REWRITING THE REAL: MAGICAL REALISM AND THE FICTION OF WILSON HARRIS AND BEN OKRI

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ABSTRACT

Magical realism, which incorporates both physical and spiritual "realities," is often considered a "postcolonial" genre of literature. This perspective depends upon a monolithic conception of "Western" and "non-Western" ideologies, and assumes that "magical realism" does something Western texts do not do. Investigating the works of the Nigerian novelist Ben Okri and the Guyanan writer Wilson Harris problematize this idea of magical realism as a postcolonial phenomenon.

Despite numerous differences, Okri and Harris share a conviction of the inherent universality of the human consciousness. This factor plays a major role in the development of their fiction, which explores similar themes of revision, history, and liminality through very different stylistic techniques. By comparing the articulation of these themes in Harris’s *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and Okri’s *Infinite Riches* (1998), one realizes that despite the various strategies of magical realism (which include intertextuality, metatextuality, surreal and fantastic imagery and events, and highly figurative use of language), each author emphasizes the necessity of reconciling paradoxical or contrary elements of reality in order to both better understand the world and work toward political and social change.

This approach to magical realism is particularly relevant to the field of postcolonial literary theory. While theories of hybridity or syncreticity seem to correspond neatly to the multivalent realities of magical realist fiction, the extent to which postcolonial theory is useful in interpreting and understanding magical realism is limited. Since magical realism has
frequently been disregarded as politically irrelevant for its "fanciful" (vs. sociopolitical realist) representation of reality, many postcolonial critics object to its "textualized" politics and "universalizing" themes. As the fiction of Harris and Okri reveals, however, magical realism is a strategy which allows for the reconciliation of contradictory elements of reality by challenging the binary logic which governs both our conception of "Western" thought and the conventions of literary realism. Magical realism thus provides a vehicle for the expression of a specifically located worldview with universal implications; a highly liberating cultural politics which moves beyond the constraints of polarizing logic, and helps elucidate better understanding a paradoxical and multivalent world.
For Salah-Eddine
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................... v
Vita ........................................................................................................................................................ vi

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapters:

1. Tradition and the Postcolonial Writer: Concerns of Magical Realism and Intertextuality in Postcolonial Literature ........................................................................................................... 11
   
   1.1 Magical Realism: Background and Common Conceptions ............................................................. 14
   1.2 Intertextuality and Magical Realism ............................................................................................... 16
   1.3 How Postcolonial is Magical Realism? Intertextuality and Western Literature ............................... 21
   1.4 The Problem of Categorizing Magical Realism .............................................................................. 28

2. *Infinite Rehearsals*: Magical Realism and the “Cross-Cultural Imagination” in the Work of Wilson Harris .................................................................................................................................. 36
   
   2.1 Wilson Harris: Background and Criticism ..................................................................................... 37
   2.2 Key Terms and Concepts in Harris’s Work ..................................................................................... 44
   2.3 *The Infinite Rehearsal*: Strategies of Magical Realism ............................................................... 51

3. *Infinite Riches*: Magical Realism and Real Magic in Ben Okri’s *Famished Road* Cycle .......... 71
   
   3.1 Ben Okri: Background and Criticism ............................................................................................. 73
   3.2 Magical Realism and the Abiku in the *Famished Road* Cycle ..................................................... 77
   3.3 Concerns of Intertextuality in African Literature ........................................................................... 83
   3.4 Themes of Liminality and History in *Infinite Riches* ................................................................... 92
INTRODUCTION

"I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness."
- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (232)

Despite the strength of nihilism in the West and in the so-called Third World, it is arguable that society is approaching in uncertain degree a horizon of sensibility upon which a capacity exists to begin to transform claustrophobic ritual by cross-cultural imaginations that bear upon the future through mutations of the monolithic character of conquistadorial legacies of civilisation.
- Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space* (xv)

The ability of fiction to represent an objective, external “reality” has always been a hot topic of contention and debate within literary circles. When works of fiction, however, step outside the common conventions of literary “realism” to represent a commingling of spirits, ghosts and other-worldly phenomenon alongside the mundane, every-day life, a new world of considerations opens up to the critic and interpreter. Which “reality” is real? Can literature provide access to “truths” not seen in every-day life? How does one reconcile the coexistence of paradoxical and disparate elements of reality when they are presented as accepted “facts” in a text?

Such questions provide the starting point for an investigation into literary genres that openly challenge the traditionally accepted literary conventions of mimetic representation. Partially in response to the conditions imposed by imperialism and/or colonial/postcolonial situations, a number of “non-Western” novelists have engaged in projects which challenge
both the form and structure of the “traditional” (read: Western) literary expectations of realism. Such literature rejects the conventions of mimetic representation for a mixture of fantastic and worldly imagery and themes, generally abounding with ghostly other-worldly figures and landscapes, from the famous “classic” works of magical realist Latin and South American novelists of the 1930s and 1940s to the recent emergence of similar work in Africa (Kojo Laing’s 1986 novel, *Search Sweet Country* is often lauded as the landmark example). The similarities between the initial Latin and South American works and the “new” postcolonial literatures¹ have prompted necessary and fascinating interrogation of both the nature and the implications of this form of writing, commonly defined as “magical realism.”

This project interrogates the concerns provoked by the idea of “magical realism” as a specifically “postcolonial” phenomenon by centering a discussion around the works of the Nigerian novelist Ben Okri and the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris. Because the genre is so often associated with “Third World” writers from previously colonized countries, it has come to represent a style of writing that is considered to be distinct to “non-Western” areas. Since both Nigeria and Guyana were colonized by the British,² Okri and Harris qualify as both “postcolonial” and “magical realist” writers. I therefore use their work as an illustration of both the various strategies and approaches to magical realism, and to investigate the relationship between postcoloniality and literary representation.

Like Wilson Harris (b. 1921), the relatively young writer Ben Okri (b. 1959) has emerged on the literary scene with quite a mixed bag of critical response. Alternately

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¹ By “postcolonial literature,” I refer to the literature produced in any region of the world formerly or currently “colonized” or similarly subjected to the imperialist project of “The West,” a formulation which includes the United States and Canada as well as Europe. We will discuss the issue of postcoloniality at length in Chapter One.

² As for the British, see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the historical and cultural context.
applauded and ignored, Okri’s fiction presents a view of Africa from within the liminal space of transition and chaos. His perspective and presentation in his *Famished Road* trilogy are an interesting point of comparison for Harris’s work, not least because Harris has, in both his fiction and his “critical” writing, developed a clear directive regarding the process and project of what he calls “the cross-cultural strategy of the infinite rehearsal” (1999A:62) or a “vision of consciousness” (1967:21). Similarly, Harris’s conception of realism as restrictive to the artist’s creative project seems to be the same spirit that guides Okri’s work: “The narrow basis of realism,” writes Harris, “as an art that mirrors common-sense day or pigmented identity, tends inevitably to polarise cultures or to reinforce eclipses of otherness within legacies of conquest that rule the world. In doing so it also voids a capacity for the true marriage of like to like within a multi-cultural universe” (1983:55).

Wilson Harris’s comments here on the nature of “realism” in art refer to the dilemma of the ability of “traditional” Western literary forms to convey the actual, multifaceted “realities” of contemporary socio-historical situations. In the “multi-cultural universe” in which we all live, Harris’s stance on this point echoes with a poignant immediacy; he insists on the recognition of the reciprocal relationship between conquest and dislocation, imperialism and terror, and art and the imagination, with a “vision” of interconnectedness that is not often readily embraced by the primarily scholarly circles in which his texts mainly circulate.

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This approach, as we shall see, takes the foundational resources of the imagination as the necessary and nourishing sources of hope for both the artist and society. And as contemporary “post-colonial” writers whose fiction has frequently been critically designated as magical realism, Okri and Harris together provide an excellent place to begin sorting out a discussion of the complexities involved in interrogating the sociopolitical relevance of magical realist fiction. Not only is their anglophone work both prolific and extraordinarily beautiful, but it exposes various thematic parallels, most interestingly in their construction of “reality,” history and paradox. Further, they share a position of expatriate status; both are long-time residents of England, adding to the study of their work the complicated dimension that their work reveals the conceptual resources of their native and adopted cultures while it evokes further consideration of the diasporic relationship to the “postcolonial” situation. Particularly useful to me in examining this connection is the way the concept of hybridity is played out within their texts.

As both writers have been associated with the genre of “magical realism,” what has emerged in comparing the work of Harris and Okri is an inquiry into the means by which these authors articulate a space which embraces difference and historicity while denying the apparent boundaries between what one calls “real” and “unreal” in the worlds of living and knowing. In this respect, I will not perform complete readings of their novels, but rather trace their development of similar themes and strategies in a broader attempt to better understand the various uses and implications of magical realism for postcolonial writers.

First off, then, it is important to establish what I’m using as a working definition of “magical realism.” Originally coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, magical realism is most commonly associated with the “realismo maravilloso” fiction of Latin America
and, by extension, the recent surge of postcolonial literature that incorporates similar uses of magic imagery and event. While a “standard” definition of the genre has been a matter of much debate, it is generally considered a form of narrative discourse which utilizes magical or fantastic imagery to convey “new realities” which extend beyond the conceptual realities of conventionally realist works. Most importantly, however, magical realism is seen to involve a creative response to a specific socio-cultural situation. In her discussion of Latin American magical realist works, for example, María-Elena Angulo argues that since “broad historical and social contrasts” create “frontiers between the real and the imaginary [that] are so close that it makes it difficult to distinguish one from the other, it seems natural that writers use this style as a means of expressing Latin American complexities as well as showing the need for questioning and affirming cultural identity” (3). In this respect, magical realism can be seen as a means of confronting cultural conflicts and transitions by means of exposing a new reality. By presenting a reality in which the fantastic and the magical are as real as the more mundane events of everyday life, such writers incorporate the “magical” as unapologetically “real” forces and experiences in the lives of their characters.

Wilson Harris’s own theoretical explanation of his craft serves as a useful basis for confronting this strategy. In his critical work, Harris makes much of the writer’s response to the paradoxes and contradictions implicit in postcolonial worlds (and the modern world at large), and locates the role of the post-colonial writer as one of exposing these paradoxes, using the imagination as a vehicle of symbolically re-placing the validity and originality of post-colonial populations. Harris’s conception of the “vision of consciousness” represents what he calls “the peculiar reality of language” which allows the silenced colonized voice to be articulated in terms of its own (1967:32). What Harris calls for in his theory is the
necessity of using a specifically imaginative language to depict a consciousness that has itself been fragmented by foreign imposition and supposition. While Harris sees all consciousness as inherently "multiple" or informed by various influences (and in this sense "universal"), in postcolonial situations, like the Caribbean, the individual consciousness which connects one to the past (as well as the present and future) has been "eclipsed" by the disruptive forces of imperialism, slavery and colonialism. He demands an "inward dialogue and space" which will reflect the reality of the postcolonial consciousness while articulating the "inarticulate voice" of the post-colonial subject (33). And, further, in Harris's view, such a task cannot be achieved through purely realist works: the post-colonial writer must reach beyond the Western conception of reality in order to articulate and demonstrate the silenced voice of his/her community and collective consciousness. A particularly beautiful example of this is found rather explicitly in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*:

> The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls. There are dolphins, plants that dream, . . . the sky . . . the earth . . . The trees of forest, the animals of bushes, tortoises, birds and flowers know our future. The world that we see and the world that is there are two different things. Wars are not fought on battlefields but in a space smaller than the head of a needle. We need a new language to talk to each other. (498)

Clearly, Okri utilizes the "fantastic" imagery expected of magical realism through figures such as dreaming plants and knowledgeable animals, bushes, etc., as well as the explicit call for a "new" vision of reality which would reconcile the paradox of "the world that we see" and "the world that is there." Further, his insistence on the ability of a new language, a new mode of discourse, to articulate this "real" conception of the world, seems to me to indicate the fundamental character of magical realism.
However, despite the apparent conformity of such examples to this conceptualization of magical realism, given the “fantastic” character of such texts, attempts to “categorize” them as magical realism as a catch-all genre for fiction which fails to conform to the mimetic verisimilitude expected of standard “realist” works poses serious theoretical considerations. As a literary genre, magical realism has been alternately lambasted as politically and aesthetically irrelevant, and applauded for its exposure of a “new” or “unconventional” means of creative expression. And more significantly, there is a sort of syndrome in which application of the term “magical realism” has been reserved for writers who fit within what has become an academic categorization as “postcolonial literatures.” Critics frequently resist, even denounce, the association of writers like the African-American Toni Morrison, or the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, for instance, who clearly utilize similar strategies and conventions, with the style of magical realism.

For the purposes of this project, then, I use the term “magical realism” to refer to the various strategies of representation which promote a “new” vision of reality by self-consciously interrogating the presumed distinctions between “real” and “unreal,” or material and spiritual realities. By this definition, works from any geographical location could be “magical realist.” However, as my project is focused on the relationship between postcolonial concerns and the use of magical realism, this possibility is less relevant to my inquiry than understanding of how magical realism works within postcolonial contexts.

As I explore in Chapter One, the often-uncertain distinctions between “postcolonial” and “postmodern” complicate this issue even further. The fact that writers themselves tend to reject the label of magical realism (Cooper 15) is less important to this inquiry than the matter of the implications of magical realism for literary criticism and
theory, particularly within postcolonial studies. While the ability of fiction to represent reality is itself a canonical debate, what interests me most in this discussion is the implication that in failing to conform to conventional standards of representation, magical realism therefore fails to reflect a coherent and actual “reality.” Given that the categorization of magical realism is generally applied to so-called “Third World” and “postcolonial” literatures, I find this observation particularly intriguing and politically relevant. In denying magical realist works a position in the canon-of-the-real, the worldview and epistemological foundations of such fiction are (even if inadvertently) challenged on grounds of social or political “irrelevance.” Thus the central question I explore in the first chapter relates to the theoretical distinctions constructed to differentiate between Western and non-Western literary forms, in terms of contemporary and historical discussions of “magical realist” and other non-mimetic forms of representation. Central to this discussion are the strategy of intertextuality, and the implications of literary and cultural tradition for postcolonial writers.

In Chapters Two and Three, I investigate the works of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri, respectively. Here, I interrogate the use of magical realism in their works, paying particularly close attention to their intertextual and metatextual styles. Common themes and images, such as the revision of history and the reality of paradox (or a paradoxical reality), are discussed in terms of their ability to project, present, or possibly distort a culture-specific, localized worldview. I address the question of the “reality” of the magical worlds their texts

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3 Intertextuality, or the reference to other texts within a work of fiction, is a central feature of magical realism, and will be discussed in detail throughout this project.
evoke in terms of both the author's own critical or artistic positions and the work of theorists. I begin with Wilson Harris, whose critical work provides a solid foundation for examining the work of Okri both comparatively and individually.

Chapter Four deals with issues involving the implications of magical realism for postcolonial theory. I use the comparative analysis of Okri and Harris to illustrate some of the complications evoked by issues like hybridity, location, and politics or social projects. I also discuss the problematic relationship between the ideas of universal consciousness and specificity, particularly in terms of how these issues are presented by Harris (and performed in his and Okri’s novels) and contemporary postcolonial theory. Especially interesting to me is the accusation that so-called “Third World” writers who use magical realism to express their creative and political visions are somehow failing to perform to the expectations of their (Western) readership, particularly in terms of the “politics” of their representation.

My project, therefore, attempts to confront magical realist fiction as a politicized and creative expression of the tension, on various levels, between Western and non-Western ideologies. In confronting this issue, as I hinted at above, I think it is necessary to problematize the concept of “magical realism” in order to fully understand its “global” relevance. I am also especially interested in the sociopolitical implications of magical realism involved in the “representation of reality.” In this endeavor, I hope to demonstrate that magical realism provides a vehicle of expression through which reality need not be “dichotomized” to be understood by looking at the means by which Okri and Harris reveal a “worldview” which challenges the assumption of the supremacy of objectivity. Thus, the supposed opposition between Western/scientific and magical conceptions of reality is central to my inquiry. I engage in this investigation of the use of magical realist and
intertextual strategies in the work of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri, therefore, in the spirit of Harris’s own directive in “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination”: “This issue of knowing ourselves, recognizing ourselves differently, implies a creative/re-creative penetration or blow directed at models of tradition whose partiality engenders an accumulation of crisis” (1999B:258).
CHAPTER 1

TRADITION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL WRITER:
CONCERNS OF MAGICAL REALISM AND INTERTEXTUALITY
IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

“All human beings need metaphors of the self for comprehending what the self is.”
- Jacob Pandian, *Anthropology and the Western Tradition* (10)

“This issue of knowing ourselves, recognizing ourselves differently, implies a
creative/re-creative penetration of how directed at models of tradition whose
partiality engenders an accumulation of crisis.”
- Wilson Harris, “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination” (258)

The cross-cultural and multivalent strategies of magical realism involve narrative
techniques that challenge not only the conventions of form and style, but also the
epistemological foundations, which govern “realist” modes of both writing and reading.
Magical realist works, as we will see in the following chapters on Wilson Harris and Ben
Okri, demonstrate “local” or indigenous concerns and ideologies through the representation
of specific sociopolitical conditions as well as references to indigenous belief-systems
(through depictions of ghosts, specific gods, proverbs, folklore, etc). However, magical
realism is an intricately intertextual genre: writers not only juxtapose “foreign” and “local”
elements of sociocultural “reality,” but they also draw heavily on cross-cultural textual
resources such as canonical Western novels and global historical events.
For postcolonial writers, magical realism therefore provides a forum for the artist to express the often-contradictory coexistence of “local” and “imported” concerns and ideologies, as well as to explore the possibilities of non-mimetic representation. These works can be located in the space Mary Louise Pratt identifies as “contact zones”: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). The use of magical realism to confront and expose these spaces prompts several areas of discussion which deserve our immediate attention, not least of which is the need to address the crucial issue of attempting to clarify some of the terms that one constantly encounters in criticism on this genre. “Magical realism,” “intertextuality,” and “postcolonialism” often seem like empty buzzwords whose meaning varies with each usage. While some critics are quick to identify writers using magical realist techniques with modernist or postmodernist movements, others situate them firmly in the postcolonial context.

Further, the situation of postcolonial magical realist texts within the “contact zones” of cross-cultural influence poses serious questions for the interpretation of magical realism. On the one hand, magical realism reflects an indigenous worldview and/or a specific sociopolitical environment. Yet, on the other hand, as we will see, such works are not, as is commonly assumed, unique to postcolonial writers. The long tradition of non-mimetic writing in the West, as well as the highly-literate “cosmopolitan” status of many postcolonial magical realists, problematize the conception of magical realism as a specifically postcolonial
phenomenon. The stylistic connections between postmodernist movements in Western literature and magical realism in postcolonial writing, for instance, may both be grounded in similar ideological movements.

In this chapter, I address these issues as a basis for discussion of some of the key concepts and strategies employed through magical realism, namely, the use of intertextuality and/or metatextuality (or self-conscious references to the text itself as a literary or fictional product), and its correspondent evocation of the issue of “tradition” and “influence” versus “originality.” The latter necessarily involves some exploration of the relationship between “traditional” Western discourse and literary theory and the “postcolonial” use of magical realism. This chapter therefore addresses first the background and common conceptions of magical realism. Second, I investigate the relationships between magical realism and intertextuality. Third, I interrogate the question “how postcolonial is magical realism?” by looking at the traditions of non-mimetic Western literature and its implications for postcolonial literature. Finally, we will turn to an assessment of the problematic issues involved in attempting to categorize magical realism within the realms of postcoloniality or postmodernity. In this final section, identifying the connections between “hybridity” and “intertextuality” becomes the basis for confronting the crucial significance of the ideological implications of magical realism.
1.1 MAGICAL REALISM: BACKGROUND AND COMMON CONCEPTIONS

In 1925, the German art critic Franz Roh published *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus* (*Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism*), in which he coined the term *Magischer Realismus*, referring to “the objectivity of German postimpressionism” (Angulo 3) as an “aesthetic category” (Chanady 17). In this text, Roh argued that an adherence to realist “objectivity” in art fails to acknowledge the “magic” and “spirituality” which humans need to connect “the world of dreams” to “the world of reality” (Roh 17-23).

Roh’s term was easily adapted to suit the character of the Latin and South American literature of the nineteen thirties, now most famously remembered by Jorge Luis Borges’s *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Infamy*, 1935) and Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949), along with the works of Gabriel García Márquez. Carpentier (as his original prologue to *El reino*, an article he published in 1948, demonstrates), claimed to have first discovered “lo real maravilloso americano” in a recent trip to Haiti. In this essay, Carpentier argues that “marvellous realism” is a specifically “American” phenomenon, distinguished from the academic “tricks” of the Surrealists by its authentic expression of the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the multi-cultural Americas (Carpentier 76-88). It was from this Latin and South American, and not its original German, context that the term magical realism entered into popular Western academic and literary discourse. Perhaps for this reason, critics like Angulo see magical realism as “a type of narrative discourse which is specific to Latin America due to the way it helps to elucidate social problems of race, class, and gender” (Angulo 22).
The popularity of this perspective has generated two important considerations: First, the general conception of magical realism as a literary genre specific to a certain geographical region; and second, the implications this association has in terms of attempts to classify or categorize ostensibly “magical realist” works from different parts of the world. The latter problem has generated no small amount of critical debate. An apt illustration is found in the works of critics like Amaryll Chanady, for example, who go to great pains to differentiate between genres like magical realism, fantasy, and the marvelous.

Chanady distinguishes the “marvelous,” “fantasy” and “magical realism” in terms of “antimony” or “the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes in the text,” the real world and the supernatural (12). While in the marvelous, “every event can be integrated in a certain code of reality (or irreality),” in the fantasy, supernatural events “cannot be explained by any coherent code” (12). In contrast, magical realism is characterized “by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an ‘enlightened’ and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality” (21-22). In other words, it is the text’s unproblematic acceptance of the supernatural that distinguishes magical realism. In this respect, Chanady sees magical realism as, ultimately, able to “present a world view that is radically different from ours as equally valid” (30). Clearly, this approach assumes that “ours” is the “enlightened” Western worldview mentioned earlier, and by extension her theory rests on the condition of an intended Western readership. Thus she concludes that the “world” which is presented in an unconventional manner “is the world of fiction, which is endless in its creative possibilities. The reader of magical realism must be willing to suspend any notions of what is possible or impossible, and participate actively in the ludic creation of an absurd, yet ordered,
perspective” (120). This viewpoint, like that of Angulo, provides the basis for the easy acceptance of magical realism as a specifically postcolonial phenomenon, which we will turn to later.

However, before we move to a discussion of postcolonial implications, there is another element of magical realism which, it seems to me, is too often overlooked: namely, the lack of discussion within magical realist criticism (which mainly comes out of Western academies) of “traditional” Western literary discourse, which has always been centrally concerned with questions of mimesis and representation. This is an issue of extreme relevance for postcolonial magical realism, primarily because of the frequent use of cross-cultural intertextuality within its works.

1.2 INTERTEXTUALITY AND MAGICAL REALISM

The world consists of a multitude of texts each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another texts. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation – first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase.

- Octavio Paz (cited in Bassnett and Trivedi 4)

Intertextuality, or the reference to other texts within literature, has the curious distinction of being a distinguishing feature of both modernist/postmodernist and magical realist works, a combination that further complicates the problem of “classifying” magical realism. While intertextual references are as old as literature itself, since Julia Kristeva coined
the term in 1967, “intertextuality” has come to represent a specific feature of postmodernism. The anti-conventional motivations of Western modernist and postmodernist movements are generally seen to represent “the decentering of traditional Western-centered structures” (Drake 171). Intertextuality, in this context, is often used as a strategy of challenging “conventional” expectations of literature by re-formulating canonical texts to give them a new meaning. Jay Clayton offers a particularly compelling and succinct depiction of the issues involved in intertextuality, which only gain weight when applied to magical realist intertextuality:

Intertextuality suggests not a line or a progress but multiple, overlapping, occasionally conflicting zones of force. Is literary history still possible when intertextuality offers ways to challenge our concepts of both “literature” and “history”? One would think so, for every text exists within specific fields of power, and these fields may be observed and charted. Literary history, within an intertextual frame, becomes situating a text within the zones of force that alter and are altered by it. Such histories, however, can no longer pretend to be universal. One must look for different zones, of varying sizes and shapes, depending on one’s purpose for undertaking the inquiry. These histories must be acknowledged to be partial and specific – oriented to particular tasks, with particular readers in mind. We must still spell out the exact zones of our suffering. (1991A:57)

Clayton’s thoughts on intertextuality here sound much like Pratt’s conception of “contact zones,” spaces where cultures and texts meet and clash. From this perspective, one can see postcolonial magical realism as a means of confronting the overlapping and conflicting elements of multiple resources: textual, cultural, historical and ideological.

Intertextuality, then, is not simply “mimicry” or “imitation” of previous writers. Rather, it involves a creative approach to both writing and reading “as a performative act of criticism and interpretation” (Worton and Stills 7). This factor, as we shall see in Chapter Four, is particularly important for postcolonial writers, for whom questions of intended or
implied "audience" pose special considerations. The adoption a European mode of expression (the novel) is already a problematic concern for postcolonial writers, and the challenge is to "find a way to assert themselves and their own culture, to reject the appellative of 'copy' or 'translation' without at the same time rejecting everything that might be of value that came from Europe" (Bassnett and Trivedi 4). Intertextuality can therefore best be seen as an interpretive technique, one that is strategically selective and exclusionary, simultaneously "imitative" and "original." V. Y. Mudimbe sees this relationship between the original and the new texts as mutually transformative, a "transposition of one system of signs, symbols and meanings into another. . . . In this reading," he argues, "we should not postulate a relation of dependence" (1991:127). For postcolonial writers, then, whose intertextual resources are drawn from within a politicized contact zone, intertextuality becomes a strategy of attempting a "shifting of barriers," a subversive appropriation of texts from multiple sources (Worton and Still 33).

In magical realist works, intertextuality generally moves beyond the strictly literary intertextual references found in virtually all literature. First, it is often distinguished by a metatextual or self-aware intertextuality, which posits its references as explicitly "borrowed" or transplanted portions of the text. This feature, combined with the surreal and fantastic imagery evoked in the text, has the effect of a powerful rewriting or revision of the original text. Examples of this type of intertextuality abound in Wilson Harris's work, most notably in his use of conventions such as a repeated reference to The Infinite Rehearsal as the "fictional autobiography" of its "protagonist" as mediated (or usurped) by "W.H.," the author's initials, and his juxtaposition direct quotes from canonical and folkloric "texts" with more subtle reworkings of intertextual references within the narrative.
Another distinction between magical realist intertextuality and "standard" intertextuality is the obvious dependence of magical realism upon multiple sources and/or linguistic and cultural "codes." Thus, work like Ben Okri's includes reference not only to other textual works (particularly those of earlier Nigerian writers), but also folktale, songs, images, cosmology, historical figures, geographical locations, and so on. These uses of cross-cultural intertextuality, often articulated through themes of "revision" and "rewriting," have key significance in magical realism, as they reveal the explicit sites of mutual influence from seemingly conflicting or contrary sources (most often evoked in criticism as the tension and/or reconciliation of the "traditional" and the "modern" or the "indigenous" and the imported"). In this respect, I see magical realist intertextuality as more closely aligned to the concept of "interdiscursivity," which Ato Quayson defines as a strategy of describing "the discernible relationships that inhere between literary texts and the field of conceptual resources" (16). This broader view of intertextuality, which extends beyond the resources of written texts, is necessary in understanding the multiple resource-bases of magical realism.

Given this proliferation of intertextuality, one of the primary concerns for readers of magical realism which expresses a culture or worldview different from one's own is the possibilities of misreading, or overlooking culture-specific references. While this dilemma exists in all intertextual works, it poses special questions for postcolonial studies. As Maria Tymoczko points out:

One of the most challenging features of writing about post-colonial and minority-culture literature is constructing a standard of judgement, for it is difficult to sort out the creativity of the writer from the deautomatization associated with the importation of new cultural materials, new poetics and new linguistic patterns derived from the cultural substratum of the author's culture itself. It is easy to overread such features as metaphor, linguistic transpositions of obligatory features of a native language, or shifts in
frequency distributions associated with a variant dialect; a critic may take the cultural gives of a post-colonial writer as authorial creativity. (35)

However, creating a struggle for the Western reader may also be part of the author's artistic project. Like the use of untranslated or unglossed indigenous terms and phrases in many postcolonial works, magical realism provides a platform for selective engagement on the author's behalf, empowering him or her to play with the reader's expectations and even aggravations. Such "play" is precisely what makes magical realism a very serious genre of fiction. Within the fictive reality of their texts, magical realists challenge the conventions of realism as well as the process of reading. Indeed, Wilson Harris's novels at times seem so thoroughly intertextual that "meaning" is transformed into something entirely new. In this respect, "missing the point" becomes irrelevant to the larger project of engaging with the text on its own terms in order to fully comprehend the "realities" it attempts to convey.

How to "read" magical realism, then, becomes a crucial question when one considers both the postcolonial context and the references to Western traditions involved in the works. The multivalent combination of influences is both the most complicated and the most rewarding feature of magical realism. While it is easy to accept blindly the proposition that magical realism is a specifically postcolonial phenomenon, a creative response to the "contact zones" created through imperialism, conquest and colonization, one must bear in mind the fact that non-mimetic representation is hardly "native" to postcolonial regions. In the next section, we will address this issue in terms of the traditions of Western literary theory and practice, as well as the epistemological foundations on which these traditions are founded.
1.3 HOW POSTCOLONIAL IS MAGICAL REALISM?
INTERTEXTUALITY AND WESTERN LITERATURE

Intertextuality is by no means a strategy reserved for magical realists or postcolonial writers. Harold Bloom, the self-appointed spokesperson for the Western Canon, has famously declared: “there are no texts, but only relationships between texts” (1975:3). Elsewhere, he argues that “the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call ‘poetic misprision’” (1997/1973:xxiii). Similarly, Catherine Belsey, quoting Barthes, agrees that “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (134). Such assertions, now a standard reference point in discussions of intertextuality in Western literature, provide a specific point of connection for magical realism, which is inherently intertextual, in its depiction of multivalent “realities.”

Particularly, the modernist/postmodernist dependence on the work of theorists like Derrida, Kristeva and Lacan, which focuses on the concept of the linguistic subject, finds an easy parallel in the intertextuality of magical realists. Lacan’s tripartite view of the linguistic subject as composed of the Imaginary (self-image), the Symbolic (the social order mediated by language) and the Real (the individual’s view of reality, not an objective/external reality) often underpins postcolonial literary criticism and theory (Drake 26-27).1 From this

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1 The use of Lacan is particularly popular in analyses of postcolonial “rewritings” of canonical Western texts. David Cowart, for instance, sees the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee’s revision of Robinson Crusoe in Foe as an epistemic project: “Coetzee’s point is the Lacanian one of endless repetition in the Symbolic Order. However often we hear a story,
perspective, critics like Drake and Gikandi read postcolonial literature as part of a modernist tradition. Arguing that “the European model. . . needs to be questioned and made ironic at every juncture,” Gikandi, for instance, posits Caribbean literature squarely within this modernist tradition (15).

The point of contention, however, is not the “difference” between ostensibly Western and non-Western intertextualities, but the assumption that non-Western use of intertextuality through magical realism inevitably does something different than Western texts do. This evokes two problematic considerations: first, the idea that the relationship between Western and non-Western texts is not reciprocal; that is, that non-Western writers are “caught between two worlds” as it were, while the West remains stoically aloof in its solid traditions. The second is the suggestion that these Western traditions or influences can be neatly characterized as rational, scientific, representative of the “real.”

A brief look at Western epistemological discourse may elucidate these considerations. Michel Foucault challenged the imperviousness of Western discourse when he postulated that with the invention of “man” at the end of the eighteenth century, the conception of humankind became “that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known” (345). This epistemological shift changed the ideology of the West, engendering a view of the world and its history as a system of binary polarizations, in which one defines oneself through one’s difference from others, resulting in a conceptualization of “the profound history of the Same” (386). This is the epistemic legacy the modern era inherited however it is superficially varies, we shall still be within the order circumscribed by language, by our systems of knowing” (69). While Lacan’s theory of the “symbolic order” is hardly original, the frequent appeal to Lacan in such criticism signifies the extent to which postmodernism is considered a thoroughly “new” form of representation and analysis.
through colonialism and conquest, which includes the inhibitive structures of difference by
which we measure our "reality." As Suzanne Bordo demonstrates, however, this change in
Europe was a drastic one, completely usurping previous epistemological conditions. One of
the major facets of this shift is the "new" conception of the supremacy of space and time, a
dichotomizing objectivity:

What for Descartes is conceived as epistemological threat – 'subjectivity,' or
the blurring of boundaries between self and world – was not conceived as
such by the medievals. Rather, the medieval sense of relatedness to the
world, as we know from its art, literature, and philosophy, had not depended
on 'objectivity' but on continuity between the human and physical realms, on
the interpenetrations, through meanings, of self and world. But locatedness in
space and time, by Descartes's era, had inexorably come to the forefront of
human experience, and the continuities and interpenetrations which had once
been a source of intellectual and spiritual satisfaction now presented
themselves as 'distortions' caused by personal attachment and 'perspective.'
(98)

Thus the Western "tradition," contrary to popular admission, includes a profound sense of
connectedness or universality to the world. The "current episteme" in the Foucauldian
sense, therefore, has struggled to reconcile the disparate elements of reality its objective
approach dismissively assumes cannot coexist.

This Western-scientific approach, so central to our current conceptions of reality,
history, and difference, however, is often so thoroughly accepted that its own contradictions
and paradoxes are overlooked, denied, or unseen. Thomas Kuhn provides an interesting
comment on this issue, concerning the relationship between science and reality. While he
acknowledges that science maintains a certain degree of authority, Kuhn notes that "if the
notion of truth has a role to play in scientific development... then truth cannot be anything
quite like correspondence with reality. I am not suggesting, let me emphasize, that there is a reality which science fails to get at. My point is rather that no sense can be made of the notion of reality as it has ordinarily functioned in philosophy of science” (14).

V.Y. Mudimbe addresses this issue from the perspective of anthropology and the social sciences, drawing attention to the fact that the concept of a linear history itself, like anthropology, is a Western and Eurocentric construction; he calls therefore for the need to “re-write” knowledge and history with “new myths” that will “redefine or rework or transform the history of the same” (1988:34-5).

Silvia Federici puts it more bluntly:

We can no longer afford to take that which is good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dream of our tradition. (63)

She further argues that “the Western Civilization framework cannot be defended on any pedagogical ground,” but that we need instead “a more historically conscious curriculum” (64). Using Nazism as an example, Federici demonstrates that “the Western Civilization framework can be maintained only through a set of adjustments that violate the very principles of truthfulness and rationality that Western Civilization allegedly promotes,” for instance through “the exclusion from the history of Europe and its empires of those who did not identify with the political ideology of ‘the West,’ of those who struggled against it, or, in J. P. Sartre’s words, knew Western Civilization only through their scars” (64-65). Federici’s observations draw our attention directly to the “postcolonial” situations described through the works of magical realists, and she points out a major contradiction of Western discourse often disregarded:
. . . justifying the idea of Western Civilization on the basis of a presumed continuity of values—as is done when 'Western Civilization' is identified with a unique predisposition to defend individual liberties, scientific objectivity, moral and cognitive universalism—it obscures the fact that much of the history of the West contradicts its moral and intellectual pretensions, and postulates a teleological view of history, which inevitably is permeated by idealist and racist connotations. (71)

Federici’s powerful exposure of the paradoxical relationship between the Western conception of history and the reality of its conquistadorial development, can be extended to include the contradictions between an ideological conception of the West as objective and scientific, and the persistence of a Western tradition of non-realist and experimental literature. Two particularly powerful illustrations of this are found in authoritative sources on Western mimetic traditions, John Lyons and Erich Auerbach. First, Lyons, in his impressive study *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes* (1982), identifies an important and often overlooked effect of intertextuality in Western writing:

The conflation of . . . the two aspects of mimesis, the representational and imitational or methodic, during the classical and romantic periods, may explain the twentieth century’s rediscovery of the problematic nature both of representation and of method. Because representation seemed for so long to be a concept based on a natural and commonsense activity, one that did not call into question the act or responsibility of a person, the discovery that representation is an act that imposes determinacy and closure has come with almost explosive force. . . . The rediscovery of intertextual creativity in the twentieth century can be considered a return to the earlier acceptance of the imitative function in writing, the relationship between one author and another or between text and text. . . . All of these contemporary concerns have in common an awareness that literature cannot be considered simply or even primarily as representation of a common, external reality. They point to an understanding that the active relationship to the prior activities of others, a domain that is the object of the theory of imitation, has to be taken into account as we study the ways in which literature represents (18-19).
While Lyon’s work reminds one that the ability of literature to represent “reality” is always a contentious claim, it also indicates that intertextuality itself is not a specifically modernist or postmodernist convention.  

Secondly, Auerbach’s comprehensive and influential volume, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953), traces the history of representation in Western literature, from Homer and the Bible and up to the twentieth century. Auerbach argues that literature is inherently interpretive:

For there is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self. We are constantly endeavoring to give meaning and order to our lives in the past, the present, and the future, to our surroundings, the world in which we live; with the result that our lives appear in our own conception as total entities— which to be sure are always changing, more or less radically, more or less rapidly, depending on the extent to which we are obliged, inclined, and able to assimilate the onrush of new experience. These are the forms of order and interpretation which the modern writers . . . attempt to grasp in the random moment—not one order and one interpretation, but many, which may either be those of different persons or of the same person at different times; so that overlapping, complementing, and contradiction yield something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at least a challenge to the reader’s will to interpretive synthesis. (549)

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2 As Manfred Pfister argues, although “postmodernism and intertextuality are treated as synonymous these days,” intertextuality is a literary technique as old as literature itself (201-210). For a particularly compelling illustration, see Michael Gerli’s *Refiguring Authority: Reading, Writing, and Rewriting in Cervantes* (1995). Gerli demonstrates how Cervantes, in *Don Quixote* and other works, “redefined” literary tradition, using intertextuality as a subversive moral assessment of dominant culture: “As he wrote, he would critically read, assimilate, deconstruct, and as it were, rewrite—often write against—not just discrete literary traditions but also a broad spectrum of texts and discourses ranging from abstract Renaissance literary theory to specific legends, textual typologies, even his own prior versions of a passage” (2). Gerli contends that “Modern literary theory has explicitly confirmed what Cervantes and his seventeenth-century contemporaries intuitively know—that reading and writing are two closely linked dimensions of the literary enterprise” (2).
Auerbach argues here that global changes result in shifting perceptions and interests; thus since World War I, "certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. That this method should have been developed at this time is not hard to understand" (551). Here, he locates non-realistic modes of representation within a specific sociopolitical and historical situation, emphasizing the idea of "multiple consciousnesses" so frequently evoked in relation to postcolonial contexts (551). Auerbach further believes such strategies of non-mimetic representation "mirror... the decline of our world" (551), another symptomatic formulation found in postcolonial analyses.

While these "Western" formulations form a basis for questioning the legitimacy of classifying magical realism as a specifically or necessarily postcolonial phenomenon, they also give rise to other questions regarding issues of specificity and universality. The supremacy of subjectivity in postmodernism often seems at odds with the universalizing principles behind the idea of "history" and "influence" and cross-culturally shared resources. Thus, while Abiola Irele insists that "we have entered into the intellectual inheritance of eighteenth century Europe as regards our political culture because its ideas have now become the property of all mankind" (1982:23), Western critics, in their obsessive desire for preserving subjectivity, often reject or ignore such universalistic perspectives, even when they are explicitly clear in the text itself. We will return to this issue in Chapter Four, after looking at examples of magical realism in the works of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri.
1.4 THE PROBLEM OF CATEGORIZING MAGICAL REALISM

This complication of magical realism's relationship to Western literary traditions is rendered all the more confusing when one considers the seemingly arbitrary placement of magical realist writers within camps of modernism, postmodernism, and/or postcolonialism. Particularly, the meaning of “postcolonial” (and post-colonial, neo-colonial, imperialist, neo-imperialist, etc.) seems at times so obscure as to be devoid of sense. Some critics, like the Australian authors of the “seminal” text in postcolonial literary studies, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), see postcolonialism as the historical period which began with the European colonial enterprise and continues in various forms to this day. Others see it as a category that marks the “post-independence” period for formerly colonized nations. Some prefer neocolonial, for the attention it draws to the present time and to ongoing forms of imperialism (colonial and otherwise) and away from the illusory definitiveness implied by “post.” However, by conflating time and space with the specificity of colonial impact, each of these conceptualizations has had the disconcerting effect of rendering the term ambiguous, and more often than not, the term “postcolonial” refers quite dismissively to any area of the world that is not the U.S. or Europe. In this respect, such postcolonial theorists have been rightfully attacked for their complicity in an intellectual imperialism, which has actually deterred attention from the increasingly polarized North/South division of the world.

With that in mind, Leela Gandhi offers what is perhaps the most honest perspective:

... postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the
colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between coloniser and colonised. (4)

In this sense, postcolonialism is recognized frankly as another academic “ism,” an important consideration. Gandhi’s definition clearly grounds postcolonialism within the academy, emphasizing the importance of not confusing specific postcolonial situations with the “disciplinary project” of postcolonial studies. The “postcolonial” condition, or experience, therefore, from which magical realism allegedly springs, must be understood with both the fact of literal colonial experience (and its current legacy in the form of neocolonialism) and the dangers of essentializing tendencies in mind.

That said, it is interesting to observe the ways in which critics designate the magical realism of postcolonial writers as essentially and necessarily the result of their social and historical conditions. Many critics (such as Angulo and Angel Flores) see the first sparks of magical realism in the work of Kafka, associating magical realism with modernism. Flores, for instance, sees magical realism as both a modernist “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” and an authentic expression of a specifically Latin American identity (Chanady 19-20). Others, like Lois Parkinson Zamora, see magical realism as “truly postmodern in its rejection of binarisms, rationalisms, and reductive materialism” (1997:77). Brenda Cooper, similarly sees magical realism as postmodern, but also acknowledges the problematic effects of conflating postmodernity and postcoloniality:

Magical realists are postcolonials who avail themselves most forcefully of the devices of postmodernism, of pastiche, irony, parody, and intertextuality; they are alternatively recognized as oppositional to cultural imperialism, but also as reactionaries, who perpetuate the retention of the Western stereotype of the exotic Other. In other words, magical realism and its associated styles and devices is alternatively characterized as a transgressive mechanism that
parodies Authority, the Establishment and the Law, and also as the opposite of all of these, as a domain of play, desire and fantasy for the Rich and Powerful. (29)

Jean-Pierre Durix, on the other hand, represents a third perspective. While he sees writers like Wilson Harris and Ben Okri describing “the radically novel reality of the post-colonial experience” (171), he argues that they are not postmodernists: “Where postmodernists have indulged in the firework displays of linguistic virtuosity, in the shimmering brocades of intertextuality, in the dizzying spiral of echoing signifiers, post-colonial writers have tapped the plentiful source of cultural variety which, for the first time, was not envisaged from an Orientalist standpoint but through the eyes of insiders personally involved in the cross-cultural experience” (1998:7). Durix sees magical realism, then, as the expression of a specifically post-colonial hybridity, which is articulated and interrogated through highly original uses of both local and imported conventions. He describes this process:

Reality is shown to be the sum of the different components of their hybrid identity. Far from conceiving of this as a bastardized alternative to the “full” metropolitan version of reality, post-colonial artists build temporary syntheses and are acutely conscious of the relativity of their visions anchored in a certain history and context. Because reality is multiple and contradictory to them, they feel the need to approach it from several – sometimes widely differing – angles, hence the ‘mixed’ genres that they use. Magic realism is one of the best-known forms of this generic hybridity. [While] ‘magic realism’ may owe as much to surrealism and to the European learned traditions than to ‘traditional cultures’ . . . it constitutes a counter-discourse which uses fantasy in a manner reminiscent of indigenist literature while subverting its premises. (187-88)

While Durix’s perception of the depiction of “reality” in magical realism seems to fit most magical realist texts, his focus on a distinctive hybridity and a “debt” to Europe reveals a theoretical bias. If “hybridity” and a concept of reality as “contradictory” are the
prerequisites of magical realism, the idea that only “postcolonials” experience these conditions smacks of the kind of Self/Other binarism postcolonial theory allegedly wages war against. The conceptualization of magical realism as a postcolonial phenomenon is an essentializing gesture, one that perceives “real” as the territory of Western influence and “unreal” as the localized, “traditional” space. Further, one cannot help but note that, like Harris and Okri, many magical realists are highly educated, extraordinarily well-read admirers of the Western “classics,” and resident members of the Western academy. This condition, as much as their “indigenist” one, may well prompt the type of anxiety of “hybridity” Durix evokes.

With that in mind, one must be careful not to conflate intertextuality with the type of postcolonial hybridity described by Durix. As we have seen, intertextuality itself is not a solely “postcolonial” phenomenon. In magical realism, the cross-cultural resources, which contribute to the text’s intertextuality, extend beyond textual references to include ideological, psychological and sociocultural elements. In other words, the “contact zones” of magical realist intertextuality are not limited to the literary “zone” in and of itself, but reflect also deeper sense of intertextual consciousness. Aldon Nielsen, who reads African-American literature as part of a mutually intertextual American tradition, argues that “an intertextual view of human consciousness sees the self as continually resisting itself and as reconstituting consciousness elsewhere as it accrues experience and transposes meaning across its layerings of inscription” (25). Thus, magical realism problematizes the notion that “intertextuality” is simply a literary strategy which results from a “hybrid” consciousness. What this means to magical realism, then, is that intertextuality “demands a willingness to reterritorialize oneself, to re-site ourselves within a transfigured language” (23).
In challenging the constructs of conventions and traditions, magical realists demand that their readers do the same to fully experience their works. As we will discuss further in Chapter Four, the postcolonialist model may not necessarily prove the ideal lens through which to view these texts. And as we explore in the next chapter, Wilson Harris himself often goes against the grain of conventional postcolonial theory. Robert Schwartz, whose recent study examines “the basic transcultural universality of human experience” (11) through an exploration of the founding metaphors common to Eastern and Western societies, observes that changes in the twentieth century have demanded “a radical reappraisal of the mind” (182). “As we learn more and more about how we construct reality,” he writes, “the problem of mind and consciousness move to center stage” (182). And while magical realism does expose the contradictions and paradoxes of culture-specific sociopolitical and historical situations, it also speaks directly to the need to confront and negotiate these paradoxes in terms of their psychological and philosophical implications. An approach centered on localized hybridity, then, runs the danger of dismissing this important aspect of the work.

Ironically, perhaps, one of the most insightful ruminations on non-mimetic writing is found in Pierre Mabille’s *Mirror of the Marvelous* (1998), first published in 1962. Unlike most postcolonialists, Mabille grounds his discussion in the internal politics of the texts, locating its potential in its ability to effect consciousness, rather than one’s conscience. In his sensitive and beautifully written text, Mabille distinguishes between fantasy and the marvelous, dismissing fantasy as inconsequential fancy. His conception of the marvelous, on the other hand, provides a fascinating point of comparison for magical realism. Taking seriously the root of “marvelous” in the Latin *mirabilia* (itself rooted in “mirror”), Mabille,
using examples like the work of Lewis Carroll, develops a deeply nuanced theory of the marvelous:

... in front of the mirror, we are led to ask ourselves about the exact nature of reality, about the links connecting mental representations with the objects prompting them. The problem arises of reconciling human necessity, which stems from our desires, with a natural necessity that obeys implacable laws. These are the questions that allow us to reach an exact definition of the marvelous. ... the real purpose of the marvelous voyage, as we may already understand, is to explore universal reality more thoroughly. (7)

While Mabille is speaking here of classical European texts, his line of reasoning is remarkably similar to that of many postcolonial writers. His insistence, for instance, that “inquiry into the marvelous” leads to “the study of the collective unconscious and the folklore that expresses it” (27), bears uncanny similarity to both Auerbach’s concept of a “synthesized cosmic view” or “multiple consciousnesses” and Wilson Harris’s depiction of the “vision of consciousness” which he, too, sees as collective and accessible through myth. Further, Mabille anticipates “postcolonial” concerns by noting how the multiplicity of influences and “layers of reasoning” in the marvelous produces an “ambivalence” or “multivalence, which is the very law of initiatory symbolism” and “has not been understood any better than the dialectic that translates personal fears into cosmic realities” (28).

It seems to me that one important aspect of “postcolonial magical realism” that is too frequently disregarded, then, is the direct connections and access to Western literary traditions that are revealed in magical realist texts like Harris’s and Okri’s. The assumption that “reality” stands for the West and “the supernatural” stands for “tradition” made by most theorists, I think, misses the whole point of what magical realists attempt to do in their work. “Tradition” is neither an indigenous event of the past nor a library in London; it is a living and continuous “thread” that connects the present to the past and the future (to echo
Emphasizing the relationship between West Indian writers and European civilization, literature and history, C. L. R. James explains,

[We have the same language as the British and the outline of our civilisation is based on theirs, we are in the same situation that has created the great writers of the twentieth century. We are members of this civilisation and take part in it, but we come from outside. And that is why those Irish and American writers and Joseph Conrad have dominated English literature in this century. I believe that at the back of the success our writers are gaining (for which there are many reasons) is the fact that we are part of the civilisation, we can come here and live here, we can stay abroad and understand the civilisation, but we don't really belong. And it is when you are outside, but can take part as a member, that you see differently from the ways they see, and you are able to write independently. (244)]

Further, the kind of intertextuality Eileen Julien defines as “the continuous dialogue of works of literature among themselves” (26) inadequately describes work like Harris’s and Okri’s, which take as their intertextual resource-base not only literary, but oral, cultural, and historical elements of their experience and imagination. Thus the “magic” in magical realism does not appear only through its spiritual figures, but through subtle and calculated constructions and re-constructions of all of the imaginative resources available to the author. If these resources happen to be Western, critics should not be surprised; nor should they dismiss their authors for “metropolitan” inauthenticity.

In conclusion, while magical realism can and often does express culture-specific geographical and ideological perspectives, definitions of magical realism as a distinctly “non-Western” or “postcolonial” mode of expression are essentially unfounded. This fact is made most explicitly obvious in both the long history of non-mimetic literary traditions in the West, and the more important reminder that the ostensibly “Western” worldview is by no means exclusively “empirical” or scientific-rational. “Western” writers from Kafka to
Kundera have demonstrated that so-called Western ideology is not to be conceived as wholly alienated or distinct from “magic” or connections to the spirit-world, whether literal or metaphorical.

In this respect, magical realism is best seen as any work of fiction (whatever its geographic/socio-political origins) which challenges the literary and ideological conventions of realism and/or reality, by using the strategies of literary and cultural intertextuality, fantastic or surreal imagery, and a highly figurative use of language. Indeed, magical realism, as we shall see, is a genre whose “counterrealist conventions are particularly well suited to enlarging and enriching Western ontological understanding” (Zamora 1997:77). And if one accepts John Snyder’s contention that, as historically conceived and constructed modes of representation, “genres – not the individual texts composing them – are ideological forces and not simply processionial groupings” (205), one can begin to understand the potential implications of magical realist fiction as a genre in its own right. As the fiction of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri demonstrates, the very “hybridity” or “contact zones” of cross-culturality that makes postcolonial magical realism possible are a common ground for all people; the resources may differ, but the project and the process are the same.
CHAPTER 2

INFINITE REHEARSALS:
MAGICAL REALISM AND THE “CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGINATION”
IN THE WORK OF WILSON HARRIS

The work of Wilson Harris provides a particularly intriguing and complicated illustration of the possibilities and strategies of magical realism. Because Harris’s oeuvre includes fiction, poetry, and creative critical writings, he offers highly developed insights into the process of writing, and a complex and multifaceted theory of the imagination and the role of the writer in society. Harris’s writing involves an intricate intermingling of theory and experience, philosophy and fiction. Since his work self-consciously confronts various textual and theoretical concerns of postcolonial literary theory, Wilson Harris proves an excellent starting point for working out the complications involved in interpreting magical realism within a postcolonial context.

Using his novel The Infinite Rehearsal (1987) as an example, this chapter examines the various ways in which Harris uses magical realist techniques such as intertextuality, tropes of revision and rewriting, and surreal imagery and events to develop both a fictive “reality” and a theory of “vision of consciousness” which may help to elucidate the concerns of magical realism and postcoloniality discussed in Chapter One. In this chapter, we will begin with an introduction to Harris’s work by discussing his background, and by looking at his larger
“place” within Caribbean writing by turning to some of his critics. Second, we will examine some of the key terms and concepts which emerge in Harris’s work, focussing on his articulation of “vision of consciousness,” “the limbo gateway” and strategies of “infinite rehearsal.” Finally, a close reading of selected themes and strategies in The Infinite Rehearsal will provide a means of interrogating Harris’s use of intertextuality and magical realism. This investigation will establish a framework for discussion of Ben Okri’s work in the next chapter, and of the complications involved in connecting magical realism and postcolonial theory in Chapter Four.

2.1 WILSON HARRIS: BACKGROUND AND CRITICISM

The theme of “revision” or “rehearsal” has been the subject of much of Harris’s fiction and “critical” writings, which together comprise a highly original and consistent philosophy or theory of literature and the imagination. Harris, born in British Guiana (now the Cooperative Republic of Guyana) in 1921, was educated in engineering, and worked as a Government Surveyor in the Guianan interior from 1942 to 1958, during which time he published his first volumes of poetry. Harris emigrated to England (where he lives today) in 1959, seven years prior to Guyana’s Independence. His first novel, Palace of the Peacock, was the first of his famous Guiana Quartet, followed by The Far Journey of Oudin (1961), The Whole Armour (1962) and The Secret Ladder (1963). By 1996, with the publication of Jonestown, his

Harris's work utilizes the "conventions" of magical realism discussed earlier through fantastic imagery, a highly descriptive representation of "strange" landscapes and characters, and the non-mimetic and often metatextual depiction of events and interactions between characters (living, dead, and fictional). Further, his highly sophisticated and intricate weaving of intertextual references from a resource-base which can best be described as the totality of human history and consciousness, breaks down the boundaries not just between the Caribbean, Africa and "the West," but also extending to Asia, Northern and Eastern Europe, and the world at large. His work therefore reveals a specifically located Caribbean, rooted in local events, cultural references, and "the deep, salty tang of Guyanese speech" (Moore 331) while it simultaneously explores cross-cultural connections through various intertextual references. In this respect, Harris's magical realism juggles the connections between a universal capacity or consciousness, and the culture-specific imagination of the individual.

Wilson Harris is one of the most truly original writers of the twentieth century. His approach to magical realism, metatextuality and theories of "hybridity" and cross-cultural understanding anticipated both the postmodernists and the postcolonial theorists, a fact that often goes unacknowledged. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* point out, for example, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) predates and anticipates Derrida's "investigation of the limitations of the western philosophical tradition, and the resulting development of his theory of language 'difference'" in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1967) by
seven years (Ashcroft, et al. 1989:153). Perhaps more significant, as we will see later, is the uncanny resemblance of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "hybridity" and the "third space" to Harris's own views of the cross-cultural imagination and "limbo." Indeed, the seminal work of Harris and fellow Caribbean writers like C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire is only now beginning to appear more frequently in the anthologies and the bibliographies of postcolonialists. This may be partly related to the focus of postcolonial studies on Africa and India, but it also indicates that the specific (and undeniably severe) circumstances of Caribbean colonialism and its aftermath created an environment in which direct confrontation and creative expression both predated and anticipated similar work on/in the "rest" of the postcolonial world.

However, it is important to note that, despite recent re-insertions of Harris’s fiction and theory in postcolonial studies, as Gareth Griffiths points out, "Harris himself has remained, to use a favourite term of his, 'curiously' detached from the heat of the critical struggle over colonial and post-colonial discourses and their place in a history of cultural hegemony" (61). This "distance," however, may be partially explained by Harris’s approach to intertextuality. While the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (who include Griffiths) see postcolonial writing, and especially intertextuality like Harris’s, as necessarily "writing back" to an imperial center, Harris himself denounces this categorical polarization of center and periphery. His novel *Black Marsden* (1972), for example, is set in Scotland, and explores his own Gaelic/Scottish, Catholic, Protestant, pre-Colombian/Amerindian, and Caribbean "memories" as part of his individual cross-cultural legacy or inheritance. In writing *Black Marsden*, Harris observes, the "necessity to immerse oneself in and to unravel hypnotic persuasions became an enormous and subtle cue, a kind of magical reality, that bore upon
new visualizations and relations between Northern Celtic and Southern pre-Columbian poles of consciousness, between apparently incompatible bodies and cultures” (1981:89). In other words, Harris does not perceive himself as “writing back” to an “imperical center” but rather sees himself as an integral part of, and in a reciprocal if contradictory relationship with, both the “center” and the “periphery.” Indeed, Harris refuses to make such distinctions, appealing always to the cross-cultural points of contact between seemingly disparate material and ideological locations and conditions.

Harris defines this relationship as a “gateway complex between cultures” (1981:34). In this space, the multiple legacies of the individual are emphasized and negotiated through imaginative re-vision of one’s creative resources. Harris best describes this situation in The Womb of Space: “The paradox of cultural heterogeneity, or cross-cultural capacity, lies in the evolutionary thrust it restores to orders of the imagination, the ceaseless dialogue it inserts between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness, within an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, are or bridges of community” (1983:xvii). Therefore, the intercultural resources at Harris’s disposal greatly influence his approach to intertextuality.

What make Harris’s work “magical realist” are not simply the unquestioned appearances of ghosts, historical figures, and supernatural events, but the very ways in which he presents these figures. Combining direct references to canonical Western works of literature with contemporary and pre-Columbian legends, myths, and folklore (including songs and dances), Harris exposes a living tradition through imaginative use of language. Magical realism provides a mechanism for presenting the collaboration and interconnection of opposite and parallel influences within the individual and collective consciousness.
Harris's work (like that of many magical realists), however, has been received with widely varying degrees of acceptance, particularly in his native Caribbean. While the theoretical impetus of Harris's work seems to similarly aligned to that of other Caribbean writers like C. L. R. James, Derek Walcott and Stuart Hall, his work has yet to be fully accepted within the Caribbean literary canon. This response seems to involve four major objections to Harris's work: dismissal of his style of magical realism, suspicion of the "politics" of his global approach to history, tension between his own rejection of the "progressive realism" of other Caribbean writers, and the difficulty of fully understanding his complex and highly metaphorical theoretical concepts.

First, Harris's anti-conventional technique results in difficult, seemingly convoluted texts, which are sometimes considered "incoherent." As Michael Gilkes points out, due partly to accusations of "obscurity" and immediate political irrelevance, relatively few Caribbean critics were interested in Harris's work until recently. In a review of his work, for instance, Sylvia Wynter has denounced him for engaging in a "free fall of obfuscation" and the projection of an "unrelated individual imagination" (quoted in Poynting 103).

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3 Indeed, after C.L.R. James's 1965 piece, *Wilson Harris - A Philosophical Approach*, Gilke's own *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (1975) was the first book-length text on Harris, and it has been followed by a handful of anthologies of essays and just three full-length books: Sandra Drake's *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition* (1986) and Hena Maes-Jelinek's *The Naked Design* (1976) and *Wilson Harris* (1982). Particularly notable is his absence from the 500+ page volume *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (1996). The editors devote one paragraph to Harris in a section called "Theoretical Debates." Ironically, they note that his work "needs to be considered in any discussion of Caribbean theory" as it has been "instrumental in establishing a vocabulary for discussing Caribbean culture," but focus on Harris's "marginalization." "as with an emergent Caribbean literary canon," they say, "certain writers and writings have been more readily admitted into a Caribbean critical tradition" (441).
Second, since Harris situates the hegemonic relationship between the West (or the North) and the South in "such a long perspective of history and in such a wide geographical perception of cultural relations (global in the fullest sense)... for a long time his writing, creative and critical, was dismissed by fellow Caribbeans as esoteric and uncommitted, as irrelevant to the issues of decolonization and the assertion of an independent and liberated post-colonial identity" (Griffiths 61). In this respect, Harris's view of history as cross-culturally interconnected often diverges greatly from the realism of other Caribbean writers. This factor is partly due to Harris's dialectical, rather than Manichean, understanding of knowledge, an appeal to the "partiality of truth" (Williams and Riach 53) which, as we have seen in Chapter One, the Humanities find difficult to accept.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significant to his Caribbean reception, is Harris's own forceful denouncement of the "progressive realism" of other Caribbean writers. While Harris has often been the subject of much praise from the influential C. L. R. James, as Stefano Harney points out,

He has been, for decades now, the suspicious target of 'progressive political' novelists and critics in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Third World, who view his fantastical and mytho-philosophical texts with suspicion. His texts do not tell realistic stories of colonial exploitation and anti-colonial struggle. He fails to fit the programme of nationalists who seek to control the public discourse. His myth-making and Heideggerian liberty look dangerously spontaneous. (177)

While we will return to the implications of the "political" expectations of postcolonial writers in Chapter Four, it is significant to be aware, at this point, that Harris's precarious position within the "canon" of Caribbean literature is due in no small part to his refusal to
depict the “postcolonial” situation as one of inevitably Manichean character. Ironically, the
harshest criticism and the greatest possibilities of his fiction reside in Harris’s conviction that
the postcolonial subject must be situated within a framework of global interconnectedness.

It is this “global” perspective of history and tradition that governs Harris’s critical
tory and his magical realist fiction. A final problematic concern in Harris’s critical
reception involves the selective usage or understanding of his theories. While critics are
eager to accept his notions of a hybrid or multivalent identity, they are often reluctant to
address his views on the “universality of human consciousness.” Indeed, in an essay on
Harris and realism, for instance, Stephen Slemen distorted Harris’s concept of “phenomenal
legacy” from its original context as the multicultural source of “alternative realities” \(^4\) to an
implication of the inherited restraints of imperialist ideology (see Slemen 70-82). There have
also been tendencies to “seek some single hermeneutical key to the total meaning of his
work by focusing on a particular aspect” or to “gloss over some of the implications of his
political beliefs which do not fit cosily into the post-colonial orthodoxy,” including the
religious/spiritual aspects of his work, and his critique of the Humanities (Williams and
Riach 52). Since the theoretical gist of Harris’s use of magical realism is crucial to our
investigation, understanding the key concepts underlying Harris’s writing, then, may help
elucidate the goals of his larger project as well as the basis for criticisms of his work.
2.2 KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS IN HARRIS'S WORK

A major difficulty in understanding the work of Wilson Harris lies in trying to work out precisely what he means by key terms he uses in his writing. Because he is challenging the boundaries of "realism" and convention, his style of writing (both critical and fictive) becomes a distinctive, yet complicated, means of exploring "alternative" creative options. His "definitions" of key concepts, then, are often highly metaphorical and tend to overlap one another to varying degrees. While Harris avoids use of terms like "postcolonial," "hybridity," and "intertextuality," his ideas on "conquistadorial" oppression, cross-cultural traditions, and "interwoven tapestries" (1983:120) clearly parallel similar concepts in literary theory. Central to his work, and most relevant to our inquiry, are his interconnected conceptualizations of a universal "vision of consciousness," the "infinite rehearsal," and the "limbo gateway." Although it is often difficult to clearly distinguish the boundaries between these terms, they all deal with the relationship between an on-going historical tradition and the imaginative consciousness of the individual.

First of all, Harris first coined the phrase "vision of consciousness" in Tradition, the Writer, and Society, referring to the universal "capacity for exploration" which exists in every widely varying person and place (1967:21). Harris sees this "vision" as a highly imaginative capacity for understanding and exploring the various and contradictory elements of reality, such as discrepancies between historical "fact" and "fiction," and what he calls "the great

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4 We shall discuss the "phenomenal legacy" in greater detail in the next section.
problem of opposite tendencies, the man of the museum and the real man” (16). For the postcolonial writer, Harris argues, such vision is necessary to move beyond the polarizing and restrictive basis of realist representation (1983:55).

Underlying this conception of the role of the artist is Harris’s belief in the on-going process of historical and cultural revision, the “infinite rehearsal” of tradition. He sees the “imaginative arts” as the very “roots of tradition,” which lie in “a complex dialogue” of mutual interaction (1999B:83). This “dialogue” or “rehearsal” of tradition implies that history, literature, philosophy, etc., are never static, but always in a state of exchange and transformation. “Tradition” therefore represents the multiple and various resources available to the writer, and contributes to Harris’s conception of the infinite rehearsal as an ongoing process of articulating the vision of consciousness. Thus, for Harris, writing is always intertextual, a transformative “rehearsal” or translation of previous texts. In his view, the connection between past, present and future can be best articulated through the artist’s “infinite rehearsal” of the “vision of consciousness”:

Each story is a different kind of text and each text challenges other texts, so that no text has an authoritarian ascendancy. Each text is partial, each text declares that it cannot command the whole situation and thus it has to give way at some level to some other value, which may be apparently eclipsed, or apparently buried in history, but which is still alive within ourselves. Because there is some thread that runs out of the past and into our psyche, some indestructible thread of hope. This thread rises out of our imaginative capacity and it reminds us of our profoundest creative resources.

We must draw upon those resources if we are to begin to overcome the tragedies which appear to rule our vision so totally and absolutely. (1999A:55)

While the “we” here seems to refer to a universal conception of humanity, Harris applies this theory to the specificity of the Caribbean situation by developing the metaphorical conception of “the limbo gateway” between cultures.
In "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guiana," first published in 1970, Harris presents his theories on ambivalence, disconnectedness and historicalrevisionism. Drawing on Edward Brathwaite's connection between the limbo dance and African anancy or spider fables, Harris sees "limbo" as the "space" created from the transitory necessity of the Middle Passage - a "gateway" between Africa and the Caribbean, marked by conquest and exploitation. Limbo is therefore both a literal and metaphorical figure of the Middle Passage, the "space" in which the ongoing process of "historical" knowledge or tradition can be accessed through the imagination. "Limbo," he writes, "reflects a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles" (1981:26), or

... the human gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic. This dislocation of interior space serves therefore as a corrective to historical documentary stasis of imperialism. ... Once we perceive this inner corrective to historical documentary and protest literature which sees the West Indies as utterly deprived, or gutted by exploitation, we begin to participate in the genuine possibilities of original change in a people severely disadvantaged (it is true) at a certain point in time. (28)

Limbo is not, he insists, the "total recall of an African past," but "rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of culture?" (26-27, emphasis mine). Thus "limbo" represents the intercultural (and intertextual) consciousness evidenced in examples such as Haitian vodun and the differing conceptions of Brazilian and Guyanan limbo. While Harris's discussion centers on the

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Caribbean, he does not restrict this “space” of limbo to survivors of the Middle Passage. Rather, limbo is analogous to the “vision of consciousness” in its suggestion of “the inner universality of Caribbean man” (25).

Harris’s conception of limbo and infinite rehearsal well articulates his position on intertextuality (in the broader sense of “interdiscursivity”), and the need for non-mimetic representation. He argues that “the gateway complex between cultures implies a new catholic unpredictable threshold which places a far greater emphasis on the integrity of the individual imagination” (34). The role of the artist, therefore, is to engage in this “inner corrective” to imperialist constraints on ideology and the imagination through what Harris, in a recent essay, calls the “dialogue with the past” (1999A:57). Realism, he says, is “authoritarian” because “it cannot bring other texts into play... When you bring other texts in, you question that text and then you begin to unleash resources which begin to come into play and to saturate the narrative” (61-62). It is in this respect that Harris’s intertextuality and magical realism are inextricably bound. From *Palace of the Peacock* to *The Infinite Rehearsal*, he claims, he has attempted the same strategy:

... the strategy of the voyage, the strategy of the infinite rehearsal, the cross-cultural strategy which links figures in Europe with eclipsed figures in the ancient world... We see connections. We see that there is an unbroken thread which runs throughout humanity. However, that unbroken thread cannot be taken for granted. We cannot be complacent about it. At times it seems to be severed. When it appears to be severed that means we have to adjust ourselves afresh... It is not absolutely given to us. We are on trial and to some extent unless we understand that, we will lose our way. (62)

Recovering this “thread” of tradition, then, amounts to the ultimate project of Harris’s magical realism. Using intertextuality to demonstrate the overlapping “contact zones” between cultures, Harris challenges not only notions of “realism” but also
conceptions of time and space as monolithic categories. In this respect, he differs greatly from many other Caribbean writers, who tend to politicize “time” and “space” as part of an imperial hierarchy. This difference may shed light on both Harris’s sometimes-negative critical reception and his own “politics.”

Unlike Caribbean writers like E. K. Brathwaite, for example, who stress the importance of politicizing time and space by reversing them “as hierarchical positions” in postcolonial contexts, for Harris, “space ‘annihilates’ time as it establishes itself as the primary category, the ‘womb’ of space from which and to which temporal structures and constructions arise and return” (Griffiths 61). As Harris demonstrates in his fiction, “time” and “history” are both fictions, and the “cross-cultural imagination” is the key to re-covering or revising historical/temporal losses. As Harris writes in “The Phenomenal Legacy,” the art of fiction provides “an imaginative fluidity that is as close as one can possibly come to existing now, with immediacy, in a form that has already been broken in the past. It is here that one starts to concede, and may enter upon those alternative realities (‘phenomenal legacy’) which may lead to a new scale or illumination of the meaning of ‘community’ ” (1981:45).

This perspective is closely aligned to Derek Walcott’s conceptualization of tradition as “alert, alive and simultaneous” (357) and history as “fiction” or “memory” which is always and continually “subject to invention” (354). However, according to Walcott, “as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that history...is a kind of literature without morality, than in its actuaries the ego of the race is indissoluble and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim” (354). While Walcott’s conception of the fictive nature of history is clearly compatible with Harris’s, the type of
racialized Manicheanism implied by Walcott's proposition clearly differs from Harris's insistence on the mutually reciprocal connections between cultures and traditions. And although it is easy to imagine how the "politics" of Harris's theory might sound esoteric to, those demanding a material revolution, the distinctive revolutionary politics of magical realism, in my opinion, cannot be so glibly dismissed as "irrelevant." 

C. L. R. James, as early as 1965, associated Harris's ideas on the "capacity for language" and existence with those of Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre. The connections James makes between Harris's philosophy and that of the Europeans proves extremely helpful in working out the politics governing Harris's elaboration of the "vision of consciousness":

[The peculiar reality of language provides a medium to see in consciousness the 'free' motion and to hear with consciousness the 'silent' flood of sound by a continuous inward revisionary and momentous logic of potent explosive images evoked in the mind. Such a capacity for language is a real and necessary one in a world where the inarticulate person is continuously frozen or legislated for in mass and a genuine experience of his distress, the instinct of distress, sinks into a void. The nightmare proportions of this are already becoming apparent throughout the world. (Harris, quoted in James 170)]

Particularly, James sees Heidegger's concept of *dasein* or "being there" acted out in Harris's work. Heidegger claims that humans live an "inauthentic existence" in "everydayness," but that "when *dasein* begins to function, what a man is 'being there' he begins to live an authentic existence" (160). This theory is evidenced in Harris's approach to historicality and temporality (in *Palace of the Peacock*), through individual conceptions of time and the concept of transcending "ordinary things" in one's search for the truth (161-62). James sees language as the means of living an authentic existence, and claims that he has "seen that nowhere

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6 We will return to this issue of the politics of representation in Chapter 4.
stated as sharply as Harris states it. . . Language is not a tool; politics is a tool; painting is a tool; scientific procedures are tools of mankind, but language is not” (161).

James therefore suggests that Harris also articulates Karl Jasper’s idea that humans today live in an “extreme boundary limit situation” which reveals “what man really is and what he is likely to become” (164) and Jean-Paul Sartre’s proposition that one must “make a political choice between the inauthentic existence and the authentic” (164). James sees this activity specifically within the way that Harris develops both “inauthentic” and “authentic” existences within the same text by exposing the extreme situations of the postcolonial world together with “philosophical exploration” (165).

James provides what he sees as the “key to Harris”:

European civilisation for many centuries had a fixed assumption and classification of material achievement and corresponding philosophical conceptions. Harris says that America is not like that. He insists America is not like that, the West Indies are not like that. They have a different attitude to the world, because their whole historical and material experience has been different. But Heidegger, in my opinion, and Jaspers and Sartre, are aware that the European preoccupation or acceptance of the material basis of life, a fixed assumption – that has broken down. . . . The whole European conception of a fixed material assumption of things – that has broken down. Harris is saying that in the Americas, in Central America and in the West Indies, that has never been. There has never been that fixed assumption of things, that belief in something that is many centuries old and solid. That is why he is saying what I interpret as the dasein, the ‘being there’. I find it profoundly important and viable especially for people who live in these territories. (168)

While James finds Harris’s condemnation of artists who conform to “traditional standards of judgement” overly restrictive, he applauds Harris for “grappling with a West Indian problem” and reaching “conclusions which dealt with the problem of language as a whole in the world at large” (170).
In light of James’s analysis of Harris’s philosophy, one can begin to discern the overlapping qualities of a universal capacity for consciousness and a highly subjective perspective on the postcolonial situation of Guyana which emerges in Harris’s work. Harris’s theoretical conceptions of the “infinite rehearsal,” the “limbo gateway,” and a “vision of consciousness,” as we shall see, provide a firm foundation for understanding the implications of magical realism in both his own fiction and the works of other postcolonial writers.

2.3 THE INFINITE REHEARSAL: STRATEGIES OF MAGICAL REALISM

One of the finest fictional articulations of Wilson Harris’s magical realism is found in *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987), the second novel in his *Carnival* trilogy, which began with *Carnival* (1985) and was completed with *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990). The trilogy explores continuous themes through different (but sometimes parallel) characters and settings. In *The Infinite Rehearsal* Harris constructs the highly metatextual “fictional autobiography” of its protagonist, Robin Redbreast Glass, as a continuous or cyclic approach to rebirth and death which is (implicitly and explicitly) analogous to history. *The Infinite Rehearsal* is therefore not a plot-driven text. Rather, Harris utilizes a compelling and provocative combination of metatextuality, intertextuality, and frequent narrative shifts to create a magical realist novel which challenges realist conventions at every level, including the linear conceptions of “plot.” Thus, the text is driven not by a consistent story-line but by a self-conscious “revision” of the life of its characters, as Robin finds himself alive (and

51
dead) in various juxtapositions of time and space – past, present and future. In this section, our discussion of Harris’s use of magical realism will focus on three strategies of The Infinite Rehearsal: metatextuality, intertextuality, and the tropes of history and revision.

As the text is mainly comprised of a complex and multi-layered development of various themes and characters (which are continually transformed, rehearsed, and revised), a coherent summary of the text proves not only difficult, but also to diminish the impact of Harris’s anti-conventional project. That said, the “note” which prefaces the text might provide an insight into the stylistic and thematic techniques Harris uses throughout the novel. I cite this excerpt in its entirety to give a sense of Harris’s narrative style and also for its brief introduction to the major “mortal” characters of the text (Robin, W. H., Alice, Miriam, Peter and Emma):

W. H. has stolen a march on me and put his name to my fictional autobiography. So be it. I do not intend to sue him for my drowned rights. Call it character license on his part.

He and I are adversaries, as my book will show, but we share one thing in common, namely, an approach to the ruling concepts of civilization from the other side, from the ruled or apparently eclipsed side in humanity.

Not that my grandmother, my mother Alice, my aunt Miriam, or my close friends Peter and Emma saw themselves as ruled or afflicted subjects of an imperial establishment. And their voices, their plays, their dances and the theatre they created are immanent substance in this book. Yet my grandfather’s Faust (which he wrote or brought to completion in the year I was born) possesses roots as much in the modern age as in the pre-Columbian workshop of the gods and therefore addresses a European myth from a multi-faceted and partly non-European standpoint.

All of which goes to show that my family were profoundly concerned with the original nature of value and spirit and for them there was no final performance to the ‘play of humanity’ or the ‘play of divinity.’

Each apparent finality of performance was itself but a privileged rehearsal pointing to unsuspected facets and the re-emergence of forgotten perspectives in the cross-cultural and universal imagination.

- Robin Redbreast Glass (vii)

This “note” provides a key of sorts not just to the text which follows, but also to dissecting
Harris's own critical theory on the imagination. The passage situates first off a central dialectic in the text between its "authors": Robin Redbreast Glass (the timeless "drowned voyager") and Wilson Harris ("W. H.": "real" author and adversary of Robin). In Robin's "fictional autobiography," the "author" (Robin) is therefore perpetually and self-consciously aware of the presence of his "adversary," "W. H." (Wilson Harris).

Through such strategies as frequent shifts in narration (from first to third person and back) the "authorial voice" of the text becomes ambiguous. Further the question of "who" is speaking is bound up with the question "who is Robin?" While the text presents a historicized Robin who was born in 1945 and lived until his drowning (with his mother and aunt) in 1961, Robin's "post-drowning" and "pre-birth" existence is also textualized, demolishing the barriers between "living" and "dying." His prenatal knowledge, as we will discuss later, and his reappearance in the 1980s and into the future, solidify the novel's central theme of "revision" or "rehearsal."

Robin, writing from his position as a drowned man, talks of the circumstances of his pre-natal existence as a similarly liminal state:

I was the foetus revised, the unborn grandson revised, entangled in the waters of mirrored death revised in the unconscious fluid of my coming birth. There was a turbulence in that revised fluid and I knew what my mother knew. I shared with her – in a kind of void yet potent revisionary abstraction – her concerns, her anxieties, the postman's knock bring letters. . . . Robin Redbreast foetus revised in the book of humanity, the book of the Beast of heaven and hell. (14)

As this passage indicates, Robin's continuous state of being-unborn and being-dead serve to reinforce the notion of a hybrid or collaborative historical existence, one in which the spatial and temporal boundaries of "reality" are challenged by the fact of his simultaneous existence(s).
Harris develops a complex and fascinating metatextual doubling between Robin and W. H. – both are characters and author in the text, and they often engage in conversations and heated debates. The relationship between Robin and W. H. is one of mutual authority – an on-going struggle of what Harris calls “revisionary strategies.” A wonderfully comic illustration of this is marked by a passage in the text in which Robin finally begins to understand that W. H. has undertaken the revision of the book of his life. “I was filled with a sudden animosity toward W. H.,” Robin writes, “It is my life – not W. H.’s – I shall spit in his eye when we next meet for a rehearsal” (47). W. H. then suddenly appears to set Robin straight on the “facts” of his death – since Robin apparently cannot remember his death, having confused his own identity/experience with that of W. H., who (he thinks) was “in bed with the flu” when Robin and his mother drowned.

Robin and W. H. are thus set up as doubles, a distorted mirror-liminality, as the “shadow and substance” which “all everywhere in adversarial contexts of history. And out of that illusion is born the resurrection of the body of the soul that we share with one another, black with white, humanity with humanity... We share an enduring tradition” (48). The “fact,” then, that W. H. reveals is “that fate is the mask authorial freedom wears... until it yields to true myth we share with one another, the future with the past” (48). Harris thus establishes a reality in which fiction reveals truths as the resurrection of archetypal myths (48), and all reality is always a revision of the past – characterized by “a capacity to look at and move beyond immediate place, immediate time” (79). This “vision of consciousness,” or capacity for both transcendence of the immediacy of the present and the incorporation of the past, is achieved through Harris’ skillful creative application of his own concept of limbo – the gateway of the vision of consciousness in which “reality” is continually changing and
continually rewritten and reborn, a process of infinite variation and infinite rehearsal. In the
text, both Robin and W. H. operate within this limbo gateway, struggling with and against
each other for the right to authorship of Robin’s fictional autobiography.

In addition to such metatextual self-consciousness of authorship, Harris also utilizes
various strategies of intertextuality in *The Infinite Rehearsal*. There is a central “reworking” of
*Faust* (Goerthe’s and Marlowe’s versions appear) as variously intertextual referent,
metatextual subject (Robin’s grandfather’s revision of *Faust*), and as textual project (“Faust”
is also a character in the text). T. S. Eliot, Harris’s model for a conception of “tradition,”
appears frequently, in references to *The Wasteland*, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
and other works by Eliot. The following sequence provides a particularly telling illustration:

Hunger was so real that I ascended the moon as if it were Glass in a
shoestring ladder and knocked on the door.

‘Is there anybody there?’ said the Traveller,

Knocking on the moonlit door.

Belly to belly
Back to back
Ah don’t give a damn
Ah done died already

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
I who sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.

*I could not believe it.* Ghost was speaking at last. No formal message.
A repetition of familiar texts become however strangely cross-cultural, the
strangest subversion, where one least suspected or expected to find it in
hollow convention or solemn usage. And edge, nothing more, above the
malaise, the death-wish of an age: an edge born of temptation that one
unravels, perceives, and sifts until it yields a value beyond the immediate taste
of temptation, the remorse, the penalty, the rewards (32)

This passage demonstrates both Harris’s use and theory of intertextuality. From Robin
knocking on the door of the moon to “Is there anybody there...?” from Walter De La Mare’s poem “The Listener” to the Tiresias figure who appears as both a Homeric character in the text and as reference to Eliot, Harris reconstructs canonical texts, juxtaposing them with a magical realist narrative which transforms their meanings and localizes it within a specifically “postcolonial” setting by explicitly returning to themes of conquest and subversion. 7 Harris’s own use of metatextually “interpretive” strategies (as seen in his direct comments on the intertextual speech of Ghost) deepens the layering of his intertextual project, transforming fiction into theory.

Harris’s intertextual references to Western texts are numerous and central. The very “Glass” of Robin Redbreast Glass often evokes Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass. Robert Burn’s “Auld Lang Syne” is sung on New Year’s Eve. Blake’s “Tyger,” as well as Homeric and Caribbean “Calypso(s)” are evoked through a political/theatrical band named “Tiresias Calypsonian Tigers.” 8 However, The Infinite Rehearsal also contains other types of

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8 There also seems to be an interesting connection between this “band” and the ideas of the Brazilian scholars and educators Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. Robin questions at one point how “Tiger,” the leader of this band, could “stand on a platform...toss a drum or a claw to the winds, and thereby cause millions of ammunition and dollars to roll up the creek, or down the creek, was a measure of economic illiteracy and of the deprivations of simulated cities of Skull” (27). In Theatre of the Oppressed (1975/1985), Boal contends that “nothing is alien to Politics, because nothing is alien to the superior art that rules the relations among men” (11). He therefore calls for a participatory democratic theatre of the people, suggesting that if theatre itself may not be inherently “revolutionary,” it is nonetheless “a rehearsal of revolution” (155, emphasis mine). A study connecting Boal and Harris in terms of “theatre” and “rehearsal” may help further elucidate Harris’s political position on the imagination. Further, in The Politics of Education (1985) and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1979)
intertextuality, including references to popular songs like “Jumbee Jamboree” (Durix 1991:214) and popular theatre, as well as specific references to historical events (both “real” and imaginative). The latter are particularly intriguing, for several passages juxtapose the usually-continuous narrative with fragmented “notes” or “outlines” of historical occurrences, playing on the reader’s expectations as they play with notions of history and time. I offer two examples, the first from a memory of Robin’s fifth birthday with his mother and aunt, the second the result of an argument between Robin and Ghost over the nature of the city of “Skull,” the symbolic site of urban “modernization” in the “Third World”:

We are on our way to celebrate my fifth doomsday birthday on a fading dusty calendar. A relic of a newspaper blows at our feet. September 1950 turns to mould in June 1961. The paper twists into spray April 1986 and the apparition of Birthday Ghost. I touch my ring [an heirloom gift from his mother] and taste the wreck of civilizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>164 BC</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost is Babylonian cake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 BC</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost is Chinese and Roman cake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 66</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost is broadsword cake over Jerusalem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 295</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost ices the constellation of Andromeda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 451</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost adorns Attila the Hun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 684</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost ices a Nurnberg Tiger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1066</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost divides William and Harold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1910</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost submits to photographers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1985-6</td>
<td>Birthday Ghost dresses up for many a party around the globe.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paulo Freire similarly argues for social transformation, through a conception of conscientização ("conscientization"), through which oppressed peoples can attain freedom and humanize their own realities through conscious and active participation in the world. He calls for a radicalized education, through which people can attain “a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation” (1979:9). In Pedagogy, he stresses the centrality of dialogue in both liberation and authentic communication, a theory which deserves further comparison to Harris’s conceptualization of the “literate imagination” (see, for instance, “Literacy and the Imagination” in The Selected Essays of Wilson Harris, ed. A.J.M. Bundy, 1999).
‘Taste it,’ said Alice. ‘Taste a comet and live. Taste the ridiculous fantasies that are the seed nevertheless of history and tragedy. Taste illusion.’ (38)

I pencilled some notes into my book.
Dateless Day Play. Dateless Day (plucked from a pre-Columbian infinity calendar) relics of memory. Hollow humanity.
Indistinct clamour of refugees of spirit. Cheap energy is all. (AD 1962-86).
Faeryland burns at Chernobyl. (AD 1986).

Such passages mark a shift from narrative “dialogue with the past” (Harris 1999A:57) and speak instead to the concept of chronological time as a marker of events. References to contemporary disasters like the Chernobyl nuclear and the Space Shuttle Challenger explosions of 1986, as well as historical conquests and disasters, further serve to highlight the interconnection of the old and the new, modern and ancient influences and events. Quantum physics are juxtaposed with a ride into Bethlehem. There is a simultaneous awareness that “drunken Quetzalcoatl was the source of all philosophy” while “the book of modern Europe possessed its roasted pigment in the adventures of Faust, Caliban and Magellan” (7). Thus, Harris’s use of intertextuality provides a mechanism for developing his theme and theory of history as a cross-cultural tradition.

Themes of history and tradition are intricately constructed through various intertextual strategies. Harris’s referential use of intertextuality in The Infinite Rehearsal is accompanied by an equally intertextual construction of his characters, space and time. This is perhaps most apparent in the very first chapter of the text, which “sets” Robin in a
thoroughly ambiguous space. The text opens with Robin “on a beach in Old New Forest,” “a grave-digger in a library of dreams and a pork-knocker in the sacred wood” (1-2). The first lines of the text are a “confession”:

The values of a civilization – the hope for a universally just society, for the attainment of the mind and heart of love, the genius of care – are an impossible dream…

I repeat ‘impossible dream’, impossible quest for wholeness. In the same token, however, I know that those values are true and that the impossibility of their achievement nurses, prompts, give reality to the creative imagination and instills one with profoundest paradox, with insight into the numinous character of all things, all features, all aspects of being. (1)

Establishing from the start a position of “realistic idealism,” Robin then situates the focus of the text with concerns of conquest and exploitation. He contemplates “the meaning residing within a deposit of ghosts relating to the conquistadorial body – as well as the victimized body – of new worlds and old worlds, new forests and old forests, new stars and old constellations within the workshop of the gods” (1). Thus the figure/character of Ghost appears, as both conquistadorial and victimized, un-gendered (though Robin “decided to accept IT as male persona,” trusting that he could “see the phenomenon [he] had encountered in the wholeness of a transformative light bearing upon all genders, all animates and inanimates, all masks and vessels in which a spark of ultimate self-recognition flashed… faded… flashed again. Modern phenomenon or ancient magic?” 2). Ghost becomes Robin’s “conscience,” the “quest for the nature and meaning of value” (9). The trouble, however, is that although Ghost suggests the “revised histories of the world,” bearing at one point the head of Sir Walter Raleigh in his hand, Robin cannot communicate with him, as Ghost rarely speaks (although he “writes” the postscript in AD 2025).
It is crucial to remember Robin’s position as a “grave digger” of “libraries of myths of gold, silver, bone within a community of convertible soils and dreams. . . . the living and the dead. . . . texts that broke a uniform narrative domination by the conquistadores of history in inserting themselves into my book despite the apparent eclipse they endured, despite voicelessness or oblivion” (2). Here, Harris’s description seems clearly aligned to Leela Gandhi’s definition of postcolonialism as “theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath.” Robin’s project of “recovering” and “revising” lost or forgotten histories and “ancestral treasure” (37) forms the central movement of the novel.

However, if his position as gravdigger implies noble pursuits, as “pork-knocker,” Robin also manifests the greed and hunger of civilization’s fortune-seekers. A “pork-knocker,” according to Sandra Drake, is the Guyanese term for a “roustabout seeking fortune in the interior” (17). In The Infinite Rehearsal, this is explained through the intertextual image of the Traveller “knocking on the moonlit door” (2). When short of food, Robin climbs “oblivion’s ladder” to the moon, scrambling for “a morsel of pork hidden in a pale moon-barrel.” “Knocking” a “splinter of silver roast” from the bottom of the barrel, he enjoys a gluttonous feast, dreaming of “palatial halls and feasts of civilization” (3). This gluttony, however, is paired with another association in the text of “barrels” with slave ships, “the round coffin of my ancestors” (36), a comment on the violence involved in the vampiric relationship between conquest and exploitation, power and poverty.

Here in the “dateless” and “timeless” “sacred wood” of the first chapter, Robin encounters not only Ghost, but the characters of Frog (an “inferior Don Juan Ulysses”) and Calypso (his “painted mistress, a black, white woman” belonging to the famous band of Tiresias Calypsonian Tigers) (4). Ulysses Don Juan Frog plays the magisterial and piratical
statesman to the “apparently illiterate” Ghost. Frog, who patrols the world “in every national costume, east, west, north, south, Marxist, Capitalist” is perceived as a threat to Ghost and Robin, the judge of his trial. Frog accuses Robin of hiding Ghost, who has arrived over the Middle Passage, threatening “interrogation” (9). Frog represents the conquistador, claiming “I have built a traditional system and network,” who self-consciously personifies a Fanonian colonial mentality, complete with “schizophrenic claws and diamond eyes” (10):

I don’t like you, Glass. You tangle me up in myself, in my own wildness, my own reflection in you. It’s dangerous to see myself reflected in you, intimately black, intimately white . . . I may sentence you, I may judge you, but I’m an inferior at last. Poetic justice! You know me – you flee of scum from the sea – much better, more deeply, irreverently, terrifyingly, than I ever knew you. (9-10)

Frog further conflates “Beast” and “Ghost,” creating a conception of Ghost as both the “real” receptacle of history or truth and the “myth” of legend and false conceptions, both “conquistadorial” and “victimized.” Frog angrily sentences Robin to death by drowning, and at the end of the first chapter strikes him with “his mottled hand,” and Robin’s head “toppled into the Globe” where he “saw the civilization of Skull and the Mountain of Folly that [he] needed to climb and transcend if [he was] to rise from the sea” (11).

This first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the novel. From this “dateless” and “timeless” space, Robin emerges into the ostensibly real world of his living life and memories. He is always aware of the ambiguity and paradoxes of his existence as “drowned author”: “I was innocent. I was guilty. I was good. I was evil. I was solipsistic (autobiographical) character. I was polyphonic (fictional) author” (12). Thus his “autobiography” tells a tale located in the time before, after, and during his death
simultaneously, in a kind of “dateless day infinity” where past, present and future are both acknowledged and denied. In this way, Harris’s construction of history as an inherently intertextual and cross-cultural process becomes the instrumental mechanism for his magical realism.

Robin (and/or W. H.) constantly pose questions regarding the nature of both reality and their fictional project, and the identities of the text’s characters are often complicated by major and minor shifts. Key figures of Ghost, Faust, Frog, and Billionaire Death exist beside familial characters in Robin’s mother Alice, Aunt Miriam, W.H., Peter and Emma. Characters blur into each other, swap identities or personas and frequently experience significant changes in form. Emma, for instance, is transformed from schoolgirl-friend to female priest with divine powers, while her brother Peter changes from childhood friend to a popular singer and addict who uses Robin’s identity toward political gain.

Harris comments on a particular scene from the novel in “The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination.” At Robin’s drowning, you will remember that W. H. was in bed with the flu. Robin’s friends Peter and Emma were on the scene at the time, however, and were saved from drowning by Robin’s mother. Robin remembers them lying together on the beach (as he lay in bed and was drowning). Later, however, encountering Emma revised as female priest, he “remembers” himself lying there with her on the beach “with my lips within the cover of her hair yet on her breasts” and they exchange (in the ostensible “present”) “the kiss of all loves and all true lovers” (61). Harris sees this moment as representative of the subtle paradoxes evoked throughout the text:

He lies with his head beneath her hair and upon her breasts. And yet he recognizes her as an aged woman simultaneously. He sees her as a female priest. It is this saving paradox within age and youth, within the translation
of obsolescence and fertility, that gives to the spectrality of encounter a wholly different apprehension of the living in the dead, the dead in the living, absence in presence, presence in absence. I am not sure that the terms 'dead' and 'living' apply in this context for one is dealing with a continuity of encounter that nourishes itself by overturning legacies of expectation. That is how it seems to me. I have no dogma or absolute theories about the unfinished genesis of the imagination. (1999D:254, emphasis mine)

In Skull, the serenity of their pre-drowned life by the sea is lost, the “desolations of Prosperity” result in significant character transformations. They become “refugees,” “the odd survivors” who “belong yet do not belong” (57). Thus memory of past events is confused; each character has a different impression of the day of the drowning (including W. H.), and at times a character speaks to another as if s/he were speaking to a third character. The “folly” of this situation means that none of the characters appear real to themselves:

Our apparent unreality – our very unreality – witnessed to a self-confessional reality in which we came to the edge of ourselves and looked through ourselves. To be true (to know truth) within an age of violence and lies, an age subject to the reflexes of Skull, was to sense a curious irreality in oneself, a curious originality, a curious divergence from the circus of the real (or what passed for the real). (60)

Here, one sees that the “very unreality” of a paradoxical identity in “an age of violence and lies” means that one must move beyond the conventions of what “pass[es] for the real” to create a new, “true,” understanding of identity in all of its contradictory dimensions.

This play on character, like the “authorship/charactership” relationship between Robin and W. H., is further expressed in the figures of “masks” and “theatre” throughout the novel. W. H. has a trunk of masks (manipulated by Ghost) which he uses to distort perception, giving him the appearance of authorship. However, masks are not limited to human or ghostly figures, but also to conceptual figures like time and freedom. “Fate,” for
instance, “is the mask authorial freedom wears. . . until it yields to true myth we share with one another. Referring to the initials "W. H." on the "ageing mask" of representation, Robin notes "a crucial development in my book," stating:

They implied the secretion of ageless myth in the theatre of the world as a subtle rebuttal of an authoritarian realism – however sophisticated – an authoritarian story line or sophisticated dumping ground in the theatre of Skull for an irrelevant and a doomed humanity held in thrall by the logic of violence, the logic of hell. In that subtle rebuttal lay the foundations of religious hope. (57)

Here, “authorship” and characterization are seen to be inextricably tied to the process of the infinite rehearsal of history. The “subtle rebuttal” of authoritarian conventions evoked by the text’s metatextual intertextuality serves to reinforce the conception of “history” as a continual process of revision. In this respect, Harris challenges the conceptions of linear history and objective reality by explicitly confronting the imperialist “logic” which disallows for the understanding of the paradoxical realities of human existence by restraining one’s “capacity” for imagination.

The Infinite Rehearsal, like Harris’s critical work, manages to draw from the paradoxes and complications of postcoloniality a sense of hope and survival. Unlike theorists like Gayatri Spivak, who claim that the “subaltern” voice has been irrevocably silenced, Harris demonstrates both a means and method of speech, a cross-cultural dialogue that extends beyond texts and into the very consciousness of the individual. Questions of authorship, audience, and authority permeate his texts as both subjects and themes, and the agency of the characters to speak is recovered through the “dialogue with past” evoked by his conception of “limbo.”
The Infinite Rehearsal provides a particularly apt example of this in a delightful passage reminiscent of Socratic dialogue, which deals explicitly with Robin's ability to control his own speech. Agonizing over W. H.'s appropriation of his story, Robin demands, "Why me? ... Why choose me? Who is it — let us be truthful, Ghost — that writes of me as if he is me in the future? Some damned expert no doubt. ... Did I not drown happily when Alice and Miriam drowned? Whose body of expertise am I? Whose dear poverty, whose cheap prosperity, am I?" (46-47). However, these words explode unexpectedly, and Robin immediately questions his outburst:

I uttered the questions without thinking. I spoke, it seemed, in a dream without knowing I had spoken. I was alive yet dead. Why had I spoken as I had? Dream-reflex? Skull-protest? Simulated freedom of speech? Such speech (such uncertainty of motivation) sprang out of a fear, an ambivalence, a distrust of futures that come upon one before one knows the choices one is making, before one knows one's potential age, one's deepest age, one's cross-cultural heritage and body of wisdom to come abreast of the tools that may damn or save (one cannot say) the human race.

Such involuntary speech (half-simulated, half-unscripted) sprang out of the dilemmas of a post-colonial civilization, out of Third Worlds, and bewildered First Worlds. Out of ancient conquests and legacies of evil that Alice and Miriam and all the Calyponians had danced and played in all apparent and perverse innocence.

I repeated my questions and added automatically, 'Can one trust the experts who write the fictions of the future?' (46)

Like the fictions of history and myth, Harris identifies here the "adversarial" relationship between author and subject. Ghost explains that while W. H. is Robin's adversary, they can "elbow" one another into "revisionary strategies" which involve the ability to allow the subject to speak. When Robin asks, "What are revisionary strategies?," Ghost replies that they "imply that as you write of other persons, of the dead or the unborn, bits of the world's
turbulent, universal unconscious embed themselves in your book” (46). Robin immediately understands: characters “revise” “around and though” other characters and consciousnesses (47).

It is at this time, however, that Robin is “filled with a sudden animosity towards W. H.” (47), angry at W. H.’s usurpation of his own revised consciousness. Ghost rebukes Robin with a soundless laugh and explains that “intuitive theatres” reveal the “truths of fiction” as a dialogue between author and subject. These truths “validate” Robin, make him

. . . the substance of stranger quarrels. . . stranger myth, untameable reality, and renaissance of faculties within the womb of space. You live and write your fictional autobiography from the other side of W. H.’s blind/seeing mind, Robin Glass. He is a character in your book. You are no invention of his. You are no pawn of his. You validate and contest his discoverics. (47)

Thus Ghost establishes for Robin that while adversaries, he and W. H. are equally dependent upon the other for the authenticity and authorship of “their” text. Ghost, however, solidifies his own authority by adding that “he” himself “merely confers” upon W. H. “a body and a mask that are an extension of my paradoxical Being and of your youth into the fictional middle and old age in which you lift your pen and write as you do now of your adversary W. H.” (47). Ghost thus represents the “limbo gateway” through which Robin/W. H. access a “dialogue with the past,” a reminder of the need to reconcile contraries in order to fully actualize one’s sense of identity.

This passage is immediately followed by a consciousness of “W. H.’s presence and mask in my book” (47) and the dialogue in which W. H. explains to Robin that it was W. H. who was really home in bed when Robin, Alice and Miriam drowned. W. H. goes on to say that when Robin was drowning,
I thought I heard a voice from the ocean cry: "Remember me as I remember you. Become a character in my book. Fiction is real when authors become unreal. Fiction reveals its truths, its genuine truths that bear on the reality of persons, the reality of the world, when fiction fictionalizes authors and characters alike. This is archetypal myth resurrected. Thus am I your nephew if not in blood in the language we share." (48)

As a whole, this passage demonstrates both the ability of the author to "speak" through his/her characters and imagination, as well as the text's ability to speak, or rather, the ability of tradition to expose itself, as it were, through the writer's imaginative dialogue with the past. This interaction between past and present, unlike the pessimism of Spivak's theory, provides a source of optimism, or "religious hope" through with the "inarticulate" voice can find its own, "true" medium of expression.

"This theory of hope," according to Drake, "is related to the possibilities of doubling, alterity, and alienation as both positive and negative, depending upon whether they are conceived as part of a centered, hierarchical structure or a decentered, nonhierarchical structure" (170). This project is rooted primarily in the linguistic project of re-vision and imaginative re-creation of "tradition." Harris's optimism, therefore, reclaims from the postmodernists a ground for intertextual and intercultural communication in terms of humanity rather than intellectual capacity.

Our various legacies, both the painful and the positive, says Harris, provide the source for liberation from legacies of both imperialist oppression and "the narrow basis of realism" which "tends inevitably to polarise cultures or reinforce eclipses of otherness within legacies of conquest that rule the world" (1983:55). "We must draw upon these resources if we are to begin to overcome the tragedies which appear to rule our vision so totally and absolutely" (Harris 1999A:55). Thus, "Survival," we are told in The Infinite Rehearsal,
necessitates "a capacity to look and move beyond immediate place, immediate time. True survival should be aware of the temptations of prosperity in fabulous ghettos, fabulous concentration camps. True survival should measure the price we have begun to pay to the Beast in the garden of life as we gambol with it, dance with it, and exploit it to our apparent heart's content" (78-79).

For Harris, "the art of memory" is a universal process and project, one "which fell into total neglect [and] is now in process of being unearthed and rediscovered" (1967:57). Harris embraces this universality while still maintaining a firm conviction of the individual and his/her subjective experience. In other words, the "cross-cultural imagination" or "vision of consciousness" is universal because of the essential universality of the human psyche. However, specific (historical, geographical, sociopolitical) contexts provide different, highly subjective locations of personal experience. It is in this spirit that Harris contends

... a purely formal appropriation of the material of the past reduces the past to a passive creature to be manipulated as an ornament of fashion or protest or experimentation in post-modernist styles, post-modernist games. Such games are rooted, I believe, in a one-sided modernism which takes us back to defects in the enlightenment that aborted a profound cross-culturalism between science and art, as among the diverse cultures of humanity around the globe. (1999B:243)

What is needed, then, is "an appreciation of profound tension between originality and tradition" (243); "We need a narrative that helps us to sense the partiality of linear progression and brings home to us in genuine stages of creativity (rather than purely intellectual experimentation) the simultaneity of the past, the present, and the future in the unfinished genesis of the imagination" (244). It is here where Harris sees his divergence from the "postmodernists" who applaud such experimentation:
The way I diverge from the post-modernists – I must insist on this – is that the post-modernists have discarded depth, they have discarded the unconscious, thus all they are involved in is a game, a kind of game, whereas what I am saying is not just a game. I am convinced that there is a tradition in depth which returns, which nourishes us even though it appears to have vanished, and that it creates a fiction in the ways in which the creative imagination comes into dialogue with clues of revisionary moment. The spectral burden of vanishing and re-appearing is at the heart of the writer's task. (1999C:86)

Unlike the postmodernists, then, Harris's use of magical realism and intertextuality is firmly rooted in a belief in the universal unconscious, an honest and urgent desire to engage in a dialogue with the past which will create "new" fictions which demonstrate a "truer" reality, the reality of the multiplicity of human experience.

*The Infinite Rehearsal* provides an example of magical realist narrative, as a creative and highly original dialogue between and within cultures. "Infinite rehearsal," according to Harris, "implies that there is no final performance – a civilization never arrives at a final performance – the final performance is itself a privileged rehearsal" (1999C:81). Like the notion of "limbo," infinite rehearsal reflects "the gateway complex between cultures [which] implies a new catholic unpredictable threshold which places a far greater emphasis on the integrity of the individual imagination" (1981:34). By deploying various strategies of intertextuality and metatextuality, *The Infinite Rehearsal* manages to accomplish both the creation of a "new" multivalent reality expected of magical realist works, as well as to challenge dominant conceptions of history and tradition on a highly philosophical level.

If the syncretic conception of identity evoked in *The Infinite Rehearsal* "provides a model for a new post-colonial conception of history, language, and textuality" (Ashcroft et al. 154), it also suggests a model for a new conception of magical realism. By positioning cross-cultural influence within the jurisdiction of the imagination and psyche, Wilson Harris
challenges the view which sees magical realism as a response to a specific set of sociocultural conditions. In other words, Harris's work, like that of other magical realists, exposes a multivalent and reconciliatory perception of "reality," but the "worldview" that emerges is not one which posits the "traditional" (pre-colonial) as the uncomfortable opposite of the "new" (modernized or hybridized). Rather, the worldview Harris articulates points to the inherently cross-cultural and multi-faceted nature of all human experience, using magical realism as a means of confronting the paradoxes of human ontology as well as the paradoxes implicit in a postcolonial society. This standard of comparison will provide a basis for examination of the magical realist fiction of Ben Okri, which may further elucidate our understanding of the nature and objective of contemporary postcolonial magical realism.
CHAPTER THREE

INFINITE RICHES:
MAGICAL REALISM AND REAL MAGIC
IN BEN OKRI’S FAMISHED ROAD CYCLE

While Wilson Harris’s stamp on magical realism reveals the intricacies of the universality of consciousness and the individual imagination, the *Famished Road* cycle of Nigerian writer Ben Okri deals less self-consciously with issues of history, paradox and the existence of multiple “realities.” Like Harris’s, Okri’s optimism is grounded in the liberatory capacity of the imagination, however his texts reveal a deeply fractured and chaotic “reality” troubled not by metatextual overlap and confusions, but by the tensions between the sociopolitical and spiritual contradictions of a postcolonial condition. Ironically (and sometimes problematically), Okri presents a “postcolonial” perspective through his representation of a *colonial* environment: an urban setting clearly analogous to Nigeria just prior to Independence, which was achieved in 1960. This already-complicated project poses various considerations for both the critical reception of Okri and his work, and the analysis of his fiction.

In this chapter, I explore the implications of Ben Okri’s use of magical realism on various levels. First, brief look at Okri’s background and critical reception will help to illuminate both the major differences between Okri and Harris and Okri’s own unique position as a postcolonial writer. Second, while Harris explores themes of liminality and
syncreticity through highly metatextual fiction in The Infinite Rehearsal, Okri's Famished Road cycle confronts these themes through the use of the abiku figure. In this section, I demonstrate how the abiku (the Yoruba term for a child who continually undergoes a cycle of birth/death/rebirth) serves as both the literal and metaphorical basis for Okri's development of magical realism. Since the abiku provides the framework for Okri's use of intertextuality, in the third section I attempt to delineate some of the concerns involved in discussing the implications of intertextuality in African writing. Here, we shall look at some of the critical concerns of African intertextuality, as well as the corresponding issue of language use and representation in African oral and literary traditions, in an attempt to determine which perspective best suits the magical realist work of Okri. Finally, we shall turn to the third and latest novel in the Famished Road cycle, Infinite Riches, to see how Okri uses strategies of magical realism to develop themes of liminality, history, and revision. By comparing Okri's development of such themes to Harris's in The Infinite Rehearsal, this final section interrogates the similarities and differences of two postcolonial approaches to magical realism, setting the stage for our discussion of the connections between postcolonial theory and magical realism in Chapter Four.
If Harris was “marginalized” from the canon of Caribbean literature (as the editors of the Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature suggest), Okri has also enjoyed an ambiguous reputation. Celebrated abroad for his creativity and seemingly limitless imagination, 1 Okri’s work and vision has been less enthusiastically embraced “back home.” When Okri won the 1991 Booker Prize for The Famished Road in an upset victory over the co-nominated Nigerian legend Chinua Achebe, many Africanists bristled at the acceptance of what they considered his “irrelevant” fantasy and over-indulgent prose over the realism and political drive of Achebe’s work. Further, when Okri’s second novel in the Famished Road cycle, Songs of Enchantment (1993), unlike its prequel, was found to collapse into simplistic Manichean moralism, many critics seemed eager to dismiss Okri and his glittering metropolitanism from the realm of “authentic” African literature. The influential Anthony Appiah, for instance, lambasted Okri, calling Songs of Enchantment verbose and unnecessary, 2 and claiming that, unlike Achebe’s, “Okri’s work needs explaining. I do not suppose many Nigerians have read Okri’s work from beginning to end and if they have, I am sure many of them did not enjoy it” (Agyeman-Duah 29).

This reception also reveals a major issue confronting the “new generation” of

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1 As the jacket blurb in Infinite Riches notes, in addition to the 1991 Booker Prize, Okri has received the Paris Review Khan Prize for Fiction, the Chianti Rufino-Antico Fattore International Literary Prize, the Premio Grinzane Cavour Prize 1994, and the Crystal Award for “outstanding contribution to the Arts and to cross-cultural understanding by the World Economic Forum”. He is currently a vice-president of the English Centre of International PEN.

2 “What Okri needs,” Appiah said, “is a good editor. [..] to some extent Okri’s second novel looks as though he just said ‘Well, I can do whatever I like because I have the Booker prize.’” (Agyeman-Duah 27 28).
contemporary African writers. Writers like Ben Okri and Kojo Laing of Ghana, using "experimental" or postmodernist strategies in their fiction, diverge from the traditional realism of writers like Achebe or Ngugi, calling into question the "revolutionary potential" and strategies of resistance to imperial domination. As we will discuss further in the next chapter, a major critique of postcolonial theory is the issue of "privileging" texts and discourses over other, literal, forms of subversion. Such a gesture "replaces politics with textuality," and is seen to diminish the effect of (or response to) "real-life" subversion or resistance in the sociopolitical sphere (Gandhi 156). Some critics, as we shall see, therefore argue that magical realism is complicit in such evasion of "real" politics, by moving a discussion of "revolution" from the poverty of the streets to the esoteric realm of individual consciousness.

Ben Okri, in this respect, has a precarious foothold in the "canon of the real." Despite his publication of seven novels, two volumes of short stories, a collection of poetry, two creative non-fiction works and numerous essays between 1980 and 1998, Okri's name is still relatively unknown in postcolonial literary circles. Not only is his fiction magical realist and highly surreal, but his personal background and status within the African community fail to meet the expectations of the "traditional" African or postcolonial writer. First, and most obviously, is Okri's "migrant" or "expatriate" status. Born in Minna, Nigeria in 1959, Okri and his family lived in London from 1961 to 1966, then returned to Nigeria where Okri was schooled in Ibadan, Ikenne, Warri and finally Lagos (Quayson 1997:B:101). In 1978, Okri began his studies at the University of Essex, moving to London, where he remains today. According to Ato Quayson, Okri draws his inspiration from his formative years in Lagos, a time when his passion for the books and art developed alongside increasing understanding
of the sociopolitical realities of post-Independence Nigeria. This was a period of both “awareness” and “disappointment,” Quayson writes, in which Okri “was simultaneously living in a world of beautiful ideas and in the harsh realities of the slums” (1997A:600). These contradictions are omnipresent in his fiction, expressed through a tangible friction between the idealism of poetic vision and the realities of poverty and social disillusionment.

Further, Okri’s sense of “tradition” poses interesting and unique considerations. While Okri’s ethnicity is mainly Urhobo, his *Famished Road* cycle focuses on the reflection of “traditional” Yoruba ideology. Intertextual references to Yoruba folklore, belief, and oral and written traditions are what make Okri’s work specifically localized, situating him within a tradition of Nigerian writers. In this respect, his project is less anthropological than literary: while the Yoruba ideology he explores in his work is surely a tradition he had personal contact with, his fiction is best seen as part of the Yoruba literary tradition established by such writers as Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka. His work therefore raises the question of “authenticity” in its representation, while it indicates his own firm belief in the “interpenetration of cultures” (Quayson 1997B:101). In his recent text, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997B), Ato Quayson positions Okri in the tradition of Yoruba writers, identifying “tradition” as “a strategic quest in which Africans have located themselves simultaneously in relation to an African ethos as well as to the rest of the world” (9). Because these traditions draw on both literary and oral resources, Quayson prefers “to transfer the notion of an inter-semiotic relationship between systems... implicit in the usage of term intertextuality [sic], to a new terrain that would not privilege physical texts as such” and proposes the term “interdiscursivity” to “describe the discernible relationships that inhere between literary texts and the field of conceptual resources” (16).
Quayson, citing Biodun Jeyifo, elsewhere maintains that African (and specifically Yoruba/Nigerian) writers utilize strategies which demonstrate the need to represent a fictional “reality” which corresponds to the actual socio-political reality of the postcolonial situation. This situation, however, poses special concerns for the “new” generation of African writers:

In the particular case of Nigeria the euphoria of decolonisation was rapidly replaced by disillusionment and a questioning of the viability of the nation-state in its contemporary constitution. . . . For Okri and his generation, growing up in a post-independence Nigeria, the euphoria of decolonisation was not available to fall back on. All that they inherited was a bewildering sense of absent opportunities. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of corruption and graft in social and political life deepened the sense of disillusionment even further. . . . The state of corruption made it impossible to write about events using the same rationalism of prevailing protocols of representation. (1995:156)

It is this position of “disillusionment” that prompts the need to resort to non-traditional and non-realist modes of expression in order to express the totality of the contradictions implicit in the sociopolitical and ideological conditions. As Quayson argues, reading Okri’s *Famished Road* cycle in these terms allows us to “see that the radicalisation of narrative form is a means of rendering the acute sense of bewilderment at the incoherence of the socio-political domain. The experiments with form have a literary as well as socio-political dimension. It is not idle, therefore, that at certain moments in the novel the *ahiku* motif becomes a trope by which the condition of the nation-state and other realities are to the understood [sic]” (156). Similarly, Ken Harrow sees such “experiments” by writers like Okri, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Wole Soyinka as “literatures of the oxymoron” the “postrevolt” literatures which express “postindependence contradictions and frustrations” (x). Harrow refers to this type of writing as depicting “the most recent, most complex, most convoluted
'reality,' that of the literature of the oxymoron and contradiction, which depicts a post-
Independence Africa in a state of turmoil. Social problems and corrupt officials appear on
one level, while on another are found the troubled psyches of those living a world that offers
no haven of ease, no insight into truth” (258). In Okri's *Famished Road* cycle, as we shall see
in the next section, this sociopolitical turmoil is expressed through the development of the
*abiku* figure.

### 3.2 MAGICAL REALISM AND THE *ABIKU* IN THE *FAMISHED ROAD* CYCLE

In Okri's *Famished Road* cycle, (*The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, and Infinite
Riches*) these concerns are developed (over the course of some 1,135 pages) through the use
of intertextuality, surreal and fantastic imagery and events, the ghostly presence of spirits
who exist on a parallel plane with the real-world characters, and a highly figurative use of
poetic language. These are all mediated through the consciousness of the narrator, Azaro, a
young *abiku* spirit-child who is faced with the conflicting horrors and wonders of both his
fantastic encounters with the "spirit-world" and the variously chaotic and mundane socio-
political realities of "everyday life."

Azaro's narrative, like his character, is fragmented, unpredictable, and often elusive.
The images he presents are vivid, full of color and detail, and his play with language loads
meaning into the most unlikely phrases. His narration shifts from first-person speculations
which betray a youthful innocence, to omniscient depictions of the events "seen" in his
dreams and "walkings," including the dreams and thoughts of others. Like Robin Redbreast
Glass, his whole nature is bound up in paradoxes: he is of two worlds, one of which is “infinite.” Thus while at times his omniscience seems complete, at other times he seems astonishingly dim-witted. For example, Azaro can read his father’s mind, and yet he cannot fathom the meaning of a simplistic moral allegory his mother tells him until it is explained to him. Given this, at times it seems as if the “narrator” is not really the Azaro one knows as a character, and one has difficulty dislodging Okri’s authorial presence from the text, despite its lack of explicit metatextuality.

Set in an unnamed African location, which is clearly evocative of Nigeria on the eve of Independence, Okri explores through Azaro the landscapes of the urban ghetto and its surrounding and rapidly-disintegrating forests – landscapes which are frequently transformed from the “real” of the physical world to the “real” of the spirit-world, as Azaro shifts (often without warning or concrete impetus) between these worlds. Through his construction of a vision of the world as seen through the abiku figure, Okri is able to circumvent the expectations of conventional realism by following Azaro through his various adventures.

Azaro, like Robin Redbreast Glass in Wilson Harris’s *The Infinite Rehearsal*, is born with “prior knowledge” of living - Azaro as an abiku child, and Robin as “the foetus revised,” who knows before being born (and speaks from his position as dead) “what [his] mother knew” (Harris 1987:14). The abiku figure is central to *The Famished Road* cycle, providing both the literal movement of the text through Azaro’s consciousness and the figurative implications involved with the “reality” of a simultaneous existence in multiple worlds. Like the similar Igbo oghanje figure depicted in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in the character of Ezinma, Okonkwo’s daughter, the Yoruba abiku is a spirit-child engaged in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, generally to the same mother.
The *abiku* child belongs to an un-earthly realm of existence, where pacts are made with other *abiku* spirit-companions to always return to what Okri calls the “land of beginnings” where “spirits mingled with the unborn” (*FR* 3). The link between the *abiku* and the spirit world is solidified by the burial of “spirit tokens” (stones or other objects buried secretly by the child which connect him/her to the spirit world as long as they remain undiscovered). When these children are “identified” as *abiku* upon their young or infant death, they are generally “marked” with razor incisions so that they will be recognized as *abiku* on their rebirth.

Azaro, however, is an *abiku* child who has made the decision to break his pact with his spirit-companions and remain in the world. This decision is the impetus for the constant attempts of his spirit-companions to either capture or “reclaim” him and persuade him to return to the spirit world. I quote the following passage at some length in order to make clear Azaro’s position and give a sense of Okri’s lyrical narrative style. This passage, which comes at the start of *The Famished Road*, reveals not only the details of Azaro’s *abiku* identity, but also evokes the themes of interstiality and motherhood prevalent in the series:

How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions. It wasn’t because of the sacrifices, the burnt offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special treatment, or even because of the grief I had caused. It wasn’t because of my horror of recognition either. Apart from a mark on my palm I had managed to avoid being discovered. It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to remain forever in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to

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3 From this point, “FR” and “IR” refer to Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), respectively.
love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (FR 5)

Ironically, Azaro’s attempt to avoid the terrible-ness of remaining “forever in-between” is resolved by choosing to remain in the world of Living – a decision which places him in a perpetual state of coexistence, as the spirit world and the world of the living are continually juxtaposed and their “barriers” called into question. He chooses to “stay,” but as abiku he is always a wanderer, leaving his room and walking “the roads of the world” incessantly, giving no end of grief (and sometimes violent anger) to his parents. Through this liminality, the abiku becomes a metaphor for the transcendence of paradox, a figure which demonstrates the simultaneous reality of the “real” physical world and the “also real” spiritual world.

It is also interesting to note, as Ato Quayson has pointed out, that Okri’s construction of the abiku is not “wholly African” but itself hybridized, implying that Okri’s construction of the “afterlife” is itself multi-dimensional, and not a function of “a coherent dimension of the abiku phenomenon” (1997B:137). Azaro’s abiku friend, Ade, for instance, has experienced former lives as “a murderer in Rome, a poetess in Spain, a falconer among the Aztecs, a whore in Sudan... a one-eyed white ship captain who believed in God and... made his fortune capturing slaves in the Gold Coast” (FR 137). The abiku is thus clearly analogous to Harris’s conception of the limbo gateway, the threshold-space in which past and present, multiple and contradictory histories, exist simultaneously. Like Robin, Azaro
has access to various physical, metaphysical, psychological, and historical realities; indicating that Okri and Harris share similar conceptions of the cross-cultural and universal realities of consciousness.

For Okri, the *abiku* itself becomes a figure of *intertextuality*, of multiple knowledge and resources, however paradoxical, coexisting within the same *literal and metaphorical* space. This space, that is, is “real” in that Okri attempts to reflect the “reality” of a worldview or consciousness which does not impose (or accept) distinctions between the material and the spiritual, the real and the unreal. According to Ato Quayson, the conventions and premises of “standard realism” are insufficient strategies for this type of reflection:

All the different aspects of realist narrative such as character and setting are based on the implicit belief in the knowability of the real as it unfolds and its meaning in linear time. To postulate realism based on a pervasive animism is to fracture that basis of belief by suggesting that not only is the real decentered because of its permanent interplay with the esoteric, but that neither is reducible to the other. Standard realism, then, promotes a view of reality which is inadequate to engaging with the problematic fusion of the real with the other-worldly. (Quayson 1997:149)

No matter how fantastic or unlikely Azaro’s ventures into the spirit realm may be, then, their reality lies in the fact of their possibility, the fact that Okri (like many others around the world) *believes* that they are real. {4} Okri’s magical realism is therefore both a stylistic strategy and a reflection of the “real magic” which is exposed through the intertextual disintegration of polarizing conceptions of reality.

One danger in appealing to the “real magic” of Okri’s work, however, is that such a perspective tends to confl ate *textual realities* with the corresponding *spiritual* or *material realities* they represent. Derek Wright, for example, argues that writers like Okri claim:
that the spirit world of the novel is not an imaginary mythic, metaphorical, or parabolic construct after the fashion of magic realist; neither is it a surrealist fantasy, as in the folkloric dream-narratives of Amos Tutuola. Rather, it is a reality in its own right, an actuality that is itself fantastical, in which the dead are still alive, the marvelous takes place in the ordinary, and the supernatural is an accepted part of everyday life. In this single, seamless order of being all matter inheres with a spirit potential that manifest itself in erratic shifts of contour, substance, and genus, so that the human figures match the spirits in the bizarre and grotesque. (Wright 156)

While it may well be true that magical realism represents the literal reality of the spirit-world, it is crucial to keep in mind that, in magical realism like Okri’s and Harris’s, the idea of a monolithic conception of “traditional” ideology or cosmology is one of the many conventions being challenged through their fiction. In other words, to assume that each “ghostly” reference in the text corresponds to a “real” spirit is a precarious gamble unless one has personal experience or validation of that contention. In Okri’s work, for instance, the textual reality includes references to both Yoruba and Western cosmology, but also an abundance of invented or “revised” versions of gods and spirits.

The distinction between a textual reality and an “other” (“real”) reality, however, should not diminish the impact of the writer’s project. Rather, it should serve to further illuminate the implications of magical realism’s attempt to move beyond a strict, binary logic of “realism” as it suggests the possibilities of multiple realities. In this sense, Azaro’s abiku condition is real as both a feature of literal belief in the spirit-world and as a metaphor for the multiple levels of reality which form the basis for all human existence.

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4 For more on Okri’s belief in the spirit-world, see, for instance Olatubosun Ogunsanwo (“Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri’s The Famished Road” 1995).
Okri’s use of intertextuality is itself multi-faceted, particularly in his combination of Yoruba texts, cosmology and worldview with Western histories and texts. Unlike the metatextual and philosophical project of Wilson Harris, Okri’s work is more easily seen as part of a tradition of African literature and is therefore more closely linked to that tradition’s corresponding criticism and critical theory. Because issues of intention, audience, and tradition are heavily stressed in African literary criticism, Okri’s use of intertextuality demands special considerations. In terms of his Africa-based intertexts, then, several issues must be immediately addressed.

Because intertextuality takes place on linguistic, textual, and cultural levels in works like Okri’s, the matter of determining exactly what intertextuality means to African literature has been the matter of much debate in fields of literary studies, linguistics, and social sciences. As we have seen, references to European texts, as well as the use of Western conventions like the novel, often pose problematic concerns when accompanied by references to indigenous resources. The figure of the abiku, for example, is an intertextual reference that might have different meanings as figurative literary convention, cultural belief, or anthropological reference. In terms of Okri’s *Famished Road* cycle, then, I see three factors as being particularly relevant to our discussion of magical realist intertextuality: the concept of “traditional” cultural references, the question of the relationships between language use and representation, and the larger placement of Okri within an indigenous literary tradition.
The first factor concerns popular assumptions about the nature of "traditional" African references, which, as Eileen Julien warns, are often carry-overs from essentially anthropological conceptions in which "Africa is assumed to be ontologically oral" and "the act of writing is therefore disjunctive and alien for Africans" (8). By this perspective, Okri's use of magical realism to convey "traditional" concepts like the abiku might be interpreted as an attempt to articulate a conception of "traditional ideology" as a residual reference to pre-colonial Africa. The danger of this kind of interpretation lies in the fact that "tradition" thus becomes a static and monolithic event of the past: oral tradition is set up as the polar opposite of literate, post-contact modernity. Despite the obvious flaws in this logic (especially in that it denies the realities of pre-colonial literary traditions and thriving post-colonial indigenous traditions), often this conception of tradition governs criticism and interpretation of references to indigenous cultures in contemporary African literature. For this reason, "orality becomes overworked, and therefore devalued, . . . made to stand virtually alone as a measure of authenticity in contexts where little else seems to emanate from traditional culture" (21). This danger may be specifically relevant for "metropolitan" writers like Okri who are removed from ostensibly "traditional" settings, and actively participate in (Western) modes of postmodernist strategies. For such writers, intertextual references to orality may differ significantly from other (contemporary or previous) works from their home countries. It is thus all the more important that one be careful in "assessing how individual writers make their creative emergence from the true, not the wishful untainted back cloth" (Soyinka 1988:10). In other words, it is crucial to keep in mind that "tradition" is less an anthropological "fact" than a multi-faceted resource base for creative writers.
Second, considerations of the nature of language and representation are also contentious topics within Africanist debates. On the one hand, the concept of “palimpsest,” as theorized by Chantal Zabus, implies that “layers” of meaning (traditional and modern) have both textual and linguistic dimensions. “Behind the scriptural authority of the European language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the African language can still be perceived. . . . one can catch a glimpse of linguistic stratification, i.e., the multi-tiered system that differentially distributes the European language, the African language(s) and the languages in contact” (Zabus 3). Zabus sees the Europhone African novel as “a hybrid product which is looking ‘inward’ to African orature and literature and ‘outward’ to imported literary traditions” (4). Thus, “indigenization” is “the writer’s attempt at textualizing linguistic differentiation and at conveying African concepts, thought-patterns, and linguistic features through the ex-colonizer’s language” (3).

The relationship between language use and representation is made even more problematic by critics like Abdul JanMohamed and Ngugi, who see the use of Europeans languages themselves as psychologically and politically debilitating and restrictive:

From the political viewpoint what is significant [in the paradox of the will to particularism] is that the introduction of the English language, and consequently of the whole English culture, opens up a new world for the colonized man. But once he has learned to command that language he finds himself condemned to participate in the physically and culturally different worlds of the colonizer and the colonized, which are both engaged in a manichean conflict. Simply by using the alien medium the colonized writer is involved in an antagonistic dialogue (JanMohamed 283).

While the notion of palimpsest is attractive when one considers the multi-layered levels of reality in magical realism, the implication that the medium of representation (the use of a European language and genre) forces the African writer into a Manichean conflict with
indigenous and European modes of representation may ultimately distract the reader from the (however paradoxical) unifying project of magical realists like Okri and Harris.

On the other hand, however, some theorists have demonstrated that linguistic features may not necessarily "convey," in and of themselves, a specific worldview. Arguing against the "linguistic relativity" theory promoted by critics like Ngugi, Whorf, Sapir and Zabus, Alamin Mazrui promotes instead the Chomsky-inspired recent research which looks for linguistic universals in disparate languages and provides evidence to refute the claim that language and cultural perception have an inherently causal relationship. While colonial language policies, for instance, may have served as an "important cultural aid to colonialism" (in the case of French) or "to maintain social distance" between colonizer and colonized (British and German), Mazrui argues that there is no convincing evidence that the acquisition of European languages by Africans caused a major shift in ideological or cultural perception (166-169). Rather, he argues, material conditions determine both language and perception of the world (Mazrui 165). Masolo agrees, and further argues that language (or language use) itself doesn't necessarily determine or reflect an objective "reality" (101-102). This view is much more applicable to magical realist works than the theory of linguistic relativity, as it allows the reader to avoid challenging the "authenticity" of the writer, as well as allowing for interpretations of European-language African texts as autonomous responses to specific sociopolitical situations, rather than adoptions of an inherently faulty medium to convey an indigenous worldview.

Julien provides a helpful means of confronting these concerns. Using Bakhtin as a model for discussing intertextuality which "binds oral genres and the novel," Julien argues that
The history and contradictions of language (and literature) are present in my new act of speech (or writing), which – being particular to the historical moment and social circumstances in which I live – necessarily reconfigures language (textual signs) and its (their) meaning. The recombination of elements from other texts gives not the same elements with old meaning but new elements with new meaning. Semiotically speaking, repeating an utterance is not, in fact, to repeat it but is, rather, to speak in a new context and thus create a new utterance. So the elements of traditional oral genres repeated, as it were, in new forms mean something new, accomplish something different. (47)

While demands for authenticity are not to be confused with demands for accountability, such a perspective is useful in confronting accusations of "inauthenticity" in contemporary postcolonial magical realism. As Julien forcefully asserts, "demands for authenticity are a prescription for mystification" (154). She sees the desire to read an unaltered original or traditional meaning through orality in contemporary texts as essentializing, and suggests that perhaps the oppositions perceived between written and oral reflect a desire to erase "the distance in reality between two populaces, one rich, the other poor, one literate, the other oral" (158). In this respect, the magical realist use of both indigenous and imported intertextual references is best seen as authentic in its own right, as a literary project which is aware of the connections between "traditional" and "modern," as well as oral and literary, resources. Indeed, at the heart of the project of magical realism is the need to challenge the conceptualization of these simultaneous dimensions as fundamentally disparate or incompatible.

Finally, the third relevant factor of African intertexts in Okri's work relates specifically to his intertextual use of Yoruba epistemology and culture, particularly in respect to the Nigerian tradition established by FAGUNWA, TUTUOLA and SOYINKA. However original and cross-cultural his own use of magical realism may be, it is impossible to fully understand
Okri's work without situating him in the literary tradition to which his works repeatedly refer. After a brief overview of this tradition, then, one will begin to see how Okri's work emerges from, and transforms, the thematic and technical strategies of his predecessors.

The first consideration here is the inherently "intertextual" or integrative nature of the Yoruba worldview and its traditions, which themselves comprise a tradition of non-realist writing. In his discussion of early literary works by D. O. Fagunwa, Abiola Irele writes,

For the Yoruba, the balance of human life, the very sense of human existence, consists in the dynamic correlation of individual responsibility and the pressure of external events and forces. In the oral literature, the understanding that human fate is as much a matter of chance as of conscious moral choice is what determines its social function — their illustration of the moral and spiritual attributes needed by the individual to wrest a human meaning out of his life. In the folk tale, in particular, the imagination is led precisely towards a vision of the world that privileges the part of human will and responsibility, and by the same token reduces the forces of the arbitrary and the hazardous. It is this element of the folk tradition that is so vividly drawn out by Fagunwa in his novels. The trials and terrors, the forces that his heroes confront in their adventures, set off on the one hand the fragility of man, but on the other, by an ironic reversal, emphasize the every strength of his moral and spiritual resources through which he triumphs over nature. (1981:181)

Amos Tutuola continues this tradition in English, but through "a total reliving of the collective myth within the individual consciousness" (185). Wole Soyinka applauds Tutuola's famous The Palm-Wine Drinkard as "apart from the work of D. O. Fagunwa who writes in Yoruba, is the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer to gather multifarious

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5 Interestingly, the work of Tutuola and Fagunwa emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, at the same time as the Latin American "magical realism" movement. Thus Adewale Maja-Pearce's dismissal of Okri's work as "inferior imitation" of Latin American magical realism and "tedious exercise in the fantastic for its own sake" (in Wright 156) misses an important connection of an "internal" intertextuality which is part of the Nigerian literary tradition.
experiences under, if you like, the two cultures and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole” (1988:9). While Tutuola’s novels borrow heavily from Yoruba oral tradition in both style and content, incorporating puns and tongue-twisters (Okpewho 308-11), they also include various references to the imported culture of the West. His legacy is therefore the “imaginative duality” which expresses the fact that “the deistic approach of the Yoruba is to absorb every new experience, departmentalize it and carry on with life” (Soyinka 1988:9).

Like Okri’s, Tutuola’s “imagery reflects an unusual capacity for perceiving and realizing in concretely sensuous terms a certain order of experience that lies beyond the range of the ordinarily ‘visible’. And in this ability to give body to the fruits of his unusually productive imagination, Tutuola also displays the multiple facets of a sensibility keenly attuned to the marvelous and the mysterious” (Irele 1981:186). His “exploration of the governing symbols that translate the Yoruba perception of the forces that are active in the life of humanity” acts as an allegorical framework, while he “restores for us a sense of the fluid connotations that wrap around their central meaning” (187).

Tutuola’s work demonstrates that combining the traditional and the modern is a fact of African life, and in his work this “comes from an acceptance of life in all its manifestations,” illustrating “the contemporary imagination in a story-telling tradition” (Soyinka 1988:11). Soyinka also attempts to incorporate a sense of universal humanity and historical vision in his work and sees the role of the true artist as “the relentless seeker after the profound meaning of existence,” as the Professor in his play The Road (1965)
demonstrates (Irele 1981:193). Soyinka’s work is more explicitly cross-cultural in its intertextuality, however, than his predecessors’, as is seen, for example in his re-writing or revision The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite.

Okri’s Famished Road cycle clearly draws on this tradition of Nigerian writing, probably at least as much as it draws on traditional “folklore” or orality. As Irele notes, this tradition “expresses the essence of myth as a comprehensive metaphor of life: as a re-formulation of experience at the level of image and symbol so as to endow it with an intense spiritual significance” (1981:196). This re-formulation is similarly manifested in Okri’s work, decades later, in a changed political environment, and with a broad resource-base more aligned to Soyinka’s than Tutuola’s or Fagunwa’s.

Unlike Tutuola’s heroes, for example, Azaro lacks the “energetic stature” or “heroic potential” manifested as “partial inscriptions of communal values” (Quayson 1995:153). Similarly, in Okri, “the spaces of reality and of the spirit-world are no longer demarcated so that men can move from one to the other through their own volition. The logic of arbitrary shifts seems to take precedence over the volitional acts of the central characters” (Quayson 1997:137). Rather, his work more explicitly echoes Soyinka’s and other contemporary writers’, as in, for instance the “Abiku” poems of Soyinka (Idanre and Other Poems 1967:28-30) and Clark-Bekedemon, and the oghanje figure in Achebe’s novel. Also, although Okri himself denies a direct connection (Wilkinson 83),6 “the famished road” is an intertextual

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6 In a 1990 interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri said, “I think that when reading the novel one should just think of my primary sources as being the invisible books of spirit. My primary sources are those invisible books. And I mean that very seriously” (quoted in Wilkinson 88). This view, while it denies the intention of direct intertextual references present in his texts, seems more closely aligned to Harris’s view of the universal unconscious.
adaptation of Soyinka's line, "the road waits, famished," which appears in both his autobiography, *Ibadan*, and his poem "Death in the Dawn" (*Idanre and Other Poems* 1967:10-11). As in Soyinka's work, for Okri Yoruba thought provides a foundation as "the collective system represents a global reference for the individual artist's expression" (Irele 1981:193). In *The Road*, for instance, Yoruba belief is evidenced in "the fusion of the image of the road with the Yoruba belief in a transitional stage between life and death expressed in the Agemo cult" (Irele 1981:193).

However, Okri differs from Soyinka in his confrontation of the "real" and "spirit" worlds as paradoxically simultaneous. While for Soyinka, "*The Road* expresses the idea of existence as a becoming, as one long rite of passage" (Irele 1981:194), for Okri "the famished road" is the source of chaos and confusion, a perpetual and multivalent journey through the unexpected and unexpectable. As Quayson demonstrates, the difference for Okri is that

... the context in which the real world and that of spirits is explored is not in an either/or framework as is implied by the treatment of the concept [by] the earlier writers. Rather, because Azaro desires to stay in the real world while at the same time refusing to break links with that of his spirit companions, both real world and that of spirits are rendered problematically equivalent in his experience. (1997B:122)

Thus, intertextuality in Okri is both part of an ongoing Nigerian tradition as well as an original confrontation of the theme of "tradition versus modernity" encountered so frequently in postcolonial literatures. By erasing the distinctions between "real" and "spirit" worlds through the *african* figure, Okri "represents the indigenous resource-base comprehending its own hybridity and discursive eclecticism" (Quayson 1997B:163).
This is perhaps most evident in Okri’s extension of the metaphor of the *abiku* to the idea of nationhood and history, a concept which is most fully developed in *Infinite Riches*. With a characteristic ageless maturity and childlike innocence, the narrator suggests that “things that are not ready, not willing to be born...” History itself demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the *abiku*-child” (FR 487). While *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* confront this theme primarily through (sometimes obligatory) connections between the *abiku* and the nation-state, *Infinite Riches* provokes a more subtle and nuanced intertextuality, by broadening the cross-cultural connections of history and consciousness.

Thus, while Okri clearly draws on the resources of an established Nigerian literary tradition in addition to his use of a more cross-cultural intertextuality, his adaptation of “traditional” elements like the *abiku* figure to fit a particular postcolonial perspective distinguish him as part of a “new generation” of African writers who reject the conventions of realism in new and highly original ways. As we shall see in the next section, Okri’s development of the themes of liminality and history, in particular, provide a perspective on magical realism which differs greatly from Harris’s, and poses additional questions for our project of understanding the “political” implications of this genre.

3.4 THEMES OF LIMINALITY AND HISTORY IN *INFINITE RICHES*

In *Infinite Riches*, Ben Okri utilizes the strategies and conventions of magical realism to evoke many of the same concerns found in the work of Wilson Harris. While the authors
differ greatly in background, style and technique, they both confront through their literature the same fundamental issue: namely, the paradoxes involved in epistemological differentiation between the “real” and the “unreal.” As we have seen, both writers also employ various strategies of intertextuality to demonstrate the need for a cross-cultural understanding of the complexities of human experience, particularly in postcolonial settings.

On a formal level, Okri’s work greatly differs from Harris’s. Like The Infinite Rehearsal, Infinite Riches is not a plot-driven novel. Azaro’s unpredictable movement between worlds provides the main “structure” and motion of the text, although there is a sense of linear time implicit in the political unrest over the “up-coming” elections and the general sense of apprehension for the future on the text’s “mortal” level. However, unlike The Infinite Rehearsal (which consists of nine untitled chapters, a pre-facing “note” and Ghost’s “postscript”), Okri near-“infinitely” divides and sub-divides his text into numerous sections. The text is comprised of five major parts or movements (headed with roman numerals), which contain eight untitled “books,” each of which is sub-divided into numerous fragmentary chapters. The one hundred-fourteen total chapters, bearing titles such as “Invisible books,” “Ghosts of narratives past,” “Night of wondrous transformations,” and “Dad summons his ancestors, and fails,” range in length from one sentence to about ten pages. The formal character of the text is difficult to fully understand; partly because the “numerology” of the text is incomprehensible, and the grouping of fragmented chapters into

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7 The text is formatted as follows: Part I (pp. 4-169) contains: Book One (26 chapters), Book Two (15 chapters), Book Three (5 chapters), Book Four (4 chapters); Part II (pp. 170-212): Book Five (15 chapters); Part III (pp. 213-56): Book Six (14 chapters); Part IV (pp. 257-77): book Seven (4 chapters); and Part V (pp. 279-338): Book Eight (32 chapters). (Discrepancies in pagination indicate blank pages.)
books often seems arbitrary. These formal traits contribute to the text’s elusive “plot,” creating a highly fragmented series of “wanderings” through Azaro’s psyche. While Azaro is the ostensible “narrator” of the novel, and the trope of “revision” and “rewriting” is developed throughout the text, Okri does not evoke any of the metatextuality found in Harris, as Azaro seems “unaware” of his role as “author.”

Further, while Harris’s work is guided by a concrete philosophical premise and project, Okri’s *Famished Road* cycle is often much more ambiguous. Indeed, Okri’s main project seems to be a direct engagement with the ambivalence of the postcolonial situation. Therefore, themes of liminality and the interstitial permeate his work, as well as themes of history and revision. By comparing Okri’s development of these themes to Harris’s, one can better understand the points of convergence and divergence in their approaches to magical realism.

To begin, *Infinite Riches*, like *The Infinite Rehearsal*, deals explicitly with themes of liminality. Both Azaro and Robin are located in an interstitial space of ambiguity, simultaneously connected to both the “real” and “spirit” worlds. However, while in Harris’s novel each character is equally part of this liminality, in the *Famished Road* cycle, only Azaro and his spirit-companions have full access to the spirit-world. Further, the spirit-world of Okri’s texts is, quite literally, the realms of ghosts and un-earthly spirits, while in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, this realm is the world of universal consciousness, more of a “spiritual-world” than a “spirit-world.” In this respect, Okri speaks directly to Yoruba ideology and belief, while Harris speaks more generally to a sense of universal spirituality.

It is important to remember, however, that a central paradox in *Infinite Riches*, as noted earlier regarding the *abiku* figure, is the revision of Yoruba ideology as a response to
social and economic realities. "Traditional" belief is not set up as a monolithic cosmology, but rather as an inclusive and accommodating worldview. In this respect, tradition itself becomes part of the theme of ambiguity and liminality. This aspect of Okri's approach is best seen in *Infinite Riches* through the widely cross-cultural aspects of the spirit-world.

An interesting illustration of this view of spirituality is found in a scene in which Azaro's Dad is in prison, having been arrested for a murder he did not commit. Badly beaten and entranced by a feverish delusion, he begins to "call out the names of the ancestors," enlisting their help. However, "his brain was all in a tumble, and his lips were so swollen that the names came out differently. He got stuck in the grove of his spirit." One of the names he chants is "Ozoro, the warrior, blacksmith;"

... who fought in one of the white man's wars and was surprised by the softness of their spirits. He returned home an uncrowned hero, forgotten by those whose war he had fought; but he brought with him a message that the white man's power was both real and an illusion, a reality that hadn't been faced, and an illusion that had been accepted. Dad chanted the great name of Ozoro more than any other, the Ozoro who claimed that spirits are essentially the same the world over, and that power resides in hard work, in scientific investigation, in intellectual curiosity, in creative greatness and freedom, in the fullest exploration of our human powers, and in the truest independence. ... Before he died he announced that in the spirit-world we had already gone past the age of technology and entered the era of pure power, the power that moves... planets... the heart and all destiny. ... [His] last cry to the world, the essence of his legacy, was: 'CATCH UP WITH YOURSELVES!' (50-51)

Here, one sees how Okri's formulation of the spirit-world relates to Harris's conception of "vision of consciousness" as historical, contemporary and futuristic; the fact of power as both reality and illusion is explicated through an imaginative magical realism which restructures perceptions of both Yoruba and Western logic.
Further, when Dad finishes chanting, and “none of his ancestors appeared,” he “fell to wailing, to throwing himself about. And when the darkness cleared from his mind he saw three forms over him. Thinking that they were his ancestors at last made manifest, he assumed an attitude of utmost reverence” (51). These “forms,” however, are “three men” who take him to an interrogation room, where he is later joined by a “white man” who is infuriated to waste his time on a man who only babbles the names of his ancestors and cannot hear “because of his swollen ears” (51). In this passage, Okri demonstrates the ruptures, the violence, and the suffering caused by colonialism, but also the paradoxically liberatory possibilities involved in moving beyond the illusory conceptions of immediate time and space, linear logic, to the “spirit-world” where one can see objectively the “true reality” of the interconnectedness of all things. Whatever the bleak condition of daily life in the text, the ability to access a “more true” reality, in which paradoxes exist comfortably, provides the main mechanism for liberation and hope throughout the novel.

While the “linear” action of the novel centers on Dad and the upcoming elections, throughout the text, Azaro frequently finds himself “observing” the actions, thoughts, and dreams of other characters. Because of his own liminal position, the choice to stay in the world of the living, Azaro has defied his “true” nature as agbeku and cannot control his movement between the every-day and spirit-worlds. A secondary “sub-plot” is thus developed as Azaro finds himself periodically observing, and entering the consciousness or dreams of, the parallel figures of the Governor-General and “the old woman of the forest,” both of whom are re-writing history. In these passages, which we will discuss at length, Okri best develops his themes of history and revision.
In one such passage, just before entering the Governor-General's mansion, Azaro is home, sick in bed, with "the whole world... in the room... All the events of our history were alive in the little space... Is history the vivid hallucinations of time... The ghosts of historical consequences wandered through our room, looking for their destinations" (110). Azaro then "sees" the Governor-General and the old woman in the forest, parallel figures who represent, on one level, the conflicting realities of African history: the equally "invented" histories of the colonizer and the indigenous population. The Governor-General, who is about to seal the fate of the unborn nation as its independence has been scheduled, in writing his memoirs, is "rewriting" and "reinventing" the history of Africa, alternately in terms of love and disgust. Simultaneously, Azaro observes the old woman of the forest "weaving... our true secret history" in her own, invented language.

Okri creates here a conception of history as the process of re-vision and re-writing, informed by infinite sources. This history is the revision of consciousness implicit in Harris's "limbo" and Homi Bhabha's "third space"\(^8\) — the continuous revision of history comprised of both past and present resources which constitute the immediate "space" of a hybrid reality. Like the \textit{abiku}, history and nations are in an ongoing state of revision and rebirth. By juxtaposing the revised histories of the Governor-General and the old woman, Okri presents a view of tradition very similar to the intertextual revisions we have seen in \textit{The Infinite Rehearsal}.

The figure of the Governor-General, who undergoes a revision himself in the novel, is especially interesting in terms of the implications of an "imposed" history. The history

\(^8\) We will discuss Bhabha's formulation of the "third space" in more detail in the next chapter.
that he invents, however imagined and derogatory, is considered as “real” and influential as the “true” history woven by the old woman in the forest. In this respect, the Governor-General is analogous to Don Juan Ulysses Frog in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, a colonial figure who struggles, consciously and unconsciously, to reconcile his conflicting relationship to the “other” he imagines Africa to be.

When he is first encountered, Azaro has been “circling” “in and out of the dreams of the community” (both the living and the dead). The Governor-General is sleeping in his mansion, “dreaming about colonial rule” (11):

> In his dream he was destroying all the documents. Burning all the evidence. Shredding history. As I lingered in the Governor-General’s dream a wave of darkness washed me to an island, across the ocean, where many of our troubles began, and on whose roads, in a future life, I would wander and suffer and find a new kind of light. (11-12)

What is significant in this passage is the prophetic connection between the Governor-General (who, surely, in pre-Independence Nigeria, was British) and the England “where many of our troubles began,” and where Azaro anticipates postcolonial suffering and revelation. While Okri develops a fluidity of consciousness here – one can become something/someone else in a future life – he maintains throughout Azaro’s sense of “we” as the local community, or the communal consciousness exhibited through the Yoruban intertexts. Thus, there is a continuous tension in the text between the localized ideology of the community and the universal reality of the spirit-world, where all humans unite (before and after “life”).

The Governor-General does not just appear through Azaro’s dreams, however; he also figures as a character through his position as the British authority “responsible” for the politics and poverty of the pre-Independence chaos. When Azaro’s Dad is imprisoned, a
mob of women from the community pressure his Mum, their unwilling leader, to “sweep into the Government House and storm the doors of the Governor-General” (36). At this point, Azaro (part omniscient narrator, part dream-voyeur), reveals his sequestered activities, in a passage which clearly delineates the contradictory elements of the colonial psyche:

The Governor-General had spent seventeen days burning the crucial papers relating to the governance of a country whose people he did not much like, and seldom saw except as shapes with menacing eyes and too many languages, too many gods, too many leaders. A people who took too little interest in the preservation of their culture.

He still had twenty-eight days to burn all the secret documents, all the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation, the redrawn boundaries, memos... He also burned diary references to the three African women who consoled him while his wife badgered him about the plums of summer and the seashores of Cornwall. The women bore him seven children, whom he denied, though he was to send each of them fifty pounds a year for life, anonymously.

And when he heard the story of the marauding women, I saw his eyes light up their green and blue of lovely deep sea fishes. (36)

Unlike The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment, in passages like this, Infinite Riches addresses specified moments and locations of colonial violence, confusion, and paradox. This addition of detail, coupled with the familiar flowering passages of esoteric dreamscape, allows Okri’s intertextuality and magical realism to come through more forcefully. In this way, the Governor-General becomes a character in the text as much as a symbol of imperialism, and his own psychology is explored delicately, through a wife who longs for the summers and plums of England, and the illegitimate African children he denies yet cannot deny.

In a chapter titled “The battle of rewritten histories,” Azaro is in bed in the room in which he and his parents live, recovering from an injury in the soon-to-be-deforested forest. Here, the Governor-General appears again, having finished burning “all the incriminating
documents relating to the soon-to-be-created-nation. When he had finished, he proceeded, in his sloping calligraphic hand, to rewrite our history” (110).

This "rewriting" of history by the Governor-General translates to the colonial legacy, the legacy Okri grew up with and we experience today. The Governor-General rewrites the geography, the names, the languages, the foods and plants and seasons, and immediately Azaro feels the change: “The renamed things lost their old reality. They became lighter, and stranger. They became divorced from their old selves. They lost their significance and sometimes their shape. And they suddenly seemed new to us – new to us who had given them the names by which they responded to our touch” (111). The Governor-General becomes more passionate, more empowered, as he writes on and on, and Azaro catalogues the losses that the Governor-General deprives them of: language, poetry, architecture, civic laws, mathematics, abstract conception, philosophy. Here, Okri provides, with irony and grace, an assessment of the legacy of colonialism and the effects of epistemic discourse as concisely as any theorist has:

He deprived us of history, and of civilization and, unintentionally, deprived us of humanity too. Unwittingly, he effaced us from creation. And then, somewhat startled at where his rigorous logic had led him, he performed the dexterous feat of investing us with life the moment his ancestors set eyes on us as we slept through the great roll of historical time. With a stroke of his splendid calligraphic style, he invested us with life. History came to us with his Promethean touch, as his pen touched our Adamic souls. And we awoke into history, stunned and ungrateful, as he renamed our meadows and valleys, and forgot the slave trade. (111)

And as the Governor-General rewrites the history of “we whose secret ways have entered into the bloodstream of world-wonders silently,” he alters both the past and the present (112).
At the same time, however, the “old woman in the forest pressed on with the weaving of our true secret history,” a history “that was frightening and wondrous, bloody and comic, labyrinthine, circular, always turning, always surprising, with events becoming signs, and signs becoming reality” (112). It is in this “true” and “secret” history that Okri develops a sense of cross-cultural universality of consciousness, the space in which paradoxical elements of human consciousness are accepted as part of a unified whole. Thus the old woman can be related to the figure of Ghost in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, a sort of guiding spirit of the universality of consciousness, a figure who represents the need to assimilate contrary conceptions and accept them as part of an inclusive whole.

Since she “represents” the indigenous population (like “illiterate Ghost”), the old woman re-covers a specifically African history, the histories eclipsed by the Governor-General’s version:

She recorded snatches of conversations heard on the wind, conversations that had floated across from other continents... She recorded stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativities of African Time and Space, how Time is both finite and infinite, how Time curves, how Time also dances, how Space is negative, how Space is always populated, how Space is the home of invisible beings, the true destination of death... She recorded forgotten items of meteorological discoveries, calculation of distances to stars as yet unnoticed, and astronomical incidents: the date of a stellar explosion, a supernova bursting over the intense dream of the continent, heralding, according to a king’s soothsayer, a brief nightmare of colonization, and an eventual, surprising, renaissance. (113-114)

While the history that the old woman “codes” involves the specifics of African experience, she also reveals a universal human history that corresponds directly to Harris’s view of a universal “vision of consciousness”: “

She even coded fragments of the great jigsaw that the creator spread all over the diverse peoples of the earth, hinting that no one race or people can have the complete picture or monopoly of the ultimate possibilities of the human
genius alone. With her magic she suggested that it's only when all peoples meet and know and love one another that we begin to get an inkling of this awesome picture, or jigsaw, or majestic power. (112)

Unlike the Governor-General's writing, however, the old woman's weaving is a secret code, in her own private language, and she "kept the deciphering of the code to herself" (113). The implication here is that the old woman's "true" history, however liberatory and inclusive, is elusive to the individual, a "secret" not easily revealed in a paradoxical world.

Thus, the parallel histories of the old woman and the Governor-General, cited at length to give a sense of their scope and complexity, are both simultaneously real and illusory. The Governor-General's history is an illusion that gives rise to a sociopolitical reality of global exploitation and condescension, poverty and racism, hate, fear, and death. The old woman in the forest's history is a reality that has become an illusion in a world ruled by the Governor-General's "hard copy" document. However, if the old woman's weaving is lost, forgotten, or manipulated, it is a spiritual history, whose essence and optimism can be recovered through patient excavation. Through Azaro's voyages into disparate consciousnesses, Okri uses magical realism mechanism for recovering the "lost" history which reveals the "true" realities of human understanding. Despite the harsh realities and violence of the text, Infinite Riches retains a persistent, if tenuous, grasp on the possibilities of recovering the "spirit-world" of infinite consciousness.

As the text moves on, the old woman continues to weave, from her hidden house in the forest, and to comfort the people in the slums with cool night breezes. Meanwhile, the Governor-General finishes the first draft of "the rewriting of our lives," argues with his wife over the heat and ponders "Ovid's indirect theory of racial differentiation," while his daughter, set afire by hallucinated spirits, almost burns the house down (120-124). Such
parallels between the old woman and the Governor-General persist; while the Governor-General becomes increasingly complex and inquisitive, the old woman becomes increasingly benevolent and enigmatic. She weaves “a tender myth of how white people were invented” while the Governor-General prepares for the first elections and begins to think of returning to England to write his memoirs (128).

While Okri roots Azaro’s community and family in a distinctly Yoruba tradition, the old woman in the forest seems at times to represent a Pan-African “spirit” or totality. While Okri does maintain throughout a sense of communal “we” through Azaro, he avoids an essentializing Pan-Africanism like that promoted in Alexander Crummel’s racialism or Kwame Anthony Appiah’s de-racialized version. While there may at times be tension between the political and spiritual sense of Africanity and the universalizing gestures in Okri’s text, the vision of humanity as the “great jigsaw” points to the interconnectedness of all things. This is most clearly demonstrated through the further struggles of the Governor-General in his rewriting of African history.

The Governor-General is not simply an unrelenting, allegorical imperialist figure in the text. Like Harris’s Don Juan Ulysses Frog, he experiences a Fanonian psychosis. As the elections near, he begins to sense an awareness of his connections to Africa that surprise and enlighten him. In a curious passage, as he’s revising his history, he begins to recall the passions and pleasures he has experienced during his commission, and writes “WHEN YOU BEGIN TO FALL IN LOVE WITH A PLACE THAT YOU HAVE WOUNDED IN SOME DEEP WAY, MAYBE IT’S TIME TO LEAVE” (158). He thus begins to realize that the songs of Africa “had become part of his spirit and his future yearnings” (159), and revises his history as a “celebration” of Africa, extolling the docility and light-heartedness,
the excess and passion of her people. As he writes this, he’s suddenly disturbed and entranced by the singing of his servants. He goes to the door to see a child he had noticed/not noticed earlier sitting on the lawn “surrounded by a yellow glow” (160). He approaches the child and a strange a moth startles him, chasing him back into the house, where he writes a strange and revealing passage, in which he wonders “about the possibility that there were angels in disguise among the wretched of the earth . . . he found himself writing about angels in Africa . . . about the unnamed ones, who seem to be human, with eyes that penetrate the human spirit and see into the full nakedness of the heart and conscience. Then his mind dissolved into an indigo space as, unknowingly, he wrote the following problematic lines”:

‘What happens to Empires . . . ? . . . Rome is now a glorified theatre of ruins . . . Egypt is a necropolis. They conquer the world and are later overrun by the world. Because they set out to dominate the world they are condemned to live with the negative facts of their domination. They will be changed by the world that they set out to colonize. They shrink, and their former glory becomes an angry shadow. Is that the fate of imperialists . . . ? Is it possible that those we colonize will later overrun us? Are we too to suffer the fate of all overreachers – the inevitable evisceration of the spirit?’

The Governor-General paused again. He was unaware that an angel, all celestial fire and gold, was poised just above him . . . Soaring and lost in himself, he wrote that in the beginning the creator spread the great jigsaw of humanity and human genius among the peoples of the earth and that no people can have the complete picture alone. He wrote that:

‘It is only when the diverse peoples of the earth meet and learn from and love one another that we can begin to get an inkling of this awesome picture . . .’ (162-63)

Thus, the Governor-General, in a frenzy of “spirit” writes the same “true” history as the old woman in the forest. His transformations embody characteristics of other literary colonizers: Conrad’s Kurtz and Marlowe, Achebe’s District Commissioner, Ngugi’s Mr. Howlands. Yet, in this moment, he is freed from “himself” and submits to the unconscious
"spirit" (vision of consciousness) which allows him to see and understand that the illusion of
difference prevents him from understanding the true "music of our collective soul, of our
immense possibilities, of our infinite riches" (162). That these title words, lifted from
Christopher Marlowe ("infinite riches in a little room") are spoken through the Governor-
General implies that Okri's project is closely aligned with Harris's. Through processes of
revision, one can begin to articulate the deeper, hidden truths which are cross-cultural and
universal. While specificity of location (time and place) have a profound effect on one's
psychological and experiential existence, transcendence of the conventions and restrictions
of one's location are necessary in the pursuit of "infinite riches."

These moments, however, as Okri constantly reminds us, are fleeting. Immediately,
we are told that, much later, in England, the Governor-General rediscovery those lines and is
surprised, because he had no memory of having written them. This concept of "not
knowing" he had written the text is reminiscent of Robin's demands of W. H. mentioned
earlier: "I uttered... without thinking. I spoke... without knowing I had spoken... Such
involuntary speech (half-simulated, half-unscripted) sprang out of the dilemmas of a post-
colonial civilization, out of Third Worlds, and bewildered First Worlds" (Harris 1987:46).
Like Robin, the Governor-General has no "control" over his text; he has unwittingly
experience the liberatory "vision of consciousness" possible by engaging in what Harris calls
a "dialogue with the past." It is ironic, then, that "when his memoirs came out to a modest
critical reception, he would much regret... that he had allowed the editor... to cut out that
passage which he felt constituted the most inspired fruit of his colonial service" (IR 162-3).
Despite his lack of conscious knowledge of this "dialogue," the Governor-General
intuitively senses the import of the universal consciousness which "appears" in his text.
Meanwhile, Azaro watches on from “the darkness of our small room in the ghetto.” the Governor-General’s “inspired mood had deserted him and the singing had stopped,” the moth had flown out the window “into a sky magnetized by an unusual saturation of the yellow dust of angels” (163). Later, Azaro enters his dream to find horrific, Conradian nightmare: from fear-infested jungle to travel down “splendid” roads marked by the signs “HEART OF WORLD” and “BRAVE NEW DARKNESS,” the Governor-General embarks on a “civilizing mission” for God (203-5). “The Governor-General’s dreams,” Azaro knows, “sowed misery in the realms where dreams become real. But he lived long enough to witness the first of the ambiguous harvests of the karmic dust of angels” (206). Thus, like the old woman’s “secret” and “coded” history, the Governor-General’s revelation is elusive and precarious. While Okri himself “weaves” the “true” and liberating universal history through the text, the harsh restrictive realities of the every-day world are consistently presented as barriers to an enlightened understanding of the world.

In this way, Okri’s magical realism is anchored to the realities of the everyday world in ways that Harris’s is not. Where a solid philosophical premise and intertextual project direct Harris’s fiction, Okri plays on a theme of ambivalence, exposing the “truth” and then contradicting it with the “reality.” The political chaos of the novel, which pits “The Party of the Rich” against the indistinguishable “Party of the Poor” and shouts “POLITICS IS NOT A LAUGHING MATTER!,” is only futilely influenced by the forces of the spirit world. However, in Azaro’s decision to stay in the world of the living, “an alternative to the despair of the world [is] expressed by the abiku’s departure from it... a defiant assertion of faith in Africa’s material survival and betterment, no matter how difficult the circumstances and how great the suffering” (Wright 154). Whatever the political message Okri is trying to convey,
the fact remains that “the abiku, in his tenuous earthly presence,” has chosen the chaos of the world over the relative “security” of the spirit-world (Hawley 38). Ultimately, it is the human, the mortal and dangerous realities of humanity, which holds the power to change the world. In Infinite Riches, the paradoxical nature of being overcomes both the pessimism of disillusionment and poverty and the optimism of “the karmic dust of angels.”

In an interview, Okri has argued that “in an atmosphere of chaos art has to disturb something. For art to be distinctive it either has to be very cool, very clear – which, in relation to chaos, is a negative kind of disturbance – or it has to be more chaotic, more violent than the chaos around” (in Wilkinson 81). Clearly, the “chaotic” narrative of Infinite Riches attempts to articulate this goal of “disturbance.” Okri further contends that to create a new “level of art” which has the potential “for something good to come about,” one must “liberate it from old kinds of perception, which is a kind of destruction. An old way of seeing things has to be destroyed for the new to be born” (81, emphasis mine). In this respect, Okri’s project is clearly aligned to Harris’s; both writers use magical realism as an explicit attempt to articulate a “new” vision of reality which they believe has a profound potential to impact the “real” world, in terms of consciousness and change.

However, Okri and Harris differ most fundamentally on the matter of “tradition.” Where Harris’s theory is grounded in an unwavering dedication to the principle of cross-cultural imagination and the universality of “infinite rehearsals,” Okri more explicitly extends his own universalizing conceptions of history and consciousness to the individual and the ways in which the individual confronts his/her own sociopolitical situation. He best summarizes this perspective in A Way of Being Free.
There is no such thing as a powerless people. There are only those who have not seen and have not used their power and will. It would seem a miraculous feat, but it is possible for the unvalued ones to help create a beautiful new era in human history. New vision should come from those who suffer the most and who love life the most. The marvelous responsibility of the unheard and the unseen resides in this paradox. Nature and history are not just about the survival of the fittest, but also about the survival of the wisest, the most adaptive, and the most aware. (Okri 1997:103)

Clearly, Okri’s emphasis on the global distortion of power-relations points to an essentially Manichean understanding of the political aspects of human interaction. While this may appear to conflict with his attempt to articulate the universal and literal realities of the spiritworld and the world of dreams, it indicates, above all, Okri’s perpetual ambivalence and his desire to articulate the ambiguities and paradoxes of human existence.

While Harris confronts these ambiguities with a clear directive of the universal “capacity” for imaginative reconstruction of identity and history, Okri’s ambivalent stance is a type of directive in its own right. While we may yet see a more fully developed articulation of Okri’s position as his future work unfolds, the foregrounding of the ambiguities of human existence in Infinite Riches demonstrates that magical realism does not necessarily provide the “answers” to postcolonial problems, but rather addresses the complications and concerns of sociopolitical paradoxes while attempting to articulate a spiritual reality which extends beyond the conventional expectations of what is “real.” Thus, if Harris’s brand of magical realism derives its power from its ability to grapple with the “eclipsed” continuities and connections of human experience and consciousness, Okri’s magical realism finds its own most powerful implications in its very ambiguity. The “chaos” of Infinite Riches establishes both a glimpse of potential enlightenment and a firm case for the need for social and cultural
change by demonstrating that the “next” battle, the battle to reconcile the paradoxes implicit in modern life, has yet to be fully recognized as “the battle of rewritten histories” (110) and “contending dreams” (203).
CHAPTER FOUR

WHO'S AfRAID OF POSTCOLONIAL GHOSTS?
CONNECTING MAGICAL REALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

We live in an age when writers need confidence. I think this applies to writers from the so-called Third World as much as anywhere else. Unless one can arrive at some ground of confidence which has to do with the profound roots of the imagination, what is fiction? It's just a piece of rubbish that we toss on the heap. . . . Fiction is . . . profoundly relevant . . . provided one can sense the roots of the imaginative thrust, and to sense . . . how we are in dialogue with the past, how our unconscious links us into what you may call the native world from which we have come, but also unleashes a universality, that can tie apparently alien configurations together.

- Wilson Harris, “Judgement and Dream” (66)

All I'm trying to do is write about the world from the worldview of that place so that it is true to the characters. . . . It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions.

- Ben Okri (quoted in Wright 156)

Thus far, we have explored the practice of magical realism by postcolonial writers by challenging the conception of a specifically “postcolonial” magical realism (in Chapter One) and by looking at examples of magical realism in the work of Ben Okri and Wilson Harris. As we have seen, while it involves various strategies and techniques, the fiction of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri seems to conform to the definitions and expectations of “magical realism” in both content and style. Whether it is useful or inhibiting to classify their works within this genre is another matter. While both writers employ the conventions of magical realism, they are writers from different generations, different geographical locations, and
have very different perspectives on the potential of their work. A conception of magical realism predicated on the author's location within a postcolonial context, therefore, may ultimately prove to diminish the impact and possibilities of such fiction.

Considering the tradition of non-mimetic literature in "the West" discussed in Chapter One, a definition of magical realism as explicitly postcolonial becomes highly problematic in light of the widely varying approaches to magical realism by postcolonial writers. Although the novel itself may be an "imported" medium of expression in postcolonial areas, the magical realism of writers like Okri and Harris challenges more than just the conventions of realist genres. In other words, a view of "postcolonial magical realism" (i.e. the use of magical realism by postcolonial writers) as essentially a rejection of "imported" values and traditions runs the risk of overlooking the deeper implications of such fiction.

While magical realism provides a mechanism for confronting postcolonial concerns, particularly the complications involved in the conjunction of disparate ideologies and worldviews, the issues raised by writers like Harris and Okri concerning a "universal consciousness" seem problematically aligned to the emphasis on specificity in postcolonial studies. Since much postcolonial literary theory centers on the idea of the postcolonial novelist "writing back" to an imperial center, the question of "audience" for postcolonial magical realism poses serious considerations. Given the location of writers like Okri and Harris within the camps of both "postcolonial writers" and "magical realists," one must, therefore, confront the question of how to approach magical realism with the tools of postcolonial theory.
Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the field of postcolonial theory has become a hot academic enterprise, crowded with discourse and counter-discourse from all branches of "postcolonial" area studies. The work in postcolonial theory has been instrumental in negotiating interdisciplinary and cross-cultural concerns in literary fields, and it has also served to establish a distinct sub-branch of literary theory under the umbrella of "postcolonial theory." While postcolonial theory is clearly far from a monolithic category, its central concerns with questions of location, agency, hybridity, and subjectivity provide a new arena of discussion for "postcolonial literature" outside of "Eurocentric" models of literary analysis.

In this chapter, then, I investigate some of the connections between magical realism and postcolonial theory. Having already problematized the conception of magical realism as specifically postcolonial, the central question directing this inquiry is: *to what extent is postcolonial theory helpful in understanding the implications of magical realism?* Using the work of Wilson Harris and Ben Okri as illustrations, I interrogate both the possibilities and limitations of postcolonial theory in elucidating the concerns raised by magical realism, focusing on four key areas of overlap between magical realism and postcolonial theory: hybridity; mimicry, migrancy and belief in magic; universality and subjectivity; and the political implications of fiction.

First, given the syncretic nature of magical realism, it is important to examine the relationship between Harris's concept of "limbo" and theories of "hybridity" developed by postcolonial theorists. While Homi K. Bhabha, who is commonly credited with popularizing this theory, sees "hybridity" in similar ways to Harris, the implications of his and Harris's theories may differ. Particularly significant here are the implications of critiques of hybridity
and postcolonial politics, which give rise to the question of the extent to which postcolonial theory is able to accommodate actual belief in universal consciousness and “spirit.”

Second, the contention that postcolonial literature “writes back” to Europe is a problematic issue in postcolonial theory. Given the “migrant” status of writers like Okri and Harris, this issue becomes even more problematic when one considers the questions of “audience” and “authenticity.” In this section, I examine these concerns in terms of the complications involved in determining which “reality” magical realists attempt to represent. The matter of actual belief in the spirit world, as we will see, poses very serious difficulties for postcolonial theory.

Third, the tension between “universality” and “subjectivity” is a central focus of much postcolonial theory. How does one confront questions of “identity” through a universalizing model like the one Harris proposes? Given the unambiguous stance of writers like Harris and Okri on the universality of human consciousness, how useful is postcolonial theory in helping to elucidate their work?

Finally, issues of metropolitanism, location and politics pose serious concerns for postcolonial theorists. If magical realism can be accepted as a specific response to imperialist or postcolonial sociopolitical situations, how is one to read the fiction of Okri and Harris, long-time expatriates? Is their work “relevant” to the on-going struggles of the people their work supposedly “represents?” If so, to what extent? How can one approach the “politics” of magical realism? Is their subversion of dominant paradigms merely textual, or does it also involve an explicitly social or revolutionary aspect?
4.1 HYBRIDITY AND "THE LIMBO GATEWAY"

To begin, liminality and the interstitial, in both Okri and Harris' texts, are manifested on various levels, as thresholds of every sort are challenged or denied, including the concept of "history" as an objective fact. Through Robin and Azaro, the trope of "revision" or "rewriting" emerges as both a theme and a theory, thus dissolving the apparent distinction between theory and experience. This issue relates directly to Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Harris's concept of "the limbo gateway." Bhabha and Harris both emphasize the importance of understanding the plurality of identity as a metaphorical "space" which is informed by social and ideological forces that operate along an historical continuum.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha focuses on the concept of "the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world" (21). Concepts of "hybridity" in postcolonial theory are not distinctive to Bhabha, although his version seems to attract the most attention. What he calls for is a new theoretical discourse which "opens up a space of translation; a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations" (25). This negotiation between the "one" and "the other" is what Bhabha calls a "third space" of cultural hybridity. In literature, this hybrid third space reflects the fact that language is "never simply mimetic and transparent" (36) but rather evidence of the ambiguity of meaning which "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing" (37) and posits history within the third space - as a part of this hybrid construction. He refers to a "discursive temporality" in which "the event of theory becomes
the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle, and destroy those negative polarities between knowledge and its objects, and between theory and practical-political reason" (25).

Bhabha's conception of hybridity can therefore find an easy illustration in the multiplicity of magical realist characterization. Azaro and Robin Redbreast Glass, as we have seen, both occupy a "third space" of sorts — neither exclusively "native" nor exclusively "foreign," participating in both material and spiritual worlds. Further, the "hybrid" histories evidenced in Harris's metatextual "revisions" and Okri's "weavings" and "writings" seem to fit neatly into Bhabha's definition of the non-homogenous cultural experience.

Further, Bhabha's concept of hybridity is clearly analogous to Harris' own theory of "limbo." "Limbo," as we have seen, "reflects a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles" (1981:379). Thus limbo, like Bhabha's third space, becomes the metaphoric space in which the ongoing process of historical knowledge is stored and contained. It is not, he insists, the "total recall of an African past", but "rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" (380). Harris sees the limbo gateway as both spatial dislocation and accommodation, born out of the "art of creative coexistence born of great peril and strangest capacity for renewal" (380). Thus, limbo is a subversive strategy, in which "a community... is involved in an original reconstruction or re-creation of variables of myth and legend in the wake of stages of conquest" (381). When considered in relation to his concept of a universal capacity for "vision of consciousness," the limbo space becomes, like Bhabha's hybrid "third space," the site for imaginative construction and reconstruction. According to Bhabha, this space allows
for the negotiation and translation of cultural identity within "a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference" (38) – a strategy which allows the postcolonial subject to "revise the known" (175) and re-claim political agency.

It is worth noting that Bhabha owes a mysteriously unacknowledged debt to Wilson Harris. While he does cite a short excerpt from Harris in *The Location of Culture*, it is not to acknowledge that Harris, twenty years prior in "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas" and *Tradition, the Writer, and Society*, had anticipated theories of "hybridity" with his ideas of the limbo gateway, itself a concept borrowed from Brathwaite. Rather, he cites Harris as evidence of "the cultural and historical dimension of that Third Space of enunciates which I have made the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference" (38). Further, both Harris and Bhabha use the terms "translation" and "re-vision," the latter being "broadly cognate with Bhabha's liberatory conception of 'catchresis'" (Moore-Gilbert 183). Similarly, Harris's conception of "infinite rehearsal" is conceptualized much like Bhabha's idea of the "performative" (183), while Harris's concept of "a certain 'void' or misgiving attending every assimilation of contraries," like "limbo," is virtually identical to Bhabha's "characteristically metaphorical and often psychological conception of the 'third space'" (184). Bhabha pulls a similar move in his use of Stuart Hall, enlisting his arguments on counter-hegemonic possibility in socialism, and ignoring Hall's work on cultural identity and diaspora which deals explicitly with issues of hybridity and syncretism.

In addition, Bhabha's prose often bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Harris, most obviously in their frequent preoccupation with pairing related or congruent terms with the word "or" (i.e., "negotiation or translation"). The critical work of Harris and Bhabha also, as Moore-Gilbert points out, is similarly "elusive" and occasionally convoluted, "which
may be related to a common suspicion of realism as a fiction mode and its empiricist, positivist analogues in criticism" (183). However, where Harris's elusiveness seems to result from a commitment to style and metaphorical representation, Bhabha's prose lacks the figurative or creative impulse which makes this kind of critical writing acceptable. Rather, Bhabha, like Spivak and Said, seems at times to intentionally and vigorously attempt production of the kind of highbrow pontification that has brought so many complaints from critics of postcolonial theory.  

If Bhabha's hybrid third space is related to Harris's conceptions of limbo and "cross-cultural capacity", however, one must also ask if criticisms of Bhabha are applicable to Harris. Critics like Benita Parry and Ania Loomba, for instance, have recently called into

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9 Note Harris's response to a question regarding the difficulty of his work, in a 1989 interview:

"The questions you raise with regard to an imaginative writer's responsibilities to communicate his or her 'message' to readers must take into account profound visionary and re-visionary strategies that may be integral to a narrative reading of reality. It would be a tragedy if an imaginative writer were aware of an alteration in the fabric of the imagination – an alteration that deviates from given codes, given ways by which we have been conditioned to read nature, to read the world – and were to turn away from, or to betray, his gift of awareness in order to satisfy the appetite of a biased readership. In the long run his best gift to readers is not to betray the mystery of the profoundest imagination in which writer and reader are involved" (Hamlet 200-201).

10 As Moore-Gilbert acknowledges, Harris's "formulation of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange does not just prefigure some key arguments in Bhabha's work, but foreshadows some of the most intractable problems now facing the whole postcolonial field" (184). In this respect, the often ignored prefiguring of contemporary concerns and concepts in postcolonial theory by earlier postcolonial writers (particularly those of Fanon, Harris, C. L. R. James, Ngugi and others) poses a very serious problem. By neglecting to acknowledge the theoretical contributions these writers have made, postcolonial theorists today are guilty of either not having done sufficient research within the areas they purport to represent, or, more likely, they demonstrate that the postcolonial studies enterprise is as hegemonically part of the West as colonial discourse itself. This charge, often leveled against postcolonialists for their stubborn retention of the binary logic of Western discourse, warns one to be wary of too-readily accepting the applicability of postcolonial theory to any given postcolonial text.
question Bhabha’s version of “hybridity,” accusing him of ahistoricism and privileging the text to the extent that its social or political implications are abstracted beyond the realm of reality. They warn of the dangers of the promotion of such theories, like some feminist theory, “wherein consciousness is prioritized to the point where it breaks with social existence; or ideology moves from being ‘material in its effect’ to ‘structured like a language to material in itself or the same as language; the ideological or discursive is narrowed down to mean simply the individual, and simultaneously, the entirely fruitful exercise of looking at the textuality of history turns on its head to collapse history into a privileged text” (Loomba 307). As Leela Gandhi has observed,

If imperial textuality finds one of its limits in the critical response of anti-colonial readers, the obligatory subversiveness of postcolonial literature is seriously limited by the notion of ‘textual politics’ favoured by postcolonial literary theory. In a move which effectively replaces politics with textuality, such theory delivers a world where power is exclusively an operation of discourse, and resistance a literary contest of representation. (Gandhi 156)

Therefore, some critics, like Parry and Abdul JanMohamed, reject the way “emphasis on the hybridity of colonial discourse has the effect of obscuring what Fanon called the ‘murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists,’ ” preferring the interrogation of a Manichean dichotomy of colonizer/colonized to a view of hybridity (Loomba 307).

One must ask, then, whether the magical realism of writers like Okri and Harris posits its own “hybrid” characters within a similarly discursive framework. Within the framework of postcolonial theory, one might ask the following questions of Okri’s and Harris’s work: Is Azaro’s liminality purely a textual convention? Is the *abiku* more than a
metaphor for national and psychological ambivalence? Does Robin’s “infinite rehearsal” of his “fictional autobiography” remove the postcolonial subject from his/her sociopolitical realities?

If these questions arise from a theoretical consideration of hybridity, they give rise to another, more pressing question: Can postcolonial theory help one find the answers to these questions while retaining the integrity of the anti-conventional project of magical realism? That is, does an emphasis on the “performative” hybridity proposed by theorists like Bhabha provide a mechanism for deeper understanding of magical realism, or does it obscure a “broader” project such fiction might involve?

Leela Gandhi provides her own answers to these questions by emphasizing the “migrancy” of writers like Okri and Harris. She sees their work as particularly dedicated to a privileging of the “hybrid” over the “national” identity found in “continental” or “localized” works:

The textual mapping of the colonial encounter... concludes with the new ‘migrant’ novel. It is often argued that the counter-textual mood of anti-colonial or nationalist writing finds its apotheosis in the cosmopolitan restlessness of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Bharati Mukherjee. Postcolonial literary theory... tends to privilege ‘appropriation’ over ‘abrogation’ and multicultural ‘syncretism’ over cultural ‘essentialism’. While the anti-colonial novel is shown to betray these symptoms despite itself, the ‘migrant’ novel is entirely explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Positioned on the margins or interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up an in-between space of cultural ambivalence. (153)

Gandhi’s resistance to this notion is clearly discernible, as she sees this type of anti-essentializing logic as indicative of postcolonial theory’s struggle between “the politics of structure and totality on the one hand, and the politics of the fragment on the other” (167). She suggests that postcolonial theory “is situated somewhere in the interstices between
Marxism and postmodernism/poststructuralism,” calling attention to the “third world” from this positioning within a Western framework of analysis (167). Ultimately, she argues, the emphasis on textuality and “imperial structure/language/culture” diminishes the reality of “indigenous process/practice/experience” (175). Criticizing the authors of The Empire Writes Back, Gandhi insists that these critics once again repeat the tired colonialist assumption that it takes the West – in the shape of either theory or history – to bring the ‘rest’ to intelligibility. In this guise, postcolonialism becomes little more than the benign face of colonial rationality” (176).

Gandhi’s criticisms are especially relevant in light of an approach to hybridity which defines the “multiple” identity(ies) of the postcolonial subject without allowing for the recognition of long-standing cultural continuities within the “native” or “indigenous” culture. By this view, Okri’s juxtaposition of the parallel histories “written” by the Governor-General and the old woman in the forest would serve to obscure the specificity of the local history which is not written in the text. The “hybrid” universality of their stories would be seen not as a move toward cross-cultural understanding, but as a move away from indigenous realities.

Loomba, however, addresses a different type of “variegation” or “hybridity” which “both draws upon indigenous tradition and is not entirely dependent upon the contradictions of colonial authority. As such, it also questions the idea that colonial power was completely effective in erasing native cultures with all their differences, shift, evolutions and contradictions, which makes them irrecoverable in any pristine form. The paralysing dichotomy of black skin/white masks can be questioned without downgrading indigenous cultures and subjects” (308). For Bhabha, Loomba argues, “the hybridity of enunciation [the
“space of translation” spills over into becoming the definitive characteristic of all colonial authority, everywhere, at any time” (309). The problem with Bhabha, therefore, is that his theory is not historically grounded, he shifts too easily “from semiotic to social” and hybridity “swells from its previous colonial context to become paradigmatic of all oppositional theory and politics” (309). “The reception of the text,” she claims, “involves all that Bhabha does not care to see, not just in socio-economic terms but also finally, in native discourses themselves, which even colonial discourses engage with – mutilate, transform, appropriate – in their production of hegemony” (310). Loomba argues, therefore, that in addition to the “history of imperialism” critics like Spivak focus on, we must also consider “another history where resistance, however problematic, is present, and where precolonial history also needs to be rewritten, lifted from its nostalgic or Orientalist versions. . . that other history is of strategic importance, not simply and romantically to sanction our own voices, but also to look at the pretexts of colonialism” (318, emphasis mine).

It is here, then, that one can begin to sense the difference between Bhabha and Harris. While the “third space,” “the cross-cultural imagination” and “limbo” are all hybrid spaces of ambiguity where the negotiation of paradox takes place, for Harris, this space is always specified within a specific sociopolitical location and through specifically individualized traditions of history, while Bhabha’s “third space” implies an essential continuity of character across material conditions. As Bhabha argues in “Signs Taken for Wonders,” “hybridization” is produced by imperialism, the “effect of colonial power” (1995:35, emphasis mine). For Harris, “hybridity” is a universal characteristic of human consciousness, evocative of the multiple influences informing one’s individual identity, whether pre-Colombian/African/European or Irish/English/German. Further, Harris’s
project is inextricably bound to the notion of revision and recovery of history. For Bhabha, “history” is part of this third space, a hybrid construction. Yet, for Harris, “history” is both a cross-cultural construction and a localized actuality. What is for Bhabha an abstract “discursive temporality” is for Harris “the real” itself.

The hybridity of postcolonial writers like Harris and Okri, then, demonstrates “with much authority that reality can be multifarious. The hybrid experience of most post-colonial writers does not place them in a no man’s land between two cultures. It forms the basis of their questioning of the fixed terms that such a polarity implies” (Durix 1998:189). This “questioning” of conventional ideology, as we have seen, constitutes the primary project of magical realism. This factor is particularly relevant to postcolonial theory, as we shall see in the next section.

4.2 MIMICRY, MIGRANCY AND MAGIC

The distinction between Bhabha and Harris is perhaps most evident in Bhabha’s conceptualization of “mimicry.” Drawing on the “anxiety of influence” theorized by the literary critic Harold Bloom, Bhabha proposes that “between the Western sign and its colonial signification there emerges a map of misreading that embarrasses the righteousness of recordation and its certainty of good government” (1994:95). In other words, when postcolonial writers “appropriate” European languages and modes of expression (like the novel), “mimicry” becomes “the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience” (Gandhi 149). The best examples of this are the
postcolonial “rewritings” of canonical European texts, such as, for instance, J. M. Coetzee’s 
Foe or the countless re-inscriptions of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. According to Gandhi, 
mimicry “inheres in the necessary and multiple acts of translation which oversee the passage 
from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial usage. In other words, ‘mimicry’ inaugurates the 
process of anti-colonial self-differeration through the logic of inappropriate appropriation” 
(Gandhi 150). The unfortunate impact of theories of mimicry, for Gandhi, is therefore that 

... the paradigmatic moment of the anti-colonial counter-textuality is seen to 
begin with the first indecorous mixing of Western genres with local content. 
By this reasoning, anti-colonial texts become political when, for instance, the 
formal shape of the European novel is moulded to indigenous realities, or 
when the measured sound of English is accentuated through an 
unrecognisable babel of native voices. (150)

If Gandhi’s perspective means reading postcolonial magical realist intertextuality as 
“mimicry” of a European model, the “postcoloniality” of magical realism is also complicated 
by the aforementioned fact of the “migrant” status of many magical realist writers. Some 
critics, like Jean Franco, have criticized magical realists for perpetuating imperialist exoticism, 
and pandering to a Western readership with a hunger for “magic” and “other-worldly” 
escape (Cooper 30-31). Brenda Cooper, who sees magical realism as being inherently 
postcolonial and postmodern, is similarly wary of the “privileged” migrant’s ability to 
represent the “common” indigenous perspective. Cooper argues that magical realists, 
because they “are heir to many traditions, pressures and conflicting strategies ... tend to be 
an amalgam of politics and purposes, working at different times in the interests of different 
segments [sic] of different populations” (22). She further contends that unlike their 
“exiled” or “diasporic” counterparts, free-to-choose migrant writers are caught in a delicate 
situation: “Border interstices may be fertile spaces for artistic creation but these nooks and
crannies are also privileged and comfortable spaces, a planet away from the poverty and oppression of migrant workers” (29). In Cooper’s view, cosmopolitan magical realists are therefore at risk of becoming “exploitative” of their indigenous cultures by “participating in the cultural politics of postcolonialism” (32). In this respect, she sees magical realists as walking “a political tightrope between capturing [a hybrid postcolonial reality] and providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership” (32). Cooper, however contentious her distinctions between “peasants” and “migrants” might be, identifies a crucial concern for postcolonial magical realists: she ultimately claims that it is the tension between indigenous belief and Western-scientific ideology which comprises the “hybridity” of the magical realist writer.

These features of mimicry and migrancy pose perhaps the most problematic questions for magical realism in postcolonial theory: Is the intertextuality of writers like Okri and Harris simply “mimicry” of the colonial model, however potentially subversive that may be? Has their “migrant” distance from indigenous culture desensitized them to the struggles of actual politics? Is the “reality” they depict nothing more than a hyper-textualized polemic on “hybrid possibilities” of postcolonial intellectuals? While Gandhi might answer that their “cosmopolitan” removal from the postcolonial scene means, inevitably, “yes,” I propose instead that the way Okri and Harris engage in magical realism does something entirely different. While their uses of intertextuality and genre do serve to reject (and therefore challenge) the conventions of “standard realism”, they are not merely engaged in a textual “refiguring” of a Western model. In other words, Okri and Harris are not simply at “play” with the figurative logic of magical realism, they believe that they are, however metaphorically and imaginatively, depicting reality. Compare the following
My own belief is that such images come out of the unconscious, out of the world's unconscious. But there are two specific matters that one has to look at, because one cannot generalize about the unconscious. First of all, such images must relate to one's background and to all sorts of apparently vague premises which exist in one's background. On the other hand, because they come out of the unconscious it means that they have a universality. In other words, what is native, what is profoundly native, relates to what is profoundly universal. (Harris, on the revision of drafts which seem to have "been planted by another hand" 1999:51, emphasis mine)

An important part of my tradition is that we do not believe that the dead die. . . We believe that when people die, they go to another realm. . . And as I listened to people and read and encountered others, I found it wasn't just for me. . . It's a new wind that is spreading across the world. . . It's a new yearning and a new discovery that is slowly occupying the old tyranny of the mean description of reality. We are now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings.

We want more because we sense that there is more in us. We need ritual passages to separate different points of our experience. We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness. We need these things because without them, we don't know if we are growing or if we are static. We don't know when we've crossed certain silver lines in our consciousness. . . These are things that are always part of all societies. It's just we went ahead and forgot. And I think we are paying a terrible price for it, and it's only the psychiatrists who benefit. The thing is that it's time that we started healing the human spirit by giving back to it its full, rich, hidden dimensions. And that is all I am trying to do in my fiction – to restore the kingdom. (Okri, quoted in Ogunsanwo 40, emphasis mine)

These comments, while they may make postcolonialists squirm, force one to address an undeniable fact of the projects of Ben Okri and Wilson Harris. Unlike Bhabha's "discursive" politics, Harris and Okri believe firmly that their work helps to elucidate and confront very real sociopolitical and ideological conditions through a syncretic vision of consciousness. For Okri, this clearly means literal belief in the world of spirits, and for Harris, it means belief in the liberatory power of the "unconscious" and the mutually
reciprocal relationship between the individual’s specific identity and the universality of
human consciousness. This matter of literal belief, then, gives rise to the crucial question:

*exactly what is the “magic” in magical realism?*

Postcolonial theory easily accommodates the subversive textuality of magical realism.
A major concern of such theory has been strategies of resistance to colonial/postcolonial
domination, a structure of hegemonic impositions which include the “Western” model of
representation, European languages, etc. Thus Ogunsanwo notes, in reference to *The
Famished Road*, “the parodic intertextuality incorporates and subverts the orthodox adoption
– the traditionally unmodified adoption – of the European mode of narration, demanding a
re-consideration of the idea of origin and dominance” (45). This kind of subversive strategy
is rightfully interpreted as a means of confronting restrictions of representation, as a means
of articulating a specifically original artistic expression of “reality” by refusing to adopt the
conventional “mode of narration.”

However, “textual reality” cannot be confused with the “reality” which exists outside
the text – in the real world, as it were. Admittedly, Okri and Harris create textual realities
which cannot be said to have a “direct referent” in the world. One does not *actually*
encounter Faust en route to the Mountain of Folly. One does not encounter “mermaids in
high-heeled shoes, of dazzling beauty in the daytime, but ambiguous at night” (IR 188). But
it is not this “textual” reality which Okri and Harris purport to be real. The *magical realism of
the text* provides the *basis* for understanding the multivalent and contradictory realities which
actually exist in the world. In other words, magical realists like Okri and Harris are not
simply engaged in "textual politics"; they attempt rather to construct a model for comprehension of the cross-cultural syncretism which informs all human reality, "Western" and "postcolonial."

In this respect, postcolonial theories of "mimicry" and debates over the relevance of "migrant" writers serve only to distract one from the larger project of magical realists like Okri and Harris. Within the terms of such theories, the relationship between hybridity, textual magic and real magic, thus becomes clouded with numerous ambiguities and concerns. How does one understand the implications of syncretic characters like Azaro or Robin? Are they "representative" of indigenous reality? Are they textual metaphors for a migrant hybridity syndrome, as Gandhi might argue? Is the "magic" of the text "real?" Does it matter if the magic is "authentic" or "invented?"

Each of these questions points to a fundamental dilemma in discussing magical realism in terms of postcolonial theory: the question of audience. Postcolonial theory, as we have seen, despite objections from its critics, often assumes a "Western" audience to which the postcolonial author "writes back." The theory of mimicry is predicated on this assumption, and the issue of migrancy is bound up in delicate and sensitive issues of "authenticity," accountability, and audience. And this matter is particularly precarious for magical realism, a genre which defies boundaries and limitations, and challenges not only the conventions of realism, but the expectations of "the reader."

Who is, then, "the reader" of magical realism? To which audience do writers like Okri and Harris speak? As we have seen in our discussion of intertextuality, both Western and non-Western readers might struggle to fully grasp each cross-cultural reference, much less understand its full implications. While a Western reader like myself may get the general
gist of *abiku* or “pork-knocker,” the indigenous connotations of such concepts may be totally different from my own. Similarly, Okri’s references to Joseph Conrad or Harris’s echoes of Goethe might be completely foreign to any reader not familiar with the original texts. While an “outsider” might read Yoruba metaphysics completely metaphorically, an “insider” might read it literally. Which reader is correct?

It is here, then, in the multiplicity of meanings involved in magical realist intertextuality, that the key element of the magical realism of postcolonial writers like Okri and Harris is revealed. Magical realism, as a literary genre, involves the intertextual creation of a new, syncretic vision of reality. The juxtaposition of disparate ideologies or worldviews as a sustainable whole in these texts provides not simply a depiction of the “hybrid” psyche of the postcolonial writer, but a *mechanism* for understanding the paradoxes implicit in a cross-cultural reality. The “magic” of the text, then, is precisely what makes the text real. Whether or not the spirits and ghosts of the text are “authentic” is irrelevant to the *project* of unveiling the coexistence of multiple realities within the “space” of postcoloniality. And in the work of Ben Okri and Wilson Harris, the reality of this space is revealed through a persistent and unwavering dedication to the conceptualization of the universality of human consciousness.

4.3 UNIVERSALITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Magical realists like Okri and Harris create a model for syncretic understanding, then, which raises important questions regarding the relationship between specific, localized
“individual” consciousness or identity and the concept of a “universal” consciousness. As we have seen, postcolonial theorists often have serious problems with concepts of “universality” which detract from the material sociopolitical realities of postcolonial conditions. Thus, while critics like Abiola Irele announce a firm “conviction of the universality of all human experience” (1982:28), Ania Loomba wisely reminds us that the slogan “we are all human” “can function in many contradictory ways at the same time” (Loomba 313). A notion of human universality which does not take cultural differences into account (and it is worth noting that critics of postcolonial theory often raise this objection) fails to establish a case for “universality” at all, but rather reinforces a projection of “otherness.” To say, for instance, that “Third World writers” share the same concerns as Western writers because “we are all human” is to invest in a monolithic conception of the so-called Third World as a homogenous category, an error which only serves to uphold the conception of defining the Self through the Other.

One must, therefore, determine precisely what type of “universality” emerges in postcolonial magical realist literature. To be human, according to Okri and Harris, means not to share a “universal” condition of hybrid reality (in Bhabha’s sense), but a universal and cross-cultural capacity for understanding the fundamentally human consciousness. Irele’s conception of universality is therefore especially significant to our discussion of magical realism:

The notion of the universality of human experience does not... imply uniformity – quite the contrary – but it does mean that cultures maintain their dynamism only through their degree of tension between the particular and the universal. Alienation, in this view, cannot mean total loss; the fulfillment it promises resides precisely in the degree of integration it helps us to achieve. In its creative potential, alienation signifies the tension between the immediate closeness of the self and the reflected distance of the other.

129
Such a view of universality is crucial to understanding the work of magical realists like Okri and Harris, whose work demonstrates both a cross-cultural capacity with universal implications and the specificity of cultural identity. Azaro, for instance, is firmly rooted in the sociopolitical reality of the poverty and confusion of his day-to-day life. Yet, through his visions and physical excursions into other realities, he glimpses the universal continuities between disparate cultures, as we have seen in the histories of the Governor-General and the old woman. Similarly, in The Infinite Rehearsal, Harris posits Robin in a figurative space, which is clearly the multi-dimensional context of Guyana, while simultaneously incorporating the idea of a universal consciousness which extends throughout human history through both fictions and events.

Stuart Hall, himself a Caribbean scholar, deals with this issue of cultural identity explicitly. Acknowledging that “we all write and speak from a history and culture which is specific” (392) he formulates a conception of “cultural identity” as both temporarily and spatially located, as well as undergoing “constant transformation” (394):

... cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside of history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm, either. It is something – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories – and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past,’ since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break.’ It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin.’ (395)
In other words, cultural identity is not an unchanging extension of the linear past. In the Caribbean, he argues, cultural identity must be seen as being “framed” by two “simultaneously operative” vectors: one grounding identity in its “continuity” with the past, the other reflecting a “profound discontinuity,” the result of slavery and colonization (395). The reciprocal relationship between these seemingly contrary or paradoxical elements comprise the “reality” of the Caribbean actuality, and this is precisely the formulation Harris makes with his conceptualization of the “inner corrective” of “dislocation” by “the limbo gateway.”

In Hall’s view, cultural identity in “diaspora” is defined by “recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 402). Diaspora does not, therefore, refer to “those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to who they must at all costs return. . . This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising form of ‘ethnicity’ ” (401). This is a particularly liberating perspective on identity and diaspora, for it allows for the “profound discontinuity” or what Harris would call “dislocation” of the nightmare realities of slavery, imperialism and colonialism, while it simultaneously avoids the racialist essentialism of “ethnic” or “regional” conceptions of identity.

Magical realists like Harris and Okri do not question the crucial importance of “subjective” grounds of location – historical, social, political, spatial, etc. – when they promote a universality of spirit or consciousness. What they question is the manner in
which the supremacy of objectivity, an appeal to empiricism and fact, distorts and conceals the “other” aspects of human reality – spirituality, belief, consciousness, faith. “Universality,” according to Wilson Harris, is quite simply what “can tie apparently alien configurations together” (1999:66).

As we have seen in Chapter One, the notion of “the West” as a monolithic institution where “logic” and “reason” reign supreme among all is a discursive illusion. The paradoxes and contradictions which arise from a conception of the world as entirely objective (i.e. the illusory logic of “Western” discourse) are not problematic only within postcolonial situations of hybridity (in Bhabha’s sense). They are problems which confront the West as well. C. L. R. James provides a particularly illuminating explanation of this condition:

The logical principle of universality contains within it a logical contradiction, the contradiction of abstract and concrete. This logical contradiction is a direct reflection of the objective circumstances in which the men of early Christianity lived. Their physical and material circumstances were on the lowest possible level. And therefore, to make their existence a totality, they had to fill it out with this tremendous abstraction. Thus is established the basic logical contradiction in the universal between concrete and abstract, between objective and subjective, between real and ideal, between content and form. But both together form a whole and have no meaning apart from each other. They are opposites but interpenetrated (83).

These philosophical questions have been preoccupations for as long as human history can be remembered. Assumptions of a “Western” epistemology as inherently objective and rational can no longer be supported, as evidence from Western discourse demonstrates, and the paradoxical foundations of imperialism prove. In Sylvia Wynter’s formulation, there is a clear and obvious distinction between the “cultural myth” and the “cultural reality” of Europe: “The cultural myth under-prop the economic and political
power of Europe based on its exploitation of non-Europeans; the cultural reality of Europe consistently attacked and opposed this dominance, this concept of Europe as super-culture, as the end product of Man’s glorious march towards ‘humanity’. The cultural reality of Europe sees the ambivalence of its own power and glory; and embodies its real creativity best when it is most self-critical” (Wynter 1996:311-12).

While postcolonial critics are right in resisting theories which “universalize” human experiences on the subjective level (i.e., which do not take cultural difference into account in their formulations of monolithic categories of “colonizer” and “colonized”), the acknowledgement of a universal humanity is a necessary step in the reconciliation of contraries for both Westerners and postcolonials alike. As Harris asks, “When will this realm of half-forgotten, half-buried notions give way and become part and parcel of a theme of a living drama of conception, the conception of the human person rather than the ideology of the ‘broken’ individual?” (1967:27).

Okri and Harris, therefore, demonstrate that magical realism can examine social issues with a firm footing in a specific sociopolitical situation while simultaneously exploring issues of universality. Objections which see their theory as moving from the concrete to the abstract, “universalizing” widely differing situations, fail to understand the very premise of magical realism as a means of expressing the simultaneous reality, the mutual coexistence, of the universal and the particular. In contrast, critics like Dash sees magical realism as “the way out of Négritude” and its essentialism through a re-engagement with history as “an investigation of the past which goes beyond the documented privations of slavery and colonization to a more speculative vision of history in which the consciousness of dominated cultures would predominate” (200).
To avoid the trap of reading magical realism as an universalizing abstraction of human difference, one must realize that the project of magical realists is to challenge the boundaries between “real” and “unreal,” “universal” and “particular,” and so on. Further, one must either accept or reject their contention that “reality” is a multivalent and complicated sum of many wholes. Postcolonial “reality,” by this logic, is not just the imposition of a “foreign” ideology onto a “native” cosmology. Rather, postcolonial realities (like all realities) involve the simultaneous coexistence of a wide variety of influences and resources. The Western model of discourse and logic which dictates postcolonial theory itself, then, needs a mechanism for acceptance of the “traditional” as more than just the dead and remembered elements of pre-colonial culture, and the ability to confront “history” as a process of both material and spiritual elements interacting in various dimensions.

4.4 THE POLITICS OF MAGICAL REALISM

The objection that magical realism is “politically irrelevant” because it promotes a “fantastic” and unrealistic view of the world (as in Wynter’s critique of Harris, for instance), is one which does not hold up when one considers the real basis for “rational” or “scientific” thought. As Satya Mohanty demonstrates in Literary Theory and the Claims of History, the understanding that science itself is not as empirically infallible as convention assumes it to be means that we need new ways to “reorient our political critiques” (10).
Magical realism therefore, in challenging the distinctions between “fact” and “fiction” or the “real” and the “unreal,” presents a philosophical project, I believe with explicit and inherent political implications.

As Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues, “What the African writer is called upon to do is not easy: it is demanded of him that he recognize the global character of imperialism and the global character and dimension of the forces struggling against it to build a new world” (75). While Ngugi promotes a sort of liberating realism and the need to reflect the socio-political needs and reality of the African working class, the contention that magical realist works fail to reflect upon “the global character of imperialism” is clearly not applicable to the works of Okri and Harris, as we have seen. Their work demonstrates a full awareness of the sociopolitical realities prevalent in our “ever more cross-culturalized and mutually contaminated world” (Bongie 359). The question, however, is what kind of “politics” do they advocate?

It is important to note that the demands for necessarily political aspirations in postcolonial literature seem in some ways an essentializing gesture, clearly the application of a different expectation or standard of judgment for postcolonial writers than for “Western” writers. A view of postcoloniality which posits the function of the writer as inevitably counter-discursive or reactionary serves to re-validate the Eurocentric conception that postcolonial literature always “writes back” to an imperial center.

However, in a sense, one can agree with the Brazilian scholar Augusto Boal that “nothing is alien to Politics, because nothing is alien to the superior art that rules the relations among men” (11). In this respect, “politics” refers to the complexes and institutions governing human social interaction. The politics of magical realism, therefore,
should not be seen as “less political” than the revolutionary politics of much postcolonial realist fiction, but as a different kind of politics, a politics of transformation. The call for revision of epistemological models may not carry the overtly revolutionary thrust as a call for “mass action,” but its ultimately political implications cannot simply be dismissed as “irrelevant.” Magical realism provides a mechanism for transcending the debilitating rigidity of absolutist logic, a mechanism with specifically politicized effects. As Wynter observes,

Injustice, based in all its forms, on a concept of elitism, continues, not because the technological means are not available, to provide food, shelter, and freedom from material want for all, but because minds, which have for centuries been moulded and preformed to come to terms with the actuality of scarcity and therefore of injustice and elitism and division, find it difficult to come to an awareness of the distortion of their own barbaric formation. This formation . . . continues to dominate use through the power of the very cultural myths which we had devised as our avenue of escape, our illusionary flight from this necessity. And that is why the twentieth century revolution must essentially be a cultural revolution; a transformation in the way men see and feel. (1996:313)

This idea of a “cultural revolution” is precisely what magical realists like Okri and Harris see themselves as promoting. Okri, for instance, writes that “Before we can create a new world we must first unearth and destroy the myths and realities, the lies and propaganda, which have been used to oppress, enslave, incinerate, gas, torture and starve the human beings on this planet” (1997:58). The magical realist writer provides, therefore, “a model for dismantling the more unsustainable binarism and developing a genuine sense of textual syncreticity and transformation as in itself the most profoundly radical and oppositional of positions for the post-colonial writer and critic to adopt” (Griffiths 69).

As Harris sees it, the role of the artist is to engage in active discourse with that part of the human psyche “eclipsed” by binary logic. The writer, therefore, can illuminate the possibilities of human experience by rejecting the “illusory freedom” of realism and
identifying the deeper, less tangible aspects of humanity:

[1] the writer . . . both transcends and undermines (or deepens if you will) the mode of society since the truth of community which he pursues is not a self-evident fact; it is neither purely circumscribed by nor purely produced by economic circumstance. To put it another way – the so-called economic unity of man (the story-line of progress) is an illusion, in particular when it is maintained as a blanket moral proposition over the actual and obscure moral crises in the heart of those it professes to change. (Harris 1967:60)

Harris argues that it is “vital . . . to break away from the conception so many people entertain that literature is an extension of the social order or a political platform” (1967:45).

He contends that literature does have a social and political function, but that function lies in its ability to re-connect the significance of the imagination to matters of everyday life. He therefore contends that

Literature has a . . . profound and imaginative bearing [on society] wherein the life of tradition in all its complexity gives a unique value to the life of vocation in society, whether that vocation happens to be in science, in education, in the study of law or in the dedicated craft of one’s true nature and life. For tradition . . . participates in the ground of living necessity by questioning and evaluating all assumptions of character and conceptions of place or destiny. A scale of distinction emerges, distinctions which give the imagination room to perceive the shifting border line between original substance and vicarious hollow, the much advertised rich and the hackneyed caricature of the poor, the overfed body of illusion and the underfed stomach of reality – room to perceive also overlapping areas of invention and creation . . . It is this kind of scale which is vital to the life of the growing person in society. And this scale exists in a capacity for imagination. A scale which no one can impose since to do so is to falsify the depth of creative experience, the growth and feeling for creative experience (1967:46-7).

Harris, then, locates the politics of fiction within the power of the imagination to effect and potentially change the material conditions of the world. He does not romanticize his influence as a writer as equivalent to or participant in the revolutionary struggles of the people (like some postcolonial writers) but situates his realm of influence squarely within the context of art. As Ghost “writes” in the Postscript to The Infinite Rehearsal, “if I do write now
I do not claim to be original but to tap the innermost resources of eclipsed traditions in the refugee voices that W. H. heard in the sea” (86). In Harris’s work, then, the political implications of his fiction lie in the figurative recollection of histories lost.

The project of Wilson Harris, then, it not so neatly aligned to the representational politics of postcolonial theory. While his work, like Okri’s, demonstrates the kind of subversive textual strategies that postcolonial theory can help us to better understand, ultimately, magical realism, by moving explicitly beyond the realm of material postcoloniality, suggests that we need new ways of understanding human reality in general. In Harris’s words,

It is the only way we can come close to the real power of man, by showing the interaction of all the levels of his life, thereby not only baring his conflict, but the rhythms within the welter of his existence. These rhythms, being after all the source of man’s generation of energy yesterday and today, are also the source of a man’s energy – tomorrow. The real hope for man lies not in promises of splendour or in virtuosity but in the revelation of original and authentic rhythms within the gloomy paradox of a world. (1967:14-15)

This “hope,” is the essence of Harris’s politics. He clearly sees potential change within the power of fiction to reveal the necessary and vital connections between past, present and future – connections which cannot be accessed through “empirical” rationality. He therefore uses magical realist technique to create highly original fiction which challenges each precept of logic and convention in order to demonstrate a “reality” in which the “real” is not necessarily the factual, recordable event. Since he sees realism as “a behaviouristic and deterministic dead end,” Harris calls for a new type of fiction, “an art of memory which dislocates... an idolatrous plane of realism by immersing us in a peculiar kind of ruined
fabric” which may “help to free us from a consensus of bestiality, monolithic helplessness, monolithic violence” (Harris 1981:14). However “textual” the basis of Harris’s politics, he clearly sees the recovery of the imagination as central to social and political change.

If the magical realist writer can be accepted as engaging in a politics of cultural revolution, the specific approaches of Okri and Harris differ sharply. While Harris’s critical writing reveals a consistent (if complicated) philosophy, Okri’s politics are much more difficult to comprehend. As we have seen, the Famished Road cycle involves a sometimes-uncomfortable juxtaposition of progressive hope and profound despair. While Harris’s optimism for a new “vision of consciousness” finds its complement in Okri’s persistence in striving for a hopeful future for Nigeria, it’s often difficult to get a handle on Okri’s politics. Where Harris uses the locale of Guyana as a platform for confronting the whole of human history in The Infinite Rehearsal, Okri’s Famished Road cycle examines African and European constructions of history in very different ways. Particularly problematic is Okri’s projection of a “retrospective prophesy” (to use Chad Allen’s term) of post-Independence disillusionment in a pre-Independence setting. Thus, while Okri himself makes ambiguous remarks like “Politics is the art of the possible, creativity is the art of the impossible” (1997:127), his fiction fails at times to delineate precisely what “impossible” goals he seeks to achieve as an artist. On the very first page of Infinite Riches, for example, we find Dad pondering the implications of this “retrospective prophecy”: “Time is growing . . . and our suffering is growing too. When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And
who will make it real?” (5). From the start of the novel, then, Okri reveals the ambiguities involved in solving infinitely discouraging sociopolitical problems through an appeal to the “dreams” and consciousness of the individual as a mechanism for social change.

However, perhaps the “political message” of Okri’s work is less important than the process of engaging in paradoxical realities that his fiction achieves. Whatever his “vision” for Nigeria or world politics, like Harris’s, Okri’s magical realism provides a means of confronting the contradictions and complications of linear logic by demonstrating the multiplicity of influence in the “real” world. It is also significant to remember at this point that Okri writes out of a long tradition of non-mimetic Nigerian writing, and his use of magical realism is a new and contemporary expression as well as a part of that tradition. His project therefore differs from Harris’s significantly, in that Okri explicitly (even at times almost anthropologically) depicts a specific Yoruba world-view and Nigerian politics together with a sense of optimism for the fundamental universality of humankind. The ambivalence, then, between his pessimism and his optimism is best read as another paradox in a changing world. Whatever narrative flaws this ambivalence reveals, Okri’s persistent sense of hope for a better future for the world rings clear at the close of each text in the *Famished Road* cycle. As he writes in the closing stanza of *Infinite Riches*,

> We go on living as if history is a dream.  
> The miracle is that we go on  
> Living and loving as best we can,  
> In this enigma of reality. (338)

The impact of this kind of potential for hope in both the work of Okri and Harris is another delicate matter. While, as I have tried to demonstrate, magical realism does something more than simply propose a “textual” politics which privileges the text over
material realities, the kind of "solution" it offers for a new "vision" of reality is not easily achieved. Perhaps, however, a basic understanding of the intrinsically multi-dimensional aspects of human reality is in itself a form of liberation. To fully understand this proposition, one must recall the fundamentally metaphorical grounds of all human understanding, a theme taken up in an explicitly politicized way by Sylvia Wynter.

Wynter has called for "a new poetics" which would be grounded on "the concept of a human history as the history of how we represent the life that we live to ourselves...[that] would take our origin narratives...to be central to any inquiry into the processes by which our behaviors are...lawfully dependably regulated" (1995:47-8). What this means is that "history" is less the authoritative record of human events, but part of the process of human understanding, the ever-changing means by which we understand ourselves. This view of history, she says, is founded upon culture-specific origin narratives which, through language (or what she calls our "always linguistically-constituted criteria of being" 45), humans construct "systems of symbolic representations" (30-31). In other words, metaphor is the means by which "specific perceptual-cognitive processes by which we know our reality" (12) bridge the gaps between the "language and cognitive bases of social life" (19). The founding metaphors of every culture provide the structures of society and its norms.

The essentially metaphorical construction of "reality" is the very essence of magical realism. By depicting the reality of everyday life as inextricably connected to the reality of spirituality or consciousness, magical realists demonstrate that what is "real" is far more complicated than what can be empirically understood. And it is by understanding this metaphorical construction that one can begin to discern options for confronting the paradoxes evoked by contradictory principles. Robert Schwartz sees this possibility as both
liberating and necessary:

I believe there can be no question now that metaphors underpin human thought. Those which have proved fundamental over time are associated with irreducible universals of human experience. They operate to generate discursive thought through assimilated action schemes that represent those transformations which can occur in a humanly construed world. Further, this insight will inevitably flower. When this happens, humankind will inevitably bend its efforts toward transcending this recognized limitation and it will succeed. To pronounce any limitation as final is to be a fool in the brief moment of human history that finds us still in the first day of conception wherein our beginning surely know nothing of our ends (214-215).

Admittedly, this kind of “transcendental liberation” fits uncomfortably into postcolonial theory, which, despite its efforts to recognize the “authenticity” of “other” forms of articulation, has yet to make room for the possibility that the “magic” of magical realism actually exists in our world. This magic, however, is not simply a gesture towards culture-specific belief-systems. It consists in the very real ways in which human consciousness extends beyond the confines of material reality (the real) and into the realm of immaterial possibility and imagination (the also real). Whether or not one accepts the “spirits” of Ben Okri’s work, for instance, as part of the “real” world, one must accept the fact that the spirituality of humankind cannot be divorced entirely from any consideration of history, society, philosophy, or epistemology. The sequestering of the metaphysical to the confines of “philosophy” and “religion” has served to greatly diminish the potential for holistic understanding within the disciplines of the Humanities and Sciences in the West. And while using a “postcolonial” model of metaphysics runs the dangers of mystifying and essentializing the “superstitions” of non-Western ideologies, one can nonetheless recognize in magical realism an alternative to the hegemonizing and totalizing conception of reality as purely empirical and material.

142
According to Ben Okri,

Everyone's reality is superstitious. It's a simple fact you can't get away from. The scientist's view of the world is superstitious because it is provisional and a description of reality. The atheist's is superstitious, just the same way because it excludes. The person who has got a very strong religious belief is superstitious because their belief constructs the universe. Everyone's universe, everyone's perception of the world and of time is unique to them. It's a world in itself. It's a complete world. (quoted in OgunSANwo 41)

Postcolonial theorists would do well to take note of this logic. The optimism of the work of Harris and Okri provides a liberating alternative to the pessimism of postcolonial theorists like Spivak. Postcolonial theory which emphasizes the "paralyzing" constraints of imperialist discourse rather than acknowledging the realities of coexisting indigenous discourse(s) results in "deliberate deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard" (Loomba, quoting Parry 318). Rather than accept the illusory dominance of imperialism over the human psyche, Harris and Okri use magical realism to demonstrate that the "subaltern" voice has been speaking all along. In Wilson Harris's work, this is shown through his highly developed theory of the ability of the artist to recover the "silenced" or "eclipsed" histories of the Caribbean as well as "revise" traditions inherited through colonization and slavery. And in his Famished Road cycle, Ben Okri develops a multi-layered voyage through the consciousness of Azaro, a young boy who represents not only a sociopolitical reality but also the living tradition of Yoruba ideology. As Okri himself has recently written, it is now time for the "contemporary victors" to listen "to the silences of strangled nations, to the passionate dreams of difficult artists and to the age-old warnings that have always lurked in the oral fables of storytellers and shamans" (Okri 1999:27).

Okri and Harris are postcolonial writers who use the techniques of magical realism to present a new way of understanding reality, not just postcolonial reality, but the reality of
human understanding. Their work promotes a new vision, and while postcolonial theory is helpful in understanding the subjectivity and limitations of textual representation, magical realist fiction like Okri's and Harris's demands a willingness to move beyond the constraints of polarizing logic to fully comprehend the human condition. And until postcolonial theorists provide a mechanism of their own for interrogating the contradictions implicit in the conception of "reality" as a monolithic category, it is perhaps best to let their works speak on their own terms, and accept the reality of the "magic" in magical realism as proof of the multiple dimensions of human understanding.
CONCLUSION

This inquiry has attempted to explore some of the fundamental concerns involved in postcolonial magical realism. In the first chapter, I identified the problematic considerations involved in the idea of magical realism as a specifically postcolonial phenomenon, demonstrating that "Western" literary traditions themselves involve many of the same philosophical underpinnings and technical strategies as magical realist works. I retain the term "magical realism," however, partly of convenience, as it refers to a specific literary style, but primarily because it emphasizes the appeal to a "magical" or extra-material reality which conventional realist strategies do not allow. Further, there is a certain empowerment implicit in the grouping of such texts under the umbrella genre "magical realism." The idea of genre as an ideological force allows one to more fully comprehend the potential impact of magical realist fiction.

In Chapters Two and Three, we saw how Wilson Harris and Ben Okri use various strategies of magical realism to develop similar themes and a common fundamental conception of the universal "vision of consciousness" the creative writer attempts to convey. I hope to have demonstrated here that each writer uses magical realism to convey both a specific sociopolitical situation and the liberating possibilities involved in a mode of understanding which moves beyond the restrictive, polarizing conception of "real" vs "unreal" by appealing to a universal and cross-cultural capacity for understanding. As the
fiction of Harris and Okri reveals, magical realism is, above all, a strategy which allows for
the reconciliation of disparate and paradoxical ideas by challenging the binary logic which
governs both our conception of “Western” thought and the conventions of literary realism.
For these writers, magical realism is thus a necessary and liberating means of articulating the
realities of human understanding and consciousness.

In Chapter Four, I addressed the complications involved in using postcolonial theory
to interpret and understand the magical realism of postcolonial writers like Harris and Okri.
While the concept of hybridity was found to be particularly well-suited to describe magical
realist works, the corresponding concerns of migrancy, audience, and actual belief in “magic”
or spirit-worlds pose serious limitations on the ability of postcolonial theory to help elucidate
the project of magical realists. Similarly, the emphasis on subjectivity in postcolonial theory
proved to be an uncomfortable and unfruitful point of comparison for the universalizing
perspective of magical realists like Okri and Harris. Because the project of magical realism
explicitly engages in disrupting the distinctions between contrary aspects of reality, the
notion that magical realists diminish the “subjectivity” of the postcolonial individual was
found to distract one from the larger project of magical realism as a challenge to
conventional approaches to understanding human identity and consciousness. In light of
this project, I argue that the politics of magical realism lie not in the sociopolitical,
“revolutionary” position expected of postcolonial writers, but within a larger movement
towards a transformative cultural revolution.

In utilizing the figurative logic of magical realism, writers like Ben Okri and Wilson
Harris are able to challenge hegemonic discursive and epistemological conventions by
refusing to conform to the conventional expectations of standard realism. Drawing from
the hybrid realities of their conceptual resource-bases, they seem to successfully reveal the "vision of consciousness" Harris demands of post-colonial writing. In articulating the revision of history as an ongoing ontological process, Okri and Harris challenge the standards of conventional realism in ways which can be seen as specifically political, by demanding recognition of the multiplicity of influences which inform human experience, indigenous and imported, material and spiritual, conscious and unconscious. If their mutual theme of the universality of human understanding and experience is unfashionable, it is always historically grounded, inclusive and sincere. As Pierre Mabille sagely observed, "If the exploration of the marvellous requires emotion, that's because an emotional shock temporarily reestablishes our communication with the world, which the intelligence has cut off" (Mabille 45).

"We live," says Wilson Harris, "in a twilight situation which half-remembers, half-forgets. As such the language of consciousness has to literally rediscover and reinform itself in the face of accretions of accent and privilege, and the burden of 'sacred' usage or one-sidedness" (1967:64). Magical realism therefore provides a ground for both the recovery of usurped or "eclipsed" histories and traditions, while it simultaneously points to the significance of returning to the imagination as a profoundly meaningful source of access to potential solutions to contemporary sociopolitical concerns. In magical realism, one sees that "tradition" is not a static event of the past, but a living and vital resource which bears specific relevance in the process of overcoming the restrictions of imperialism and domination, even (perhaps especially) today. As Michael Gillespie has observed, "Whether we like it or not, our world has come to conceive of history as the human actuality. It is thus all the more perplexing and disheartening that we are unable to articulate a conception of
history that can consistently sustain human dignity” (23). If “Western” conceptions of history and tradition fail to acknowledge the totality of human experience, the magical realism of postcolonial writers like Ben Okri and Wilson Harris therefore provides a mechanism for a critical reexamination of the way we understand our reality in order to avoid the “mystifying amnesia” of colonialism and its aftermath.

In conclusion, magical realism provides a mechanism for cross-cultural understanding that extends beyond the “textual politics” of postcolonial theory. The power of magical realism, its ability to challenge and uproot conventional assumptions about reality and consciousness, is exactly what makes it problematic for postcolonial theory. Magical realists writers, however “cosmopolitan” they may be, attempt to move beyond the restrictive constraints of realist representation to demonstrate the ways in which “tradition” is a living and vital force in the life of all humans. For postcolonial writers like Okri and Harris, this move allows them to present the simultaneous realities of specific postcolonial situations without appealing to an essentializing or anthropological conception of “tradition” as an event of the past. In rewriting the real, Okri and Harris have rewritten the text of humanity in terms which self-consciously account for the validity of disparate ideologies and experiences of those who other histories have historically silenced. Their magical realism demonstrates the various ways in which “in the upside down reality in which we have our being, paradoxes are ‘normal’ ” (Wynter 1996:308). And in exploring what is, in Harris’ words the “cross-cultural and universal imagination,” they’ve demonstrated that the barriers between cultural understanding are only as real as we imagine them to be. In this respect, where postcolonial theory attempts to articulate the ongoing disruption of colonized regions
since the point of European contact, magical realism provides a means of moving on to fight the "next" battle, the necessary and highly liberating struggle to reconcile and accept the infinitely various aspects of our human reality.
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