to the film is by Bill Goody Koontz who writes, "Lars von Trier's latest film, and his most accessible in ages, is definitely not for everyone...*Melancholia* is an intense, exhausting experience. That may not sound appealing, and for some, it won't be. But nor should it be off-putting. Proceed with caution, perhaps. But proceed nevertheless." The description of *Melancholia* as an uplifting film in comparison to his other works matters because it speaks to why von Trier emphasizes Justine's acceptance and even joy at the potential eradication of the planet. If we have witnessed the worst of humanity in von Trier's previous films, then in this film we are privy to someone who, considered damaged

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<sup>47</sup> The subject matter of his films is generally so dark and twisted that many have described watching them as an exercise in sadistic torture. For example, a wife who sexually debases herself at the request of her paralyzed husband and willingly allows herself to be gang raped and murdered because she believes this is what God wants in *Breaking the Waves*, a young woman who is sexually and physically abused and forced into slavery by an entire town in *Dogville*, a couple grieving over their dead child become involved in escalating violent sexual and sadomasochistic behavior in *AntiChrist* are a few of his more famous works. In fact, *AntiChrist*, along with *Nymphomaniac* and *Melancholia*, form what von Trier refers to as his "Depression Trilogy," which is a subject he returns to often because he suffers from and has been treated for depression.

by society's standards, exhibits remarkable courage and acceptance in the face of death. She is able to accomplish this, in part, because she knows that all of the trauma inflicted on people, women in particular, in the past will no longer occur once earth is destroyed.

Like Curtis, Justine embodies Delbaere-Garant's concept of psychic realism, as her depression "renders...her particularly sensitive to the manifestations of an otherwise invisible reality," which in *Melancholia* is revealed through her accurate prediction that the world will end (251). However, Curtis's psychic moments are rooted in ordinary and understandable fears about being able to protect his family if a catastrophic event like those in his dreams occurs; this parallels his anxiety in real life about affording his daughter's surgery and his ability to communicate with her. Unlike Curtis, whose preternatural dreams and visions begin without warning when he is an adult, Justine appears to have accepted that she has the psychic capacity to "know things" that others do not. As Claire remarks, Justine has always "imagined" she some special clairvoyant gift, which may or may not be a side effect of her depression.

When we first meet Justine, she is on the way to her reception with her new husband, and she personifies the radiant, carefree bride whose wedding day stress is behind her and who looks forward with anticipation to celebrating her nuptials. As the night progresses, however, we see her joy evaporating as she deals with disinterested parents and a demanding, overbearing boss who hounds her with work during her reception. Initially, it appears that Justine will be able to manage the egocentric people and the major change life change she has just experienced, but then, as Marta Figlerowicz points out, "a screw comes loose. 'I'm trudging through this grey woolly yarn' she tells Claire, 'and it's clinging to my legs. It's really heavy to drag along'" (22). The transformation that the trajectory of the planet melancholia towards earth brings about in Justine reverses the image of her being pulled down by the tree branches that we see in the

Prologue of the film. Instead, at the end of the film when everyone knows her prediction that the earth will cease to exist is true, she takes tree branches like those that dragged her down in the Prologue and uses them to create the “magic cave” for Leo.



Fig. I, Still Image from *Melancholia*. Zentropa Pictures. 2011.

Justine is not the one who falls apart at the thought of the world ending; rather, it is her money obsessed, scientific minded brother-in-law and her stoic sister that have greater difficulty accepting that melancholia (the planet) may collide with earth. As Briohny Doyle posits, Justine is “cheered by the imminent demise of the Earth as it confirms her intuition that things cannot continue as they are” (30). She tells Claire: “The earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it. Nobody will miss it.” Christopher Petersen observes in “The *Gravity of Melancholia*:”

As it approaches, Melancholia weakens the gravitational pull of our small planet, producing a weightlessness that is not altogether unwelcome. Justine, whose crippling depression weighs her down to the point that others must help her out of bed and assist her in bathing...is lifted out of her melancholia the closer the rogue planet careens toward earth.

Melancholia's approach, then, reverses the roles of the sisters as they "gaze up at a new planet as it makes its slow but inevitable way toward Earth. One sister fears the worst. The other, who has already seen the worst, exudes an eerie sense of calm, bordering on rapture" (Vognar). While the first half of the film focuses on the banal moments of a wedding reception that is slowly and excruciatingly ruined as the night passes, the second part of the film highlights the fears, anxiety, and anticipation that Claire, her husband, son, and Justine experience as they wait for the planet Melancholia to pass them. Despite Justine's previous dysfunctional behavior, which brands her as a damaged human being, her magical sight into what the future holds seems to better prepare her for the potential end of the world than her sister and brother-in-law.

### **At World's End**

One method Nichols and von Trier use to reinforce the principal themes and enhance the feeling of hesitation the viewer experiences is to create or recreate similar visual moments in the opening and closing images of the films. "Narrative framings of an ending are given a specific perspective: rather than what is left of a story, the question arises for what is left of its being over, especially when the plot is essentially devoted to endings, its own person ending in particular" (Thede 2). In both films, the opening shots foreshadow the ending—we see Curtis gazing at swirling storm clouds similar to the clouds Samantha sees at the end of the film, while the prologue of *Melancholia* is made up of series of slow motion images that conclude with a small planet slowly passing a larger planet "which seems to pull the small globe closer with translucent rays as if in an apocalyptic embrace" (Dargis). These "visual spells" created by the colors and the cinematography choices that frame the film enhance the internal struggle Curtis

and Justine experience.<sup>48</sup> For example, the eight-minute “Prologue” of *Melancholia*, which has been likened to a series of cinematic paintings, sets the tone for the film and foreshadows the oncoming destruction of the world. “Time seems to stand still, or at least slow to an absolute adagio. From the outset the viewer experiences firsthand the ruthlessly slow wait for the approaching heavenly body” (Pinter). Set to music from prelude to Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* that particularize these visual moments, the images unfold in an eerie, fantastical sequence illuminating, through a “masterpiece in miniature that is a palimpsest of literary, artistic and cinematic allusions,” what is to come, so that we experience the end at the beginning, so to speak (Dargis).

While each of the sixteen images to appear in the prologue is significant, there are two that illuminate the trajectory of Justine’s mental state in the second part of the film. The prologue begins with a close-up of Kirsten Dunst’s apathetic face that seems to last a few seconds too long, and the camera remains pointed on her as dead birds begin to fall behind her. Her countenance is expressionless, and she appears disinterested in life in general. Later in the film, we see this expression when she first returns to her sister’s home after her complete mental collapse and the disintegration of her marriage and job. A few frames later in the Prologue, we

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<sup>48</sup> Frederic Jameson was one of the first critics to (attempt) make a connection between magical realism and film in his 1986 essay “On Magic Realism in Film.” Jameson uses the term “magical realism” as a starting off point to discuss the Polish film *Fever*, the Venezuelan film *The House of Water*, and the Columbian feature *Condores*, which utilize color and tone to depict political violence. These portrayals of violence, Jameson argues constitutes a type of magical realism through the “visual spells” they cast” (130). The magic exists in the cinematography of the film, not through the story itself, once “we grasp the necessary and constitutive relationship between intensities of colors and bodies in these works” (152). More broadly, his hypothesis “that the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present” provides a fruitful way of thinking about how contemporary films participate in this mode (138). Barbara Klonowska points out that though Jameson deserves credit for trying to connect magical realism and film, his definition “does not differentiate between magical realist films and those which also use colour consciously or slow down their speed...[he] does not connect these features to any general theory of magical realism” (185). Where the two films I am discussing do employ elements of magical realism in their anticipation of an event that has not happened in our world.

observe a brighter more engaged Justine, as she marvels at the lightening bolts coming out of her fingers. This image signals the revitalization that Justine experiences as she realizes her premonition that Melancholia will collide with earth is true and the world that she denounces as evil will vanish. Rather than being frightened of the lightening bolts, Justine is mesmerized, as she physically becomes a part of the storms caused by melancholia's approach.



Fig. II and III, Still Images from *Melancholia*. Zentropa Pictures. 2011.

Keeping with the stunning, painterly visuals that define the Prologue, at the end of the film von Trier freezes the camera on one of the most beautiful cinematic images to occur before an event of massive destruction. After creating a “magic cave” for Leo out of eight sticks they gather in the forest themselves, Justine sits with Claire and her nephew in this newly christened magical cave space, calmly awaiting the planet's crash. Roger Ebert points out that when destroying the world in a movie there needs to be a shot of the moment of destruction, which no one does “better than von Trier does here. There are no tidal waves. No animals fleeing through burning forests. No skyscrapers falling. None of that easy stuff. No, there is simply a character standing on a hill and staring straight at the impending doom...happening in what logically must be slow motion.” von Trier is taking us—humanity, earth itself—back to its primordial beginning where

nature's power to give life or destroy it is no match for the scientists who inaccurately predicted that earth would be safe. In a reversal of the beginning of the second half of the film, it is Justine who holds up her stricken sister and guides her to Leo who waits for them in the makeshift cave his aunt built for him. Sitting together in the "cave," Justine and Claire embody two different perspectives in their expectation of not just an end, but also the end of all life: acceptance and fear. Justine's facial expression is calm and composed as she gently takes Leo's hand and tells him to close his eyes, while Claire begins to weep as she senses the planet getting closer. The final image of the film, right before the planets collide, is of Claire letting go of Leo and Justine's hands and covering her ears while staring at the approaching melancholia; Justine sits immobile, her back to Melancholia and her hand still holding Leo's. In this moment, we see the fulfillment of a magical realist vision of the end-of-the-world "joining a sublime and magical depth reminiscent of romanticist traditions" as the larger-than-life planet looms over the characters and emphasizes human insignificance in an encounter with the larger cosmos (Theede 2).



Fig. IV, Still Image from *Melancholia*. Zentropa Pictures. 2011.

Though *Take Shelter* does not have an extended, painterly prologue like *Melancholia*, the mirror images that visually frame the opening and ending of the film illuminate the concerns over climate change that the film depicts and unsettle viewer notions about Curtis's mental state. Davis Rooney affirms, "rarely have electrical storms, cloud formation and glowering skies had such an unnerving impact or expressed such dark poetry." Below, the image on the left appears at the start of the film as Curtis stands outside and views the ominous cloud formation. He is then startled when yellow oil begins to rain down on him. At first, the audience embraces Curtis's perspective because we understand why he is on edge about the weather after seeing this cloud formation and being drenched by yellow rain. However, as the film progresses, and Curtis's sleeping and waking dreams about being chased by birds or zombies, being attacked by his dog, or trying to save himself and his daughter from a torrential storm, we begin to question if anything we have observed through Curtis's point of view is real. Is that first image of him looking at the storm clouds something that happened, or is it something he imagined that is a symptom of his mental illness? We get our answer at the end of the film as Samantha slowly emerges from the beach cottage they are renting to view the apocalyptic storm clouds that extend as far as the eye can see across the water. What she witnesses is the manifestation of Curtis's dreams, and she realizes that his prophecies about "a great storm coming" that no one would be ready for was true. However, as I previously discussed, Samantha is, to an extent, able to face the oncoming storm with a sense of calmness because she knows that her husband anticipated this event and set out to protect her and Hannah. As with the ability of Justine in *Melancholia* to face the inevitable event more calmly after predicting the planetary collision, Samantha is more prepared for the storm because of Curtis's visions. Though, most likely, it is too late for anyone to protect or save themselves from this storm, there is a moment at the end when a flicker of



relief flashes across Samantha's face because she recognizes that Curtis's visions turn were prophetic, proving that he was not succumbing to mental illness after all.



Fig. V and VI, Still Images from *Take Shelter*. Sony Pictures. 2011.

Ultimately, in these two films, finding a way to save the world is not the end goal. There is no way to thwart melancholia's collision with earth, so the choice of how to respond is reflected in the actions of Justine, Claire, and John. A man of science who realizes his predictions are incorrect, John takes what most would consider the easier (or more cowardly) way out by killing himself in the barn before the planet hits. Claire, thought to be the more practical, stable sister, attempts to escape to the village in the hope that the more populated location will provide protection for her and Leo. It is Justine, the woman whose mental unraveling we previously witnessed, who is able to accept, even welcome, the forthcoming collision. While it may seem on the surface to be fatalistic, Justine's ability to accept earth's demise provides a sense of calmness and peace for her and her nephew. Though the ending of *Take Shelter* is a bit more ambiguous than *Melancholia's* in regards to whether or not the world ends, it implies that "Curtis and his family apparently fall into the abyss; all pretraumatic visions of the catastrophe finally come to pass" (Kaplan 51). Each film "ends with a family trio, in one a father, mother and daughters, in the other a mother, son and aunt, face complete destruction

together” (Stein 7-8). The psychic visions or prophetic ability displayed by the lead characters as the end of the world approaches illustrates the idea that the “magic” in magical realism allows people to confront anxieties about the future that are a part of our present-day fears, enabling filmmakers to present what is at this point still a mysterious event in a way that does deal with the most basic human fears and anxieties.



Fig. VII, Still Image from *Take Shelter*. Fig. VIII, Still Image from *Melancholia*.

### **Visionary Magical Realism**

As I discussed in my first chapter, cinematic works of magical realism have garnered significantly less attention than their literary counterparts, even though one could argue that as far back as George Méliès in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century films were employing elements of magical realism. Because films are visual narratives, it can be challenging to differentiate between what is an irreducible element of magic and what is merely technological trickery stemming from special effects. Films adaptations of magical realist novels, such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) or *The House of Spirits* (1993), successfully retain elements of the magic realist events, like Tita’s transmission of emotion through food in *Like Water for Chocolate* or Clara’s ability to move objects with her mind in *The House of Spirits*, nearly as seamlessly as they are portrayed in the novels. These examples show that it is possible

for the “magic” to be more than just tricks of the camera; the irreducible elements may emerge organically in the narrative. More recently, adaptations of works that use characteristics of magical realism, like Tim Burton’s 2003 film version of Daniel Wallace’s *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*, the 2006 film *The Illusionist* based on Steven Millhauser’s short story *Eisenheim the Illusionist*, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) based on the F. Scott Fitzgerald short story of the same name demonstrate the possibility of translating elements of magical realism from page to screen while also enhancing the stories and adding depth by emphasizing or adding to the social and political commentary in the stories.

Moreover, what I find most fascinating is the trend, particularly in the past ten years, of filmmakers who are gravitating towards original screenplays that may be considered variations on magical realism because, as I state in my introduction, magical realism is a narrative mode adept at representing current issues and anxieties and the basic conditions of trying to find love and stability in our modern world. Films like *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), *Midnight in Paris* (2011), and *The Cobbler* (2014), employ elements of magical realism in whimsical ways to highlight the challenges of relationships, while award winning films like *Whale Rider* (2002), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2006), and *Black Swan* (2010) demonstrate how moments of magic enable moving depictions of social issues, especially in regards to themes of gender inequality, subjugation, and the objectification of the female body. *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* continue this trend with their visions of the end of earth that develop as Curtis and Justine try to cope with their mental breakdowns while the possibility of death looms over them, their families, and potentially the human race.

In my next chapter, I examine *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, another film that is reflective of this present moment in its representation of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Released in

2012, the storm that the characters in *Beasts* survive could be the storm we see looming at the end of *Take Shelter*, creating a trifecta of films that present magical realist visions of the world's potential end. What *Take Shelter*, *Melancholia*, and also *Beasts of the Southern Wild* have in common is their acknowledgement of how little control people have over forces of nature, but that each person does have the power to control their reaction to these events. Curtis chooses to seek help for his dreams and erratic behavior, Samantha calmly faces the storm, and Justine lovingly creates a symbolic cave to ward off her nephew's fears. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Hushpuppy, the young protagonist of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, with her imaginative abilities and belief in cultural myths confronts the torrential storm and her father's death with a steely-determination that transcends her age and circumstances. Perhaps that is the most important use of magical realism in these films: it provides a means for representing and confronting what were once unimaginable traumatic events and that are now a part of our everyday reality. Eugene Arva claims, "if there is a nexus between trauma, imagination, and magic, it comes about fleetingly in both the creative process and the reading [or viewing] experience, in the author's and reader's minds" (281). These magical realist films revise the disaster genre by focusing it more intensely on the human imagination, not trying to fix the outside events, which are hopeless. Since the events portrayed in these films haven't happened, yet, there is a larger quotient of imagination in these films and that links up with an implicit hope and faith in our ability to imagine a solution for these unknowable experiences.

## CHAPTER 5

ESSENTIAL MAGIC: *BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD* AND THE CULTURAL  
IMPACT OF MAGICAL REALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us.

~ Jack Halberstam

The Big Lesson I learned from Hurricane Katrina is that we have to be thinking about the unthinkable because sometimes the unthinkable happens.

~ Mike Leavitt

Just because we are magic does not mean we are not real.

~ Jessie Williams, *BET Awards* Acceptance Speech

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) is a fitting text with which to conclude my analysis of magical realism in the twenty-first century for two reasons. First, the film offers what we might consider to be resonances with other texts I examine in this project, which provide a sense of cohesiveness to the disparate works I discuss, and hence argues for the collective strength and widespread nature of contemporary magical realism. The affinity between a young girl and a near mythic creature in *The Tiger's Wife* closely resembles Hushpuppy's fearlessness when interacting with the aurochs, the magical status conferred on the adolescent females discussed in chapter three resonates with Hushpuppy's preternatural imagination, and the forces of nature that engender apocalyptic fears in *Take Shelter* and *Melancholia* manifest in very similar ways to the hurricane that nearly destroys the setting of the film, an area known as The Bathtub. Secondly, as my analysis of *Beasts* illustrates, the many layers of the film render what I believe is a significant and accurate portrayal of a recently experienced traumatic event and underscores the capacity of magical realism to depict current anxieties related to representations of race, gender, climate change, and government injustices. Much of the success of *Beasts* can be attributed to the fact

that the film struck a cultural nerve when it was released in its representation of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath by giving voice to the most underrepresented and marginalized group of people affected by the storm. Playwright and screen writer Lucy Alibar, whose one act play *Juicy and Delicious* is the original source material for *Beasts*, and director Ben Zeitlin include irreducible elements of magic to create an environmental fable that examines how those subjected to racial, gender, and economic inequality are affected by a large-scale ecological catastrophe, and to make their nearly unbelievable as well as traditionally invisible sufferings dramatically present to viewers. Through this film, we recognize magical realism's function as a means of gathering and highlighting the emotional and psychological tensions of current social events, which, in turn, elucidates the genre's creation of important and necessary representations of twenty-first century experiences, particularly those experiences which are traumatic on both an individual and communal scale.

Examining the characteristics of magical realism in a film is not a simple process, however, particularly with a text as complex as *Beasts*. Like other works in this genre, analyzing *Beasts* as a text that employs magical realism is complicated by several factors. The first factor is that, according to Zeitlin, what we assume is "magic" in the movie is really the function of the exquisite imagination of the film's heroine, Hushpuppy.<sup>49</sup> However, as I conveyed in my first chapter, resistance to a text being labeled "magical realism" by its creator is not unique in this genre; some of the most renowned artists to employ magical realism in their works have resisted this classification, which reinforces the points made in my first chapter about the challenges of classifying twenty-first century texts as works of magical realism. Hushpuppy's imaginative ability, as I will discuss later in this chapter, is an irreducible element of magic in the film, a

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<sup>49</sup> This does not have a significant impact on my analysis. However, I think it is important to acknowledge what the filmmaker's perspective is on classifying this work as magical realism because it does support previous points I made about the challenges facing twenty-first century magical realism.

focal point of *Beasts*. Similar to Carlos Rueda's magical imagination in *Imagining Argentina*, the ineffable imaginative power Hushpuppy possesses enables her to make the past present for the audience, bring to life an extinct species, and evoke the presence of her absent mother; all of this contributes to her development and aids in her survival through the course of the film. Despite Zeitlin's objection, I argue that, like Curtis's dreams in *Take Shelter* and Justine's premonitions in *Melancholia*, Hushpuppy's abilities are more than just the work of a child's overactive imagination.

A more pertinent reason *Beasts* is complicated—in terms of its magical realist elements and more broadly in terms of its subject matter—because of controversy over the larger social implications of the film. The issues of racism it raises (and, according to some critics, perpetuates) in the current political and social climate in the United States, does make categorizing this film as magical realism problematic if one assumes that the genre eroticizes the primitive and exoticizes aspects of third-world cultures or marginalized groups of people. As I discussed in my first chapter, “the objection that many critics raise against magical realism is that it is a very popular fictional form among western readers who are not familiar with the world which it depicts” (Bowers 126). Yet the world of The Bathtub—the impoverished community on an isolated bayou of Louisiana cut off from the inland by a levee built by the mainlanders to protect their land—is as foreign to many viewers as a country we might consider to be part of the third or fourth world. Richard Corliss comments, “Hushpuppy's land is far from what mainlanders would call civilization; the place could be in Brazil or aboriginal Australia, and in any period over the past hundred years.” For some critics, this setting is one of the most troubling aspects of the film because they claim it perpetuates racist portrayals of African-Americans. Jayna Brown expresses concern that “with its dystopian landscape, the film evokes

the precarity, instability and vulnerability of black life... The film romanticizes [the inhabitants] abject poverty [and] aestheticizes the filth and destruction around them” (1). Others also voice their disapproval of the portrayal of race relations in the film’s depiction of a contemporary social drama set in an impoverished area. bell hooks complains that “deploying myth and fantasy we are shown a world in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* where black and white poor folks live together in utopian harmony. No race talk, no racial discourse disturbs this peace” (2). This, according to hooks, is not realistic in any place, regardless of the inhabitant’s economic status. She is accurate in her observation about the racial harmony that exists in the Bathtub; everyone is treated equally and cares for others equally, regardless of race, because basic necessities needed to survive, like food and shelter, are the central concerns for this group. While I find this display of communal unity and support inspiring, I understand hooks’s argument that this portrayal of racial harmony in the face of more severe economic problems glosses over the real issues of neglect and injustice that were experienced on a larger scale by African-Americans during and immediately after Hurricane Katrina. However, this overly harmonious portrait of race relations amidst both the catastrophic conditions and the magic implicitly does what I claim the film does—make us look at the disaster in productive ways—i.e. imagine beyond the current race relations that often prevail in more normal circumstances.

While I am mindful of the issues these critics raise and will address them in this chapter, I contend that the complications that arise from these concerns underscore why magical realism remains a viable and potent mode in the twenty-first century: it enables a heartrending representation of the aftermath of an event like Hurricane Katrina that might otherwise be beyond comprehension for many people outside of the areas affected by the storm. The images of dead bodies rotting in filthy water, people pleading from their rooftops for help, and the



horrific stories that emerged from the Superdome were, in a way, almost too real and traumatic for most viewers to fully make sense of while watching on television. Patricia Yaeger argues that the “film carries the nation’s baggage; it investigates a culture of racial neglect, creates a zone of history-making for Katrina’s disposable bodies, and provides a steady critique of white capital. The film’s rags and wastelands—its killing fields, become emblems of the Southland’s commitment to inequality” (2). In its representation of poverty, race, and how those who exist on the margins process an environmental disaster, *Beasts* brought the reality of the events of Hurricane Katrina to the screen in a manner that both moved audiences and filled them with the hope that this type of tragedy was survivable and (maybe) preventable. Whether this hope still exists, however, is debatable. Here as elsewhere, magical realism does not sugarcoat harsh realities and does not assume magical positive solutions to horrific problems.

### **Current Consideration: The “Magic” and the “Real”**

One way to situate the film, and the constructive way it uses magical realism, is to consider the cultural shift we are currently experiencing, particularly in the United States, in representations of race. This is significant because, as I will discuss further in this chapter, at the heart of this story is the portrayal of the how relationship between a single black father and his precocious daughter is shaped by their race, her gender, and the absence of the matriarch. At the *BET* (Black Entertainment Television) Awards this past June, actor Jesse Williams gave a powerful acceptance speech after receiving the *BET* Humanitarian Award for his activism on behalf of the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>50</sup> His speech instantly went viral, receiving praise across social media by a broad spectrum of celebrities and activists.<sup>51</sup> Addressing recent acts of

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<sup>50</sup> He executive produced the documentary, *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*.

<sup>51</sup> He was also on the receiving end of criticism from a fringe conservative group that started a Change.org petition to have him fired from his job on the hit television show *Grey’s Anatomy*.

police brutality against the black community—the deaths of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, to name a few—as well as the history of violence and appropriation his community has experienced, Williams exhorted his audience to no longer allow themselves to be victimized by white culture: “We’ve been floating this country on credit for centuries, yo, and we’re done watching and waiting while this invention called whiteness uses and abuses us, burying black people out of sight and out of mind while extracting our culture, our dollars, our entertainment like oil.” The ending line of his speech—“the thing is though... the thing is that just because we’re magic doesn’t mean we’re not real”—touched a cultural nerve in those reporting on the award show; the sentence became the headline in the majority of press the speech and the *BET* Awards received. While the notion of magical black lives carries a certain amount of irony, since magic is associated in the black community for some in that community with voodoo or connotations that are in opposition to foundational Christian beliefs, this particular wording served as a reminder of how black lives are often depicted in popular culture: as somehow different, less real than their white counterparts. Reading the transcript of his speech, I was reminded of Shylock’s famous lines from *The Merchant of Venice*: “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?” Williams speech struck a chord because he did not claim, as Shylock did to his Christians audience, that black people are the same as white people; rather, he affirmed to his black audience that not only were they worthy of the same status as any other race, but they needed to demand this status for themselves. By calling them (and himself) “magic,” he seems to imply that not only are they equal, but they are somehow better than equal—they are the personification of irreducible magic. That use of a magical identifier is similar to the use of magical events in magical realism; it highlights something about the entity to which it is attached. It is also a central issue in critiques of magical

realism as glossing over or exploiting the preindustrial cultures it portrays, especially in earlier magical realism texts. For Williams, surviving despite a legacy and history of slavery, mistreatment, and a battle for equal rights, which still continues, underlines the determination he feels is inherent to his culture.

As someone who is interested in the cultural effect of magical realism, I find his choice of the words “magic” and “real” to describe black lives intriguing. In one sense, his use of those terms together implies that the culturally revisionist discourse of magical realism is creeping into popular political discourse. As I made clear in my first chapter, the term “magical realism” does seem to be applied or referenced with some frequency to works that lack characteristics of the mode, which could be the case for Williams.

Beyond this description, however, Williams’s speech points to an important cultural shift that has occurred in the four years since *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was released. Since 2012, the Black Lives Matter movement has influenced, to a degree, how we read or think about texts that portray black lives, particularly modern texts written/directed/created by white artists, like Alibar and Zeitlin. Considering the phenomenal success for an independent film from a first-time director that *Beasts* experienced, along with the equal parts of praise and derision it received from literary and cultural studies critics for its representation of black lives, particularly those of Hushpuppy and her father (Wink), makes a discussion of the film fraught with tension in our current social climate. Does the film exploit Hushpuppy and Wink because of their race or negatively stereotype black lives? Williams’s point about how black lives are often viewed as stereotypes or archetypes that make them seem more magical than real succinctly articulates the central issue that critics of *Beasts* have with the film’s representation of race.

### **A Father, a Daughter, and an Absent Mother**

Emphasizing the significance of magical realism in a text that highlights issues of race and parental neglect (along with the environmental anxieties I address later) is not without its complications. Because the central storyline in *Beasts* addresses the issue of race and representation through its depiction of a father, his six-year-old daughter, and how they approach life in the absence of her mother in a place that appears for all intents and purposes to be a preindustrial culture, then the criticism that magical realism can be exploitative is not without merit. As the criticisms I addressed earlier in this chapter reveal, the depiction of a black father in one of the poorest areas of the United States trying to prepare his daughter for life after he dies from an illness poisoning his blood in a narrative interspersed with elements of magic is not viewed favorably by some critics. However, beginning with the portrayal of Hushpuppy's mother, we see that believing in myths and magic is an inevitable part of survival for those living in the Bathtub.

We are never told what happened to Hushpuppy's mother, though it is implied that she left the Bathtub for the mainland. Her presence hovers over the film, however, in the stories Wink tells about her and the conversations Hushpuppy addresses to her mother when she is alone. Along with the aurochs discussed later in this chapter, Hushpuppy's mother is given an almost mythologized status in the story. We learn that Hushpuppy was conceived after an alligator almost attacked Wink. As it was preparing to lunge, Hushpuppy's mother, wearing only rain boots and underwear, similar to what we see Hushpuppy wearing through most of the film, approaches the alligator and kills it with a shotgun. Blood splatters all over her mostly naked body and, rather than repulsing Wink, makes her more attractive to him. Besides this display of fearlessness, Hushpuppy alludes to the fact that her mother may have possessed preternatural

gifts. Not only is this woman of the swamp able to facedown terrifying creatures, but she can also control at least one of the elements that provide nourishment for her family. “Back when daddy used to talk about mama, he says she was so pretty, she never even had to turn on the stove. She just walked into the room and all the water starts to boil.” While Hushpuppy tells us this story in a voiceover, we see the backside of her mother in an almost sheer white dress as she walks past the stove in their kitchen. The focus of the camera lens is momentarily on the burners that light up on their own as she passes. As she slowly saunters through the kitchen going from one appliance to another, we never see the mother’s face or much of the lower half of her body. We see her as Hushpuppy’s memory conjures her: a faceless woman whose sex appeal is her most defining feature, because this is most likely how Wink has portrayed her to Hushpuppy.

When Hushpuppy envisions her mother or tells stories about her, she is always pictured in white and the stories are about events occurring that are not normal, like the alligator killer or the burners lighting. Because of this portrayal, the viewer’s understanding of Hushpuppy’s world is being questioned by the conjunction of the realistic voice over and the magical visual image. For Hushpuppy, her mother is as mythical a creature as the aurochs: a woman who is extinct, but whose presence is still felt by her daughter. Though, we gather early on that this was not a mother who was nurturing or physical with her daughter. When Hushpuppy tells us that she can “count on two fingers the number of times I have been picked up,” we acknowledge the possibility that neither of those times was by her mother because she is not portrayed as maternal in any way.

As great of a shadow as the mother casts over the film, the central narrative is that of Wink and Hushpuppy’s relationship. Alibar initially wrote the play as a way of working through her relationship with her father when he was dying. It is noteworthy that in *Juicy and Delicious*

the father and his child (a ten-year-old boy) are white. She changed the gender of the child for the movie because she was interested in seeing how this relationship would play out if it were a girl having to deal with a dying father and what that would mean for her future. Originally the call for actors to play Hushpuppy was for girls between the ages of eight and twelve, but the filmmakers decided to change Hushpuppy's age to six after Quvenzhané Wallis performed so well in her audition. So if the change in age was because of Wallis and the change in gender was because Alibar and Zeitlin felt it would make the character more vulnerable, what accounts for the change in race? Thomas Hackett argues that the portrayal of Wink and Hushpuppy “deploys a casual racism... It skims the surface of serious matters without asking us to actually grapple with their complexities: We can feel guilty, virtuous, and indifferent all at once.” This contention stems first and foremost from the representation of Wink, who throughout the film “drinks, trashes his shack, and fires his rifle for the hell of it. ‘I’ma bust your ass,’ he shouts, and then does just that—smacking his daughter hard across the face. Far from deploring the abuse and neglect, the film ennobles her father” (Hackett). I would agree that at times it is difficult to watch the volatile interactions between Hushpuppy and Wink, ranging from their yelling at each other to their physically hitting each other. Often Wink's actions come off as painfully abusive. However, this volatility makes the dire situation that these two are in more realistic and believable than if Wink displayed more tenderness towards his daughter. They are constrained by time (he knows he is dying), they live in an economy<sup>52</sup> where survival is contingent on one's ability to provide food and shelter for herself, and there are no other blood relatives (that we know of) who could take care of Hushpuppy. Wink recognizes Hushpuppy's situation for exactly what it is: she is on the verge of being an orphan in a world that is more often than not unsympathetic to the plight

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<sup>52</sup> I am referring to the specific economy that exists in the Bathtub.

of impoverished, black, females, and she has to learn to fend for herself if she is to have any chance of surviving. Though his inconsistent behavior is irrational and does add to her pain, it is obvious that one thing that motivates his actions is displaced anger at their situation, the social ills they must contend with, and his wife's abandonment. So, while on the one hand his treatment of Hushpuppy seems unjustifiable, on the other hand he teaches her the survival skills he believes are necessary for her to thrive after he passes, which does not excuse his actions, but does offer an explanation for his motivation.

To this end, Wink focuses on teaching her survival skills like how to fish, how to kill animals for food, etc., and how to survive in the wild space that is The Bathtub. This starts with their daily living arrangements. Though she is only six-years-old, Hushpuppy has her own home across a small field from where Wink lives. While some critics claim this is because Wink does not trust himself with his young daughter, I think this reading perpetuates a dangerous stereotype. I think it is more that if he is going to teach his daughter to survive, then she must first learn how to handle being alone. She is responsible, at least at the start of the film, for caring for her animals, dressing herself, and sometimes preparing her own meals.

Even more valuable than the domestic skills she acquires, however, Wink teaches her the importance of community and shows her that loyalty and compassion for their fellow residents in the Bathtub will result in receiving help and compassion in return. Nowhere is this more apparent than when other residents of the Bathtub take the dying Wink from the government health center back to the Bathtub and rally around him and Hushpuppy as he lay dying. He rescued many of them when the Bathtub was flooding, and now they are returning the favor by not allowing him to die "plugged into a wall." Where his admonishment to Hushpuppy early in the film "not to cry" may seem harsh, we realize as they share one last moment before his death that this was not done

out of callousness. He wants her to be strong enough to survive anything, even his death. “If her father has taught her anything, it’s resilience, and no mere hurricane is going to make [her] extinct” (Corliss). This training is really begun when he allows her to live alone, because he implicitly allows her to imagine outside the box of what normal existence is for a six-year-old, so to speak, which includes “magical thinking.” This is the only real legacy he can leave her.

### **Critical Reception**

When it was released in 2012, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* received instantaneous critical acclaim (in some circles) and enjoyed an award circuit run that few films from first-time directors ever experience. In his effusive review of the movie, Roger Ebert wrote: “sometimes miraculous films come into being, made by people you've never heard of, starring unknown faces, blindsiding you with creative genius. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is one of the year's best films.” A.O. Scott proclaimed, “This movie is a blast of sheer, improbable joy, a boisterous, thrilling action movie with a protagonist who can hold her own alongside Katniss Everdeen, Princess Merida and the other brave young heroines of 2012.” Richard Corliss declared, “film speaks in words and images of a clarity and vision nearly unique in today’s independent cinema.” Writing for *The Atlantic*, Silpa Kovvali praised *Beasts* for forcing “us to try on a new worldview in the hopes that we permanently expand our own.” The widespread critical acclaim landed *Beasts* on most top-ten films of year lists and became an award show favorite. It won the prestigious Caméra d’Or award for best first feature film at the Cannes Film festival, the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, along with a slew of other critic awards. Most impressively, it was nominated for four Academy Awards, including: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Actress for nine-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis, making her the youngest best actress nominee in Academy history. This impressive recognition thrust *Beasts*



and all those associated with the film into an international spotlight and reminded viewers that the wounds of Hurricane Katrina were still healing.

Despite the international acclaim and awards, and the fact that the film was both critically and (for an independent feature) commercially successful, as I have mentioned briefly above, there were many viewers who did not find the film worth celebrating. bell hooks begins her review of the film with, “I leave a showing of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* deeply disturbed and militantly outraged by the images I have just seen” (1). While she lists several reasons why the film was so offensive to her, her main issue is:

At the center of this spectacle is the continuous physical and emotional violation of the body and being of a small six year old black girl called Hushpuppy (played by the ten year old actress Quzenhane Wallis). While she is portrayed as continuously resisting and refusing to be a victim, she is victimized. Subject to both romanticization as a modern primitive and eroticization, her plight is presented as comically farcical.

Christine Sharpe makes a similar observation about the film’s protagonist: “”Hushpuppy, in her grime-covered and half-naked childlike innocence, embodies the Western fantasy of the primitive.” These criticisms are not without merit, and “Hushpuppy’s near nakedness stirs the film’s controversy” (Yaeger 4). Throughout much of the film Hushpuppy is dressed in underwear, a white tank top, and rain boots (in a few scenes she is allowed jeans). For a brief moment towards the end, the administrators at the government health facility she is taken to put her in a dress, and her discomfort at having to wear this feminized article of clothing is evident from the permanent scowl on her face after she is forced into it. She eventually changes into a tattered, oversized white shirt, though still without pants. The lack of clothing for much of the

film raises the question of whether “the filmmakers [are] conscious of tapping into these reservoirs of stereotypical abjection” (Yaeger)? Even Quvenzhane Wallis felt her character was underdressed, telling Oprah in an interview that she thought Hushpuppy should have at least been given pants to wear for more of the film.



Fig.IX Still from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.

In line with the criticisms of magical realism exoticising the primitive for a presumably Western or European audience that I discuss in my first chapter, some critics of *Beasts* find the portrayal of Hushpuppy and her place in the community of the Bathtub troubling. hooks calls her “a miniature version of the ‘strong black female matriarch,’ [which] racist and sexist representations have depicted from slavery on into the present day.” Arlene Keizer notes in regards to the portrayal of Hushpuppy and her surroundings, the “film luxuriates in dirt, disorder, and mental disturbance—as if these were the exclusive properties of the racialized poor” (qtd. in Yaeger). Jayna Brown claims, “this isn’t the first case of black children being depicted as insensitive to pain, or black suffering and survival being used to symbolize American democracy.” Building off criticisms lodged by hooks, Sharpe, and others, Tavia Nyong’o asks:

[Why] is a black female child asked to perform the work of imagining the survival

of a civilization that has abandoned her? What is the relationship between her singular race, gender, and infancy and the ostensibly universal narrative she embodies? And why is her narrative of wondrous survival framed through such standard tropes as black familial dysfunction, paternal violence, and licentious femininity? (251)

Nyong'o raises important questions to consider in an analysis of the film and the character of Hushpuppy. Do we unwittingly situate her, as Jesse Williams might argue, as a magical archetype without recognizing the very real and dangerous situation she is facing or without acknowledging the implications of representing her as a black child who has been abandoned by one parent and is about to be orphaned by another? Or, is she representative of all the disenfranchised who are the first to be affected by capitalist mistreatment of the planet's resources? What does it mean that Hushpuppy assumes responsibility "for the catastrophe she did not make," telling her absent mother, "I've broken everything" (Cecire 173)? How we situate Hushpuppy and, to an extent, her father affects how we read *Beasts*: Is it an important cultural work that causes us to think differently about race and resources in regards to Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, or does it reinforce discriminatory race and social class stereotypes?

While Hushpuppy's race and gender, and to an extent her age, problematize her position as the figure whom we are asked to identify and empathize with, I contend that the success of the film hinges on the viewers investment in her survival, which exists, in part, because we recognize from the start of the film that she is the most vulnerable and least equipped of any person in this kind of crisis to survive. Her ability to persist in the face of unimaginable tragedy—her mother's permanent absence, the death of her father, the terrible storm that

temporarily destroys the Bathtub, the possibility that the government may remove her from her home—is believable because we as viewers need to believe she has the skills to survive.

Otherwise, as spectators of the real-life tragedy this is based on, we become voyeurs complicit in the circumstances that threaten her existence.

One way Alibar and Zeitlin approached making Hushpuppy’s survival believable is by drawing on the qualities and characteristics that we recognize and empathize with from our favorite classic literary and cinematic child heroes:

Hushpuppy is an American original, a rambunctious blend of individualism and fellow feeling. In other words, she is the inheritor of a proud literary and artistic tradition, following along a crooked path traveled by Huckleberry Finn, Scout Finch, Eloise (of the Plaza), Elliott (from “E.T.”) and other brave, wild, imaginary children. These young heroes allow us, vicariously, to assert our innocence and to accept our inevitable disillusionment when the world falls short of our ideals and expectations.<sup>53</sup> (Scott)

Situating Hushpuppy in this pantheon of classic adolescent heroes from literature and film is an appropriate way to think of her role as the bearer of our hopes and fears in relation to how we survive personal losses—like that of a parent dying—or the universal fear over the potential environmental losses we might suffer as climate change continues to wreak havoc around the world. Of all the marvelous creatures that inhabit the Bathtub, most critics agree, “no creature is more entrancing than the precocious, poetic Hushpuppy. Living in a shack on stilts across the yard from her willful, ailing father Wink, she cooks her own meals and tends lovingly to the birds, dog, and hog in her care...Hushpuppy is six and ageless – a wise child who looks like an

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<sup>53</sup> I am not saying that all viewers will recognize these characters. And I do think there is a needed discussion about why none of the characters listed are black, but that is outside the scope of this project.

angel and speaks like Sybil” (Corliss). She is a younger version of Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, willful, stubborn, forced to learn survival skills because her mother has disappeared and her father is succumbing to an illness that will make him unable to care for her. She has a deep empathy for animals and a strong connection to nature, and she is more at home in the muddy backwater bayou that is her home than she is in the dress that is forced on her by government health workers.

But, despite the grand company of fictional heroes to which she belongs, does placing the responsibility for surviving these traumatic events on her, seem, as Sharpe points out, giving into Western primitivist fantasies? It certainly was pointed out by some critics that the change in character from Lucy Alibar’s play from a ten-year-old white boy to a six-year-old black girl in the film might imply this idea. In fact, since the characters of Hushpuppy and Wink were not a part of the original play, the question of why Alibar and Zeitlin decided to make the film revolve around a black father and his daughter is important. Did they think this representation would create more sympathy for the viewer for the circumstances Hushpuppy is going through? Is Jessie Williams right in his claim that white culture attempts to “other” black people by depicting them as less real and more “magical?” With the result that the social needs of those very people are pushed into the background by this delectable magic where an extinct species seem to manifest from the imagination of Hushpuppy?

The marketing approach for *Beasts* certainly capitalized on the notion that highlighting “magic” would be a good way to create interest in the film. For example, the first poster for the movie features the most ethereal image from the film – Hushpuppy is running through a field during the opening party thrown in the Bathtub holding sparklers in her hand. Against the backdrop of a purple sky, the sparklers illuminate the night and capture the image of a child

experiencing a moment of pure bliss. Juxtapose this moment with every other frame of the film, and it is immediately noticeable that the most luminously positive image from the movie was chosen as the first and main marketing image for the film. In the poster, there is no evidence of the dirt that covers Hushpuppy's clothes and body through most of the film or of the messy, grimy space Hushpuppy calls home. The central event of the film, the storm that completely remakes the world of the Bathtub, is not referenced in any way. Instead, the filmmakers hope we are enticed by this dazzling image of innocence and light.



Fig. IX Film Poster for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

A second poster created after the film was released features the highlight of the film's magical moments: Hushpuppy's confrontation with the aurochs. While this poster does indicate what a beast of the southern wild might be, it makes this encounter appear more enchanting than terrifying by illuminating the image with a backdrop of the sparklers used in the first poster.



Fig. X Film Poster of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Above we see the same background lit up by sparklers from the first poster, but now the iconic image is that of Hushpuppy staring down the mythical aurochs. The leading headline, which is in larger lettering than the film title, is “Discover the Most Magical Film of the Year.” Though I agree with the filmmakers that the film is magical, I find it curious that this would be the lead selling point for a film about one of the worst natural disasters, as well as an example of government inefficiency, in our recent history. In fact, compare the second poster with the actual image of Hushpuppy’s encounter with the aurochs and one sees a telling difference—gone are the sparkling lights illuminating a purple sky and the bright green grass shading the bottom part of the image. Instead, the sky is gray and overcast in the aftermath of the storm. There is very little green in sight; rather, in the background is a barren tree stripped of its leaves and instead of grass Hushpuppy stands on a dilapidated wooden bridge. Even Hushpuppy appears larger and is placed more prominently in the foreground of the poster than the film.



Fig. XI Still from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.

The moment captured in both of the movie posters present a different type of film than the one we see if we juxtaposed them with the most prolific of the film’s images of dirt, and water, animals—both dead and alive—the mundane visualized in its most primal, dirtiest form. As we have already seen, through most of the film Hushpuppy is wearing underwear and a wife beater shirt, yet the poster captures her in the white nightgown she leaves the hospital wearing while the most “magical” moment of the film occurs when she comes face-to-face with the aurochs. Unlike the first poster, which hides her racial identity in shades of purple and golden light, the second poster highlights her as the magical black child facing down the great beast of the southern wild. In terms of marketing, this strategy makes sense. After a successful run on the film festival circuit, *Beasts* was gaining significant pop culture exposure, both for average movie audiences and on the award show circuit. The fact that the film was receiving (mostly) positive reviews of its treatment of Hurricane Katrina and Quvenzhané Wallis was generating serious Oscar buzz made highlighting her role, and her race, important for marketing *Beasts* as more than just a movie, but as an important cultural representation of an event that had challenged our nation’s social and political beliefs.



### Where the Wild Things Are

Near the beginning of the film, Hushpuppy and her classmates are told by their schoolteacher, Miss Bathsheba, that “any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. Ice caps gonna melt, water’s gonna to rise, and everything south of the levee is going under. Y’all better learn to survive now.” This instruction turns out to be more important than any other lesson the teacher could impart to her students; in the poverty-stricken, disregarded bayou of Louisiana where Hushpuppy lives, daily existence is difficult enough without the added challenge of trying to survive the onslaught of one of the most destructive hurricanes in United States history. Richard Corliss points out that even before the storm comes, “Hushpuppy knows danger and tragedy: her daddy whacks her when angered, and her mother just ‘swam away’ to her death or the mainland.” Perhaps this is why Hushpuppy feels a strong affinity with the aurochs, “an extinct species of cattle” whose “apocalyptic arrival” is predicted by her teacher (Corliss). She senses something is coming that might threaten the life she knows, but, like the aurochs whose memory is kept alive through her teacher’s stories and the tattoo of them she has on her leg, she determines that her life matters and will be remembered in some way.



Fig. XII Still from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.

However, her teacher’s warning about the unraveling of the universe foreshadows what is to come for Hushpuppy through the course of the film, as she copes with her dying father and the torrential storm that will exacerbate the already dire economic conditions endured by the community of the Bathtub where she lives. That this arrival occurs just as Hushpuppy and her father are in a fight—after he slaps her she punches him in the chest and yells, “I hope you die”—signals how Hushpuppy filters events through her six-year-old worldview. Her father’s terminal illness is an earth-shattering event, and the way she comes to terms with it is to bring to life an actual beast that threatens her existence. The aurochs function as a representation of Hushpuppy’s fears because they hover between the mythical and the realistic for her. The tattoo on her teacher’s leg provides her with an image that she can magnify into a larger-than-life animal whose journey from the melted ice caps to her corner of the world signals that her way of life is threatened by forces of nature that are out of her control. Though she does not want to acknowledge his illness, her father’s death is the biggest threat to her way of life; however, for a child to put a parent’s impending death into perspective is a nearly impossible task. Instead, it is easier for her to imagine the resurrection of an extinct species than to imagine her father’s death.



Fig. XIV “A Vietnamese pot-bellied pig dons a nutria skin and latex horns for its role as an aurochs in *Beasts*.” *Voices.NationalGeographic.com/exclusive-the-secret-of-the-aurochs-those-beasts-of-the-southern-wild.*

In “Environmental Innocence and Slow Violence,” Natalia Cecire writes that “the film poses a nearly unthinkable, yet all too present, question: how does one prepare a small child for a future marked by environmental collapse?” (164). The answer given in *Beasts* is that there is no clear way to prepare anyone for the type of environmental devastation we are seeing around the globe because of climate change and large scale disasters like Hurricane Katrina. The best we can hope for is that in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event we are able to find a way to rebuild and survive in a world that has been completely altered by the forces of nature. In *Beasts*, the ability to survive the unimaginable tragedy that befalls Hushpuppy and those around her occurs through her magical imagination and the presence of the aurochs, the mythical beasts she brings to life near the end of the film, emerging, literally, from the overflowing waters in the bayou. The inspiration for the aurochs came from actual cave paintings Zeitlin saw in Lascaux, Pech Merle, and other places.



Fig. XV Le Grotte de Lascaux Cave painting.

Zeitlin explains the connection between these paintings and the film:

[Hushpuppy] sees herself as the last of her kind, on the verge of extinction...She sees herself as being in the same position as the cavemen: we look back on them

and understand them by their paintings. So it's that parallel that inspired us to use the aurochs. What Hushpuppy sees as coming to destroy her is literally what the cavemen painted. (qtd. in Berlin)

That Hushpuppy connects with these creatures demonstrates the continuing theme throughout the film that she will survive because she sees herself as part of a larger cosmic narrative:

When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me lying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. And when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I'm a little piece in a big, big universe. And that makes things right. (*Beasts*)

While at first the aurochs may seem as fantastical creatures as a hippogriff or dragon to Hushpuppy, their potential return to earth is made imaginatively real by the fact that Miss Bathsheba has a tattoo of them on her leg and promises that they will return as the waters around the Bathtub rise. The tragic tale of the aurochs extinction is a story not dissimilar to what those living in the Bathtub are facing.

A relative of the domestic cow, the wild aurochs once thrived across Europe, India, and North Africa. But hunting and human encroachment slowly reduced its habitat to, finally just the Jaktorowska forest in Poland. For several hundred years, the last of the aurochs survived as property of the Polish crown. Only the king had the right to hunt them. As they dwindled further, the king himself abstained from their hunt, charged the local village with protecting the aurochs. This sovereign act was an early assertion of what Michel Foucault would later name biopolitics: the 'power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.' As such an early assertion, it was weak and experimental, and it ultimately

failed. For when King Zygmunt's inspector arrived in 1630, he learned the last of the aurochs had died years earlier, in what we today classify as 'the first documented anthropogenic extinction.' The horned relics of the last male aurochs were brought to the king, in whose keep they remained until carried off as a trophy to a rival's armory in Stockholm, where they remain on view today.

(Nyong'o 249)

The aurochs are symbolic representations of what can happen when humans overestimate the value of their own needs and desires and refuse to recognize the symbiotic relationship we share with animals and the environment, and this reflects the situation that Hushpuppy finds herself in as a storm threatens the only life she has ever known.

Hushpuppy is not the only child to use a creature, fictional or real, as a substitute way of dealing with a traumatic situation. We see this happen in *The Tiger's Wife* with Natalia's grandfather and the eponymous tiger's wife who form a preternatural connection with the escaped tiger that haunts their small village. Long before Hushpuppy encounters the aurochs she imagines what it would be like for them to emerge from the melting ice caps and make their way through the waters that surround the Bayou; the images this creates in her imagination are periodically flashed onscreen to remind viewers that meeting these larger-than-life creatures is something that Hushpuppy often envisions. In a similar way, Natalia's grandfather in *The Tiger's Wife* desires to meet a tiger long before an actual one makes his way to Galina. After being given a copy of *The Jungle Book* by the village apothecary, and becoming fixated on his favorite stories of Shere Khan from the novel, Leandro dreams of meeting a tiger. Because the tiger has so long been an intriguing figure in his imagination, he, unlike the other villagers in Galina who are terrified of and then hunt the tiger, seeks out the tiger after it comes to Galina. He forges a

relationship with the tiger's wife because she is the only one of the villagers who embraces the tiger and attempts to save his life. The tiger's wife, like Hushpuppy, is cast as a disadvantaged adolescent female who must use her wits and imagination to find a way out of her abusive marriage.<sup>54</sup> Though secretly feeding the tiger brings on the worst of all the beatings Luka inflicts on her, culminating in him tying her up in the slaughterhouse in the hope that the tiger will eat her, it is also her salvation. After her night in the Slaughterhouse, Luka is never seen in the village of Galina again, and the belief that the tiger's wife and the tiger are responsible for his disappearance creates the myth that the tiger and the tiger's wife had some illicit relationship. Whether or not she knew what a tiger was before he showed up in Galina is something we are not told, but we do know that their connection was immediate and that they mutually trusted each other. Because of the limited access to the outside world that both Leandro and the tiger's wife had, it is not a stretch to say that the tiger was as mythical a creature to them as the aurochs are to Hushpuppy.

Another story analogous to Hushpuppy's experience with the aurochs is the "melancholic and visionary 2009 film version of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*," the classic children's story about a boy named Max and the imaginative kingdom he escapes to every night (Halberstam 6). Like Hushpuppy, Max imagines larger-than-life beasts populating his kingdom: "Max, the small seeker who leaves his room, his home, his family to find the wild beyond, finds a world of lost and lonely beasts" (Halberstam 6). Hushpuppy too looks to the wild beyond as the extinct aurochs she both fears and is drawn to come to life. Jack Halberstam remarks that in *Where the Wild Things are* what matters is not the end result of Max's encounter with the beasts, but his realization that the imaginary world he has created as an alternate to "the Oedipal land

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<sup>54</sup> She is thirteen when her father tricked Luka into marrying her. She is also a deaf/mute who is routinely and violently beaten by Luka.

where his mother rules” is not the escape he wanted (7).

That Max fails to make the wild things happy or to save them or to make a world with them is less important than the fact that he found them and he recognized in them the end of something and potentially the path to an alternative to his world. The wild things were not the utopian creatures of fairy tales, they were the rejected and lost subjects of the world Max had left behind. (Halberstam 7)

A similar moment of recognition occurs for Hushpuppy when she finally faces the aurochs. Leaving the floating boat of prostitutes, where she searched for but did not find her mother, Hushpuppy and the other children with her run across the plains glad to finally be on land. As she makes her way back to her dying father in the Bathtub, a small herd of aurochs comes thundering towards her. As the other three girls runaway screaming as the beasts approach, Hushpuppy stops on the bridge and stares across the field at her father, who is lying in a bed looking at her through an open window. A look of understanding passes between them, and then, as she feels one of the giant aurochs breathing on her neck, Hushpuppy slowly turns and stares at it. Determined and fearless, she reminds viewers and Wink of her mother staring down the alligator. While her father watches from his bed, the aurochs look at this tiny figure and slowly lie down in front of her. Hushpuppy tells them, “you my friend, kind of.” After a pause, she tells them, “I gotta take care of mine.” She has faced down the beast whose return she has both anticipated and feared, and now she must leave it and return to take care of her dying father. This moment is necessary for both Hushpuppy and Wink. He spent the entire film attempting to prepare her for life without him, and watching her stare down the beast shows him that she is ready to let him go—there is nothing else he can teach her. The fearless independence he has forced her to cultivate, living alone, facing dangers by herself, means that she has a good chance

of surviving, aided by her lively imagination that can—sometimes magically—imagine alternatives to the grim reality she faces.

Hushpuppy's encounter with the aurochs is the pinnacle of the film. As the "Making of *Beasts*" special tells us, one of the most important moments of the film was "bringing the two sets of young warriors together onscreen." There are several different critical readings of this meeting between Hushpuppy and the aurochs. Tavia Nyong'o claims, "when Hushpuppy finally meets her aurochs face-to-face, the flash of recognition between them suggests a reconciliation between human and animal on shared autochthonous ground, in which it is left deliberately uncertain who is truly the titular 'beast of the Southern wild' (256). Producer Michael Gottwald affirms this reading:

In terms of her facing the herd, I think that's her recognizing the harmony that she's always talked about in nature... There is a natural point at which organisms in nature show weakness and allow for each other to exist—the same way she learns from her friends in the Bathtub to take care of each other. The aurochs recognize her as a similarly ferocious beast. And so they give way.

(qtd. in Berlin)

Any species that is able to survive the forces of nature and the neglect or over consumption of resources by humans is, in this place, a force to be reckoned with themselves. The world of the Bathtub, the southern wild place that exists beyond the confines of the city and the outer bayous that we might recognize from the images we saw of the aftermath of the hurricanes in Louisiana on television, is a place that is wilder and more entrenched in the mythic than we can imagine.

So what is the purpose of including the aurochs in the film? Why is this extinct animal the image that captures Hushpuppy's imagination? Zeitlin says, "the aurochs meaning evolves



over the course of the film” (qtd. in Berlin). Similar to what Hushpuppy learns through her relationship with her father, her understanding of what the aurochs represent changes as she learns how to survive from her father and as she figures out where she fits into the larger universe around her.

At the beginning, Hushpuppy’s relationship with nature is that she’s a morsel of food that’s going to be consumed by things bigger than her—her father being consumed by his illness, her home being consumed by storms and floods and saltwater intrusion and land loss. That violent relationship is the way she begins her understanding of nature. But over the course of the film her view evolves into a more enlightened, complete view of nature as a flowing system—something in which everything has its place and everything plays its part. She comes to peace with it. (Zeitlin qtd. in Berlin)

We observe how extinction, or the potential for extinction, affects people; particularly in the case of someone like Hushpuppy who has already lost her mother and is watching as her father also leaves her. The aurochs are also the animal counterpart to Hushpuppy, the other “wild” creature whose extinction may be on the horizon. Natalia Cecire claims that the presence of the aurochs gives us a universal touchstone to the intimately personal story of Hushpuppy’s survival:

Having established early on that ferocious primordial beasts called aurochs lie preserved in polar ice, the film, filtered through Hushpuppy’s consciousness, visualizes the inevitable storm and its aftermath as an event that is global in scale yet narratable and deeply tethered not only to the local but also to the personal.

(166)

They anchor this story to a larger narrative in a time of global concern over climate change,

species extinction, etc. When Hushpuppy finally faces the aurochs they create a connection that crosses space and time as the past and the present are tied together in one moment. In this moment we recognize the fears and anxieties about a future where human existence is as tenuous as the existence of the aurochs because humans face the kind of issues that may bring about their extinction. The point of including the aurochs is that, like Hushpuppy, they are “on the verge of extinction... both creatures understand...that the greatest sin you can commit is to kill an animal on the verge of extinction—to kill the last of its kind. So it’s not just about your own survival. It’s about allowing each other to go on” (Zeitlin qtd. in Berlin). The film emphasizes the importance of caring for others, human and animal, being responsible with the earth’s resources, and preserving through every difficult circumstance. While humanity seems to believe they can dictate or control most situations, the one thing that cannot be controlled is nature. Considering the history of the aurochs, it could be argued that *Beasts* “ostensibly teaches humans how to behave less like the king of Poland and more like his wild, herbivorous beasts. Its celebration of the convivial survivalism of an outsider human community has intense, if romantic appeal” (Nyong’o 251). While there is something joyous about watching the hardscrabble people of the Bathtub barely survive the storm and then refuse to allow themselves to be subjected to government sanctions, we know that this momentary victory will be challenged. Other storms—both natural and manmade—will threaten their way of life again. If there is any romantic appeal here, it comes with the idea that these dispossessed people have shown that they have the will to survive. Because mainstream society often tends to ignore such outsiders, perhaps it takes the magical resurrection of an extinct species to remind us (and them) of this fact.

## Mythic Realism

What governs the world of *The Bathtub* and its residents, particularly Hushpuppy, are the myths that they create, appropriate, and transform making their space into something more than just an abandoned backwater bayou. This film “refuses the realism of social critique and advances instead into hubris land, into a new realm of myth making for the twenty-first century. ‘We’s who the earth is for,’ boasts Hushpuppy, echoing her father’s view of the racially mixed population of the Bathtub” (Yaeger 2). This is a world where food, shelter, alcohol, and the impromptu gatherings that bring the community together are the daily focus for this group of people. In this tight-knit circle, Hushpuppy creates “a wild set of gods: demiurges, mother figures, aurochs, and sirens,” and “she forces us to ask: what myths do we need to live in an era of global warming where every coastal community may soon look like the Bathtub” (Yaeger 2). In an interview with *NationalGeographic.com*, co-producer Michael Gottwald confirms, “the film is trying to create its own intrinsic mythology” (qtd. in Berlin). To do this, it brings to life a part of Americana that is often overlooked or ignored.

Jeanne Delbaere-Garants concept of mythic realism when applied to *Beasts* underscores the important statement about the environment and our connection to space and place that is integral to the film’s portrayal of how this marginalized community reacts in traumatic situations, whether it is the storm, flooding, or being forcefully removed from their homes by government officials. In mythic realism, the physical space presented in the text influences how the irreducible element of magic manifests. Delbaere-Garant posits that the term “mythic realism” may be applied “to all countries that still possess ‘unconsumed space,’ where ‘magic’ images are borrowed from the physical environment itself” (253). The “wild” space of the Bathtub is the starting point for this mythic realism to intrinsically emerge and become the

foundation of the magic that is enmeshed in the narrative of *Beasts*.

In the New World, where the climate is often less temperate and more dramatic than in Britain, magic realism does indeed display a deep connectedness between character and place...The interpenetration of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal; the landscape is no longer passive but active—invading, trapping, dragging away, etc.” (Delbaere-Garant 252)

The unconsumed space of the Bathtub whose small group of residents whose connection to this land is so strong they won't even leave it during the storm. They don't view nature as an enemy or something they have to fight against in order to survive; rather, they live in a symbiotic relationship with the land and the animals. They believe wholeheartedly in the myths they create to explain why this space is sacred to them. “Myth are crucial as implements of attachment and ownership for all the unintended consequences we have to live with in order to make a buffet, a moveable feast, and a pedagogy out of our cosmic impasse” (Yaeger 8). The occupants of the Bathtub take this to heart in the way they approach caring for each other and preserving the exclusivity of their space.

The film's representation of this unknown place in the United States serves to highlight the economic, social and government injustice that occurred after hurricane Katrina in a way that resonated profoundly with audiences in 2012. In her work on environmental trauma, Anne E. Kaplan writes, “In the case of Katrina, among other things, there was shame at the racism that emerged beneath the perpetual cover-up. Governmental inefficiency or worse was also exposed” (xvi). The setting also highlights “America's class and race politics, since the people living in the areas most open to drastic flooding and storm damage were significantly minority or lower class” (Kaplan xvi). From the opening images, we recognize that Hushpuppy, Wink, and the other

motley characters that occupy the Bathtub live in the type of squalor that is not often depicted on film. Everything is muddy, messy, and dirty; homes and boats are made out of makeshift materials and barely hold together. Nature overruns everything with dirt seeping through the cracks and crevices of the houses and boats the people live in and weeds and trees overtaking nearly every space that is not already covered by water or dirt. This display of the omnipresence of nature was not just manufactured on a film set. The entire movie was filmed on the Isle de Jean Charles, and the sets emerged from elements the film crew scavenged. For example, a sunken school bus found behind a gas station was transformed into Wink's house. In the special feature "The Making of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," included on the DVD, the narrator tells us "the team immersed themselves so fully into the narrative they were telling that even Ben [Zeitlin's] sister, Eliza, moved into the house she was creating."



Fig.XVI and XVII Stills from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.



Fig.XVIII and XIX Stills from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2012.

The movie includes the category of magical realism in which there is a spectrum running from the actual but amazing to the magical that induces us to reevaluate our ordinary categories and in this case to pay attention to the unusual circumstances in which these people live. Nature in all of its dirty glory becomes as important as any character in the film.

However, because of the deep affinity the inhabitants of the Bathtub feel for their tiny space of land, and the shelters they have created in order to live there, they are intensely protective of what they have created and deeply loyal to each other. Their survival depends on their ability to live together and help each other, and they take these tasks seriously.

Nature is the most compelling force in the world of the Bathtub. In this world there is no-us-against-them mentality when it comes to human and nature.

Instead, there is an intimate merger so complete celebration of their collective feral animal nature binds everyone in a sacred contract; they are to resist domestication and civilization at all costs. (hooks 2)

It is evident that the inhabitants of the Bathtub live far below the poverty line, though this lack of economic stability does not bother them in the least. They take pride in their ability to survive

despite being cut off from the mainland's resources. The unfavorable view of the mainland in favor of the impoverished Bathtub is similar to how Ava Bigtree's family, for the most part, unfavorably view the mainland of Florida in comparison to their family run alligator amusement park called Swamplandia in Karen Russell's novel of the same name. Similar to the inhabitants of the Bathtub, the Bigtree family makes a valiant effort to remain on their island and fight for their way of life against encroaching urban influences. Unlike Hushpuppy, however, they eventually realize that there is no point in trying to fight progress, so they abandon Swamplandia and move to the mainland of Florida. In fact, the residents of the Bathtub, on the other hand, abhor everything that those who live on the mainland stand for, and they find it amusing that a levee was built to separate the Bathtub from the mainland of Louisiana. Hushpuppy tells us, "Daddy says, up above the levee on the dry side they are afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built a wall that cuts us off. They think we all going drown down here. But we ain't going nowhere." The sacred contract that exists between the inhabitants of the Bathtub is that they will preserve their isolated space and they will take care of each other. We see this depiction most clearly after the storm has passed and Wink takes Hushpuppy with him to search for survivors. Once they have literally fished people out of the rising waters, they gather together to drink and eat the baskets of shrimp that Wink has caught. The code they live by dictates that they protect each other and their private kingdom of the Bathtub.

Tavia Nyong'o affirms, "living literally outside the law, the residents call their island "the Bathtub," and fiercely defend their autonomous way of life from the rising tides and worsening storms that climate change is wreaking on their pre-carious community" (256). Rachel Arons describes the Bathtub as "a harsh utopia that is cut off from civilization by an imposing levee but pulsating with natural beauty and the raucous, defiant spirit of its inhabitants."

This defiant spirit is most evident in Hushpuppy, who, despite her age, demonstrates an unshakable belief in her ability to endure whatever challenges are thrown her way. With its focus on the most rural location in Louisiana—rather than the destruction of a city like New Orleans—*Beasts* shows that with very little in the way of “outside” help, the residents of the Bathtub form their own autonomous community and use ingenuity and sheer nerve to keep from starving. Through this depiction, *Beasts* addresses the discrepancy that exists for those who do not have the economic means to get help or get out of an area when uncontrollable conditions hinder their survival. Richard Corliss writes, “The soggy patch of Delta Louisiana called The Bathtub is home to all manner of untamed marvels: crocodiles and boars, greenery and swarming green flies, a hardy band of humans who know it’s dangerous to live there and unacceptable to leave.” Their greatest fear is not that their homes may be destroyed by a hurricane or other natural disaster; their greatest fear is that those on the mainland (and the government) will take them away from their homes and put them in shelters or force them to take government assistance.

This fear is underlined by Miss Bathsheba’s horror at the idea that Wink and his cohorts are going to blow up the levee (in order to drain the rising waters around their homes) because she is afraid the mainlanders will remember that the people of the Bathtub exist. If they blow up the levee, Miss Bathsheba insists, “You know what them people goin’ do? They goin’ to find us and stick us in a damn shelter.” Sneaking onto the boat that Miss Bathsheba is driving to stop them, and grabbing the trip wire on the bomb, Hushpuppy is the one that blows up the levee, which makes the waters in the Bathtub recede. Sure enough, as Miss Bathsheba predicted, government officials come to evacuate the residents of the Bathtub. But this scene demonstrates the strength and spirit that defines the population of the Bathtub. Whether it is Wink organizing a group to



create the bomb and work out the engineering needs to successfully blow up one section of the levee, Miss Bathsheba fearlessly facing off with Wink to try to stop the bombing, or Hushpuppy determinedly setting off the explosion, Alibar and Zeitlin emphasize that there is something to be admired about this raucous group of people who, regardless of age, gender, or race, are determined to protect themselves and each other no matter the cost.

The correlation between the fictional space of the Bathtub and its real life inspiration, Isle de Jean Charles, is significant because it underlines the importance Alibar and Zeitlin place on the location where Hushpuppy's story unfolds. It is not the center of New Orleans, where most of the footage of destruction and the stories terrible things occurring emerged from in the aftermath of reporting on this storm. Press interest in this choice resulted in several pieces on the setting of *Beasts*, like the following Rachel Arons wrote for *The New York Times*:

When developing the idea for his film, Mr. Zeitlin traveled outside of his adopted hometown [New Orleans] in search of real-life cultures that live on the front lines of storms and coastal erosion. "When you look at the map, you can see America kind of crumble off into the sinews down in the gulf where the land is getting eaten up," he said. "I was really interested in these roads that go all the way down to the bottom of America and what was at the end of them." What Mr. Zeitlin found were the bayou fishing towns of Terrebonne Parish. Relatively unscathed by Katrina but hit hard by Hurricane Rita the same summer, and by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008, Terrebonne is a region with a vibrant culture that extends to the very edge of the Delta's vanishing wetlands. On his first trip there Mr. Zeitlin drove down a narrow road, half-sunk in water, leading to Isle de Jean Charles, a tiny island just off the mainland. Only 40 years ago the thriving home

of French-speaking American Indians, the island, with around two dozen families left, is gradually disintegrating into the Gulf of Mexico and falls outside the protection of the federal levee system. Although “Beasts” draws cultural inspiration from across the southern part of the state, Isle de Jean Charles provided Mr. Zeitlin’s reference points for the Bathtub’s surreal ecological precariousness and its residents’ fierce commitment to remaining.

The inhabitants of the Bathtub who refuse to leave when the storm hits reflect this fierce commitment to the land that Zeitlin observed when visiting the residents of Isle de Jean Charles. So strong is their “fierce commitment to remaining” that they escape from the government shelter where they were brought, literally carrying the dying Wink with them, to return to the flooded bayou that is barely habitable for humans. Yet, the site is also precarious enough to support Hushpuppy’s belief that the waters rising will bring the aurochs back to life making the mythic real for her at the moment when her real world is unsettled by personal and communal loss. It is a belief in magic that fuels her strength to confront the nearly unbelievable reality surrounding her.

### **Twenty-First Century American Magical Realism**

The entwining of what Patricia Yaeger calls a “luminous trash, glowing debris, garbage that lights up” type of southern realism with the mythical magic in *Beasts* is, in my opinion one reason the film is effectively able to address divisive issues like race, climate change, and governmental failures (4). It offers what critics Philip Hoad and Tom Shone describe as a type of American magical realism. Shone calls the film “a howl-at-the-heavens ode to being child kin, feet planted in the mud and mess of America, head filled with myth and magic...Maybe that’s the American genre now: magical realism...imagine *Mad Max* retold by Gabriel Garcia

Marquez and you're halfway there." Hoad sees a similar portrayal of magical realism in the United States in this film, writing: "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* hollers exuberantly, but there's something frenzied about it as well. It's an intoxicated wake, as well as a celebration. American magical realism, [as a predominant narrative mode] if it comes to pass, could mean a retreat into the imagination, rather than a reunion with an inner self." Instead of focusing on the beliefs or values that define an individual, the emphasis on the power of the imagination, as reflected by *Hushpuppy*, engenders a connection between the mythical past and the traumatic present that strengthens *Hushpuppy* and her community. Reflecting Haruki Murakami's belief that the way stories are told and received has dramatically shifted in the new millennium, Hoad posits: "The growth in the American imagination seems to be in inverse proportion to the country's inability to shape the world any longer, and fend off the overweening threats it's always been so good at conjuring up for itself." Incorporating elements of the fantastical in stories that specifically tackle issues facing the United States in the twenty-first century is one way that our storytellers—writers, filmmakers, singers, and artists—have been able to make sense of the violent and traumatic experiences this country has endured in the twenty-first century.

A recent example that highlights the type of American magical realism Hoad and Shone identify is the pop culture phenomenon *Lemonade*, a visual album from singer Beyoncé. Premiering on HBO this past April, *Lemonade* highlights the influence and inclusion of magical realism with nontraditional art forms. A collection of music videos following a thematic progression—with "chapter titles like 'Intuition,' 'Denial,' 'Apathy,' 'Emptiness' and, eventually, 'Resurrection' connected by a voiceover from Beyoncé reading poetry by Warsan Shire"—*Lemonade* incorporates magical realist imagery with song lyrics to emphasize the

struggles black women and black families in the United States experience (Leight).<sup>55</sup> Creating a profound connection to *Beasts*, the now twelve-year-old Quvenzhane Wallis<sup>56</sup> appears throughout the hour long special: her face is still recognizable as the young child who simultaneously broke hearts and inspired hope in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. In her scenes in *Lemonade*, she is surrounded by a fierce group of other black women, some known celebrities and some not recognizably famous, giving her the support system (and surrogate mother figures) she lacked in *Beasts*. It also serves as a subliminal reminder that issues of race and privilege brought to life in *Beasts* are still relevant today.



Fig. XX Quvenzhane Wallis in a scene from *Lemonade*.

<sup>55</sup> In his explanation of *Lemonade*, Elias Leight writes: [Beyonce] “also tells a story about the experience of black womanhood. A snippet pulled from a speech by Malcom X declares, ‘The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman...’ Large groups of women appear again and again, presenting a united front of solidarity and sisterhood.” The emphasis on the struggles of black women in America resonates with part of Jessie Williams *BET* acceptance speech that I discussed earlier. Early in his speech, he dedicates his award to “the black women in particular who have spent their lifetimes dedicated to nurturing everyone before themselves. We can and will do better for you.”

<sup>56</sup> This is not the first time Quvenzhane Wallis has been called upon to play a version of her *Beasts of the Southern Wild* character, or at least be placed in situations that remind us of Hushpuppy. In 2014, the luxury car company Maserati tapped her to star in their Superbowl commercial. The commercial begins with scenes of nature at its most terrifying—massive waves crashing in the ocean, a tornado approaching a house, etc. The ad features image of Wallis that recall some of the close-up shots of her face in *Beasts*, while in a voiceover she tells us “the world is full of giants. They have always been here.” She goes on to say, “we were small, but fast, remember? Drawing comparison to her famous line from *Beast*, “I see that I am a little piece of a big, big universe.”

This form of American magical realism is, in Hoad's opinion, different from the hyperbolic imagery and moments of magic that pulsate through nearly every sentence of a Latin American writer like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. While there is also the muck and dirt surrounding people in those stories—think of the old man relegated to the dirty chicken coop in “The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”—in *Beasts* there is no magic conferred on the ordinary objects that are a part of the fabric of daily life of the sort we see in a text like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where ice and magnets are imbued with fantastical wonder to the inhabitants of Macondo. In *Beasts*, the elements of magic in the everyday are conjured through creative imaginations and the belief in powerful myths for those in the community of the Bathtub, which is on the brink of extinction just like the aurochs. Using *Beasts* as his example of an emergence of a twenty-first century version of American magical realism, Phil Hoad writes:

What's interesting about the possibility of magical realism flowering in North America is how much this species may differ from the original South American variety. South American magical realism also occupied the fringes, the marginal zones where the individual mind, not the consensus of the real, could rule. But in Latin American fiction, this often took place in a joyful, florid explosion of inner identity; from Gabriel Garcia Marquez to *Like Water for Chocolate*, indigenous fables and aromas burst through from a pre-colonial past through the hard paving of the Europeanised present.

What Hoad is intimating is that magical realist writers addressing the history of colonization and marginalization experienced by Latin American countries,<sup>57</sup> use magic as a form of resistance to the political or social power structures that may not be easy to change in real life. While he

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<sup>57</sup> Though there may be similarities in the experiences between various Latin American countries, it should be noted that each country has its own unique history of colonization, marginalization, and political upheaval.

emphasizes the “explosion of inner identity,” in these works it is more often a group identity that is central to the infusion of magic. While I find Hoad’s explanation of the differences between South American and North American magical realism lacking in clear theoretical definition, I do think he is right in pointing out the possibility of a particular form of Magical Realism in the United States, particularly in the twenty-first century, when representations of reality, at times, need narratives to use magic as a way of describing these extreme events using methods not available in realism to the reader. According to Gary McMahon, the need for magical realism is even more imperative in the twenty-first century to address subject matter like that which is depicted in *Beasts*: “This is the moment when reality realized its compass was off and the richest country in the history of the world came face to face with Third World footage—not of foreign famines but down south in New Orleans” (McMahon 26).

While I agree with Hoad and McMahon about the relevance of examining magical realism in the United State, one issue I have with Hoad’s claim of a particular type of magical realism emerging in the United states is that he only refers to *Beasts*, which is a film situated in a specific region and focused on a group of marginalized citizens that, as I previously discussed, gives them more in common with places we recognize as third-world or which are more economically disadvantaged than many parts of the United States. Focusing on a disadvantaged area and/or a marginalized group of people is not uncommon in critiques about magical realism in North America. In “Lifting ‘the Weight of the Continent:’ Magical Realism on the North American Landscape,” Shannin Schroder affirms:

The magical realism of the United States and Canada frequently manifests itself as an extension of the ‘Other’ of Western culture and society, as illustrated by the revision of accepted religious, historical, and even supernatural beliefs by authors

Thomas King, Ana Castillo, Robert Kroetsch, whose texts are inhabited by a wide spectrum of marginalized peoples. (213)

Though Schroder's work focuses on twentieth century texts only, this is an important consideration when defining a specific North American magical realism. So while I think Hoad could provide a clearer definition of the differences between South American magical realism from magical realism in the United States, I do agree with him that *Beasts* is a valuable example of the contribution magical realism makes to contemporary American storytelling.

Furthermore, if *Beasts* is the Ur text for this type of twenty-first century American magical realism that highlights "a retreat into the imagination," then it is an imagination intimately connected to social reality—at least in this particular film. Hushpuppy's imaginative capability helps her navigate the trauma that is inflicted on her community and her family and provides, in some measure, a means of combatting the forces that threaten her by giving her an outlet to imagine that it is possible to survive. Alibar and Zeitlin's emphasis on her magical imagination, along with her inimitable mother and the mythical aurochs, supports Hoad's assertion that a particular American (United States) magical realism is apparent in contemporary texts. Certainly the three novels discussed in my previous chapter, all by female American writers, point to this along with writers like Karen Russell, Kevin Brockmeier, Natalie Lloyd, and other contemporary U.S. authors who are using elements of magical realism in their works in ways that highlight a clearly modern American experience. In these texts, "magical realism performs a wide and profound cultural and ideological work. It yanks us out of the comfortable complacency that assesses the real as an either-or kind of argument, placing us in an alternative intellectual landscape" (Benito, Manzanar, and Simal 3). In this alternative intellectual landscape, the miraculous, the ineffable, the preternatural are accepted and embraced as part of

our everyday reality, and which simultaneously describe and question it. . But where *Beasts* separates itself from these other works is in its unflinching portrayal of a place that we don't know (or don't want to acknowledge) exists in our backyard. It does this by emphasizing what it means to be poor, black, and one of the dispossessed in the United States during an environmental crisis. In *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in U.S. Ethnic Literatures*, the valuable intersection between ecocriticism and magical realism that has emerged in the past twenty or so years is emphasized by the editors:

Instances of both 'friendly' and (mostly) 'rapacious' relationships between people and nature abound in magical realist fiction...Environmentality is also 'encoded' in magical realism through both literal and metaphorical renditions of the frictions between the capitalist notion of progress and the survival of the earth as we know it, the spiritual wasteland resulting from the literal wasteland, human greed as the originator of devastation, and other environmental issues. (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 194)

If magical realism is a narrative mode that enables us to confront contemporary struggles—like environmental disasters or representations of race and gender—in a way that is more compelling to an audience than traditional realism, as Murakami would argue, then perhaps this is “the real lesson magical realism has to offer America” (Hoad).

### **Beyond the Wild**

In his preface to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Jack Halberstam identifies an emerging cultural space that he calls “a wild place that is not simply the left over space that limns real and regulated zones of polite society; rather, it is a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness” (7). The wildness he refers to emerges



during times of crisis and resistance to established power structures. It is not merely the breakdown of accepted stereotypes or categorizations; it is undoing the perspective that these stereotypes or categorizations exist. An example he gives is Franz Fanon, who “wants not the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense” (8). The only way to accomplish this is “to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism” (Halberstam 8). Doing this is a revolutionary act because it shows a refusal “to call others to order, to refuse the interpellation and the reinstatement of law” and a desire to live beyond the constraints of society (Halberstam 9). Embracing the space of the “wild beyond” is to disavow any system or structure that would dictate or create constraints on how one lives. This disavowal of a system of rule or structure is exactly what the remaining inhabitants of *The Bathtub* achieve at the end of the film when they consign Wink’s body to the flooded bay. Whether or not their independence will last—by this I mean whether or not they will be allowed to stay in the devastated remains of *The Bathtub*—is not a concern of this film. The image we are left with is their triumphant march back to the wild space they claim as their own after the floods have passed and they have sent Wink’s body to its final resting place in the waters of his beloved home, as Halberstam says, “continuously produc[ing] its own unregulated wildness” (7).

Bearing in mind some of the criticisms *Beasts* received raised challenging questions to consider as I began to view the film through the lens of magical realism. Is this film, as some critics claim, a miracle of storytelling that ushers in a new wave of American magical realism, or is it a condescending representation of race and poverty where stereotypes of violence, absentee parents, and alcoholism persist? Of all the texts I discuss, *Beasts* elucidates some of the most critical issues we as a society currently face: the intersections of race and economic

disadvantages, gender inequality, and environmental concerns. That the film works through these issues by incorporating Hushpuppy's magical imagination, the return of an extinct species, and mythic realism shows the capacity of magical realism to tackle current social issues with particular success. The end of the film, perceived as hopeful by some critics and a return to primitivism by others is in actuality bringing to life of the hopes and desires of the one of the most disenfranchised groups in American history. This is what matters about this story. I argue that the ending offers a type of relief to the heaviness of the devastation that is experienced through the course of the film.

Lighting the funeral pyre and sending her father's body back to the water that was his second home demonstrates Hushpuppy's acceptance of his death and her determination to continue on in spite of all of the loss she has experienced. Of course, it helps the pathos of the film that symphonic music swells as Hushpuppy pushes the truck bed holding her father's body into the water and then walks along the bay with her fellow Bathtub residents. And, during these moments, in a voiceover she says the most recognizable lines from the film:

When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me lying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. And when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I'm a little piece in a big, big universe. And that makes things right. When I die, the scientists of the future, they're gonna find it all. They gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy, and she live with her daddy in the Bathtub. (*Beasts*).

Natalia Cecire remarks, "It is telling that Hushpuppy intends for her mark on the world to be found by 'scientists' not historians" (175). However, I think it makes sense; Hushpuppy relates more to nature than anything else, and she is concerned with her place in the physical universe

throughout the film. Like her fascination with the aurochs, it is scientists who would find her existence, her bones, and her land to be worth studying.

Hushpuppy survives her mother's abandonment, her father's death, the storm that almost destroyed the Bathtub, the blowing up of the levee, and the government's attempt to take her away from her home. Will she have to deal with the traumatic after effects of these events? We know her life has been irrevocably changed, and we are privy to the knowledge that surviving the storm may be easier than surviving its aftermath. The people of the Bathtub still have to fight the government, economic disadvantage, race, and gender inequality. Hushpuppy's resilience is the only evidence that she might be able to survive as an orphan in this strange, wild place. At least, that is the hope we as viewers have. If she can imagine a mythical beast into existence, than perhaps she can imagine a future for herself that is not as bleak as her past.

### **Conclusion: Practical Magic in the Twenty-First Century**

While the focus of twentieth-century magical realist works is often on historical traumas or resistance to political corruption,<sup>58</sup> the texts in this project demonstrate the expansive dimensions of traumatic topics that magical realism addresses: religious fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, sexual abuse, gender inequality, climate change, environmental disasters, etc., These topics are examined in novels that employ characteristics from multiple genres, young adult literature, and film. In several of these texts, especially the films I discuss, the central element of magic emerges from the imagination or abilities in one character, allowing the audience to experience the trauma of losing a parent, anticipating or living through an environmental disaster, or surviving sexual abuse through a focalized perspective. Endeavoring to represent the unimaginable moments that have affected this century—terrorism, the aftermath of Hurricane

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<sup>58</sup> I am not claiming those are the only issues twentieth-century magical realist works address. I am referring to the issues the most notable, i.e. famous, magical realist novels explore.

Katrina, for example—along with intensified anticipatory fears about the world’s end and problems associated with gender and economic disparity, modern magical realism elucidates diverse individual, familial, and communal experiences with the traumatic. Often, instead of a proliferation of magic that pulsates throughout the text, the novels and films I examine use irreducible elements intermittently to highlight a specific fear or tragic event.<sup>59</sup>

The advantage of addressing these contemporary issues using magical realism is the reflective lens it focuses on the world we inhabit. Gary McMahon’s claim I include as an epigraph in my first chapter—that “after the impossible happened on 9/11, rivaling Hollywood’s apocalyptic futures for the capital of the world, realism would have to expand to stay real”—has guided my underlying argument for the potency of magical realism in the twenty-first century as a mode particularly adept at representing our present worries and fears (19). In an age of unprecedented technological advances, unimaginable environmental catastrophes, and unspeakable violence, our stories and storytellers continue to embrace the narrative capability of magical realism to present the unrepresentable issues and anxieties that face our planet. I am not claiming that magical realism is the only genre capable of representing these problems, but I do believe it is often the most accurate reflection of our current realities.

The function of the irreducible elements in the texts I analyze—Little People, the return of mythical beasts, psychic aptitude as an outgrowth of mental illness, colliding planets, etc.—delineates the propensity of magical realism to offer a glimpse of what the future might hold for us even as we grapple with an unsettling present. Scott Simpkins explains that,

To prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief, magic realists present familiar

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<sup>59</sup> The degree of magical inclusions does change from one text to text, which I discuss in the individual chapters of my dissertation. The point I am making is that often the magic is more focalized in one or a few individuals in each work. The exception to this is *IQ84*, which incorporates metaphysical and surrealist elements that are not germane to my discussion of the novel.

things in unusual ways...to stress their innately magical properties...magical realists use... defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. (150)

The familiarity with which we approach the issues these magical elements—the Little People’s embodiment of a new type of Big Brother, climate changes (and human interference) that are causing species extinction, increasing cases of mental instability caused by pre and post traumatic stress, fears about natural disasters—are a part of our daily existence. Magical realism portrays these realities effectively because it integrates the supernatural into the ordinary in a seamless and harmonious manner that resonates with the issues facing our global community.

Building on the legacy of works from the previous century, modern magical realism encompasses a broad spectrum of representational possibilities, including portraying past traumas, present anxieties, and fears about the future. The accessibility of magical realism to a global artistic community—which even the narrow scope of my project illustrates with works by Japanese, Eastern and Western European, and North American artists—affirms there is a space and a need for a narrative mode that combines realism and the fantastic in portrayals of our present world.

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