Momentary Magic: Magical Realism as Literary Activism in the Post-Cold War US Ethnic Novel

Dissertation

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the social climate was largely hostile toward minority activist rhetoric. In this era, some US writers of color turned to magical realism – a genre typically associated with Latin American authors of the 1960s – to criticize social injustice through the use of magic. Magical realism interrogates historical and social conditions through supernatural, mythical, or other non-realist characters and events. In many otherwise realist novels by US writers of color, moments of magic disrupt concepts of “reality” and complicate social and political inequalities. My comparative study investigates the intersections of magic, politics, and activism in magical realist novels by African American, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American authors by organizing the chapters around four recurrent themes: history, haunting, folklore, and shifting borders. This project explores how alternative visions of empowerment and engagement open up space within which writers of color can work against oppressive forces of racism and imperialism.

I begin by tracing the genealogy of the term “magical realism,” acknowledging the problems inherent in this term before turning to the genre’s foundation in postcolonial nations and its historical use as a vehicle for anti-imperialist critiques. I then shift my focus to works produced by US ethnic authors who are building on the anti-colonial politics of canonical magical realism in the antagonistic political environment of the post-Cold War United States. During this time, such authors engaged with the magical realist
genre as a mode of literary activism through which they could continue pushing for social change in an era when social protest was viewed with hostility.

The first chapter discusses how US writers of color use magic as a tool to rewrite or retell cultural histories. Building on the connections between past, present, and future explored in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 turns to the presence of ghosts as not only links to the past but also figures with active interests in their surviving relatives and broader communities. Chapter 3 is also interested in community, but on a national level, analyzing how magical realism enlivens folklore and alters it in order to assert its relevance in the contemporary United States. Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapters’ underlying discussion of magic, politics, and literary form, focusing on the intersection of avant-garde poetics and magic and exploring how authors of magical realism experiment with form as a means of commenting on contemporary politics.

Ultimately, my project contributes to an ongoing discussion of magical realism by reconciling the genre’s postcolonial roots with its contemporary deployment by US ethnic authors. While all writers of magical realism reinforce the genre’s fundamental bonds between form and content, writers of color publishing in the United States during the post-Cold War era have been more likely to overtly politicize these connections, engaging activist aesthetics to pursue clearly anti-imperialist politics. These writers use moments of magic to push the boundaries of political discourse and to imagine worlds in which people of color revision their futures.
This project is dedicated to the people who make my reality magical.

Mom and Dad
Gayle and Tyson
and Mike

Without all of you, life would be so very dull.
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Introduction

Using Magic: Magical Realism in the Post-Cold War United States

“Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [mestizaje], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?”

—Alejo Carpentier, 1949

In the autumn of 2011, I attended a conference where the keynote speaker was an African American author whose novels have been labeled “magical realism” by some critics. I approached him after his speech, excited to ask him how he saw the politics of his fiction working with the magical realist genre. However, all I got out was a prefatory “I know some people talk about your work in terms of magical realism—” before he put his hand up to stop me. With a curl of his lip and a curt shake of his head, he spent the next five minutes insisting his work was not magical realism and that what he was trying to accomplish was really quite political. All of his explanations belied the underlying assumption that magical realism is an apolitical genre – one that is necessarily divorced from any interest in issues surrounding race or resistance. Even though I was
disappointed by his reaction, I was also fascinated by the vehemence with which he responded to the concept of magical realism. Honestly, it wasn’t the first time I had encountered this kind of refusal of the genre. Native American studies scholars have told me there has to be a better term for it, Chicano studies scholars have pointed to recent Chicano and Latino authors’ resistance to working within the genre, and other scholars in Ethnic Studies have questioned my insistence on featuring the term “magical realism” so prominently in my project.

How did the words “magical realism” become a four-letter word in literary studies? I attribute this, in large part, to the attention given to the genre in the 1990s; magical realism’s booming popularity coincided with the multicultural movement that swept the American academy during the same decade. As a result of this connection, which I will flesh out later in this introduction, many authors of magical realism rejected the term’s application to their work due to its negative connotations (Bowers 85). The multiculturalist movement was perceived by many to engage with texts in a manner that promoted liberal sampling of “multicultural” authors and their works without taking the time to become familiar with the histories and social contexts those texts were coming out of. Unfortunately, many scholars still associate magical realism with the cultural tokenism model of multiculturalism – an association that is at odds with the genre’s history with resistant, anti-colonial, and anti-imperial politics. Many scholars have attempted to revive the term in the past twenty years, perhaps most notably Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in their comprehensive anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995) and Lyn Di Iorio Sandin and Richard Perez
in their anthology *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures* (2012), but their diligent work has done little to decrease the stigma surrounding the term.

**“Magical Realism: A Genealogy of the Term**

Magical realism is a slippery term. It is inherently difficult to define, which contributes to its unpopularity among some scholars. Many critics have attempted to nail down exactly what “counts” as magic in magical realism, creating lists that cover everything from ghosts to folklore to religion. However, such catalogues of magical-versus-real strike me as largely inadequate. For me, they miss the point. Magical realism is not interesting because of the presence of magic, it’s interesting because of how that magic functions. Zamora and Faris explain that the magic in magical realism “is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation” (3). Similarly, Theo D’haen argues that magical realism creates alternate worlds that disrupt dominant discourses (195). Despite disagreements over the specific elements that make a text magical realist, critics (myself included) generally agree on the politics of the genre as articulated by scholars like Zamora, Faris, and D’haen: it creates disruptive and resistant stories that work in opposition to dominant cultures and discourses. This is not to say that magical realism is always “writing back,” but instead that the alternate realities presented in these texts are not in alignment with the dominant, and they often complicate tidy understandings of race, history, and culture.

The political leanings of magical realist fiction are important, but it is also important to offer a gesture toward a more concrete definition of magical realism since so
many definitions have been offered in the past. I define magical realism as a literary
genre that uses supernatural, mythical, or other extra-realist characters and events to
critique real-world historical and social problems. Magical realist literature engages with
magic as a stylistic, symbolic, and political choice. Broadly defined, magic is extra-
realist; in other words, if a character or event defies cultural understandings of “reality”
then it may be discussed as “magical.” My understanding of exactly what constitutes
“magic” is based on the author’s culture as well as the culture of the characters
represented in the novel, rather than a western hegemonic rubric of reality and non-
reality. I always use magical realism to discuss literature, never to describe a group of
people’s lived experiences. My definition of magical realism comes out of nearly a
century of criticism and theory surrounding the term – a history that is important to trace
since the term’s genealogy continues to influence how we understand magical realism
today.

The first documented appearance of the term is in a 1925 essay by Franz Roh, a
German art critic. Roh uses the term to describe the trend in post-Expressionist European
painting now referred to as New Objectivity. He introduces the term by positing that his
use of the word “magic” stems from his “wish to indicate that the mystery does not
descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (16). He goes
on to clarify that Expressionism responded to Impressionism by tending toward
fantastical, supernatural, and even religious subjects, but that post-Expressionist painters
in Europe were turning away from the fantastic and toward the mundane. Irene Guenther
clarifies Roh’s explanation of magical realism when she writes that for Roh, “it was not
the subject matter that made this art so different. Rather, it was the fastidious depiction of
familiar objects, the new way of seeing and rendering the everyday, thereby ‘creating a 
new world view,’ that inspired the style” (36). In other words, Roh coined the term 
magical realism to refer to art that was so interested in the ordinary that its depiction of 
everyday subjects lent them an otherworldly quality.¹

Over twenty years later, Cuban author Alejo Carpentier appropriated Roh’s term 
to apply to what he saw as a very specific form of literature produced in postcolonial 
Latin American nations. In the introduction to his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* 
(*The Kingdom of this World*), Carpentier uses a slightly different iteration of magical 
realism: *lo real maravilloso* (or “the marvelous real”). Carpentier articulates how his 
understanding of American realities shifted after he visited the People’s Republic of 
China, Iran, and the Soviet Union; upon his return to Cuba, he became aware of the 
marvelous reality of the Americas and how this new awareness made “the tiresome 
pretension of creating the marvelous” in then-recent European literatures obvious (84). In 
other words, Carpentier finds falsely-marvelous European literary movements (such as 
Surrealism) to be nothing more than manufactured machinations utterly lacking substance 
or depth. Conversely, he situates *lo real maravilloso* in the Americas, explaining how the 
physical world around him is marvelous in the juxtaposition of centuries-old indigenous 
arquitecture, relatively recent colonial architecture, and the tropical flora and fauna. The 
relationship between human cultures – past and present, pre-contact and postcolonial – 
and the natural world illustrates the relationship between material realities and politics. 
Just as Roh applies the term “magical realism” to the European New Objectivists’ 
abilities to capture the magic of reality in their paintings, so Carpentier uses the term “*lo 
real maravilloso*” to describe Latin American authors’ abilities to capture the marvelous
The literature produced during the Latin American Boom of the 1960s, much of which adhered to Carpentier’s descriptions of magical realism, reinforced the popular conception of magical realism as a literary genre interested in social inequalities arising from the contact between two or more cultures. The publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s canonical novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 solidified the perception of magical realism as a product of Latin America, and it was only with time that critics extended their idea of magical realism to include the postcolonial world more broadly. In the past few decades, most scholarship takes it for granted that magical realism is a genre born of the unique situation different countries were left in after decolonization, and many scholars (most significantly Stephen Slemon and Christopher Warnes) consider it a genre through which postcolonial authors tackle the social and political issues brought about by the aftermath of colonization. Shannin Schroeder points out the relationship between the popular consumption of magical realist literature in the United States, beginning with the 1970 release of an English translation of Márquez’s novel, and the civil rights activism that was taking place in the United States at the time. She argues that authors here recognized a similar political situation in the Latin American “boom” literature, and that the popularity of magical realism produced outside of the US was a reflection of the need for a similar mode of expression. However, Schroeder stops there, without considering the rise of such a genre during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, most of the criticism surrounding magical realism is preoccupied with definitions of the magical.
Problems with the Term “Magical Realism”

One of the biggest potential problems with magical realism is the unspoken valuation of “reality.” In her popular book *Magic(al) Realism* (2004), Maggie Ann Bowers points out that “[m]agical realism is often criticized for relying on a European viewpoint that assumes that magic and the irrational belong to indigenous and non-European cultures, whereas rationality and a true sense of reality belong to a European perspective” (84). In other words, the heart of the issue is primarily a concern that an inherently Eurocentric worldview is being imposed on texts that display a non-Eurocentric idea of “reality” (Bowers 85) in a manner that trivializes the philosophies, mythologies, and cultures of marginalized peoples. While I understand this concern and appreciate the dangerous and damaging potential of such a use of the term “magical realism,” recent scholarship indicates a shift in understanding that takes a number of complex factors into account.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s scholars like Amaryll Beatrice Chanady and Wendy B. Faris began deconstructing definitions of “reality” in the existing scholarship on magical realism, articulating the potential dangers of using a fixed value system (that of the dominant culture) to analyze texts produced by authors from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds. Much in the same way western feminists have been criticized for attempting to use western philosophies of gender in non-western cultural situations, the scholarship on magical realism came under fire for attempting to use a universal rubric to define “magic” and “reality.” Moreover, the word “magic” conjures up images of card tricks, sleight of hand, and other flashy illusions and therefore can be (and has been) used in a reductive and demeaning way.
In Asian American and African American literature, the label magical realism has sometimes been applied to exoticize and essentialize cultures and histories. In Chicano and Latino literature, magical realism has been overused, often erroneously, leading to a recent trend among authors to shy away from the genre altogether. Native American literatures have an especially complicated history with the concept of magic, and ripples of this history are evident in the field’s reaction against the label magical realism. Native American (Laguna/Sioux) author Paula Gunn Allen explains, “American Indian thought is essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of magicalness—not the childish sort […] but rather an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things” (68). While Allen clearly articulates the way “magicalness” operates in “American Indian thought,” this is one of the fundamental sites of tension between magical realism and Native American literature. Western misconceptions of and biases against this “magicalness” have led to widespread misapplication of the word “magic” to describe Native American cultures and lived experiences. These troubled histories make it all the more important to respect the cultural backgrounds from which literature, especially magical realist literature, comes. To borrow Allen’s elegant phrasing, “Literature is one facet of a culture. The significance of a literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs, and the purpose of literature is clear only when the reader understands and accepts the assumptions on which the literature is based” (54). Parkinson and Zamora echo this sentiment when they write, “For the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the author who creates it, magic may be real, reality magical; there is no need to label them as such. […] Texts labeled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no
less ‘real’ than those upon which traditional literary realism draws” (3). Ultimately, it is this attention to the idea that “magic may be real, reality magical” depending on an author’s cultural background that I find most important in determining how one understands magical realism. A good example of this is Roland Walter’s argument that Chicano culture is constituted by a system of beliefs that is vastly different from Western conceptions of reality and time in its inclusion of superstition and myth into everyday life (60).

Today, scholars continue to pay close attention to these issues, and operate with an awareness of the term’s shortcomings while maintaining, as I do, that the term still has something valuable to contribute to ongoing discussions of this body of literature. Issues regarding hegemonic systems of belief and the assumption that magical realist texts were only considered “magical” by the dominant culture continue to plague the genre, and the result is an onslaught of terminology attempting to nuance or replace the label “magical realism.” Scholars have coined innumerable terms for the genre, some of which include: magic realism, magic(al) realism, magicorealism and magico-realism, marvelous realism, metaphoric realism, mystic realism, mythic realism, mythic verism, fantastic realism, telenovela realism, social realism, psychic realism, and grotesque realism.5 This multiplicity of terminology indicates critics’ ongoing engagement with the genre – no matter what it is called – and their attempts to nuance the notion of “magical realism” illustrate the continued relevance of this kind of literature.

This is one of several reasons I deliberately use Roh’s original wording. First, the genealogy of the term as I traced it above indicates the popular use of this term over the past several decades, and this consistent usage has lent Roh’s label a certain degree of
familiarity that makes it recognizable to people otherwise unfamiliar with the genre. Like all labels, magical realism has flaws. However, I feel that the term has value – not simply because it is recognizable, but also because of the specific literary history it is part of. More specifically, the popular use of magical realism to label works by Gabriel García Márquez (Colombian), Ben Okri (Nigerian), Salman Rushdie (Indian), and other “postcolonial” authors situates the genre in a very specific anti-colonial political and social history. This history is hugely significant to the anti-imperial agenda of one type of magical realism produced by authors of color in the United States, so I intentionally use the term “magical realism” to highlight and recall the genre’s long history of resistance and activism. I argue that by using moments of magic to illustrate the need for widespread social or political change, authors of magical realism perform “literary activism” by promoting an agenda calling for or recognizing the need for such change.

In addition to its history with anti-colonial politics, magical realism also has a long history of engagement with the politics of form, its authors often using magic in the employment of revolutionary poetics. Some scholars argue that magical realism is inherently postmodern, pointing out that part of its attraction for contemporary writers is the way it lends itself to addressing differences and representing conditions that are difficult to capture through “flat” realism (Faris 185). The relationship between form and content is an important aspect of magical realism’s social imperative, especially the way magical realism tends to “thematize” complex social dynamics, reinforcing content through form (Slemon 411). The argument has been made that magical realism decenters oppressive discourses and instead creates other realities in order to amend our known “reality” (D’haen 195). Magic’s function within this literature as a displacer of dominant
discourses and a corrector of past wrongs is a crucial aspect of the genre, and this subversive function lies at the heart of my inquiry.

**Magical Realism in Literature Produced in the United States**

Magical realism has most typically been read as a genre that is inherently linked to Latin American or postcolonial nations due to its tendency toward anticolonial politics, but writers from other nations have been using it for their own purposes for several decades now. There is a growing body of magical realist texts being produced outside of postcolonial nations. While generic characteristics of magical realism are essential to this project, I am most curious about the relationship between these magical realist moments in contemporary US ethnic literature and the US ethnic experience. Why is magical realism, which is typically thought of as a Latin American or postcolonial genre, becoming increasingly prevalent in the US? What is it about this genre that authors of color in the United States are tapping into as they include magic in their novels about the world around them? Why are these authors turning away from realism at moments of tension in their novels, and what is it about the politics of these moments that necessitates or facilitates instances of magic? What is the relationship between the social and political activism of the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of magical realism in US ethnic literature – and what happens in the post-Cold War era that creates a renewed interest in the genre within the US decades later? What is it about this formal element (magic) that lends itself to the interrogation and disruption of the dominant culture, and how do activist ideals continue to inform these magical moments? Why and how are US authors of color using magical realism as a form of activism?
Building on understandings of magical realism’s relationship to postcolonial politics, I shift the focus to consider how this scholarship “translates” when used to examine literature produced by authors of color in the United States. I explore the different ways magic functions in these texts, and the relationship between the presence of magical realism and cultural production in novels produced in the United States after the Cold War.

The magic in many contemporary novels by US ethnic authors often appears sporadically, which leads me to wonder exactly what it is about the moments of magic that necessitate a break from the “real” in these texts. As Jeanne Delbaere-Garant points out, “magic realism is often used only sporadically in an author’s oeuvre, and sporadically even in those of his or her texts commonly regarded as ‘magical realist’” (249). Therefore, I focus on those moments where verisimilitude is suspended and magic takes over. The works I examine in the following chapters range from abundantly magical realist, to largely realist with what I call “moments of magic.” I am interested in the occurrences of magic at crucial moments in the texts, and how the presence of magic disrupts, highlights, or otherwise interacts with the characters and plot to emphasize the literary activism being performed by the text.

Within the context of the United States, literary activism often builds on the genre’s postcolonial roots. While Maggie Anne Bowers admits that magical realism has been produced in English as well as within the United States, she also says, “Unlike Latin American magical realism, there has not been a long enough tradition in the English language to make it possible to trace influences from one English-language magical realist to another” (47). Even though the form has its roots in non-English-speaking parts
of the world, its genealogy crosses many borders – linguistics included. Anglophone authors across the globe have been influenced by English-language translations of magical realist texts, and Bowers’ claim ignores authors in the United States (and other Anglophone nations) who have been producing magical realism in English for quite some time now. The first English translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was available in the United States in 1970. Salman Rushdie has been publishing magical realism in English since the early 1980s. Authors of color in the United States have been publishing works that critics have discussed in terms of magical realism for decades: Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko (to name just a few) all published arguably magical realist texts in the 1970s; some of these authors have acknowledged magical realist influences on their work while others, like the keynote speaker I mentioned earlier, balk at the term’s application to their work. Even though many authors take issue with the label “magical realism,” the following passage presents a different perspective, illustrating the ways in which contemporary authors working within the genre are influenced by a global literary base (what I consider “canonical” magical realism):

> Probably the best-known writer of magical realism in the English language is the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie. As a writer who accepts the term’s application to his writing, he is also clear about his influences in relation to this mode: Nobel Prize winners Gabriel García Márquez, the German novelist and playwright Günter Grass, and the Russian novelist Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940). It is apparent from the history of magical realism outlined earlier that Rushdie’s English language form of magical
realism straddles both the surrealist tradition of magic realism as it developed in Europe and the mythic tradition of magical realism as it developed in Latin America. This is typical of magical realist writing in English since because it appears later than its counterparts in Europe and Latin America, it frequently produces forms of magical realism that combine influences from writers across the globe. (47)

Within the United States, authors of color are not only drawing on this global literary foundation, but are also turning to other US ethnic authors working with magical realism. For instance, in an interview Native American (Chippewa) author Louise Erdrich explained the influence Toni Morrison has had on her work. She also articulated the influence of authors like William Faulkner and Italo Calvino, stating that “Calvino is one of the most wonderful writers, and the magic in his work is something that has been an influence, as well as the South American, Latin American, writers” (Coltelli 49). Like Rushdie, Erdrich traces her literary influences to the global magical realist tradition. Despite the sometimes tense relationship between US ethnic authors and magical realism, younger generations of authors – like Erdrich – have cited postcolonial and US ethnic magical realist literature among their own influences. Dismissing magical realist texts by authors (of color) in the United States ignores a thriving tradition that traverses cultural and linguistic lines. Magical realism’s transnational influence illustrates its malleability and the flexibility of its political undertones, and in the post-Cold War United States the genre’s politics become even more important.

In 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the political climate in the United States underwent a significant shift. The aftermath of Reaganomics and the rise of
neoliberal politics were gradually eroding gains won in part through the large-scale social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Historian Mary Dudziak articulates the way in which the Cold War, despite creating an oppressive environment within the United States in many ways, actually facilitated certain kinds of civil rights gains. She explains that at “a time when the United States hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation” and inequality within its borders was both “troublesome and embarrassing” (12). Therefore, as part of its global initiatives against communism, the nation became more hospitable toward putting an end (or appearing to put an end) to racial inequality on the home front (11-13). In other words, during the Cold War the United States was motivated to be favorable toward civil rights legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act, and other legislation that resulted in prison reform and military desegregation. However, the “twin erosion of American segregation and international colonialism […] by 1968 relieved the U.S. government of much of its self-inflicted burden of trying to promote a ‘free world’ abroad while maintaining racial hierarchy at home,” and as the Cold War gradually decreased in intensity leading up to the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, so did the government’s interest in race relations and related reforms (Borstelmann 222).

As a result, the political climate in the post-Cold War United States grew freshly antagonistic toward protests and the kinds of highly-visible activism that were so influential during the Civil Rights Movements a few decades earlier, driving many activists to embrace more localized, grassroots community activism instead.

Contemporary cultural critics point out that as neoliberal ideals established the concept
that recognizing race was an inherently racist act, the multicultural push in higher
education gained momentum and when race was addressed, it was often addressed in
ways that isolated cultures rather than connected them (Duggan, Prashad). This
reimagining of the Civil Rights Era paralleled the shift “toward ‘multicultural’ diversity
within the neoliberal mainstream [which marked a move] away from the civil rights
lobbies and identity politics organizations to advocate the abandonment of progressive-
left affiliations, and the adoption of a neoliberal brand of identity/equality politics”
(Duggan 44).

This multicultural push in higher education gained momentum throughout the
1990s while neoliberal ideals simultaneously promoted the concept that recognizing race
was an inherently racist act. In his book Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting, historian
Vijay Prashad articulates the politics of the neocolonial multicultural movement very
clearly in a discussion of what he calls “the color-blind”:

As the USSR collapsed in the 1990s, neocolonialism was replaced by the
theory of neoliberalism in which freedom came to mean liberty of the
moneyed to act unburdened by notions of justice and democracy.
Neoliberalism threatens us with the reproach of equality, and forbids us to
create organizational platforms based on our historical and current
oppression. To fight against racism is twisted into a racist act, for to
invoke race even in a progressive antiracist agenda is seen as divisive. (38)

In other words, race is made into a taboo by the idea that recognizing race is an indication
of racism. This creates the notion of color-blindness, wherein the only appropriate way to
deal with race is to pretend that it doesn’t exist. In the post-Cold War era, the color-blind
erodes the ability to discuss racial injustice. As activist Tim Wise argues, “colorblindness not only fails to remedy discrimination and racial inequity, it can actually make both problems worse [because] the rhetoric of racial transcendence gives the impression […] that the racial injustices of the past are no longer instrumental in determining life chances and outcomes” and that race is, therefore, simply a cultural or biological phenomenon (18). The body of literature this project focuses on works against this neoliberal strategy of erasing race to feature discussions of race and social justice at its center.

Ironically, alongside the color-blind there is a concurrent desire to celebrate race in the form of multiculturalism. However well-intentioned multiculturalism may have been in the best of circumstances, it brought its own set of problems with it. Labeling literature produced by racial minorities “multicultural” implicitly re-centered white authors as the only writers capable of creating real literature, thereby reinforcing racial hierarchies (Chuh 16). Similarly, in its attempt to do justice to multiple different racial and cultural populations, multiculturalism too easily relied on a pluralistic model. American Studies scholar Amy Kaplan argues that this pluralism “runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly on the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating their formation” (15). In other words, multiculturalism can reinforce the concept of American nationality as monolithic if it only faces inward and focuses on social relations within the United States rather than facing outward and taking international power dynamics into consideration. Specifically, if acknowledging race was viewed as a racist act in and of itself, multiculturalism purported to celebrate racial difference in a way that tended to be reductive and essentializing. This political climate
made large-scale social organizing difficult (to say the least) and after 9/11 such organizing was not only difficult, but it was also deemed “un-American” in a militarized atmosphere where “complaint” was often met with dangerous us/them rhetoric. Under these conditions, authors of color writing in the United States experimented with magical realism as a way of mobilizing activist strategies through literature. The magical realist genre seems innocuous because of its playful nature, and it is often viewed as a relative of the largely apolitical genre of fantasy because of the presence of magic. However, instead of being apolitical, US ethnic authors of magical realism enact their own form of literary activism through this literature in an era when activist movements are difficult to organize.

**Periodization: Why the Post-Cold War Era?**

The Cold War acts as a convenient marker for a number of social, economic, and political issues at play in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s, the cumulative effect of which created a generally hostile environment toward not only large-scale social movements but also any discussions of race. As I argued earlier, the end of the Cold War resulted in a political shift as the United States’ need to portray itself as a “free state” diminished without the threat of communism represented by the Soviet Union. Additionally, the 1990s were an especially significant decade for American people of color because of the decade’s economic prosperity and the rise of neoliberalism, which diminished the perceived need for activism, changed its goals, and led to a shift in focus. In their book *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism*, Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai address the changing face of Asian American activism during the 1990s in
a discussion that is relevant not only to Asian Americans, but other racial minorities in the US as well:

The decade’s internet bubble marshaled in a seeming period of prosperity and a new capitalist vision that competed with one for a different, progressive society. [...] Culture and frames were filled with ‘new economy’ get-rich-quick discourse, pushing aside concerns for social justice and inequality. [...] Traditional liberalism yielded to the leadership of the centrist New Democratic wing in the Democratic Party, who advocated a compromised response to a resurgent conservatism [...]. The New Democrats continued to reduce funding to many of the programs that Asian American Movement activists built and worked in. The work of movement activists remained on the defensive under increasingly successful and aggressive conservative attack. The Clinton administration not only continued but also solidified the closure of political opportunities for social movements. (148-9)

In this political climate, Asian Americans were not the only people affected by these changes. The 1990s signaled a dramatic shift not only in motivation for activism, but also in how people of color were able to agitate for change. With the political left evaporating in a cloud of neoliberal political strategy, race became taboo. In his understanding of what many scholars call neoliberalism, Tim Wise explains the concept of “post-racial liberalism” as “a form of left-of-center politics” that uses “race-neutral rhetoric and colorblind public policy” in the post-Civil Rights United States where “some of the nation’s scholars and public intellectuals [have turned] against race-specific remedies for
lingering racial inequalities” (16). This erasure of race, which silences those fighting against racism, is a significant aspect of post-Cold War America. The race-as-invisible model minimizes race as an issue in the nation’s eye. Furthermore, because the mere acknowledgement of race is marked as a racist act in and of itself, recognizing racial difference – not to mention *talking about* it – is no longer acceptable. One example of how conversations around race were diminished in the 1990s is through the idea of “political correctness.” The multiplication of terminology surrounding race successfully created confusion and uncertainty around racial signifiers. For instance, how does one talk about African Americans? Are they Black-with-a-capital-B? Are they African-American or African American? What if one uses a label that’s out of date without realizing it? With so much confusion over the “proper” terms, dialogues about race are easily derailed. This effectively shuts down conversations on race, which I argue some authors of color in the United States continue to have within the confines of the literature they produce.

The lack of discussion about race is paralleled by the concept of a “post-race” society: the theory that racism was a thing of the past in the United States – that as a nation and a culture, the US had overcome racial adversity and become a society unburdened by such primitive problems as racism and discrimination. As the 1990s wore on, the perception of race as a non-issue solidified in mainstream culture, leading to the elimination of Affirmative Action in several states from 1996 through 2009 (with more certainly forthcoming) and a widespread belief that the United States had transcended race. As part of the neoliberal strategy of erasing race, the idea of multiculturalism was widely popularized.
Scholarly conversations around multiculturalism were often well-intentioned, but problematic nonetheless. In the introduction to *Multicultural Literature and Literacies*, Suzanne M. Miller and Barbara McCaskill write of the importance of “making space for cultural difference in classrooms and communities” through multiculturalism (7). They go on to argue that making space means, among other things, “making room for the voices of the ‘different’ ones themselves [and] prompting discussion and debate […] between these voices and the mainstream” (8). Notice that Miller and McCaskill’s focus is on difference. They emphasize a need to “make space” for “different” voices, which clearly demarcates an unmentioned and normalized non-different body of work. This distinction is reinforced by the idea of attempting to foster conversations between “these voices” and mainstream (i.e. white) texts. While the intention behind this collection is to value the contributions of other cultures, the rhetoric used to discuss those other cultures situates them in the margins of the mainstream.

As the national climate drew toward multiculturalism – and a brand of multiculturalism that Prashad argues was deeply invested in tokenizing difference and rejecting the grittier realities of different cultures – American authors of color began pushing against this reductive tendency. The growing popularity of authors like Amy Tan, whose literature was used by the mainstream to continue the Orientalization of Asian Americans, created the impetus for other authors to ground their works more firmly in their cultural backgrounds in ways that refuse to be distilled to one or two exotic characteristics.

Magical realism gained in popularity alongside multiculturalism in the academy during the 1990s, which I believe was a direct result of the ease with which
multiculturalism could be used to isolate and essentialize Latin American cultures, authors, and literary modes. In many ways, multiculturalism took the form of an approach to literary production through a form of cultural sampling. Unfortunately, works by authors from different cultures were treated like dioramas in a museum: things to be looked at with interest for the slice of history and culture they allowed the reader to glimpse. During this moment in the US academy, cultural difference was often acknowledged through “a ‘multiculturalism’ that aestheticizes ethnic difference as if [it] could be separated from history” (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 9). Magical realism already had roots in anti-colonial politics, so authors in the United States were able to build on the genre’s existing subversive tendencies and “translate” them to fit their own anti-imperialist political objectives in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 United States.

Imperialism is typically used to refer to foreign policy and international relationships, but the term is also applicable to internal politics. Some scholars have argued that imperialism in the United States operates on two levels: on the international level in our relationships with other countries, and within the US where issues of race are similar to issues of imperialism in that they have “to do with the nature of American self-government and American citizenship” (Michaels 366). In this vein, Amy Kaplan argues:

[I]mperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home. […] Foregrounding imperialism in the study of American cultures shows how putatively domestic conflicts are not simply contained at home but how they both emerge in response to international
struggles and spill over national boundaries to be reenacted, challenged, or transformed. (16)

The multifaceted relationship Kaplan points to connects international and internal imperialisms to illustrate the relationship between global politics and domestic cultural discourse. Similarly, historian Thomas Borstelmann argues that the civil rights rhetoric from the 1960s and 1970s took up the language of overseas imperialism and the nation’s portrayal of itself as a “free state” to challenge social injustices within the US. Questions of human rights abroad translated to questions of civil liberties “at home.” In more recent history, the “Gulf War derived its official self-representations from a symbolic economy already saturated with racial and gender hierarchies, and the discursive logic of the war also legitimated related forms of racism in the domestic sphere” (Pease 23). In other words, while the Cold War and the Gulf War both officially ended in 1991, the politics of global imperialism in the early 1990s was still rife with the kinds of contradictions civil rights activists decades earlier were able to use in order to win legislation intended to combat discriminatory practices in the United States.

**Rationale for the Comparative Approach**

Throughout this project, I employ a comparative approach in order to draw out the common threads – as well as decode the differences – in contemporary magical realism. In her book on Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano literature, Marta Sánchez articulates her rejection of the plurality suggested by the term *multiculturalism* in favor of the multidimensionality implied by *interculturalism*’s emphasis on the contact between cultures to show that they are “interdependent and interactive” (7). Similarly, Vijay
Prashad rejects “multiculturalism” in favor of “polyculturalism” – a term influenced by the musical idea of polyrhythm – in order to emphasize the porousness of culture and race. The cross-cultural methodologies embraced by the concepts of “interculturalism” and “polyculturalism” are essential aspects of what I mean when I say I engage with a comparative analysis of literature by authors of color in the United States: I am interested in the intersections of and productive possibilities suggested by novels written during a singular moment in the US by authors from different racial and cultural backgrounds.

The body of scholarship that has had the largest influence on my decision to approach these texts through a comparative lens is that of New American Studies scholars such as Lisa Lowe, John Carlos Rowe, and Donald E. Pease who ask scholars to consider American Studies within a global context. Racial histories in the United States are often studied in isolation by scholars rather than being examined side-by-side, which can elide the very real connections that exist across cultural lines, such as the disenfranchisement of Native Americans and Chicanos/as, the “importation” of African and Asian labor, and the colonization of nations such as Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawai’i, and Guam. In her essay on global labor histories, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe argues that Chinese “cooler” labor served as a revised form of slavery in the post-Civil War era, but that the history of “coolies” in the United States is often overlooked and is rarely connected to the abolition of slavery. Lowe asserts, “we must investigate the modalities of ‘forgetting’ these crucial connections” because these connections have been intentionally “forgotten” – rather, erased – in order to gloss over the “social violence and forms of domination” indigenous peoples, Asian immigrants, and African slaves experienced at the hands of the colonizer (205). Martin Joseph Ponce
similarly argues that despite its best attempts, the United States “could not, and still cannot, repress or forget […] the effects that overseas imperialism would have within its ‘domestic’ borders” (7-8). Even though I am looking at twentieth-century cultural production via literature, Lowe’s and Ponce’s reasoning remains relevant: the crucial connections between racial minorities in the United States and imperialist histories are too often purposely forgotten, and without these connections we cannot bring the larger picture into focus.

On this note, John Carlos Rowe argues that the concept of “exceptionalism” functions in a manner that essentializes what it means to be a “good” American, thereby steamrolling minorities and erasing difference (Companion 2). In other words, the comparative approach to US ethnic studies – whether we are looking at US racial formation as Lowe is, or at literature as activism as I am – makes connections across race, gender, and sexuality in order to correct dominant versions of history. Our understanding of history influences our understanding of present-day social structures, and a comparative approach helps bring the complete story into focus and put dominant narratives into perspective.

What I hope to accomplish using a comparative methodology is similar to what Chadwick Allen does using the prefix trans- to approach global indigenous studies. Allen articulates the potential weaknesses of a comparative approach that is based on a simple compare-and-contrast model, explaining that similar to “terms like translation, transnational, and transform, trans-Indigenous may be able to bear the complex, contingent asymmetry and the potential risks of unequal encounters borne by the preposition across” (Trans-Indigenous xi-xv). This kind of necessarily uneven and
complex encounter is what I hope to engage with in this project. In my exploration of
magical realism by US ethnic authors, I aim to compare texts *across* racial and cultural
lines in order to get a “big picture” understanding of how racial minorities in the United
States are using similar strategies to address same-but-different issues around race.

Magical realism lends itself to literary activism, in part because of its anti-colonial
history, and in part because of its investment in alternate realities. There is another
element of magical realism that makes it ideal for engaging with politics, and I think
Asian American literary scholar Timothy Yu makes this connection readily apparent in
his discussion of the literary avant-garde. He argues, “the communities formed by
contemporary American writers of color can themselves best be understood in the terms
we have developed for the analysis of the avant-garde,” explaining that race is socially
defined while the analytical framework we use to approach form “reminds us that the
aesthetic and the social are inseparable. An avant-garde is an aesthetic *and* a social
grouping, defined as much by its formation of a distinctive kind of community as by its
revolutionary aesthetics. As such, it can serve as a corrective to essentializing views of
any kind of artistic community” (2). While Yu is clearly interested in the politics of
avant-garde aesthetics, his point that form is “an aesthetic *and* a social grouping” defined
by the politics of those who write it applies to magical realism as well. Part of the reason
magical realism is so popularly considered the product of postcolonial nations is the bond
between the aesthetic and the social. When we look at US ethnic magical realist
literature, this aesthetic bond connects authors and texts across racial lines.

In this dissertation, I focus on those interracial connections and how they manifest
themselves in *novels* by authors of color writing in the United States. The decision to
focus on novels may seem arbitrary at first, but it is a very intentional choice. Mario Vargas Llosa, an author of contemporary and canonical magical realism, claims that at “the heart of all fictional work there burns a protest” (220), and articulates the way “fiction, by spurring the imagination, both temporarily assuages human dissatisfaction and simultaneously incites it” (221). He argues that novels – unlike poetry and drama – enable humans to address social issues through “lies” by creating alternate realities that have the potential to transform life through their non-adherence to “reality” or “truth” (217). Vargas Llosa’s point that novels engage the imagination in a manner that simultaneously assuages and incites dissatisfaction is central to my analysis of magical realist novels produced by authors of color in the United States: the magic in these novels functions in a manner that uses aesthetics to address political issues, expressing the need for social change through the use of magic at critical moments. The idea that fiction, especially the novel, gives voice to “protest” through the creation of alternate realities illustrates the larger relationship between the aesthetic and the social that Yu gets at in his understanding of the avant-garde and that I attempt to explore in my analysis of contemporary magical realist novels – especially those produced during an era when real-life protest is stymied by neoliberal political strategies.

**Organization of Chapters**

A comparative approach to magical realist novels by African American, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American authors allows me to explore the relationship between the formal and thematic conventions of magical realism and social politics in post-Cold War novels, drawing out parallel issues authors across racial lines
explore through this genre. At the same time, looking across racial lines sharpens an understanding of the cultural differences that are equally important to my inquiry as are the similarities. Rather than flattening the category of race, this comparison highlights the depth of the relationships among peoples of color in the United States. For that matter, my brief discussions of mainstream magical realism by white American authors adds to this depth by drawing out the connections between the politics of magical realism as it is employed by writers from a variety of different racial and cultural backgrounds. In order to emphasize these cross-racial readings, each of my four chapters pairs novels by authors writing out of different cultural backgrounds to look thematically at the use of magic in relation to history, ghosts, folklore, and literary form. I have organized each of my four chapters around central themes that are common to this genre of literature. I have intentionally avoided an organizational structure that focuses each chapter on authors from the same racial group, instead looking across cultural lines to hone in on key issues contemporary authors of magical realism in the US are addressing through their work. Each chapter compares two or three novels by different authors, looking at the social and political moments they come out of and the specific functions of the magic in each.

Traumatic histories feature prominently in most magical realist fiction, so my first chapter discusses how US writers of color use magic as a tool to rewrite or retell cultural histories of African American slavery and ongoing Native American cultural genocide. More specifically, this chapter looks at two revisionist novels, one that rewrites the past to shift perspectives on the present and another that writes a new present to offer a vision of the future. African American writer Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams* (1993), a novel about nineteenth-century New Orleans Voodoo queen Marie Laveau, rewrites
popular narratives of voodoo. *Voodoo Dreams* visualizes Marie Laveau’s spirituality through moments of magic, claiming her as a heroine who turns to grassroots activism after a gradual awakening to the injustices governing African Americans in New Orleans. The chapter then juxtaposes Rhodes’ novel with Native American author Gerald Vizenor’s (Anishinaabe) *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), which reimagines historical visions of Christopher Columbus to portray him as a victim of western civilization. The novel then delves into the near future to project a vision of the United States – and, indeed, the entire world – as it might exist if genetic experimentation could be used to transmit communal memory, thereby altering current concepts of indigeneity and sovereignty.

Building on the connections between past, present, and future explored in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 turns to the presence of ghosts as not only links to the past but also as figures with active interests in their surviving relatives and broader communities. Through the magical act of haunting, the ghosts in Native American (Choctaw) writer LeAnne Howe’s novel *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007) and Chicana writer Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far From God* (1993) constitute a criticism of the marginalization of minority women and communities. Howe’s novel features a “time-traveling” ghost invested in helping Lena, a Native American journalist, regain emotional wellbeing. Through this haunting, the ghost helps Lena come to terms with her own identity and reconnect with the Choctaw community. Castillo’s novel features multiple hauntings as it follows four ill-fated sisters from life into death, two of whom haunt their mother and make her more politically conscious. They do so by helping her draw on Mexican and
indigenous models of community to improve the material conditions of her impoverished township through grassroots activism.

Chapter 3 is also interested in community, but on a national level. It analyzes how magical realism enlivens folklore and alters it in order to assert its relevance in the contemporary United States. The three texts juxtaposed in this chapter each deploy cultural folklore to disrupt dominant histories and concepts of race. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Junot Díaz (Latino) follows one family’s attempts to flee the mythological curse of colonial contact, called the “fukú,” offering family and writing as counter-curses. Conversely, the Black utopia in Touré’s (African American) *Soul City* (2004) brings the trickster figure to life, promoting pride in the rich cultural heritage that ultimately sustains the characters and their community through interactions with the antagonistic neighboring white community. Finally, Marilyn Chin’s (Asian American) novel *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009) mixes kung-fu legend and Chinese nationalism to illustrate the powerful change-making possibilities that can be gained from integrating cultural traditions into contemporary life in the United States.

The first three chapters are concerned with specific instances of magic, but underlying those magical moments is an ongoing discussion of the relationship between magic, politics, and literary form (especially postmodernism). Chapter 4 focuses on the intersection of avant-garde poetics and magic, exploring how authors of magical realism experiment with form as a means of commenting on immigration politics and the exploitation of Mexican agricultural laborers. The concept of crossing literary borders through form is central to this chapter, as is the depiction of magical border crossings in literature. The chapter showcases *Tropic of Orange* (1997) by Karen Tei Yamashita
(Asian American), which plays with the complexities of narrative voice and mimics genres like hard-boiled detective fiction and canonical magical realism. *Tropic of Orange* weaves these genres together, presenting a tapestry of diverse voices that counter oppressive institutions. The chapter then turns to *The People of Paper* (2005) by Salvador Plascencia (Chicano), which is an experimental novel written in columns, pictures, and blank spaces. Plascencia’s formal experimentation visually mirrors the characters’ activist strategies as they band together to resist exploitation at the hands of the author, who symbolically represents imperialism.

This body of literature tends to be overlooked by the mainstream, which I argue is inherently related to its politics, especially given the reluctance to acknowledge race in the years during which these novels were published. Because of this, I have elected to use a text that is easily recognizable to most literary scholars and has been discussed as an example of magical realism in the past as a touchstone throughout the dissertation. To this end, I use Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* early in each chapter as a means to introduce the thematic construct at the heart of my analysis. Also, because Morrison’s novel is from a period earlier than that of my project, I use it as a jumping-off point for my analysis to help illustrate the work done through magical realism in the United States in the decades preceding the 1990s, and how post-Cold War authors build on foundations like *Beloved* while changing them to suit their needs in a different political and social climate.

In the conclusion, I turn to four key white American writers known for magical realism: Alice Hoffman, Neil Gaiman, Sarah Addison Allen, and Mark Z. Danielewski. Throughout the dissertation I assert that US ethnic authors are engaging with magical
realism to promote an anti-imperialist agenda; in this conclusion I illustrate the ways mainstream white authors of magical realism are not building on the genre’s anti-imperial foundations but are instead using magic as a mechanism to propel the plot forward. These authors endow their protagonists with magic in a manner that takes part in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism by portraying the central characters as so special that they have magical abilities. Moreover, the magic functions in a purely individual capacity that typically delivers the protagonists personal happiness.

Ultimately, my project contributes to an ongoing discussion of magical realism by reconciling the genre’s postcolonial roots with its contemporary deployment by authors of color in the United States. While all writers of magical realism reinforce the genre’s fundamental bonds between form and content, American writers of color publishing during the post-Cold War era have been more likely to overtly politicize these connections, engaging activist aesthetics to pursue clearly anti-imperialist politics. These writers use moments of magic to push the boundaries of political discourse and to imagine worlds in which people of color revision their futures.
Chapter 1

Imagining History: Temporal Excavation as a Means of Creating the Future

Novels have the power to transform history in ways that other kinds of writing cannot, which is perhaps why authors of magical realism are so interested in working with historical narratives. In a discussion about the transformative power of the novel, magical realist author Mario Vargas Llosa writes, “The reconstruction of the past through literature is almost always misleading in terms of historical objectivity. Literary truth is one thing, historical truth another. But, although it may be full of fabrication—or for that very reason—literature presents us with a side of history that cannot be found in history books. For literature does not lie gratuitously. All its deceits, devices, and hyperbole only serve to express those deep-seated and disturbing truths that come to light only in this oblique way” (222). The idea that literary truth and historical truth are different beasts is especially important to my inquiry, because one of the most important ways I see magical realism reworking history is through the intentionality of fiction. While the existence of historical “truth” is something I am always skeptical of, Vargas Llosa’s idea of literary truth as fabrication gets right to the heart of the relationship between literature and history. The assertion that “literature does not lie gratuitously” begs the question, what are authors hoping to accomplish through the “lie” of fiction? What are the “deep-seated and disturbing truths” that literature can draw out of history in ways historical narratives
are unable to? I argue that authors of magical realist fiction use literature to explore specific histories in the context of the era during which they are writing in order to illuminate the implications of current events in light of past engagements. Moreover, I posit that authors of magical realist fiction use moments of magic to further highlight sites of conflict and tension in the past to make clear how that past continues to shape the present and may play out in the future – for good or for bad.

I am opening my dissertation with this chapter on the relationship between magical realism and history because this bond is the most blatant and prevalent one of those I will focus on in the rest of this project. Alejo Carpentier’s 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) is arguably the first contemporary novel to be labeled magical realist. *El reino de este mundo* is the apotheosis of the magical-historical link in this literature. The novel follows Ti Noel through his life, beginning with his participation in the Haitian Revolution where he works alongside an escaped slave named Mackandel, who uses elements of Voodoo, rhetorical prowess, and leadership to incite followers to take action. Throughout the novel, Ti Noel becomes increasingly proficient at Voodoo. Carpentier’s novel, which blends cultural practices with the supernatural and magical to tell a version of a historical event, illustrates magical realism’s investment in the relationship between the past and the present. The novel’s politics engage with magical realism in a manner consistent with Carpentier’s anti-nationalist politics; this trend of using magical realism to subvert and rethink oppressive governments is an essential aspect of the genre (as I articulated in the introduction), and one that continues to play out in the magical realism produced by authors of color in the US today.
While Carpentier uses magic to reconsider mainstream narratives of the Haitian Revolution, this is by no means the only way magical realism’s preoccupation with history manifests itself. Its interest in the connections between past and present (and, by implication, future) can be broken down into several distinct general categories. These are by no means exhaustive, and are intended to be broad categories with some acknowledged overlap:

- **Complicating History.** Magical realism that complicates mainstream narratives of history. This could look like Carpentier’s novel, which shows a different version of a historical event through magic as discussed above; it could also look like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) which approaches a historical situation (slavery) from an unexpected angle, literally intertwining the past and the present. In *Kindred*, the protagonist, Dana, is a contemporary African American woman who is repeatedly and unexpectedly plunged into the past where she visits a young white boy, Rufus, at several key moments in his life. It turns out that Rufus grows up and rapes her ancestor, and later purchases the same ancestor and coerces her into sleeping with him regularly; this makes Rufus Dana’s ancestor as well. In this way, the past and the present are mixed together, and the past has a very direct impact on Dana. In both novels, the introduction of magic into a historical setting refuses a reductive or one-sided account of the past, and highlights its relationship to the present.

- **Altering History.** Magical realism that actively alters history. This might look like Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), in which the author playfully turns a Eurocentric worldview on its head by positing that the entirety of Western culture
and civilization – from philosophy to literature and arts to science – is stolen from (and therefore entirely based on) African culture. By shifting the foundations of Western civilization, Reed removes the creditability of the myth of non-western civilizations as underdeveloped or “savage,” instead representing them as sophisticated and rich civilizations. The use of magical elements to convey this altered history imagines an alternate reality that nevertheless has a lot to say about our own reality and perceptions of the world.

- **Reimagining History.** This is magical realism that reimagines the past in order to speculate about the future. I’m thinking specifically of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the fictional community of Macondo. Márquez famously creates this imaginary space with undeniable parallels to reality: a Latin American community that is beautiful to begin with, but deteriorates more and more as the outside world (in the form of European technologies, an exploitative banana company, and a variety of wars) erodes its cultural foundations and splits it up from the inside. In spaces such as Macondo, authors of magical realism create fictional spaces where characters’ lives play out in ways that so closely resemble historical events that they provide a commentary on that history by reimagining and altering it. Many of these fictional spaces are used to show the disastrous effects of European contact or influence on previously flourishing communities.

In the magical realism being produced in the United States, magic definitely interrogates mainstream histories, sometimes correcting longstanding fallacies, other times offering empowering interpretations of the past, and often shedding light on other sides of the
story that were (intentionally or otherwise) previously unheard. In many instances, these authors are also counteracting damage that has been inflicted by common (mis)understandings of history. However, I want to be clear that the interest in the malleability of history should not be reductively perceived as simply “writing back.” Instead, this retrospective tendency is a way for authors to revisit significant historical events and breathe fresh life into them in order to make apparent the connections between history and the present. In exploring the past, magical realism simultaneously looks to the future as the site of most importance.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I have elected to use Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) as a touchstone early in each chapter to preliminarily introduce the ideas I will discuss regarding magical realism in the United States. Since this chapter focuses on the magical use of the past to comment on the present and/or future, I will focus this chapter’s discussion of *Beloved* on the way the past – specifically Sethe’s personal experiences as a slave in the American South – is always encroaching upon the present in this novel.

Not only does Sethe’s murdered baby take on physical form as the young woman called Beloved (who I will explore in more detail in my discussion of hauntings in Chapter 2), but the traumas Sethe suffered before escaping from slavery at Sweet Home constantly remind her of her fears. The “tree” of scars on her back plays an important role in her relationship with Paul D; a particular style of hat recalls the detached cruelty of Schoolteacher; and Paul D’s words (when he says she loves too strongly, or that they’re not animals but humans) raise up memories of countless humiliations and indignities suffered at Sweet Home.
However, for all of Morrison’s attention given to the past and its impact on the present, what’s really at stake is the future. The past is Beloved, a casualty of the trauma of slavery who has returned from death to haunt her mother; the future is Denver, the child who survived and who has a chance at moving forward and having a good life. At the end of the novel, all that’s left of Beloved is a set of footprints, but Denver has found a beau, a job, and a place in the community. Ultimately, this ending indicates that there is hope for the future despite the past. Morrison, like the authors I will discuss in this chapter, revivifies the past in order to show how history maintains a presence in today’s world, and on into tomorrow.

In this chapter, I examine two novels: *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) and *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991); I examine how these novels both use magic to rethink or reinvent the past, and through this, to imagine the present and future in new ways. The first novel this chapter focuses on is African American author Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams*. Rhodes delves into the past, integrating magical realism into the historical fiction genre. Her imagining of Marie Laveau, the well-known New Orleans Voodoo priestess of the 1800s of whom we have very little tangible documentation, grapples with dominant portrayals of the practice of Voodoo while simultaneously creating a strong female heroine who is powerful during a historical period where African Americans are typically represented as powerless victims of slavery, and where African American women are considered to have even less agency than their male counterparts. I will move forward with my inquiry to look at Native American (Anishinaabe) author Gerald Vizenor’s *The Heirs of Columbus* to analyze the ways this novel refutes dominant narratives of the US settler-state and Christopher Columbus’ role in its “discovery,” offering an alternative
interpretation of the present and following through on its implications to project into the future.

I start with *Voodoo Dreams* because of the intense and undeniable connection between past, present, and future that lies at the heart of this novel. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a historical novel is “a novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing […], and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period. The central character – real or imagined – is usually subject to divided loyalties within a larger historic period of which readers know the outcome” (174). Rhodes’ text adheres to most of these characteristics of the historical novel, with one significant exception: *Voodoo Dreams* makes little attempt to depict Marie Laveau’s life with careful accuracy. In fact, many aspects of the novel are intentionally and knowingly made up (I will discuss these below). As something between historical novel and historiography, the importance of a wide variety of histories – the history of slavery in the American South, the history of Voodoo in New Orleans, and the historical figure of Marie Laveau, to name a few – is something the reader has to grapple with. Alongside this aspect of the novel, the magical realism is intertwined with these historical components of the text to become a crucial element in Rhodes’ representation of these figures during this time period. The text subverts the perceived relationship between realism and historicity, contradicting the idea that history is reality. She uses historiography to destabilize the idea of history-as-fact.

While Rhodes engages with historical fiction, her novel speaks to the present through its implied future. This is something I will discuss in more detail near the end of
my analysis of *Voodoo Dreams*, but it’s important to preface my reading of the novel by making it clear that what Rhodes does with this novel is atypical to historical fiction in that rather than fleshing out an already well-established figure by filling in the gaps with artistic interpretation, Rhodes is working with a figure about whom there is very little historical documentation. I should qualify that last statement: there are many rumors and tall tales written and passed down orally, but very little remains providing even the most basic of information about the famed Voodoo Queen. For this reason, the novel is less of a historically fleshing-out of a widely historicized figure than an imaginative generation of a historical – albeit mysterious – figure.¹

_Voodoo Dreams_ follows Marie Laveau – the daughter of another Marie Laveau² who was a well-known Voodoo Queen before her untimely death, and the granddaughter of still another Marie who was raised a Voodooienne but converted to Catholicism in adulthood – from her tenth birthday to her death as an elderly woman. Most of the novel takes place between Marie’s sixteenth birthday and the time she is nineteen years old. Marie was raised by her grandmother in Teché, a small town in the bayou hours from New Orleans, and when she is sixteen years old she and her grandmother move to the city so she can find a husband. She meets a kind man named Jacques Paris who saves her from a violent encounter in the streets on her first afternoon in the city, and shortly after this they are married. However, her curiosity about her mother leads her into the arms of John, an evil, scheming charlatan who ensnares her in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship. For the bulk of the novel, Marie struggles to understand Voodoo and the gift she has that allows African gods and spirits to possess her body and help her followers; simultaneously, Marie attempts to please John in order to minimize his abuse.
towards her. She repeatedly runs into a white man named Louis DeLavier – a northern transplant to the South where he marries his cousin Brigette and encounters the wrath of Brigette’s incestuous and evil brother Antoine DeLavier – who harbors an intense infatuation for her and, in his continued attempts to “rescue” her, becomes tangled up in Marie’s perilous relationship with John and their followers. When Antoine rapes Marie, Louis tries to stop him and Marie ends up killing him in an attempt to save Louis’ life. She is subsequently jailed for approximately three weeks, and upon her release she returns to her life with John.

In addition to her day-to-day existence in John’s home, her growing powers, and her extra jobs for people like Brigette, Marie also becomes increasingly caught up in the racial politics of the city as various riots and uprisings result in the mass incarceration of anyone of African American or Creole descent. As Marie gains a large popular following, she begins to plot an escape from John’s exploitation and abuse. When she gives birth to a daughter – John’s child, the fourth Marie – she realizes how twisted John is and plots his death, which she executes during the final ceremony of the novel. The novel concludes with Louis’ account of Marie’s death as an old woman over half a decade after that final ceremony.

**Imagining History Through Form**

*Voodoo Dreams* imitates common tropes of both the historical novel and historiographical texts, manipulating them in order to lend the texts a sense of reliability that gives the appearance of complying with mainstream ideas of historicity. The most obvious trope Rhodes imitates is the use of excerpts from written documents as epigraphs
opening each chapter. She uses fragments of letters, journal entries, and newspaper clippings as epigraphs – always complete with dates and source information – and in this way, each chapter is contextualized for the reader. For instance, the very first chapter begins with a conversation labeled “Marie Laveau, June 12, 1881, Early Evening (from Louis DeLavier’s journal)” (3) which was transcribed by Louis into his journal. Rhodes attributes these words to Louis in a move that clearly situates this transcript within his journal. This epigraph, like the rest, highlights the chapter’s central themes or events while simultaneously appearing to ground the novel in the words of a historical document, thus lending a sense of accuracy or reliability to the novel.

Only after the novel ends does Rhodes reveal that all of these documents are actually fabrications in a move that destabilizes the novel as a work of historical fiction and raises the question of accuracy after the text’s conclusion. In the Author’s Note that follows the Epilogue, Rhodes explains, “Most of this story sprang from imagination, from my vision of Laveau as a woman of power, and from my sense that Voodoo has been and continues to be a spiritual well that is far richer than American media and popular stereotypes allow. My newspaper articles and journal entries are fictional, as are all my character portrayals” (436, my emphasis). The strategy of employing created documents to contribute to the novel’s sense of historical “reliability” in accordance with mainstream ideas of documented histories allows Rhodes to draw attention to the artifice of the epigraphs and deliberately undermine a reading of this novel as a historical reconstruction grounded in “fact.” Essentially, the Author’s Note asks readers to consider the merits of another kind of historical accounting – one that lies outside the narrowly defined limits of “history.”

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Since many of the epigraphs are transcriptions of conversations between Marie and Louis – conversations that often read like interviews – they provide a kind of meta-commentary of the young Marie’s life. The majority of the conversations are from mid-June, 1881, over half a decade after the rest of the events in the novel and just days (or sometimes hours) before the elderly Marie’s death. Having the older Marie’s voice speaking about the younger Marie’s life as depicted in the novel brings the connection between past and present to life. It illustrates the way an individual person’s past continues to influence them as they age, but more than that it also offers the reader a lens through which they can interpret the young Marie’s actions. The older Marie’s feelings of regret or pride subtly guide the reader to come to specific judgments about the younger Marie’s involvement with Voodoo. In this way, these epigraphs are a mechanism through which Rhodes can control the reader’s response to the actions of the young Voodooienne, and through that, the reception of Voodoo itself. For instance, after Marie kills Antoine DeLavier, the chapter begins with a conversation from Louis’ journal on June 15, 1881, where Marie explains her thoughts on her first day in jail:

“I stared stupidly at my bruised hands. I remember thinking I was incapable of violence, Louis. I never wanted to believe my followers’ guilt was all mine.

[...]

“But it was mine. I allowed John to use me. He used me for ill, never for good. All those poor people who believed in me never suspected I knew less than they did about the Voodoo faith. From whom would I have learned it?”
“Don’t cry, Marie,” I said.

“Yes, I’m too old to cry. Where is the faith of my ancestors? I was worse than a charlatan. I wasted my gift. I led others to believe in a religion based on lies, on theatrics.

“When the judge called me evil, I perversely believed him.” (258)

Marie’s admission of believing herself evil for murdering Antoine (a completely unsympathetic and evil character) casts her as a good person with a strong conscience and sense of morals. Contrary to the image of the bloodthirsty and power hungry Voodoo priestess widely portrayed in mainstream media, this guilt-ridden old woman who the reader knows killed only out of self-defense and the desire to save a friend’s life humanizes her and makes her act of violence understandable. Her concern about misleading her followers through her own ignorance of Voodoo addresses the modern-day mainstream representation of Voodoo as a pseudo-religion based on vengeance, violence, and theatrics. Marie’s query, “Where is the faith of my ancestors?” points out the discrepancies between the religious practice as it may have looked in Africa and its incarnation in the Americas. The fact that Marie Laveau, the most (in)famous practitioner of Voodoo in the United States, feels that she has contributed to the creation of a diluted version of Voodoo “based on lies, on theatrics” because of John’s perversion of the faith shows that even this most faithful priestess has doubts about the representation of Voodoo we see in Voodoo Dreams. Through the older Marie’s commentary on the young Marie’s crimes, Rhodes anticipates the reader’s possible misinterpretations and resists the potential for this novel to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Instead, epigraphs like this one
add to the complexity of the novel’s portrayal of Voodoo and refuse an overly-simplistic reading that would contribute to the stigma surrounding Voodoo.

In addition to the epigraphs, Rhodes’ use of italicized passages to provide the reader with insight into Marie’s powers when she is possessed by gods further reinforces the occurrence of magic in Marie’s miracles by making it clear to the reader that these miracles are really happening. For instance, during one of her ceremonies, Marie levitates for a prolonged period of time, and the narration appears as follows:

The crowd hushed as she rose above them. Some pulled back, frightened. Some dropped to their knees. But they all chanted in the barest of whispers, “Damballah Queen. Maman Marie, our Damballah Queen.”

John, his arms locked about himself, kept shaking his head. Marie’s feet were merely inches removed from the ground, but it might as well have been miles. Envy was like bitter gall. It was a trick. There had to be some trick.

Marie spun around until her yellow gown was imbued with rainbows. She descended to the ground as swiftly, as smoothly, as an angel, Damballah was gone.

The drums died abruptly. (157-58, original emphasis)

In the first sentence of the passage, the fact is stated clearly: “she rose above them.” In the second paragraph, Rhodes gives us John’s perspective. Since John is a charlatan, his thoughts echo the cynical reader’s thoughts: “It was a trick. There had to be some trick.” His doubt counters the earlier statement of fact, and neither is privileged over the other. However, the italics of the third paragraph give the reader insight into the possession,
letting the reader into Marie’s mind/body and giving them access to the truth – that she is possessed by Damballah. By italicizing miraculous feats such as this one, Rhodes shows the reader what the other characters in the book are unable to see: the reality of what is happening inside Marie when the gods use her body to do their work. They serve as a kind of validation that allows the reader to share in Marie’s possession and know without a doubt that these moments of magic are not “a trick.”

**Developing Power: Reclaiming Marie Laveau as a Cultural Heroine**

One of the most important things this book does is to construct a version of history that doesn’t vilify Marie Laveau or Voodoo. Voodoo is a religion originating in Africa, which came to the United States through the slave trade. The version of Voodoo practiced in New Orleans is generally considered to be a descendant of Haitian Voudou, which is a descendant of the “original” West African religion. Laënc Hurbon argues that as “a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, the United States should not necessarily have developed, a priori, an attitude of scorn or rejection toward Vodou. At most, it could have maintained a certain indifference. But this has not been the case. Anti-Black racism being one of the major characteristics of American society [in the early 1800s], contact with Haitian culture was forged on the basis of racist prejudices, with fatal consequences” (181-82). From the outset, Voodoo was looked at as superstition (at best) and devil-worship (at worst). Because “Voodoo rituals were at the core of the uprising against the colonial rulers [in Haiti] and inspired the enslaved Africans ultimately to defeat the mighty army of Napoleon” (Fandrich 188), Voodoo is often strongly associated with revolutionary politics and activism (Gaston 114), but for white people in the nineteenth
century, it was the source of fear for this very reason. Legends of Marie Laveau as a Voodoo priestess often vilify her as an evil witch or sorceress who abused her power to escape punishment for her many crimes and to grow rich off of her followers. However, more recent studies of Marie Laveau show that she was not the petty criminal and evil woman most stereotypes portray her as; instead, they tell of her “ministry to condemned prisoners, her antislavery activism, and her leadership in the struggle by women of African descent against the hierarchy of white men” (Long xvi). This version of Marie Laveau is what Rhodes reclaims in *Voodoo Dreams*.

Rhodes’ novel uses created documents “written by” Louis to open each chapter, with the result that the novel is able to present a romanticized (and admittedly biased) vision of the renowned Voodoo priestess without losing its appearance of objectivity – a characteristic of “historical” texts that is valued by the dominant culture. This strategy allows Rhodes to appear to conform to certain conventions of research and citation while she fills in the historical gaps without buying into mainstream narratives that portray Marie Laveau as everything from a fraud to a witch, and depict Voodoo as a primitive and vindictive practice centered on devil-worship and cannibalism (Hurbon, Gaston, Ward, Tallant).

Throughout *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes involves Marie Laveau in a series of events that are grounded in the history and politics of nineteenth-century New Orleans in a way that contributes to the characters’ (and thereby the reader’s) understanding of the oppressive race politics of her world and leads her to rebel against it in increasingly dramatic ways as her powers grow. Throughout the novel, Marie frees herself from each of the systems of oppression operating on her, one at a time, so that by the end she is an
empowered, independent, free Black woman. The series of events that lead up to this moment of liberation map the social and political awakening of Marie and her growing ability to use her power and status as a Voodoo Queen to influence change in the community. As Marie develops a deeper understanding of Voodoo, she also develops an understanding of the imbalances in the power structures set up by the dominant culture and the ways her own power among the African, African American, and Creole cultures allows her to undermine those structures.

When Marie arrives in New Orleans early in the novel, her encounter with Antoine DeLavier makes clear to her the perils of being Black in a city where white people control the institutions, including that of the law. In this particular scene, Marie witnesses not only the racist violence allowed by the law, but also the kind of power women can exercise over men (who, in this scene, hold the power of the law). As Marie and Grandmére enter the city, their carriage blocks the DeLaviers’ carriage. Antoine is traveling with his sister Brigette (with whom he has been conducting an incestuous sexual relationship for some years) and their cousin (and her fiancé) from the north, Louis. Antoine’s anger at Brigette’s engagement fuels his anger at Grandmére, and he yells at her for blocking their way; when he prepares to strike her, Marie intercedes and becomes the target of his misdirected rage. He threatens her, and Jacques Paris (who Marie and Grandmére had only just met) steps in, posing as Marie’s brother and taking Antoine’s violence upon himself. Antoine whips him, and is only stopped by Brigette, who realizes Louis will find her unattractive if she doesn’t stop Antoine. When Antoine beats Jacques, he is quite literally performing his power as a white man in the American south, enacting his role as a (would-be) lynch in order to publicly reinforce the power
structures of New Orleans. Throughout the violence, he continually panders to his audience – Black and white – encouraging their involvement through dramatic flourishes and the promise of being able to fulfill their desires. The audience asserts its presence when Marie first calls for help: “Women laughed behind fans, men raucously encouraged her taming, while the coloreds about her kept their heads bowed” (46). When Marie attempts to fight back against Antoine, the “Blacks in the crowd gasped at her courageous folly” (46). Here, in the very beginning of the disturbance in the street, the audience asserts its presence and its power. The attention the crowd gives to the event becomes the source of power for Antoine just as the lynch mob lends power to those committing the murder. When Jacques gets involved, Antoine mocks his gentlemanly manner, eliciting laughter from the crowd (47). The crowd’s support lends Antoine more power, and as the scene progresses, they behave much like an audience at the theater. When Antoine gets out his whip and administers the first lash with it, “Many in the crowd applauded” (50). Antoine enacts a performance of white power – *southern* white power – for the public in the same way a lynching is a performance of power.³ In fact, this would have become a lynching if not for Brigette.

Even though she interferes only for her own selfish motivations, Brigette’s role in Antoine’s display of power undermines the power he has, illustrating the power women wield. When Antoine has nearly killed Jacques with his whip, the following exchange takes place between Antoine and Brigette:

“Antoine.” Brigette *posed* in the window, looking elegant and slightly bored. “This upsets me.” Her cool voice stilled the *scene*. The *crowd focused on Brigette* as if she were a sainted virgin.
“It can’t be helped.” Antoine’s face was petulant.

“I say it can.” With the black coachman assisting, Brigette stepped gracefully down from the carriage. She opened a white parasol to deflect the sun’s glare. “It’s rude to be threatening one’s visiting cousin. Louis already thinks we’re barbarians as is.”

“He shouldn’t interfere with southern ways,” said Antoine, playing to his audience, striding cocksure. He snapped the whip’s tail in the dirt, creating swirls of dust. The audience cheered.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassing us in front of a common crowd. Father wouldn’t have approved.” Twirling her parasol, Brigette stared at Antoine, a pout curving her tainted mouth. Her gaze was steadfast. “Do as I say, Antoine.” (51, my emphasis)

Shortly after this, the crowd loses interest and disperses. In this performance, Antoine establishes his power over Jacques and Louis (and all the northern sentiments Louis represents). However, Brigette’s performance reveals her to be even more powerful than Antoine. Her appearance with her calmness and her white parasol establish her as a virginal southern belle figure – that epitome of southern womanhood so applauded in the antebellum years – that trumps any power the southern man may have held. Her calm scolding, including a reminder of their late father, transforms Antoine into a “petulant” boy rather than a powerful man, giving Brigette the same kind of power a mother has over her children. Her performance is so successful that her simple command “Do as I say” halts his performances and scatters the crowd.
Marie, a witness to the entire performance, sees the shifting power dynamics and understands that the true power belongs to Brigette. This woman is powerful enough to stop Antoine’s violence with a few short sentences. She is able to do what Louis was desperate but unable to do and play the role of Marie’s (and Jacques’) savior.

Significantly, Marie comprehends this underlying power, as evidenced by her request that Louis thank “that lovely woman” for her (52). This causes Louis to wince, but Marie’s words indicate that the lesson she has learned from this performance is not a lesson about how African Americans are expected to comport themselves around whites, but a lesson about the power women can hold over men – even men who hold the balance of life or death in their hands as Antoine did here.

In the same scene, Marie witnesses the way her own grandmother has been rendered powerless by the constraints of another white patriarchal institution: Catholicism. When she asks Grandmère to help Jacques before Antoine gets out his whip, Grandmère calls on the Guédé⁴ – African spirits of death – and succeeds in calling them to her. However, when the Guédé arrive, she realizes:

“All she needed to do was point. The Guédé were ready. If she pointed, the process would begin. Her hand was shaking. The Guédé would destroy him.

“Do it,” said the Guédé in unison. “Do it now.”

“I can’t. I can’t.” Grandmère collapsed. Warding off sin, she pressed her rosary to her eyes, mumbling, “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not kill.” (48-9, original emphasis)
For an instant, Marie sees the power her grandmother has, but Grandmère’s subscription to Catholic views on “sin” prevent her from coming to the aid of an innocent man who has stepped in to save her granddaughter from Antoine’s “taming.” Ironically, Antoine is also Catholic, but he is willing to kill with his own two hands. In this scene, Marie remains unaware of what Rhodes has revealed to the reader: the power she has access to through Voodoo – here, a power that could offer her protection from Antoine.

This passage shows the strength Grandmère possesses when she communicates with her own cultural deities (here, the Guédé), and the total lack of power she has when she suppresses her roots in favor of a Western patriarchal institution (Catholicism). Even though in this case Grandmère is communicating with the Guédé in order to perform an act of violence, the larger significance is that through this connection she is more powerful than Antoine or the mob of onlookers. This small moment of magic implies that it is Grandmère’s lost connection with her cultural beliefs that has turned her into the “weary, sad-eyed woman” who tries to convince Marie to abandon Jacques to his death in the street (49). In the brief moment during which she attempted to reestablish that connection, Grandmère appears capable of anything. It is important, then, that this true connection is the only significant part of this scene that is not performative. The entire moment is written in italics, and aside from Marie’s observations of a fleeting change in her grandmother’s face, nobody on the street is aware of the power she channels through her body. Unlike the tableau that unfolds between Antoine, Jacques, Brigette, and Louis, the internal occurrence of this moment of magic is entirely non-performative and therefore, stands out in stark contrast to the scene around her. The implication here is that
Grandmère’s power is not an act like the DeLaviers’ power, which relies heavily on the audience’s approval, but is a true power contained within her body.

As the plot advances, it becomes clear that John is another character who performs the power he doesn’t really have. John is consistently described as wearing a “costume” and on several occasions he thinks of Marie as “playacting” when the narrative makes it clear to the reader that she is actually being possessed by gods. His condescension toward Marie and her followers often takes the form of skepticism and the attempt to convince himself that it is some sort of “trick” that Marie has executed to steal the power for herself. Marie’s fear of John prevents her from understanding that his power is false, and that she is the one who truly holds the power through her genuine connection to the gods.

John’s performance of power is intended to bring him wealth, and since he most frequently uses it to pander to a white clientele, it prevents him from actually establishing a real connection to Voodoo. To John, “Voodoo was a business. Profit. Manipulation. Power” (127). When Marie performs miracles, he rationalizes them away by telling himself Voodoo is “Nonsense. None of this was real” (156). He spends most of his energy attempting to exert control over the people around him, dismissing Marie’s spiritual feats as sleights of hand that are unimportant except for their ability to win the crowd. Essentially, John uses Voodoo the same way Antoine DeLavier uses white southern masculinity: as a performance he can put on in order to gain what he desires through the help of the crowd. The result of John’s use of Voodoo is that he is at Marie’s mercy since she is the one who attracts the crowds that make him so powerful.
It takes a long time for Marie to figure out that she is powerful, and the incident that Rhodes portrays as the turning point is Antoine DeLavier’s death. Antoine follows Marie when she leaves his home one night, where she was doing Brigette’s hair, and rapes her in an alley. Louis interrupts the rape, trying to save Marie, and Antoine turns on him and begins strangling him. Before Antoine can kill Louis, Marie crushes his skull with a rock. Contrary to popular stereotypes about Voodoo, it is not the act of killing that gives Marie power; it is the act of protecting. She kills Antoine to save Louis’ life, and then refuses to divulge her knowledge of Brigette’s incestuous relationship with Antoine to Louis (thereby doubly protecting him, first physically, then emotionally). She enacts her protection of Louis by making certain that the blame for her “crime” will fall on her:

On her hands and knees, with the edge of her shoe, Marie drew a circle about Antoine’s body. Beneath the circle she drew a snake.

“What are you doing?”

Tearing her slip, Marie twisted it about a bundle of twigs.

“What are you doing?” Louis was hovering, his hands running through his hair, his face perspiring, streaked with dirt and blood. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure everyone knows I committed this crime.”

[...]

Knowing she couldn’t save herself, Marie wanted to save Louis. He shouldn’t be convicted because he was defending her. She didn’t want anyone else being hurt at her expense. She felt, too, a strange burgeoning sense of pride. She had done something. Taken vengeance against a man
who deserved to die. It was one way to define who she was, and she’d done it on her own […]. (247)

This act alone – the act of marking the murder as an intentional act of her own – gives Marie a sense of pride and accomplishment that she has never exhibited to this point in her life. Her decision to be accountable for her crime, a crime she views as breaking the law to deliver justice to “a man who deserved to die,” illustrates her sense of righteous power. This is not to say that Marie believes herself to be above the law; however, it is significant that she takes pride in breaking the law in this specific instance. This echoes Daylanne English’s concept of “the inversion of legal and moral order embodied in the practice” of lynching in the Progressive Era (124). English argues that the public performance of lynchings in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries “violently performed a moral and juridical inversion at the same time that it dramatically revealed the wholly ideological, gendered, and racially determined nature of much of the period’s ways of knowing modernity itself” (123). While English is speaking specifically of lynching in the Progressive Era, I would argue that the practice of slavery – while obviously existing in a different historical context from lynching in the Progressive Era – similarly inverts morals and laws. Insofar as this is true, the “burgeoning pride” Marie feels in murdering Antoine DeLavier is the result of the inverted moral and legal order of the American South during the early 1800s, and her “crime” can be considered a re-inversion of the proper order of things.

Moreover, this act of empowerment – of righting the wrongness of the law – reverberates into the community and becomes a marker of Marie’s power among Blacks and whites alike as two days of riots ensue. Rhodes portrays the thought process of both
racial groups in the following passage, illustrating the hopes and fears Marie’s act incites among different factions of New Orleans:

Throughout the day, slaves and free coloreds spread the word that Marie Laveau had used Voodoo to kill Antoine DeLavier. How else could a woman overpower a strong man? How else could a man as evil as DeLavier be hurt and killed? And if he could be killed, slaves reasoned, other whites who tortured and enslaved them could be killed as well. Black gods were sending them a sign. Freedom was possible.

White gentlemen spread the word that one of their own had been killed. Even those who believed Antoine DeLavier had been too brutal managed, in the wake of his death, to call him “brother.” Whites scratched at the surface of their own fears, remembering that even the most benevolent of them was hated…could be murdered. Hexed by black gods. Tortured by maniacal blacks. (455)

For New Orleanian African Americans, Antoine’s death demonstrates the power of Voodoo and the possibility Marie represents as their Voodoo queen. She becomes a superhuman figure, a heroine, and a savior. Conversely, in the eyes of the local white population, Marie’s power reminds them of the tenuous balance upon which their own power as slave owners rests. Marie’s decision to “define” herself by her murder of Antoine DeLavier ends up becoming a decision to define herself as a proponent of justice and human rights. Since Rhodes very clearly depicts the murder as an act of defense (both self-defense and the defense of Louis), the reader sides with Marie and views the justice system as flawed for jailing her.
The riots enacted in her name clearly indicate the power Marie, as a religious leader in the community, holds. When she is brought to trial, it is clear that the whites fear her. She becomes an unintentional activist, having incited riots she never dreamed of simply by defending herself against a white rapist and murderer. Since in 1821 rape and murder went unpunished when perpetrated by whites against Blacks, the African American characters are “inspired” to rise up against white oppression, and the resultant riots lead all of New Orleans to believe that Marie had “begun a riot to free the blacks” (256). In essence, Marie’s crime defeats the white legal system, which ineffectively tries to punish her for the riots while never actually bringing charges against her for the murder of Antoine DeLavieir. By attempting to re-invert the law, Marie unintentionally becomes more powerful than the law and its enforcers.

Marie’s subsequent imprisonment (a virtual formality, since the police are too afraid to touch her and the courts are unable to convict her of a crime) is another aspect of the turning point Antoine’s death brings about in her life. While she is in prison, the second part of her rise to power happens: she realizes the responsibility that accompanies her newfound power. After nearly three weeks in prison, during which the other prisoners – most of whom were inspired by Antoine’s death to participate in the riots – tell her their life stories and ask her to either remember them (if they are dying) or save them (if they are not), Marie is released with a new perspective on her duties:

Prison taught her that whether she liked it or not she had a congregation—Creoles, quadroons, black slaves, free coloreds—all of whom wanted a little hope. Marie was determined to offer it. Prison taught
her that the desperate didn’t care whether hope was Christian or African, Catholic or Voodoo, only that it existed. (270)

The realization that she has a congregation (one composed of all kinds of people of African descent) leads Marie to take ownership over her power. Prior to this moment, Marie’s fear of John and the crowds who showed up to her ceremonies trumped any desire she had to help people. She was so overwhelmed by her desire to be possessed and validate herself as a genuine Voodooienne that she never gave a lot of thought to her followers. However, her determination to provide her congregation with hope marks a shift in her self-perception as New Orleans’ Voodoo queen. The idea that she is an arbiter of hope frees her to place the African gods next to the Christian gods, thereby creating a flexible religion that merges traditional African religion with New Orleanian religious culture. I will discuss this in more detail in the next section, but want to point out here that through Marie, Rhodes reworks contemporary myths about Voodoo, portraying the religion as one that reconciles two disparate belief systems to become its own religion that is tailored to the “Creoles, quadroons, black slaves, [and] free coloreds” Marie is responsible for. Since Marie Laveau is often portrayed as a sensationalist and blasphemous figure (Ward 23), Rhodes’ character works against that negative image to reclaim Marie as a woman who brings two religions together because her congregation needs hope, and she wants to deliver it to them by appealing to all of their beliefs.

Despite her new understanding of the role she plays for her followers, and her determination to give them hope, Marie is still trapped by John’s power over her – a power created by her fear of him. During one of her ceremonies when she is several months pregnant, Marie (possessed by Damballah) is submerged beneath the waters of
Lake Ponchartrain for several minutes. When she returns to the surface, she proceeds to walk on water to make her way back to shore. Immediately following this ceremony, John beats her for stealing his power. In this scene, Marie is described as “feeling powerless,” seeming “like a child” and “like a crippled hare,” not yet having “succeeded in fortifying herself against him,” being “bewildered” and “entrapped,” and able to be physically manipulated like a doll (311-18). The language and imagery Rhodes uses in this scene draw attention to Marie’s weakness and youth. Ironically, she has figured out how to provide her community with a leader, but has not yet been able to exercise power over her own life.

However, in this same scene, John’s agitation and drunkenness leads him to divulge information that helps Marie understand the source of his apparent power, which opens up the possibility for her to undermine that power. It is the beginning of the last change that needs to take place for Marie to become fully empowered. First, John admits to being jealous that Damballah has chosen Marie (and her mother and grandmother) but never him, which highlights his vulnerability and makes him appear “in an odd way powerless” to Marie (315). Second, he forgets to take the special blend of herbs that provide him with the illusion of youth, revealing him as the old man he really is. This causes Marie to comprehend that “Illusion was crucial to his powerful performances” (321), and that “she didn’t owe John anything. No special allegiance. She began to understand that John owed her. He’d used her” (322). These two revelations – of John’s vulnerability and his exploitation of illusion and of Marie – are enough to give Marie the glimpse of weakness she needs in order to plot her escape. By the end of this scene, Marie is nothing like the frightened, powerless girl who feared John and attempted only
to survive his abuses. Once his performance of power is revealed for what it is – a performance – Marie finally sees her opportunity to reverse the dynamics of powerlessness in their relationship: “She couldn’t count on Jacques to save her. Last night, Damballah had demonstrated his confidence in her. It might take slow-gaited steps to recreate herself, to steady her hand and find courage, but now it was clear to her. She’d have to fight her way free. She’d have to kill John” (323). It is significant that in order to overpower John, Marie must kill him just as she had to kill Antoine in order to overpower him. In both instances, Rhodes portrays Marie as the victim of physical and sexual abuse who rightfully destroys that which would otherwise destroy her. By doing this, Rhodes is able to remain consistent with historical and folkloric accounts of Marie Laveau as a dangerous woman while reclaiming her from stereotype and villany to present a sympathetic character who takes life only when hers is threatened.

John’s murder marks the culmination of Rhodes’ reclamation of Marie Laveau as a cultural heroine. The book starts with this murder in the short section called “The Middle” that opens the novel. During the first reading, this scene might appear to buy into negative stereotypes of Voodoo and of Marie Laveau: there are crowds, drums, and dances; Marie eats the heart of a freshly-killed rooster, depends on her followers’ faith in her to deceive them into believing Damballah is present, and murders John by arranging for her trained boa constrictor to suffocate him (6-10). All the trappings of a staged ceremony involving plenty of theatrics and no genuine miracles are there. Aside from two ghosts, the ceremony appears to be all performative. However, when Rhodes gives the reader the same scene – much of it verbatim – at the novel’s end, everything is clearer. The performative elements are present only because of John, who is a charlatan. The
ghosts are real, and are Marie’s family. And the murder-by-snake is understandable and justified because of John’s abuses of Marie and the threat that he will not only abuse, but also molest, their daughter (a threat made clear in the scene immediately preceding his murder). Rhodes underscores his monstrosity and the absolute necessity for Marie to permanently eliminate him from her daughter’s life. When Marie kills John the second time Rhodes includes this scene (422), the ceremony no longer reads as a theatrical production. The necessity of the act and the knowledge of Marie’s genuine abilities make it more of an act of empowerment and protection than murder. Furthermore, when this scene occurs at the novel’s end, it is followed by an ancestral visitation in which Marie’s great-grandmother, Membe, appears to her and reassures her that even though she murdered John, “Sometimes life be hard, ugly. Even the spirit loas fight and shout. All not be goodness. Being a Voodoo Queen means fighting one step at a time, to live as much goodness as possible, to help others live as much goodness too. Now you know who you be—your history—it should be easier” (426, original emphasis). Membe, as a direct servant and devotee of Damballah, essentially sanctifies Marie’s actions and encourages her to continue serving Voodoo and using it to help others. In other words, Rhodes’ rewriting of the novel’s opening scene undoes the stereotypes the initial scene might have appeared to endorse.

**Versatile Voodoo: Religious Hybridity as Cultural Evolution**

Rhodes’ portrayal of Voodoo also works against negative stereotypes that abound about the religion in American culture today. She depicts Voodoo as a hybrid of the traditional African religion of Voudon and Catholicism. This merging of Voodoo and
Christianity – accomplished through and performed by the character Marie – illustrates the versatility of Voodoo, as well as its ability to incorporate the various cultural and religious contexts of African American diasporic histories. It is a religion that evolved out of the historical and material circumstances of the slave trade. Jessie Ruth Gaston traces the history of Voodoo’s acculturation to Western culture, pointing out that “Africans attempted to take the Western culture and reinterpret it in terms of their own African experiences,” a fact that resulted in the incorporation of elements of Catholicism into Voodoo: Voodoo’s “ability to accommodate and be associated with various facets of other established religions strengthened [its] chances of survival” (112-13). The adaptability of this religion, especially in light of Louisiana’s legislation requiring African Americans – both free people of color and slaves – to be Catholic, is part of what has made Voodoo such a lasting belief system (Desmangles 180-81). This flexibility is an aspect of Voodoo that Rhodes explores in the novel, using the religion as a link between New Orleans and Africa.

Characters such as Jacques and Nattie, both of whom were once slaves in Haiti, connect New Orleanian Voodoo to Africa through an island where Voodoo was extremely popular among slaves. Jacques admits to having witnessed Voodoo trials (170), and fearing Voodoo because of his Catholic upbringing (284). Conversely, Nattie admits to having learned Voodoo spells from Grandmère in Haiti, but in her desire for power and to get Voodoo to work for her she learned only the spells (405) – the hoodoo, which Western culture mocks as the basis of Voodoo – and none of the spirituality, which Marie perceives as destroying rather than building up Voodoo (408). Grandmère, also born in Haiti – as a slave like Jacques and Nattie – abandons Voodoo for Catholicism
when she witnesses Maman’s murder in Cathedral Square. Each of these characters’ relationships with Voodoo was complicated by their experiences with slavery. While Nattie gravitated toward Voodoo as a way to give her power and control over her life, Jacques and Grandmère sought out Christianity as a “safe” alternative to Voodoo. However, just as Marie witnesses the way Grandmère’s Catholic beliefs diminish her when Antoine is beating Jacques in the street, the reader sees that subscribing to the “white gods” only makes the characters more vulnerable.

Through Marie – a racial mix of African, Native American (Muskogee), and white – Rhodes illustrates the way a hybrid religion fits this hybrid character. Not only does Marie embody racial hybridity, but she also embodies religious hybridity. Throughout the text, she is consistently likened to both the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. Marie interprets her own pregnancy as a form of immaculate conception, telling John that the child isn’t his, and thinking “It’s mine […]. Mine alone” (318). Furthermore, the moment when her “body suddenly began ascending, levitating” (157, original emphasis) recalls Mary’s Assumption into Heaven. On top of that, Marie’s ability to walk on water (which comes on the tails of her “resurrection” from beneath the surface of Lake Ponchartrain [307]) echoes Jesus’ ability to do the same. Additionally, as Antoine rapes her she is described thus: “Her hair fanned prettily in the moist dirt; her palms were arched and exposed like the crucifixion” (244). All of this religious Christian imagery is intertwined with religious Voodoo imagery since before, during, or after each Biblical reference, Marie is possessed by Damballah. Just as Marie Laveau was known for mixing Voodoo and Christianity (Tallant 55, Gaston 134-35), Marie is depicted as embodying both in the novel.
When Marie kills John, the two religious systems come together in the figure of the serpent. Marie uses the serpent to suffocate John, and afterwards tells her congregation, “‘Dahomeyans praised the serpent. For Eve came into the world blind. A snake gave her—a snake gave me sight’” (11, 422). The dual purpose of the snake merges religious symbolisms, revising Christian narratives by implying that the serpent was not the devil, but a god, and that by opening Eve’s eyes the act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge was a positive act. This not only revises Christian mythology, but also reverses its patriarchal implications of humanity to suggest that Eve was guided by a god to bring true knowledge to humanity and save them from the blindness she (and Adam) were living in.

Beyond using Marie as a figure through whom Rhodes can show the hybrid potential of Voodoo, she also uses the unique historical context of New Orleans to explain why Voodoo had to evolve in order to continue serving African Americans. New Orleans’ proximity to places like Haiti (which had a large slave population) and its situation as a major port participating in the slave trade resulted in the adoption of the Louisiana Code Noir in 1724, its own set of laws governing the treatment of Blacks – Creoles, slaves, free people of color, and anyone else of African descent. As Rhodes writes in one of Louis DeLavier’s journal entries, Code Noir stated that “To prevent Voodoo outbreaks in New Orleans, all blacks, especially Dahomeyans and Haitians, must be baptized and taught the Catholic faith” (221). My research shows that this is not an actual article of the historical Louisiana Code Noir (or the earlier Code Noir written in and enforced by France in the 1600s), but instead one of Rhodes’ mock histories. In any
case, as a response to these laws, and to similar religious influences foisted on Black slaves by religious owners, Voodoo adapted:

Mixed blood; mixed legends and faiths. This, then, was real and crucial to survival. Marie felt she had to keep on doing what she had been doing, blending black and white saints, not choosing one over the other as Grandmère had done. […] Marie would pray to African and Christian gods because there wasn’t a single truth, a single people. Voodoo wasn’t African anymore. But, in some form, Voudon had survived. Black peoples had survived. […] Surely Damballah would have realized how His children would change in a New World into a new race of people. (341)

The idea that cultural (and racial) mixing results in “mixed legends and faiths” lies at the heart of Marie’s understanding of why “Voodoo wasn’t African anymore.” The need for the religion to adapt in order to remain relevant to African Americans illustrates why it was so significant that Marie Laveau (and Rhodes’ Marie) incorporated Christianity into her practice of the Voodoo faith. Marie is recognized as a “New World Voodooienne” (427, original emphasis) for helping New Orleanian Voodoo change to better fit the specific social and material conditions of antebellum New Orleans. In this way, Voodoo becomes a culturally specific link between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.

**Reconstructing History: Voodoo as a Bridge Between Past and Present**

Voodoo enables Marie to connect to her ancestors – including her late mother, her dying grandmother, and relatives like Membe who she never met or even heard of – giving her access to her history. This allows her to move forward in productive ways,
uninhibited by her own lack of connection to her lineage. By connecting Marie with her rich personal and ancestral history, Voodoo begins to heal some of the familiar trauma of slavery.

When the novel begins, Grandmère has withheld Marie’s history from her. Her own fear of what Marie’s future holds and her grief over Marie’s mother’s death prevent her from telling Marie about Membe’s, her own, or Maman’s lives while Marie is a child. From the time she is a young girl, Marie longs to know about her history. Grandmère tells her only that they are mixed bloods: “Creoles veined from the line of French royalty. Mulattoes veined from the line of an African queen. And Muskogean warrior” (16), but to Marie, “History was faceless” (17). She longs to know more than these vague statements about her blood, specifically desiring her own mother, whose death she is ignorant of. Grandmère’s denial of Voodoo effectively silences her, since her own mother and daughter were heavily involved in Voodoo, just as she herself was before Maman’s death. By substituting silence for her relationship with Voodoo, she creates a vacuum where Marie’s history should have been.

Only when Marie runs away from Grandmère and embraces Voodoo is she able to begin to reconstruct her history. During her first Voodoo ceremony, Maman possesses Marie, surprising Marie with the realization that her mother must be dead in order to appear as a spirit and possess her. She realizes that “Maman’s spirit had been cruel, ruthless, and hadn’t spared a thought for her daughter. Would Maman alive have been any different?” (129). Only after Voodoo reconnects Marie and Maman is Marie able to work through her feelings of abandonment (the result of Grandmère’s silence surrounding Maman’s death) and understand the kind of person her mother was. It is also
Voodoo that allows her to free herself of her preoccupation with trying to be like her mother through the realization that her mother was an arrogant, hurtful, power-hungry woman. The next time Maman attempts to possess Marie during a ceremony, Marie rebels against her:

*Marie ruthlessly rejected Maman as she had been rejected. For Maman’s desire to be substantial, physical again, was too strong. She’d possess Marie again and again until there was no life left for either of them. [...]*

*Their minds touched: two Maries. “I need to live my own life.” She could feel Maman’s anger and, beneath the anger, a grudging admiration, an awareness that there should have been joy, not hate, between them.*

*“Go.”*

*Maman’s soul fled.* (155, original emphasis)

Just as it connected her to Maman, Voodoo gives Marie the agency to reject her mother. Rather than remain a timid girl who wishes to follow in her mother’s footsteps, Voodoo helps Marie become a woman who understands that she has to make her own path in life. Her rejection of Maman functions similarly to a teenager’s rebellion against her parents, and while Voodoo cannot reconcile them, it gives Marie access to a part of her history that Grandmère could not.

Marie’s pregnancy renews her desire to feel supported by her family and to know who she really is (both in an existential and a genealogical manner), which is, once again, made possible by Voodoo in a way that starts to heal some of the damage inflicted on Marie and her ancestors by slavery. Before walking on water, Marie walks into Lake
Ponchartrain and sinks to the bottom with Damballah where the following scene takes place:

_Damballah was whispering from inside Marie’s head. The language was strange, clicking and rhythmic, and Marie recognized it as an African dialect she’d heard among newly captured slaves. Gradually, she began to understand._

[…]. _Agwé, the sea god, appeared, pulling a ship as big and wide as a whale. Black people were on the ship, all different shades of black._

[…]. _Grandmère was in the stern, shouting, “Home. Let’s go home.”_

[…]. _“Marie.” Grandmère was waving. Marie felt indescribably joy. Beside Grandmère, steering the rudder, was a majestic black woman in brightly colored robes. “You are me,” she said. On Grandmère’s right was Maman, beckoning Marie aboard. And on the deck was a small child with long black braids._

_“These are all who you are,” murmured Damballah. “Mixed blood. But your blood flows because of and through me, Damballah. The god of your ancestors. We sail toward Africa. Home.”_

[…]. _The whalelike ship arrived home. Agwé, on his broad back, carried passengers ashore. Africa. Off the ship, everyone became a wondering, awestruck child again. Marie cried. […] Every particle of her being felt reborn. Love was in the lush foliage, the caw-cawing of birds. Rebirth was in the fertile black soil and among animals poised in the shade and on the limbs of trees._
And through her eyes, the spirits flew into her soul, and she cried out at having so much history inside her. “This is who you are.” At first, Marie thought it was Grandmère singing; then she realized it was her own voice crooning. “This is who I am.” (306-7, original emphasis)

This journey in which Marie and her ancestors go “home” to Africa gives Marie several important pieces of her history: the African language Damballah speaks and Marie begins to understand, a direct connection to her ancestors, a visit to her homeland, and (most importantly) an understanding of her own identity that comes out of these histories. By traveling in a ship from New Orleans to Africa, this voyage acts as a reverse-Middle Passage, giving Marie a connection to her geographical and familial background that was disrupted by slavery. Throughout this journey, she gains knowledge of her origins that would not have been possible without Voodoo.

Finally, it is Voodoo that brings Grandmère and Marie back into contact with each other after a few years of near-total estrangement and gives Marie the final pieces of her history that she needs in order to take full control of her own life. Grandmère’s knowledge that Marie is pregnant with the fourth Marie pushes her to acknowledge their familial obligation to Voodoo as descendants of Membe, who promised Damballah that she and her line would keep Voodoo alive for his children in the “New World.” Grandmère finally passes along the story of Membe’s journey in the hull of a slave ship, Grandmère’s one love (the Muskogee “warrior”), John’s appearance in their lives, Maman’s death in Cathedral Square, and Grandmère’s rejection of Voodoo (330-40). This history, transmitted orally after so many years of silence, complete Marie’s understanding of herself – as much as one woman’s story can. Even though Voodoo
threatened to be the point of separation between Marie and Grandmère, it ultimately becomes the family legacy that reunites them and heals their rift.

Even though Voodoo helps repair the damages of slavery, it cannot undo the enormous break – cultural, historical, familial – that slavery created between Africa and the “New World”:

Marie realized that part of who and what she was she’d never quite know. Like the tantalizing sound [of Membe’s spirit], which couldn’t be called back no matter how hard she tried, part of her culture and history was forever lost. An ocean voyage, slavery, and the New World had ripped away parts of herself and distorted what was left. The legacy of Damballah was frayed and tattered. [...] Voudon became Voodoo. Membe became Marie. Who knows what was lost? (341)

The admission that there are aspects of her culture and history that can never be recovered reflects the magnitude of the trauma of slavery on generations who, like Marie, have never experienced slavery firsthand. While Voodoo helps bridge the gap between Marie’s past and her present, it can only help her piece together bits of her past in order to connect her present and future to that past.

Rhodes uses Voodoo to excavate Marie’s past, partially so that Marie can put that past behind her and move forward with her future. *Voodoo Dreams* reclaims Marie, depicting her as a lost girl who becomes a successful and powerful free Black woman, a leader of her people who heals through Voodoo. Through her faith, Marie is able to rise above the injustices of the law and the systems of racial oppression in place in antebellum New Orleans, becoming also a symbol of pride and activism for other African Americans
in the novel. Rhodes’ Marie Laveau is quite dissimilar from popular portrayals of her historical namesake; the novel’s Marie is a gentle, kind individual who learns to strike back against the institutions that try to dominate her, but only in order to right grievous wrongs. Through this character, Rhodes counteracts stereotypes about Marie Laveau and the nature of Voodoo.

The novel’s use of form, simultaneously imitating the historical novel while undermining its supposed authority through the use of fictional documents, serves to further undermine the negative stereotypes discussed above and reinforce Rhodes’ portrayal of Voodoo. Ultimately, it is Voodoo’s cultural origins and potential for subversion that are highlighted here. The historical mystery surrounding Marie Laveau serves as a springboard for Rhodes’ novel: “Her enigma tempts us to shape her to our will, and her image has evolved over time in response to the shifting prejudices, fantasies, and desires of those who look for her. As a mirror, Marie tells us more about the era from which she is observed than she does about herself” (Long 211). The idea that Marie Laveau acts as a mirror that reflects the time of the author is part of what makes Rhodes’ novel so interesting. The Marie Laveau of Voodoo Dreams is a model of female strength and resilience, an activist in the making (despite her lack of formal training in Voodoo and her initial naiveté regarding the political structure of New Orleans). What was happening in the United States during the early 1990s that can be reflected through Rhodes’ portrayal of the legendary Voodoo priestess? Given the rise of neoliberalism in the tepid political climate following the Cold War and the Rodney King beating in 1991 (and subsequent race riots in Los Angeles in response to the trial’s verdict in 1992), Rhodes gives us an African American heroine who reconnects with Voodoo – one of the
aspects of African culture that survived the diaspora of the slave trade – and becomes a pillar of strength and support for the community during a time where racism and slavery were explicitly supported by the US government and legislation (Hurbon, Gaston). If Rhodes’ Marie Laveau is a reflection of the 1990s, then the “shifting prejudices, fantasies, and desires” of that era called for a legendary figure who overcomes physical and emotional abuse, institutional racism, the absence of both of her parents, and her own substantial fears to become one of the most powerful and influential women in her community. That power affords her the ability to hold sway over the law (a law that is led by inverted morals) and help the Black community with both personal and political woes.

Making History: Trickster Discourse and Mythic Verism in The Heirs of Columbus

Gerald Vizenor’s self-named “trickster discourse” has been called everything from postmodern, “surreal” (Murray 20), and “baroque, magical realist” (Lee 7) to “satire, science fiction, fantasy, […] and ‘mythopoeic space-age chronicle’” and even “postmodern detective story” (Blair 155). All of these labels attempt to do what Vizenor’s novel so deftly refuses: classify it as something recognizable. As Gerald Vizenor explains, “Verisimilitude is the appearance of realities; mythic verism is discourse, a critical concordance of narrative voices, and a narrative realism that is more than mimesis or a measure of what is believed to be natural in the world” (190). This idea of “mythic verism” correlates to the concept of magical realism in that it is not simply verisimilitude, but another kind of realism that is more than “what is believed to be natural in the world” that is central to this form. By moving outside of the “natural” or
“real” Vizenor reaches for that “critical concordance of narrative voices” that gets at something more real than reality, mimesis, or verisimilitude can ever hope to do.

Form is not only essential to The Heirs of Columbus – it’s also unavoidable. As David Treuer puts it, “To interpret and criticize Native American fiction successfully I suspect we need both our moccasins and our hobnails, our buckskin vests and our leather jerkins. To see Native American literature as linked with American literature; to see culture as an active character in modern novels (much in the same way as haunted houses are in Romances) instead of reading novels as culture, that is, as products of difference rather than as attempt to create it; to see things this way makes our criticism and our novels richer” (26, original emphasis). Treuer’s point that (Native American) literature and ethnography are different creatures is one I also subscribe to, so my intention is to look at Vizenor’s novel The Heirs of Columbus as literature: hard to classify, all-over-the-place, complex and funny literature created in the years preceding 1992 and everything that year would mean to various groups of people. In a book like The Heirs of Columbus, culture is very much an “active character” that Vizenor playfully interacts with.

Just as Voodoo has been distorted by mainstream narratives, so has Native American culture and history. Mainstream American culture tells and accepts a version of history that not only perpetuates the myth of the vanishing Indian, but actively vanishes Native Americans. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn discusses Wallace Stegner’s view that Native Americans died out in the late nineteenth century, arguing that this idea continues to harm Native Americans today. Louis Owens talks about the artificial “context of indigenous culture as vanishing [as a] collectible commodity” (21). While history books
and popular culture continue to propagate this misconception of the vanished Indian, some contemporary indigenous authors are working against this tendency to tell their own histories that show how central Native Americans are to the past, present, and future of the United States. Vizenor’s novel *The Heirs of Columbus* performs a retelling of history and science as indigenous functions that have deep roots in Native American culture and tradition. In his own way, Vizenor writes of an America that is founded on indigenous beliefs, practices, and culture. In this novel, dogmatic historical constructs are cast aside and replaced with histories grounded in Native American traditions. Vizenor doesn’t just retell history from a new angle, he goes one step further to show us how contemporary American culture is not exactly what the mainstream would have us think it is.

Like Rhodes’ novel, Vizenor’s *The Heirs of Columbus* delves into the past to flesh out a historical figure – most notably Christopher Columbus. However, Vizenor doesn’t engage with historical fiction like Rhodes does, instead using the past as a foundation for a foray into the future. Barry O’Connell argues that Vizenor breaks away from the portrayal of American history as progressive with his “own concept of ‘historicism’ [which] may also imply that those who practice it assume the past as discoverable, knowable, a set of events and meanings which careful empirical research can establish, always subject, of course, to revision” (59). This novel, published in 1991 in anticipation of the Columbus quincentennial, self-consciously and intentionally constructs a future for the United States, for tribal identity, and for indigenous peoples everywhere. In so doing, it tells a very different version of the traditional Columbus story. The novel focuses on the genetic descendants of Christopher Columbus, who are
referred to as “the heirs.” The heirs are not only descendants of Columbus, they’re also Native American. The novel, which is episodic, traces the implications and consequences of their mixed blood ancestry from Columbus to contemporary America.

Perhaps most central to the novel is the story of Stone Columbus and his partner, Felipa Flowers. Stone is a descendant of Christopher Columbus, and has started a floating casino (the *Santa Maria Casino*) that sits in international waters, thus subverting federal US laws governing gambling and immigration laws. The casino is struck by lightning, and Stone begins the years-long process of purchasing land in the Pacific Northwest (along the US-Canada national border) where he builds a new casino that opens near the novel’s end.

In the meantime, Felipa (also a descendant of Christopher Columbus) is informed by a man named Doric Michéd that Christopher Columbus’ remains have been found and are available for purchase. Felipa enlists the help of a bear shaman, Transom, who helps her repatriate the remains along with four medicine pouches. Shortly thereafter, Felipa is contacted by a rare books dealer in Europe who claims to know where the remains of Pocahontas lie. She travels to Europe where she is murdered by Michéd while attempting to repatriate the remains.

While all of this is happening in the present, Vizenor also meticulously maps out an indigenous world heritage in which he posits that Columbus was of Mayan descent – as were the Sephardic Jews – and that all of Western civilization is actually based on (and stolen from) indigenous American cultures. The novel explores Christopher Columbus’ voyage to the Americas, as well as his personal life; in so doing, it rewrites the mythologized version of Christopher Columbus that we so often hear about, and offers a
different interpretation of the historical figure. A similar rewriting happens around the Pocahontas character.

Finally, the novel concludes with the heirs and their families and friends finishing a moccasin game with the wiindigoo—an evil cannibal—that was started centuries before. The US federal government was responsible for bringing the wiindigoo back, as they had hoped to use him to shut down the casino. The primary reason for this is the free transmission of the heirs’ genetic signature to their customers without a care for any form of regulation of the indigenous blood they are “passing around.” In other words, by sharing their genetic signature, the heirs are increasing the indigenous population in the US (and the world), which subverts federal blood quantum laws and attempts to restrict indigenous rights.

**Indigenizing the World: (Re)Imagining the History of Western Civilization**

While the plot primarily revolves around the heirs and their activities leading up to the quincentennial, Vizenor takes the time to revisit historical accounts by and about Christopher Columbus and piece together a different version of the explorer’s biography. The novel turns Eurocentric versions of history upside down by positing that the “Maya founded world civilization,” were “the original civilization of the New World,” and “brought civilization to the savages of the Old World” (25, 9). By repeatedly pointing out the sophistication of the Maya, Vizenor undermines visions of America that dismiss the validity of indigenous cultures to pretend that the transmission of European culture was the equivalent of introducing civilization to the Americas. Vizenor doesn’t stop there; as Stone Columbus says, “‘Columbus escaped from the culture of death and carried our
tribal genes back to the New World, back to the great river, he was an adventurer in our blood and he returned to his homeland”’ (9, emphasis added). This version of history radically shifts the foundations of mainstream representations of America. If Columbus was Native American, then his “discovery” of North America was actually a return to the continent. Critics, among them Arnold Krupat, have argued that Vizenor wasn’t trying to write a believable version of history so much as to provide an alternative that would remove the burden placed on Native Americans by Western history’s version of Columbus’ voyage (Blaeser, Hardin, Krupat). Others have suggested that by casting the heirs as the descendents of both European colonists and Native Americans, Vizenor has “transformed European inventions and histories into tribal ventures and traditions” (Pasquaretta 713). I would add that Vizenor’s historical revisions go beyond simply removing a burden or transforming “histories,” and that this specific revision gives agency to indigenous Americans by situating Columbus’ (return) voyage as a cultural reconnection – an act of homecoming.

Since Native Americans in the US are typically portrayed as “vanishing” and invisible (especially with regard to westward expansion and narratives of the American frontier), they are often depicted as powerless subjects of colonial rule. Shifting the perception of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas in this way results in a shift in agency: Columbus was descended from Native Americans, and his voyage was a flight from the culture of death that was destroying him. While he set in motion a series of events that we are familiar with, Vizenor reclaims the Admiral from villainy to show that he needed the help of Native Americans in order to become whole again. In need of the healing genes of the Mayan hand talkers, Columbus sought out the New World, bringing the culture of
death with him – but as his heirs, Vizenor’s characters are not powerless or helpless. In fact, they are more advanced and sophisticated than the Europeans, and not only are the hand talkers able to heal Columbus, but the heirs treat non-Native individuals and organizations with a mildly patronizing manner that suggests a parental patience that is merely waiting for the colonizer to mature.

The novel’s third chapter offers a detailed account of Columbus’ life and historical voyage – an account that rewrites the cultural mythology surrounding the Admiral in dominant narratives. Like Rhodes, Vizenor includes segments from historical and critical documents (although the documents he references are not fictitious, unlike those in *Voodoo Dreams*), integrating them with his own version of these events to perform his historical rewriting. The novel gives the reader Columbus’ words as recorded in his letters and journals, interspersed with the words of critics and scholars, as well as Vizenor’s words. For instance, when Columbus first glimpses land and the people on it, the novel reads:

“At dawn we saw naked people,” he entered in his journal on Friday, October 12, 1492. “I went ashore in the ship’s boat […]” He unfurled the royal banner with the great green cross and declared possession of the island in the name of the crown.

[…] No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the island than people began to come to the beach, all naked as their mothers bore them, and the women.” (36-7)

In *The Heirs of Columbus*, all of Western civilization is recast as indigenous, which creates the opportunity for what is perhaps the novel’s most significant act of
reclamation: the declaration of a sovereign nation in the Pacific Northwest. In an act that both mimics and reshapes history, Vizenor’s characters make history in a way that mirrors the traditional Columbus story to open up possibilities for the future. This happens when Stone Columbus – a direct descendant of Christopher Columbus – leads the Native American takeover of what is commonly known as Point Roberts on the coast of Washington state. On October 12, 1992, Stone Columbus sails into Puget Sound on his ship, *The Santa María Casino*, which is plastered with banners reading “Columbus Takes Back the New World at Point Roberts” (123). He declares Point Roberts a sovereign nation, giving a speech that closely resembles Columbus’ journal entry – which appears earlier in the novel – upon “discovering” the New World. Stone Columbus says:

> At dawn we saw pale naked people, and we went ashore in the ship’s boat [...].

> The Heirs of Columbus bear faith and witness that we have taken possession of this point in the name of our genes and the wild tricksters of liberties, and we made all the necessary declarations and had these testimonies recorded by a blond anthropologist.

> No sooner had we concluded the formalities of taking possession of the point than people began to come to the beach, all as pale as their mothers bore them, and the women also, although we did not see more than one very young girl. (119)

Not only did he declare the entire world an indigenous space, but now his characters have begun the repossession of their lands. Vizenor’s redeployment of this particular excerpt from Columbus’ journal furthers his earlier assertions regarding the Mayan civilization
and Columbus’ racial heritage. By using Stone Columbus as the mouthpiece for a speech that is based on Christopher Columbus’ own words in a situation that closely parallels that of Columbus’ landing in the New World, the characters adopt not only the language of the colonizer but also the very act of colonization. Stone Columbus’ redeployment of Columbus’ words is an act of literary activism that closely parallels the Native American Occupation of Alcatraz from November 20, 1969 to June 11, 1971. During this historic occupation of Alcatraz Island, Native Americans wrote a document called “Proclamation: To the Great White Father and All His People” that Dean Rader calls a “masterpiece of inversion and reversal” that “plays with not only the discourse of proclamations but also the history of petitions. Even more interesting, though, is its deconstruction of the larger body of federal documents of issuance and order. Take, for example, the opening sentences and their cagey evocation of everything from the Preamble of the Constitution to the diaries of Columbus to the Louisiana Purchase to the Emancipation Proclamation” (12). In Vizenor’s novel, the heirs’ purchasing and renaming of Point Assinika reclaims the land in a similar way to the Occupation of Alcatraz, using a similar rhetorical strategy. Rader’s claim that the Native American activists’ “claiming [of] the land by right of discovery […] suddenly gives the Indians’ claim the very same legal support enjoyed by Anglo conquerors of the New World” (12) holds true for the heirs as well. They claim the land by echoing Columbus’ words of discovery, thereby reinforcing their legal support to conquer the Point. Stone Columbus’ repatriation of Point Roberts (re)indigenizes the land by taking it back from mainstream America. In this way, Vizenor portrays the dominant culture not as an offshoot of European culture, but as a new facet of Native American culture which will soon overtake it.
Significantly, the heirs have selected a location on the coast in the Pacific Northwest not far from where Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean on their expedition in 1805. Because Stone Columbus arrives at the point by ship, in the Santa María Casino which is itself a symbol of tribal sovereignty, his act marks the beginning of what could potentially become the reversal of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, starting on the West Coast and spreading eastward toward the Atlantic Ocean. The Trickster of Liberty further solidifies this idea; since the heirs have erected this monument in a location inverse to that of the Statue of Liberty, it stands as an inverted symbol. Rather than representing a nation welcoming immigrants from distant shores with open arms, the Trickster of Liberty’s inscription “promised to ‘heal the tired tribes and huddled masses yearning to breathe free’” (122). In other words, the Trickster of Liberty is a symbol of the promise of liberty to Native Americans and the other “huddled masses” in the United States that has yet to be fulfilled.

Vizenor re-envisions America as an indigenous space, shifting European culture away from the center and placing it in the margins. By providing alternate histories to commonly accepted ones, the novel opens up sites for new interpretations of American history and culture and introduces narratives that disrupt and oppose common ideas about American history. In so doing, Vizenor alters Native American identity by placing it at the center of the nation and reconstructing an indigenous image of America that rests on a foundation of Native American beliefs and practices. By doing so, the novel highlights the many ways the representation of the past continues to influence cultural perceptions in today’s world.
Since Columbus’ “discovery” of America is commonly portrayed as the end of “prehistoric” and the beginning of recorded history in the Americas, Vizenor’s move to depict Columbus as Mayan not only alters the idea of what is “pre-historical” (a term that implies insignificance and primitivism), but also rewrites history as we know it. I find Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities to be particularly helpful here. Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (15). This concept of the nation is so popular as to be almost common knowledge; however, shortly after this definition of the nation, Anderson explains, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (15). If we take this to Vizenor’s novel, where a community (Western civilization, rather than a single nation) is literally being reimagined, what becomes apparent is Vizenor’s strategy of literary survivance. By projecting a vision of Western civilization that has its roots not in Greek philosophies and Roman mathematics but in North American indigenous culture and thought, Vizenor shakes his reader out of their potentially dogmatic understanding of the origins of the United States, and also of Western civilization more broadly, forcing them to consider the contributions of another culture that is often glossed over or portrayed as primitive.7

**Breaking Down Boundaries: Imagining the Future of the World**

After laying down the altered foundation of Western civilization, the novel projects into the future based on the established premises, which allows Vizenor to examine the then-upcoming quincentennial from an indigenous worldview. Having created a paradigm for readers to consider, the novel imagines a variety of definitions of
indigeneity, sovereignty, and ownership. Whereas Jewell Parker Rhodes deployed her fiction into the past to rethink the past in order to open up space for possibilities in the future, Gerald Vizenor revamps the past and moves ahead to look directly into the future and imagine all of its potential into existence. In the novel’s future, there are three major changes I will focus on: the use of DNA technology to transmit the “genetic signature” of Christopher Columbus’ heirs, the subversion of borders and laws at tribal lands at Point Assinika, and the role of gambling in the game against the wiindigoo that ends the novel. Each of these events illustrates a different facet of Vizenor’s concept of survivance and the postindian warrior, and they combine to form the foundations important to rethinking indigeneity in the United States today.

Vizenor dedicates a significant amount of energy to rethinking the nation, and he does so as much through his reinvention of Christopher Columbus as he does through the destabilization of borders and laws. Vizenor uses Stone Columbus’ casinos – both the Santa María Casino and her two sister ships, as well as the Felipa Flowers Casino – to disrupt the US-Canada border and create what Kevin Bruyneel calls the “third space of sovereignty”:

[...]

indigenous postcolonial resistance re-visions American boundaries as active locations for the expression of forms of sovereignty and political identity that do not conform to the seemingly unambiguous binary choices set out by the liberal democratic settler-state.

The nonbinaristic political mapping articulated through this refusal of the imperial binary is an expression of what I am calling the third space of sovereignty. The third space is a location inassimilable to the liberal
democratic settler-state, and as such it problematizes the boundaries of colonial rule but does not seek to capture or erase these boundaries. […] Instead, a third space vision […] refuses to conform to the binaries and boundaries that frame dualistic choices for indigenous politics, such as assimilation-secession, inside-outside, modernity-traditionalism, and so on, and in so doing refuses to be divided by settler-state boundaries. (21)

Both the *Santa María Casino* and the Felipa Flowers Casino at Point Assinika exist in/on a *literal* third space of sovereignty. That is, the ship’s anchor is dropped precisely on the US-Canada international border – literally occupying the boundary itself, existing by mapping its sovereign space onto the boundary, thereby creating a three-dimensional space out of an invisible line. The sovereign nation at Point Assinika similarly refuses the “imperial binary” by creating a hole in the border that subverts the binaries Bruyneel lists in the above passage. Both casinos create a “third space of sovereignty” (quite literally, in Vizenor’s novel) where the settler-states of Canada and the United States intended there to be no space – simply a dividing line.

The *Santa María Casino*, Stone Columbus’ prototype of a casino that defies federal and (inter)national laws, creates a loophole in by means of the “third space of sovereignty” that allows the heirs to ignore federal gambling and immigration restrictions. The court declares that the Casino – whose anchor rested on the international border itself, neither within nor without the US or Canada – is a “maritime reservation” that demonstrates how the “notion of tribal sovereignty is not confiscable, or earth bound […] The essence of sovereignty is imaginative, an original tribal trope, communal and spiritual, an idea that is more than metes and bounds in treaties” (7). In other words,
Stone’s casino, located in the “third space of sovereignty” (which for Vizenor is in the mind and spirit), becomes a floating reservation between two nation-states that have historically tried to erase indigenous presences in order to maximize their claims to legitimacy and their profits from the land (and water) they consider to be within their borders. Stewart Christie argues that the redeployment of Columbus’ ships – which become the floating casino, the tax-free market, and a restaurant – as floating reservations rather than vessels of colonization opens up the possibility to consider how Columbus has contributed to the Americas in a way that might help undo some of the damage that his voyage undeniably unleashed (106). I suggest that Vizenor takes the histories of Columbus-as-destroyer and Columbus-as-discoverer into account, merging them with Stone Columbus’ entrepreneurial and sovereign endeavor to create a new history.

Columbus came to the Americas seeking gold and other riches, and through the Santa María Casino his heir “earned more than a million dollars a season” and “discovered gold in the name of his blood and survivance” (11-12). In Manifest Manners, Vizenor articulates that the “new riches of the tribes translate as political power” (142); the casino brings Stone Columbus money and illustrates the potential for successfully creating new spaces of sovereignty, but it is also, significantly, destroyed by lightning. Ultimately, there are limitations to what he can do with three ships whose namesakes were intended to bring wealth to Europeans by exploiting and disenfranchising Native Americans.

The reversal of this dynamic is a significant aspect of the Santa María Casino, and is important to its function as a contemporary construct that counteracts the historical role of the ships that made Columbus’ “voyage of discovery” possible. Paul Pasquaretta identifies the casino as a “floating barge anchored near the international border [which]
may be understood as the appropriation of an expropriated people” (713). This appropriation is definitely an aspect of the casino since the “gamblers were white, most of them were on vacation, urban adventurers who would lose at bingo and slot machines with pleasure on a moored reservation” (8). In essence, Stone Columbus is profiting from white patrons who willingly lose their money as part of their recreational pastimes. They are literally returning what has been expropriated. The liminal space the *Santa Maria Casino* occupies between and within two nations also complicates the ships’ existence within and between two eras. While they are not crossing through time, the actions of the white consumers/patrons on the ships further destabilize constructed barriers – appropriated/expropriated, discoverers/discovered, past/present – because their actions in this sovereign space reverse the actions of their ancestors generations ago.

The initial success of the *Santa Maria Casino* opens the door for Stone Columbus’ next foray into the business of gambling: the Felipa Flowers Casino, which blatantly undermines any number of laws. The casino is built on land at Point Roberts, Washington (which the heirs rename Point Assinika), and Stone Columbus and the heirs approach it by water. They sail in with a banner reading “Columbus Takes Back the New World at Point Roberts” (123) and declare it a sovereign nation by appropriating Christopher Columbus’ words as discussed above. This time, Stone Columbus is far bolder than he was with the *Santa María Casino*. He claims the point “as a free state with no prisons, no passports, no public schools, no missionaries, no television, and no public taxation” (124). His boldness is a direct result of the fact that rather than tenuously staking everything on the careful positioning of an anchor on top of a borderline, the heirs own all the land they have built on. By moving every stone of the House of Life – the
space in which the heirs house the sacred stones and pass on the stories in the blood – to Point Assinika, they have created a sovereign land mass that is more stable and rooted than the *Santa María Casino* ever was. By bringing their stories with them to the new sovereign nation, the heirs lay the foundation for Point Assinika to function as a refuge for indigenous people from all tribes. The idea that the relationship between land and memory is migratory reflects both the history of nomadism so often forced on Native Americans by the US government, and also the adaptability of indigenous peoples that embodies the very concept of survivance. Furthermore, the Felipa Flowers Casino itself is “established on the international border between Canada and Point Assinika. Bingo gamblers could enter the bright, enormous tandem pavilions and leave from either nation, as there were no inspections at the tribal border; indeed, the heirs honored tribal identities but no political boundaries on the earth” (31). The casino does not buy into the premise that the United States and Canada are legitimate nation-states, thus this open disregard of the (im)migration laws of both countries translates to Point Assinika’s position as a physical borderland. Rather than embodying Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of a borderland as a cultural phenomenon that arises out of the contact zone created by the artificial political borders cutting across lands and communities, Point Assinika behaves as a casino-shaped hole in the myth of nationhood subscribed to by the United States and Canada. Using the money gained from the un-expropriation of riches earned by the *Santa María Casino*, Point Assinika is a spot of connection (as opposed to division) that brings people together to heal the wounds of the culture of death that is western “civilization.”

In addition to breaking down physical borders, the Felipa Flowers Casino becomes a space in which other boundaries are deconstructed. Rigid gender barriers are
breached by the “order that the male casino attendants must crossdress [because] ‘men are no longer that interesting unless they dress as women’” (131). Here, the act of crossdressing is a visual parallel to the condition of being a “crossblood” since the decree comes from Stone Columbus’ (mixed blood) father who poses “as first ladies, either Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, or his favorite, Lady Bird Johnson” (132). If rigid definitions of gender are somehow “uninteresting,” then it follows that rigid definitions of race as per “terminal blood quantum creeds” (132) – are also uninteresting. Since part of what the heirs are trying to accomplish with the genetic research being conducted at the Point (which I will discuss in more detail below) is parthenogenesis, men are being rendered wholly ineffectual as both “interest” subjects of desire and necessary participants in procreation. The act of crossdressing translates symbolically to the potential for the indigenization of willing participants to counteract blood quantum laws and make the world more “interesting.” The fact that Stone Columbus’ father dresses as first ladies further interrogates the binaries imposed by the settler-states, although Bruyneel was referring to political and geographical boundaries whereas Stone Columbus’ father (no name man⁸) deconstructs the binaries intended to divide people along gender lines.

The racial dividers the heirs strive to break down through their genetic research function as a genetic “third space” within the human body that has the potential to inscribe sovereignty onto bodies otherwise deemed white. Stone’s idea that “Germans, at last, could be genetic Sioux, and thousands of coastal blondes bored with being white could become shadow tribes of Hopi, or Chippewa, with gene therapies from Point Assinika” (162) points to a larger plan for the gene therapies – one that is not simply
interested in healing children damaged by the “chemical civilization” of American
culture, but also in spreading indigeneity to white socialites who are bored or envious.
These people would become “shadow tribes,” which indicates the inversion (of power, of
numbers, of status) that would happen if the gene therapies became popular enough. The
scientific advances made at Point Assinika give the heirs an advantage through the ability
to complicate conventional understandings of race.

“Going Native”: The Use of Science and Technology to Heal the World

Vizenor portrays the heirs as capitalizing on science in a way that redefines
indigenous identity by contradicting mainstream stereotypes of Native Americans as un-
modernized (and therefore not capable of understanding or performing such things as
“modern science”). In his essay about Native American identity and science education,
Keith James argues that the values and practices of western science are biased against
Native American culture and knowledge (17). Similarly, Vine Deloria, Jr. addresses the
fact that mainstream American culture perceives Native American cultures to be largely
devoid of scientific and mathematical knowledge. He says that while modern scientists
sometimes trace the roots of new ideas to ancient indigenous societies, they also maintain
the “patronizing view that although tribals […] did originate the idea or practice, they
could not have possibly understood its significance” (58). Despite the precision of many
Native American constructs and practices which require advanced scientific and
mathematical foundations (such as mound building, to name just one), this stereotype of
the non-scientific nature of Native American culture persists in mainstream American
culture.
In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor’s characters function in opposition to this idea as they work with genetic engineers to isolate the genetic signature that contains the key to their survivance. Through science, the heirs discover that their very genes have the ability to heal in miraculous ways. Vizenor describes Christopher Columbus’ genetic signature as “the genetic code of tribal survivance and radiance, that native signature […] that could reverse human mutations, nurture shamanic resurrection, heal wounded children, and incite parthenogenesis in separatist women” (132). This genetic signature is also the home of the stories in their blood, which they refer to as “genome narratives” that embody the “idea that we inherit the structures of language and genetic memories” (136). Replicating the genetic code and reproducing the signature that flows in their veins allows the heirs to counteract the harmful effects of contemporary American culture on indigeneity. Their work with genetics enables them to do two things. First, they are able to pass on the stories in their blood, which they transfer to a series of biorobots who carry their stories for them. Second, they use their genetic signature to heal people who have been wounded by the chemical civilization of contemporary America. The scientist hired by the heirs to conduct genetic research, explains that trickster and shaman humor exists in the blood, and that this humor works with the “genome narratives” to preserve the stories in the blood which they can then pass on to the biorobots or use to heal people (134-6). By merging the technology of genetic engineering with Native American history and culture – represented by the stories in their blood – Vizenor contradicts the myth that Native Americans and Western science are incompatible. More than that, Vizenor’s characters capitalize on their knowledge of their own DNA as a means by which to reinforce and recreate indigenous identity. They have “established the genetic signatures
of most of the tribes in the country, so that anyone could, with an injection of suitable
genetic material, prove beyond a doubt a genetic tribal identity” with the desire to “make
the world tribal, a universal identity, and return to other values as measures of human
worth” (162). In this way, the heirs have found a method of subverting federally imposed
blood quantum laws (132); since they have the power to recast the entire nation as Native
American, the issue of blood quantum no longer matters. The characters’ successful
merging of Western science and technology and traditional Native American beliefs and
culture results in the redefinition of indigenous identity by freeing them from systems
like blood quantum and opening up the possibilities of what it means to be Native
American when blood composition is no longer a concern. Technology and science create
the opening that allows for the dissemination of Christopher Columbus’ genetic signature
(and by default, the stories in the blood), and this opens the door for the genetic
(re)indigenization of America.

It is significant that the technologies these characters are using are more advanced
than the technologies currently made available by Western science. The suggestion here
is that without Native American technologies and world views, these scientific feats
would not have been possible. The technological advancements of Native American
characters in this novel work against the stereotypes, and also push beyond those
stereotypes to illustrate the way that approaching Western science through Native
American technologies can lead to new advances, and to new ways of looking at science.
In this text, Native Americans have significant contributions to make to mainstream
practices. More than this, Vizenor’s novel illustrates the ways science and technology can
change the way humanity understands itself and can play a role in redefining individual identity.

_The Heirs of Columbus_ also illustrates the ways DNA science can redefine tribal identity, and therefore concepts of tribal sovereignty as well. In _Manifest Manners_, Vizenor talks about the tenuous situation of tribal sovereignty, arguing that it would be wise for successful casinos to share some of the wealth they gain from their (often white) patrons’ losses with the communities near their reservations in order to avoid the dangerous envies of those communities. He sees envy as “the manifest manners of domination, the oppression, and miseries of racialism,” arguing that “Tribal sovereignty, in this sense, could be weakened only if the casino tribes were enervated by their won new wealth, and were seen as being powerless” (147). The heirs’ actions within the global community – healing refugee children, hosting scientists from around the globe, and providing free services to the residents of Point Assinika – exemplify the kind of “international presence” that Vizenor believes will lead to a more stable, irrevocable kind of tribal sovereignty that cannot be easily done away with by the US government (148). The philanthropic drive behind the genetic research performed in the Dorado Genome Pavilion – the desire to heal the wounded, free of charge – grants Point Assinika power: “Several national polls indicated that the public was in favor of the new tribal state. That the new nation honored humor and common sense, and was dedicated to heal children without taxation, inspired millions of citizens who contributed more cash to the gene banks than they had ever given in the past to television evangelists” (124). Not only do the heirs have the power that comes from wealth, they also have the power that comes from high public opinion (which, ironically, is contributing significantly to their wealth
as well). Since the public is in favor of the “new tribal state,” the government is unable to act against them; the support of Admiral Luckie White’s talk radio show brings too much media attention to the heirs, and public support from the nation means that government retaliation would go unsupported.

Vizenor takes up the issue of Indian gaming – rights, traditions, and perspectives – to round out his critique of the damaging culture of mainstream America and offer a different version of the usefulness of gambling. For most Native American cultures, gambling is not a game of acquisition, but is viewed as “sacred rituals that foster personal sacrifice, group competition, and generosity” (Pasquaretta 698). The presence of federal agents at Point Assinika (133) is an indication of the United States federal government’s interest in the heirs’ research. Furthermore, the federal government’s involvement in the investigation into the activities at Point Assinika and the theft of the tavern stone – one of the heirs’ sacred artifacts – are evidence of their active and ongoing mistrust and jealousy of Native American technologies and histories. For the federal government, the fear that something sinister is happening on the Point illustrates their inability to view gambling as a practice that fosters anything other than greed. Despite the fact that making their genetic research available to everyone is the very image of generosity, the federal and tribal governments struggle to believe that the purpose of the gambling is not for profit.

The federal government’s actions put them in stark contrast to the heirs’ open generosity, cementing the idea that they are actively seeking out ways to gain from the heirs’ success with the casino. The private investigator concludes his report to them with the following information:
Military operatives learned from their bingo informants that the wiindigoo was frozen in a cave, the natural state of the ice woman who held the tribal world in balance. With no central authorization the wiindigoo was stolen by racist field agents and thawed out. Clearly this was an act of subversive vengeance for the harm caused by the tavern stone the same agents had stolen from the headwaters. (167)

As an act of subversive vengeance, the military’s willingness to unleash the wiindigoo is more than just disregard for Native American cultures. It exhibits the extent to which the US military will go in order to permanently erase Native American culture and presence from existence. Their vengeance (which is in retaliation for the consequences of a wrong that they committed, not a wrong the heirs had done to them) was intended to use another agent to do what the US government and military has tried to do on a number of other occasions: eliminate the indigenous presence within the United States. Their fear of the heirs, as well as their anger at the success of both of Stone Columbus’ casinos, prevents them from being able to acknowledge the potential benefits of the gene therapy and genetic research at the Point.

The military’s desire to see the “heirs and tribal children […] vanish” at the wiindigoo’s hands – and their attempt to use the wiindigoo to accomplish this erasure – allies the wiindigoo with the US armed forces, both literally and figuratively, which enhances the significance of the moccasin game at the end of the novel. The wiindigoo’s “blond hair and his perfect smile” (21) already illustrate his apparent whiteness, and this portrayal connects him with white American culture so that his cannibalism and evil nature become allegorical. With this in mind, the moccasin game’s purpose can be
considered consistent with Pasquaretta’s concept of Indian gaming as fostering “group competition” – in this case, competition between Native Americans and mainstream white society. While the heirs are gambling out of a sense of generosity and personal sacrifice (illustrated through their philanthropy and the desire to heal), the wiindigoo is gambling out of his desire to consume (literally) the heirs and the tribal children. Interestingly, it is not the desire to win that drives the wiindigoo, as much as it is the desire to profit from winning. Since the heirs placed Wovoka’s mythical “war herb” with the coin, the wiindigoo is forced to consider whether he would prefer to win for the sake of winning, or prolong the game in order to spare the world and be able to continue playing his game of conquest with the heirs. This parallel between the wiindigoo’s enjoyment of playing the consuming conqueror and white settler-colonists’ history of consuming indigenous culture and history has unexpected repercussions given the outcome of the moccasin game. The heirs, who previously had the opportunity to kill the wiindigoo while he was frozen, choose to engage him in this game not solely out of interest in keeping their word, but also because they know how to handle him. They knew exactly what they needed to do to trick the wiindigoo into ending the game without winning because, as Vizenor states in Wordarrows, “colonial evil is better outwitted than dead because someone would be sure to create a more depraved form of tribal control” (9) in its absence. This strategy is to keep the wiindigoo around because they are not only familiar with his modus operandi, but they also know how to manipulate him. Their ability to outwit him illustrates their proficiency at using trickster strategies to adapt, thereby outwitting their opponents.
Ultimately, *The Heirs of Columbus* is (re)indigenizing America in multiple ways. The characters’ discoveries and actions lead to new understandings of what it means to be Native American, as well as what it means to be American. The myth of the “vanishing Indian” is thrown into reverse, and instead readers are left with a (re)emerging Indian. This novel un-fixes history through characters who participate in oral storytelling, providing alternatives to commonly accepted historical dogma. It contradicts histories that were written about Native Americans by replacing them with histories told by Native Americans. Vizenor shows how Native Americans have not been vanished, but are very much alive. More than that, they’re at the heart of mainstream American culture. From another angle, the (re)indigenization of history works on both the public/national level, and the personal/local level, illustrating the ways Native American identity has been constructed by the mainstream, and the ways a Native American reconstruction of identity can begin to undo the damage of certain stereotypes and foster connections across racial lines.

**About the Epilogue**

The novel’s epilogue, like *Voodoo Dreams*’ Author’s Note, draws attention to the distinction between fiction and reality; however, Vizenor’s epilogue makes a larger statement about ways a novel can reveal one kind of truth while fictionalizing another. This epilogue clearly indicates the detailed research that informed the novel, but it also asserts that Christopher Columbus (and several other historical figures) has been reimagined as much for his own sake as for Vizenor’s purposes. Vizenor quotes Milan Kundera’s concept that a “character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an
imaginary being…. The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth” (quoted in Vizenor 185). When coupled with Vizenor’s concluding remark that Columbus would undoubtedly prefer to be remembered as an “obscure healer in the humor of a novel and crossblood stories than the simulated quiver in national politics” (189) underscores Kundera’s notion that fiction is a place of open-ended truth. Similarly, the past in Vizenor’s novel further illustrates the idea that within the covers of a novel, we are free to unhitch our minds from the “truth” and engage in a kind of playful rethinking. This novel, like Rhodes’ novel, invites the reader to let go of what they thought they knew and enter into a complex, nuanced, and unexplored version of history that creates space within our minds where we can exercise our brains and free historical figures from the confines of their dogmatic histories. Since most histories are composed of far more fiction than most people would like to believe, what these authors are doing is actually creating an alternative version of history that has at its core a different (and perhaps more universal) kind of truth.

An essential part of that truth is the extent to which history (the past) continues to influence the present in very real, very concrete ways. Vizenor’s trickster novel sweeps through 500 years’ worth of “American history,” intermingling the past and present not just because of the novel’s non-chronological presentation, but also because of characters like the wiindigoo and Christopher Columbus who appear throughout the text in multiple forms. By literally having Christopher Columbus – in the form of body, holographic image, or earthly remains – present from beginning to end, Vizenor highlights the way this historical figure continues to be a tangible presence in today’s world. Like the ghost in Beloved who leaves footprints in the snow (a visible sign of her absence that serves as
a reminder of her presence) and a lingering sense of the potential to return at any moment, Vizenor’s Christopher Columbus is a very real presence in the characters’ lives. While his return lacks the element of fear inspired by Beloved, the box containing his remains is a physical reminder of the legal struggles and misappropriations that have characterized the relationship between Native Americans and European settlers ever since the moment Columbus set foot in the New World. Given the novel’s publication in anticipation of 1992 and everything it symbolized, it seems especially significant that Vizenor has written Christopher Columbus as an indigenous man whose heirs are Native American.

Vizenor’s novel is a prime example of his idea of “trickster discourse,” which he uses to perform his own brand of literary activism. In his essay titled “Trickster Discourse,” he explains that the “trickster is a chance, a comic heliotrope in a postmodern language game that uncovers the distinctions and ironies between narrative voices; a semiotic sign for ‘social antagonism’ and ‘aesthetic activism’ in postmodern criticism and the avant-garde, but not ‘presence’ or ideal cultural completion in narratives (192). *The Heirs of Columbus* participates in this “postmodern language game” to use tricksters – most notably Stone Columbus and the other heirs – as the agents of social antagonism and aesthetic activism. Their actions disrupt the novel to prevent any kind of “neat” ending, instead leaving the reader with an unfinished moccasin game, a host of legal issues pending over Point Assinika, and the question of what the post-quincentennial future holds for the relationship between indigenous nations and the United States.

It’s almost as if Vizenor revels in turning order inside-out (I believe he does), which opens the door for larger discussions about the future to take place. By setting the
novel in the future, Vizenor forces the reader to consider the different ways the present may potentially unfold. As Louis Owens theorizes, “It is the utopian impulse that guides Vizenor’s mythic parodies, a quest for liberation from the entropic forces that attempt to deny full realization of human possibilities. Vizenor discovers such utopian potential in American Indian mythologies; and in trickster—who overturns all laws, governments, social conventions—Vizenor finds his imaginative weapon” (Owens 227). It is precisely this “utopian impulse” that Vizenor explores by projecting into the future. He addresses the history of the situation of indigenous peoples in the United States today, starting with the legends surrounding Christopher Columbus and moving forward to connect the repercussions of colonization to the realities of the present; however, it isn’t until the novel moves past the present that the “utopian potential” is reached at Point Assinika.

**Conclusions**

Jewell Parker Rhodes’ and Gerald Vizenor’s novels engage with contemporary politics through moments of magic (in all its varied religious, mythical, cultural, and unexpected incarnations). They take up a variety of social issues, each stemming from the specific cultural context of the author. In his book *The Art of Protest*, T.V. Reed points out the ways in which “cultural texts” such as art and literature have both been generated by and helped effect change in conjunction with social movements such as the African American Civil Rights Movement, to name just one (xvi). In this vein, the magic moments in *Voodoo Dreams* and *The Heirs of Columbus* are places where the authors use aesthetic form to comment on the social and political climate in the US during the early 1990s.
Both novels trace out a historical genealogy of different struggles – racial prejudice and religious discrimination in *Voodoo Dreams*, tribal identity and indigenous sovereignty in *The Heirs of Columbus*, as well as a host of negative stereotypes in both – in order to highlight current cultural concerns. By taking up the guise of the historical novel, Rhodes projects into the past to comment on the present, reclaiming Marie Laveau as a cultural icon of strength and activism. Vizenor also experiments with form, but in a much more explicit manner. *The Heirs of Columbus* engages in mythic verism to excavate Christopher Columbus from the past, reanimate him through the heirs in the present, and project into the future in a narrative that counters then-anticipated national celebrations of the “discovery” of the Americas. History allows both authors to ground their novels in concrete material conditions, which provide the foundation for the moments of magic that use those histories as a springboard for reinventing the past, present, and future.
Chapter 2

Haunting Politics: Activism and Transformation in Magical Realist Ghost Stories

In the United States today, ghosts are largely considered the products of superstition. Those who admit they believe in ghosts are often viewed as either capricious or unsound. The culture of science that dominates mainstream thought has even led to “ghost hunters” who seek out scientific proof of the existence of ghosts. Because of this, magical realist authors who include ghosts in their works work within the “superstitions” to call into question some of the dominant culture’s basic assumptions about the nature of what is (ir)rational, (un)known, and (super)natural. Whether or not these authors ultimately support or refute assumptions about ghosts and superstition, they use ghosts – literally and metaphorically – to trouble “the readers’ sense that the world is in fact dualistic, that the present is distinct from the past, the living from the dead, the natural from the supernatural” (Kolmar 237). By their very nature, literary ghosts push the reader to think more deeply about the relationship between these dichotomies, thereby destabilizing rationalist views of the world that disallow the “irrational” or “superstitious” side of these binaries.

Literary ghosts not only push the reader to reconsider the relationship between perceived binaries, they also take on a host of political issues that haunt the present. Novels such as Isabel Allende’s (Chilean) The House of the Spirits (1982), Gabriel
García Márquez’s (Colombian) *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) are all heavily engaged in revolutionary anticOLONIAL politics consistent with postcolonial magical realism. In the growing corpus of contemporary magical realism, ghosts continue to influence living characters. They appear in recent works such as Chicano author Alejandro Morales’ novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) and African American playwright August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (1990), and as ghosts continue to haunt the pages of ethnic American literature it is clear that authors can use them as powerful tools connecting the historical past to the present in order to critique that present. Some of the authors of contemporary US ethnic literature pair magical realist moments with ghostly appearances, and the result is similar to that of canonical magical realist authors: haunted fiction that’s haunted by more than just ghosts.

In fact, one of the most common manifestations of magic in magical realist texts is the spirit. Lois Parkinson Zamora, one of the prominent scholars of magical realism, points out that in “magical realist fiction, individuals, times, places, have a tendency to transform magically into other (or all) individuals, times, places. This slippage from the individual to the collective to the cosmic is often signaled by spectral presences” (501). This “slippage” between the individual, the community, and the “cosmic” tends to be the tension at the heart of many of the hauntings in contemporary magical realism. The magical realism produced by American authors of color constantly grapples with personal and communal histories and traumas. These authors use “magic” to open up space for addressing histories of dispossession, oppression, and discrimination, and the ghosts who materialize within the pages of these novels are oftentimes the agents that help the living characters navigate their lives. No matter what form this guidance takes –
helpful or harmful, visible or invisible, friendly or malicious – these ghosts involve themselves in their living counterparts’ lives, making it their business to interfere.

The presence of ghosts in literature often signals a move to connect an individual to a community, and to transform the individual, the community, or both. The transformative potential of the specter is the center of Avery Gordon’s book *Ghostly Matters* (1997). Gordon uses a sociological methodology to approach the phenomenon of haunting in literature. She focuses on the relationship between domination and haunting, seeing haunting as a sign of the past whose appearance in the present calls for transformation. To Gordon, the “ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Similarly, in his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida speaks to a growing concern over the inequalities in the US and across the globe during the rise of neoliberalism in the early 1990s. His analysis of hauntings points to a wide variety of social and political injustices playing out in the US after the Cold War and he argues that what haunts us now is the “Marxist ‘spirit’” to criticize systems of power and their potential to oppress. Gordon and Derrida both underscore the relationship between literary hauntings and real-life injustices. In literature, ghosts do not simply appear – they appear out of a need for change, in hopes of showing living people how necessary transformation is. The prevalence of hauntings in post-Cold War magical realism by American authors of color provides a channel through which authors can continue to interrogate power structures in a time when the face of activism was changing and opportunities for speaking out against injustice were limited.

In this vein, magical realist hauntings often function in one of three ways:
• **Helpful Hauntings.** Helpful hauntings are done by ghosts who have some kind of trauma in their pasts (usually associated with their deaths), and aim to help living characters avoid meeting a similar fate. More often than not, they also have a bond with the character they wish to help, whether it is a blood bond or simply an affinity. One such ghost is Lourdes’ father, Jorge, in Latina author Cristina García’s 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban*. He appears to Lourdes regularly, maintaining a close relationship with her after his death.

• **Motivated Hauntings.** Unlike helpful hauntings, motivated hauntings are performed by ghosts who are not interested in aiding the living in their own ventures. Instead, these ghosts have their own agenda to advance, and while they will certainly help similar-minded characters, they are more likely to try to push the living in the direction they believe is necessary, whether or not the character was initially headed there. The character Red Dress in Susan Power’s (Sioux) novel *The Grass Dancer* (1994) engages in Motivated Haunting. Having died in her own attempt to save her community from destruction at the hands of white settler-colonists, she motivates protagonist Harley Wind Soldier to find peace within himself.

• **Vengeful Hauntings.** Perhaps the most familiar kind of hauntings, vengeful hauntings are enacted by ghosts who are intensely angry about their deaths. They want revenge, and not necessarily on the person(s) directly responsible for their demise. In Salman Rushdie’s (Indian) infamous novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rekha Merchant haunts
protagonist Gibreel Farishta in this manner. She commits suicide over her unrequited love for and abandonment by Gibreel, her lover, and haunts him from her suicide until her death, cursing him and laughing at his pain each time she appears to him. Similarly, a Vengeful Haunting lies at the heart of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987). In *Beloved*, protagonist Sethe killed her infant daughter rather than allow her to be taken into slavery, and the infant returns as a grown woman to haunt Sethe in the flesh. This eponymous ghost wants to be paid back for the life she was denied, Vengefully Haunting Sethe and her family.

One of the most famous ghosts in contemporary American fiction is none other than Toni Morrison’s character Beloved. *Beloved* (1987) tells the story of the escaped slave Sethe and her daughter Denver. They live on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, during the mid-1800s in a house haunted by the ghost of Sethe’s first daughter – an unnamed infant called Beloved (a name gleaned from the inscription on her tombstone) Sethe killed in order to save from slavery. Because of this, Beloved is typically read as a physical embodiment of the trauma of slavery. Beloved shows up in corporeal form as a young woman who is the age the baby would have been if she had never died. Her in-the-flesh haunting drives Sethe’s lover, Paul D, away and nearly destroys Sethe and Denver as well. In the end, the community bands together to exorcise this ghost from Sethe’s house.

The aspect of *Beloved* that I think it’s important to focus on is the way that Beloved acts as a “liminal passage(way)” between the past and the future – the physical manifestation of the community’s collective consciousness who serves as an “in-
betweenness that constitutes and links characters, times and places” as she haunts them (Walter 224). Along these lines, we can view Morrison’s use of magical realism as “a dream-reality act of remembrance that carries a potential for the reconstruction of individual and collective cultural identity” (285). The idea that the trope of haunting can be used to connect the individual to the community and the past to the present is one that plays out in Morrison’s novel, as well as in many more recent haunted novels by American authors of color. In fact, being “haunted is by no means limited to African Americans, but […] the phenomenon is particularly important to understanding the persistent workings of memory and space in African-American literature and culture” (Parham 3). I would extend this idea to not only African-American literature and culture but to most US ethnic literatures and cultures. While it’s important to consider that the ways this “phenomenon” helps us understand the “workings of memory and space” in these literatures and cultures will necessarily depend on the specific body of literature and the specific cultural context, the general conception of haunting as a literary device through which we can gain a new or deeper understanding of literature is applicable to a broad array of works.

Not only are the ghosts bridges that help break down the polarity typically associated with concepts of individual/community and past/present, but they are also born out of complicated, traumatic histories. In reference to Beloved, one critic argues that “Morrison’s characters are survivors, condemned to life and sanity, and the spirits they see are as real as the history they endure” (Rigney 234). The idea that the living characters have survived something, but in that survival are “condemned” to go on living, is interesting enough in its implications about the hardships faced by marginalized groups
throughout the past and into the present. Moreover, the specific comparison of their
ghostly counterparts to “the history they endure” points to the trend of linking ghosts and
history within these haunted novels.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways the ghosts in *Miko Kings* and *So Far From God*
perform their hauntings in order to bring the protagonists back to their home communities
and invest in the future of those communities through political activity. Even though
Howe’s novel was published over a decade after Castillo’s, I look to *Miko Kings* first
because the hauntings are slightly more conventional than those in *So Far From God.*
Nevertheless, comparing these two novels and Howe’s and Castillo’s uses of hauntings in
conjuction with their larger historical and social agendas illustrates how ghosts can
perform their authors’ literary activism, pushing other characters to work against the
oppressive systems of power Gordon and Derrida emphasize. By using ghosts in this
way, these novels engage distinct cultural beliefs and histories for a common goal: to
assert new possibilities so that communal and individual traumas become the inspiration
for change rather than repeating the traumas of the past.

**Haunting as a Call for Transformation in *Miko Kings***

Lena, the protagonist in LeAnne Howe’s novel *Miko Kings,* is doubly haunted:
she is haunted by a spirit named Ezol and she is haunted by a mail pouch filled with
historical documents. Lena is a Choctaw woman and a journalist who was living in
Jordan for several years before a terrorist bombing claimed the life of her friend and she
heard the land calling her home to Oklahoma. When it comes to Ezol, *Miko Kings* is a
prime example of a haunted novel that uses haunting to bridge the gap between the past
and the present and to help the characters connect their understanding of themselves as individuals to their ideas of the community as a whole. The character called Hope Little Leader – a pitcher on the Miko Kings baseball team in the early 1900s – is also doubly haunted. In Hope’s case, the double haunting is a self-haunting in which his elderly self, situated in a nursing home in 1969, moves back and forth between his past and his present. His final act of haunting is a two-way haunting where his 1907 self visits his 1969 self, and his 1969 self returns to 1907 where he changes history.

The two sets of double hauntings in Howe’s novel (Ezol’s and the mail pouch’s haunting of Lena and Hope’s two-way haunting of himself) engage with Howe’s theory of “tribalography.” In her essay entitled “The Story of America,” Howe explains that tribalography is the textual space where Native Americans can integrate “oral traditions, histories, and experiences into narratives,” thereby expanding indigenous identity and creating a story that “links Indians and non-Indians” (46). I argue that Howe uses Ezol to create a more scientifically grounded kind of haunting that not only undermines Western narratives of Native Americans as primitive, but that also complicates the nature of Ezol’s character by calling her ghostliness into question. This haunting serves a larger cultural purpose in that Ezol doesn’t only help Lena figure out who she is, she also highlights the limitations of Western journalistic research methods and offers oral histories as the more accurate and complete method of historical accounting. This is where Hope’s self-haunting comes into play. Both sets of hauntings act as calls for transformation, reinforcing the idea that written histories are unreliable and changing the characters’ (hi)stories from tales of sadness to tales of success.
Before I move on to discuss individual characters, it is important to note that the prose passages of the novel are accompanied by a wide range of other materials, such as handwritten journal entries, newspaper clippings, letters, and photographs. The presence of these documents is a constant reminder of the polyvocal nature of history that Howe underscores. I argue that through the novel’s unique engagement with form and its employment of multiple hauntings, Howe emphasizes the importance of indigenous voices over written histories. In so doing, she uses ghosts as magical infusions into the lives of the living characters in order to play with the slippage between moments of magic vis a vis hauntings and the characters’ everyday realities. In Miko Kings, this slippage brings histories from over a century ago into conversation with present-day relations between the United States and the Arab World. However, before I can connect US foreign policy to the Arab World, I need to examine the double hauntings in Miko Kings.

A Cross-Dimensional Self-Haunting

Both double hauntings are simultaneously hauntings and instances of what might popularly be referred to as “time travel.” Hope Little Leader, a Choctaw pitcher whose “up-down” pitch literally alters time, performs an unusual kind of haunting in Miko Kings: he haunts himself. However, Hope’s self-haunting is different from the figurative understanding of being “haunted” by one’s past in that Hope’s younger self from 1907 quite literally haunts his older self in 1969. Throughout the novel, the elderly Hope searches for a way to right the wrongs of his past, evaluating the past from his hospital bed. The reader gradually learns that Hope was the pitcher for the Indian baseball team
called the Miko Kings. On the day of their final game in the Twin Territories Series of 1907, the woman Hope loves (Justina) flees town and as a result Hope accepts a bribe to throw the game, believing the money will appeal to her and allow him to win her back. After the Miko Kings lose to their opponents, the Seventh Cavalry, Hope’s teammates catch up with him and chop off his hands, leaving him unable to play baseball, unable to move through time, and unable to catch up with Justina. As an old man in a nursing home, Hope is haunted by a younger version of himself in an event he initially mistakes for the visitation of a spirit. However, he eventually realizes he is being given the chance to literally change history (189-192).

The fact that the Miko Kings are playing against the Seventh Cavalry – a regiment of the US Army that was involved in the Battle of Little Bighorn (among other violent conflicts in the “American Indian Wars”) – is especially significant given the regiment’s long history of violence against Native Americans. Through his self-haunting, Hope is able to return to the past and inhabit his young body in order to make the decision he should have made all those years ago. The double haunting is reflected in the novel: the reader initially gets the history of Hope’s role in the Twin Territories Series in Chapter 8 (approximately two-thirds of the way through the novel); the reader then gets the revised history in Chapter 11 (the penultimate chapter). Chapter 11 echoes Chapter 8, including several identical passages, with a few crucial differences. The most significant change is also the most obvious: Hope doesn’t throw the game.

When he alters the ending of his own story, Hope becomes part of Howe’s tribalography. In rewriting his own story, Howe uses Hope to illustrate the way “storytelling is revealed as a living character who continues to influence our culture”
(“Power” 118). By changing the outcome of the game, Hope potentially changes the outcome of other conflicts between the Seventh Cavalry and Native Americans. More specifically, the series is called the Twin Territories Series – the Twin Territories being Indian Territory and the Oklahoma Territory. Therefore, the altered history of the game indicates the potential to rewrite more than just a sporting event, but other histories as well. In this way, Howe uses Hope’s double self-haunting to open up new histories within the literary space.

**The Importance of Language to (Ghostly) Time Travel**

Ezol’s haunting of Lena is much more personally focused than Hope’s double self-haunting. At the novel’s end, she tells Lena, “I may not be your blood grandmother—but I should have been” (221). The female ancestor is not an unfamiliar figure in Native American literature. What makes Ezol’s haunting unfamiliar is the way Howe has blurred the lines between quantum theory and ghostliness. Ezol’s nature is unclear; Lena calls her a spirit, a woman from the past, a dream, and even a lost soul (24), but she never offers a concrete explanation of Ezol’s nature. Instead, all we get are indicators that Ezol has taken corporeal form (34-5) despite having died in the past.

The most crucial aspect of Ezol’s presence is her ability to move through space and time. One of the most mysterious elements involved in her time travel is something she calls the “eye tree.” We get an illustration of this in one of her earliest journal entries along with vague explanations of the way the eye tree constantly obscures her vision (80, 185), how it helps her decipher mathematical problems (178), and that it keeps her from being blinded by the flash of light that occurs when time opens up for Hope on the
pitcher’s mound (160). Other than these characteristics, we know only that the eye tree contributes significantly to her ability to move through time. I speculate that the eye tree is a symbol of the connections between the three planes: the lower world, the middle world, and the upper world. In Ezol’s drawing, it appears with a trunk resting on the earth (the middle world) and branches reaching into the sky (the upper world). While the roots (the lower world) are not depicted, they are implied. Interestingly, there is only one eye actually in the eye tree, and it rests at the base of the trunk where the tree and the earth meet. I interpret this eye as representing Ezol – and as an eye, it is the vantage point she has when she is grounded in the middle world. However, the floating eyes surrounding the branches represent the possibilities for sight (and therefore “time” travel) she might achieve when she is no longer anchored to the earth and the middle world through her body. This visual representation illustrates the connectedness of these three worlds to Ezol, and helps her understand the potential for movement between them. At the moment of Ezol’s death, the eye tree is destroyed along with her body: “I lie down, having already smothered in smoke but not knowing it. My body drifts downward in an almost comforting swoon, onto the floor […] Lying there, I have what I think is a fine perspective on my life. […] The trunk of the eye tree is on fire, its limbs detach from my body and I am truly burning up” (209). While Ezol’s body and the trunk of the eye tree burn, spirit “detach[es]” from her body. The destruction of the eye tree, which up to this point has provided Ezol with insights into the nature of time, allows her to move freely through space and time in a way that was impossible when she was anchored to the middle world by her physical body.
It is useful to revisit some of Ezol’s theories on time in order to understand the implications of her death. Several times throughout the novel, Ezol articulates the idea that time is experienced differently by different peoples – not just because of their language, but also because of their plane of existence. What she refers to here is not some cliché from a science fiction novel about parallel universes; instead, Ezol grounds it in Western science, Choctaw language, and the Bible.

While science and technology are often viewed as incompatible with religion, Howe deconstructs that relationship through Ezol, who is a Native American woman with a Christian upbringing\(^1\). She is portrayed as a person who chooses to embrace Choctaw culture in tandem with mainstream American values – as taught to her at the Good Land school – although she simply incorporates the American ideas into her Choctaw world, adjusting them to make sense alongside the belief systems of her culture. When it comes to her ideas about time, Ezol uses both Native American and Western belief systems as evidence to support her theories. The boarding schools for Native American youth, set up in the late 1800s\(^2\), were also preaching a Christian belief system (alongside assimilationist politics) to their young pupils. This religious history is at the root of Ezol’s familiarity with Christian doctrines. She uses Biblical mythologies in a similar manner to Choctaw linguistic theory: as support for her theories on the malleable nature of time. In her journal entry dated 1 June 1890, Ezol writes:

…Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered to the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gideon; and thou Moon, in the Valley of Aj’a-long.
And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it.

Joshua 10: verses 12, 13 (and one sentence of verse fourteen for my own use.) Aunt Fancy said Old Man Spivey once doctored the storm by cutting the wind in half. If Old Man Spivey can doctor a storm then the Sun must surely have stood still for Joshua and the Lord. Time is at the mercy of the speaker. (139)

The combination of Biblical lore (Joshua) and Native American folk figures (Old Man Spivey) is indicative of the incorporation of Christian narratives into Native American culture – in this case, Choctaw culture, specifically – that leads Ezol to conclude that “Time is at the mercy of the speaker.” In his book on religion in America, Vine Deloria, Jr. (Dakota) describes Western science as “the folklore of materialistic industrialism [which] has no basis in evidence” (275). When viewed in this way, Ezol’s inclusion of Biblical and indigenous folklore seems quite logical, since Deloria’s provocative statement removes science from its self-imposed pedestal and brings it “down” to the level of folklore. By using examples from both Choctaw and Christian mythology, Howe portrays Ezol as a woman whose theory of time is informed by pairings often considered opposites: Native American/Western, religion/science, language/physics, and even female/scientist. Ezol’s ability to exist within and between all of these categories
deconstructs binary oppositions and offers a form of hybridity that merges these
categories while managing to privilege Choctaw beliefs and practices above all others.

Even Ezol’s experiments, which are vaguely reminiscent of the Western scientific
method, are grounded in Choctaw language. In these experiments, Ezol plays with the
equation $1 + 1 = 4$, which would appear immediately incorrect to most rationalist
thinkers, but which is explained on several occasions. She also experiments with a set of
four statements about colors and letters: “The table is on red. / Red is on the table. / The
table is on yellow. / Yellow is on the table. / The table is on black. / Black is on the table.
/ The letter is on the table. / The table is on the letter. / Did you see the table move?” (152, 158).
The first time she performs this experiment, she is in a room with
schoolchildren and she speaks the sentences in Choctaw; the students answer that they
did see the table move. The second time she performs the experiment, she’s with her
coworker in the post office and speaks the sentences in English; her coworker replies that
she did not see the table move. When the experiment works, it’s the use of the Choctaw
language that causes the success. Her students’ understanding of the language allows
them to experience the statements differently than her white coworker, whose language
(English) denies the possibility of any movement through its rigidity. Ezol’s
interpretation of language in this experiment recalls her theories on the relationship
between language and time in Joshua’s story from the Bible, where her ability to see
alternate possibilities led her to conclude that time can be manipulated through language.

Ezol’s understanding of time, centered on Choctaw language and incorporating
Western religious and scientific beliefs, represents a successful marriage of cultures into
the larger Choctaw whole. Despite Ezol’s ability to find a way for these often-conflicting
world views to coexist in her theories on time, thereby creating a veritable pastiche of ideologies, Ezol’s theories create a cultural and ideological hybrid that places Choctaw language and culture at the center, while finding room for aspects of Western culture that are useful. Choctaw language carries more weight than the scientific method and Christianity, but Ezol’s refusal to ignore any evidence (even that which appears contradictory) that might help her prove her theories illustrates an acceptance of multiple belief systems that, when viewed in tandem, appear to support her central ideas.

The Science of Haunting

As mentioned above, Howe places the Choctaw language at the heart of Ezol’s ability to move through time and space. Her subtle rejection of rigid Western perceptions of time, specifically the idea that time is linear and one-directional, makes sense in light of Ezol’s understanding of time through a language that doesn’t have the same boundaries separating the past, present, and future. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) addresses a similar seeming incompatibility when she explains, “there are many similarities in the effect of the so-called post-Einsteinian view of time and space and the way the old people looked at energy and being and space-time” (138). In this case, Ezol’s view of “energy and being and space-time” comes from the language of her people. Early in the novel, Ezol articulates the relationship between the Choctaw language and time to Lena:

“Choctaw words are tools. They form equations, much the same as geometry […]. Language, rules of grammar, and meaning are the agreement of a particular group based on their practiced experience. I
theorized that Choctaws didn’t have the same experiences with time as those of Europeans because we speak differently. This is revealed in our vast differences in verb usage. What the Choctaws spoke of, they saw. Experienced.”

[...] In 1905 Ezol Day wrote an article entitled “Moving Bodies in Choctaw Space,” in which she argued that two systems of thought, Choctaw and English, are in conflict over “time.” [...] She based her hypothesis on language theory, and concluded that time must flow at different rates for English speakers and for tribal peoples. Her paper is elegantly reasoned, addressing fundamental questions around Choctaw expressions of space and time. She was writing at the same time as Albert Einstein, but probing the dimension of cultures, as well as of time and space. (37-38)

For Ezol, theories of time are grounded in the Choctaw language rather than the laws of physics. Her explanation that the verb tenses in the Choctaw language are what allow for the possibility of time travel, grounding her “hypothesis on language theory,” is consistent with Howe’s concept of tribalography as a way of bringing “past, present, and future milieux” together (“America” 42). She rejects Western ideas of time by pointing out that “our modern clocks [...] are set and reset by the political whims of English speakers” (39). The explanation that Ezol is writing contemporaneously to Einstein creates a parallel between her theories and his, recalling the way in which Einstein’s ideas were considered far-fetched at the time. Furthermore, the “elegantly reasoned” paper is likens language to mathematics in a manner that highlights her logic.
Despite the solid reasoning of Ezol’s paper, Lena still insists that these ideas are not compliant with mathematical formulas or science, while Ezol tries to get her to think about how she is defining math and science and consider the feats Native Americans accomplished – such as mounds – that were supposedly constructed “without” mathematical or scientific knowledge (43). This is part of a larger problem in contemporary society: Native Americans are romanticized as primitive and vanished peoples who, while once noble and at one with nature, have been wiped out as a civilization.5 Vine Deloria, Jr. (Sioux) speaks to Lena’s concerns, explaining that for most of the twentieth century, “Indian traditions have been classified as either childish folktales designed to educate or discipline children or superstitious tales made up by Indians to explain natural processes which they feared and did not understand” (279). He goes on to discuss the possibility for “two additional categories [to] be opened for Indian traditional stories: historical eyewitness accounts preserved in memory and unusual religious experiences in which traditional Newtonian space-time concepts were possibly violated” (279). In Ezol, Howe has done something along these lines. Ezol has access to her memories – considered by Lena to be “historical eyewitness accounts” – and her appearance in Lena’s living room, while not an “unusual religious experience,” certainly violates “traditional Newtonian space-time concepts.” Regardless of this, Lena is initially unable to reconcile Western concepts of science with Native American knowledge and culture as represented by Ezol.

Nevertheless, Ezol’s theories on time, which are, as Lena points out, “elegantly reasoned,” merge Western scientific concepts and traditional Native American knowledge and culture. Of course, it’s important to notice that even though Ezol grounds
her theories in language, she still performs a series of experiments over a period of several years. This subverts any idea of her methods as being unfounded, even by Western standards. The result of Ezol’s theories on time and her obviously corporeal form create an uncertainty about whether Ezol is really a ghost, a time traveler, or some combination of the two (a time traveling ghost?).

Ezol’s very presence in Lena’s life is the result of her own advanced scientific knowledge; she has figured out the key to time travel. The fact that Ezol’s theories on time are accurate, as evidenced by her very presence in Lena’s living room, indicates a superiority of her methods over those of modern science – which has yet to master time travel. Ezol also performs a sort of cultural merger by refocusing Western scientific practices – such as developing and testing hypotheses, writing academic papers, and patenting one’s findings – through a Native American lens. Here, the significance of the Choctaw language debunks the myth that Native American cultures are without science or technology, calling attention to the contrasting ways different cultures view the world around them. By indigenizing scientific theories, Howe reconceptualizes what it means to be scientifically advanced and deconstructs the myth of incompatibility between Native Americans and science.

Retelling Personal Histories

Given the novel’s publication date six years after 9/11, it’s significant that the trauma of losing a friend to an act of terrorism in Jordan serves as the initial moment of crisis for this particular protagonist. Lena has worked hard to cover up her Native American roots, articulating her attempts to erase her heritage from an early age in the
following passage: “When I moved to New York in 1982, I believed I would never return to Oklahoma. At twenty-three, I wanted to forget that I was half Choctaw and half Sac and Fox. Forget all things Okie, like twangy country-western music. Pitchers of 3.2 beer. The po-lice. The way I looked—long black hair, brown eyes, and a sturdy build—I knew I could pass for Italian, Mexican, or French, especially in New York” (18). When she moves to Amman, Jordan, years after this, she tries to pass as “the American-educated daughter of a wealthy Jordanian” (19), and she puts off returning to Oklahoma, offering the explanation, “I had my own problems with America, especially its treatment of American Indians” (20). Finally, after over twenty years of hiding her true self, Lena realizes, “without meaning to I’d become a nomad, searching the world for something I couldn’t quite name” (20). The double haunting of Lena serves as an intervention into her lost connection with her background in order to help her find that unnamable something she is searching for.

The mail pouch, which contains an assortment of documents that hold the potential to help Lena piece together her past, is innately connected to the house in which it is found and also with Lena’s displacement and nomadic lifestyle. When the novel opens, the house, which belonged to Lena’s grandmother, is being renovated. During these renovations the mail pouch is unearthed, having been sealed up between the walls. Like the angry ghost in a conventional ghost story, the mail pouch is bound to and by the house and once found, it plagues Lena with the story it wants to tell. Filled with “handwritten pages of symbols and numbers, letters, newspaper clippings, […] a 12 x 12 black and white photograph [and] a decaying journal” (15) the contents of the mail pouch haunt Lena with its version of her family’s past.
The specific history the mail pouch offers is the one commonly accepted by the mainstream, which is exemplified best by the story it tells about the Dawes Act of 1887. Also called the General Allotment Act or just Allotment, the Dawes Act dissolved communal ownership of tribal lands and imposed assimilationist policies on Native Americans. Between 1887 and 1934, when the Indian Reorganization Act ended Allotment, many lands were lost as a direct and indirect result. Given Lena’s sense that she has become a nomad, the fact that she is haunted by a bundle of documents from the Allotment era forges a direct connection between past legislation concerning Native American land rights and the present. Taken even further, the mail pouch connects Allotment to tensions between the United States and the Arab World today. The United States’ refusal to recognize a Palestinian statehood and its official support of statehood in the post-9/11 era parallels its halfhearted recognition of indigenous sovereignty in the US. The fact that Lena’s story begins in Jordan, a country that is home to over 2.5 million people who are part of the migration commonly referred to as the Palestinian Diaspora, connects US foreign policy with its history of Native American disenfranchisement. Lena’s statement that she has problems with America’s treatment of Native Americans underscores the oppressive mechanisms employed by the US government to elide the rights of less dominant groups – oppressive mechanisms whose physical traces can be seen in the documents in the mail pouch.

Interestingly, Ezol’s haunting acts as a counter-haunting to the mail pouch’s presence in Lena’s life and house. Since Ezol is also inherently connected to the Allotment era, having died in 1906 – just one year before Oklahoma became a state – she acts as a convenient foil to the documents in the mail pouch. Because of her journalistic
training, Lena is exceedingly trusting of documents such as those contained in the pouch and imbues them with value as documentable pieces of history. However, Ezol tells Lena, “No one will ever know who they really are if they rely on paper identities issued by the federal government. Documents cannot be trusted” (29). The cultural trauma caused by the Dawes Act is tied up with Lena’s personal traumas. As Lena interacts more with Ezol, she slowly opens up to the possibility that this spirit knows things Lena cannot find out through research. This motif of identity comes full circle when, near the conclusion of the novel, Lena finds out that her understanding of her family’s history was inaccurate even though the documents in the mail pouch support it. Significantly, this information comes to her from Ezol, who Howe uses to emphasize the importance of alternative histories.

While Howe’s use of pastiche and her commentary on the flaws inherent in written documents are important to the story and to Lena’s growth, she does not discount these documents altogether so much as illustrate that their contribution to the “whole story” is a partial one. In Miko Kings, documents lie, but so do people. Lena’s journey ultimately leads to the conclusion that a combination of research methodologies that considers the importance of both oral accounts and written documents is perhaps the best way to understand the “truth.” Without the documents, anyone’s accounts could be true. But without the stories, the documents mean little or nothing.

There are two essential effects that Ezol’s haunting produces: the larger cultural work of representing oral histories as more reliable than written histories, and the specific personal work of changing Lena’s perception of herself. By revealing her true family history Ezol reconnects Lena to the Native American community from which she has
estranged herself. The novel’s portrayal of documents as unreliable and limited privileges alternative storytelling methods and polyvocality over Westernized forms of documentation. Furthermore, the overall result of this pastiche in Lena’s character is a new understanding of her family history and a changed attitude toward what it means to be Native American.

Interestingly, while “historical” documents in *Miko Kings* are never able to provide concrete answers, the solution Howe offers at the novel’s conclusion is a combination of oral storytelling and writing in the form of the weblog. A technological hybrid of storytelling and documentation, the blog form privileges the stories of its contributors while creating a written history – a record of the stories – in cyberspace. The blog Lena creates functions as a digital repository of personal narratives comprising a larger cultural narrative. The blog posts, which have filled in a lot of the blanks, are able to contribute to a more complete understanding of the past. This is consistent with Howe’s concept of “tribalography” which she defines as the transformative power of indigenous narratives that are histories and stories (Tribalography 118). The idea that Native stories take “a community of people” to tell them, and that usually there is a “choir of characters that is necessary to tell a story” (Squint 216) is echoed through the novel’s endorsement of blogging. The very nature of a blog is that multiple contributors are expected, and every post is intended to garner comments from people who read them. A blog, unlike a newspaper article or the deed to a house, has no single perspective.

In *Miko Kings*, haunting highlights the schism between written and oral accounts of history. It takes Ezol’s presence in Lena’s life to shake the young journalist’s faith in researchable written histories. Only under Ezol’s tutelage and in the presence of her only
partially-verifiable stories can Lena begin to question dominant historical narratives and develop a receptivity to oral histories. Without Ezol’s magical interference, Lena’s adherence to journalistic research practices would have remained obstinately unchanged. However, with Ezol’s help, Lena becomes the catalyst for change, setting up a collaborative blog that will help her flesh out her understanding of a history that was nearly lost because of the dominant culture’s desire to erase all traces of it – to vanish the Indian through erasure. Through technology, Lena discovers a documentable method of storytelling that gives the oral tradition a makeover for the twenty-first century. Lena and Ezol may be moving bodies in Choctaw space (221), but the stories of the Miko Kings baseball team and its founding members have become living histories in cyberspace.

**Haunting as Politics in *So Far From God***

Lena is not the only one who needs help coming to terms with her culture. Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far From God* takes up the trope of haunting in its exploration of the politics of *mestizaje* in a small town in New Mexico where Chicano and indigenous Mexican cultures are neither valued nor recognized by the dominant culture. Published in 1993, this novel addresses a wide array of issues, ranging from female sexuality to disposable employees to grassroots activism. Praised by critics for its witty voice, the novel’s style grounds it firmly in a form that is at once female-centric and culturally specific: the *telenovela*. Not only does Castillo ground *So Far From God* in a specific population, but she also situates it in a specific political context through its title.

In the novel’s epigraph, Castillo clarifies the source of the novel’s title. The epigraph reads: “‘So far from God—so near the United States’ PORFIRIO DIAZ, Dictator of

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Mexico during the Mexican Civil War." This direct reference to the Mexican Civil War (dubbed the Mexican Revolution by the US) situates the novel in the context of a time of great tension between the United States and Mexico – a tension that was continuing to grow with immigration debates and agricultural economics in the early 1990s when Castillo was writing this novel. It also reflects the material reality of what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as la frontera in the community of Tome, New Mexico, approximately 250 miles north of the US-Mexico border. New Mexico’s history with the United States is a rocky one, like so many other states: the eastern half of it was annexed in the 1845 Texas Annexation (which was never recognized by either Mexico or Texas). All of New Mexico was then ceded by Mexico in 1848 in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In other words, Tome is a community that has historically been caught up in the border disputes between Mexico and the United States. Even today, it remains an unincorporated city, balancing between physical existence and official recognition. By naming the novel So Far From God, Castillo invokes this history of liminality, as well as a history of revolution – after all, the Mexican Civil War was the war that made Emiliano Zapato and Pancho Villa famous.

Despite this historical context, Castillo’s novel doesn’t take place during the Mexican Civil War but is set in contemporary times. It tells the story of Sofi, a strong, independent woman whose husband Domingo “abandoned” her and her four daughters when her youngest was only a baby. Sofi’s daughters have symbolic names (Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca Santa – names that translate to Hope, Charity, Faith, and The Crazy Saint, respectively) that contribute to the significance of their deaths. Similarly, they all meet untimely ends – although death does not always stop them from going on
with their lives. Each daughter’s death is significant for its individual circumstances as well as for how (or whether) each woman is able to haunt.

The Unsuccessful Sacrifice of Esperanza

She is Sofi’s oldest and most politically-conscious daughter who, like Lena, is a journalist. When she’s on assignment in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War, Esperanza goes missing and eventually sends word of her death through La Llorona (a folk figure). Despite her death, Esperanza frequently visits friends and family in “ectoplasmic” form, talking politics with them.

Unlike Lena, Esperanza is a passionate activist from the very beginning of the novel when Castillo connects her with La Raza politics. As one character explains, “Back in college, if it wasn’t for la Esperanza who led the protest, they never would have had one Chicano Studies class offered on the curriculum. If it wasn’t for la Esperanza, who would have known about the struggle of the United Farm Workers on campus?” (239-40). Esperanza’s social consciousness is constantly driving her into the public eye – not just in college protests, but also in her career choice of newscaster where she hopes to bring about some change.

Her chosen career path opens up the possibility for her to accomplish this, but upon scoring a job as a journalist with a major network, the low value placed on her by the American news media becomes clear when she is shipped off to Saudi Arabia to report on the Gulf War. Her father asks why they are sending her – an amateur reporter – instead of “someone with more experience, like la Diana Sawyer” (48). The question goes largely unanswered on the page, but the implication is that reporters like Diane
Sawyer are more valuable than people like Esperanza who are not only, for all intents and purposes, unknown personages but also brown ones; the combination of these two characteristics means that Esperanza is expendable. In his 2008 essay on the absence of minorities in American television, Phil Chidester explains that whiteness, which is visible on television, asserts its dominance over other ethnic groups through the absence of these groups from the screen, while the presence of whiteness fades from mind in its presumed neutrality (159). The question about “la Diana Sawyer” questions the neutrality of whiteness in the American news media. Esperanza’s presence is required off the screen in the dangerous reality of the Gulf War so that reporters like Diane Sawyer can continue to exert the dominance of whiteness from the safety of the newsroom.

Ironically, it is only through her disappearance in Saudi Arabia that Esperanza gains recognition. She becomes “a famous prisoner of war” and “instead of giving the news live in person like she did in the old days, her picture was flashed” on the screen (63). In other words, when she was physically present, nobody paid any attention to her. The use of her image unaccompanied by her voice indicates the shift in Esperanza’s value to the news media: only through bodily absence does she become worthwhile to them. The American media has no use for a living Chicana journalist, but a captured, missing, or dead Chicana keeps the ratings high. In the end, Esperanza becomes the news – yet another story of a Chicana lost to the perils of this world. The final trace of her living body takes the form of “footsteps in the sand leading toward enemy lines” (84). The presence of footsteps draws attention to the absence of the feet that made them. Even after her death, Esperanza’s body remains absent – although in this case it appears to be an absence manufactured by the American military. When her parents visit Washington,
DC, they are confronted by Army officials who “claimed to know for a fact that she was
dead” while maintaining their inability to locate her body (160). Because Esperanza’s
parents don’t have any powerful or influential friends, her “missing body remain[s] a
mystery” (160) that is never solved for the reader.¹⁴ She has not only been sacrificed to
the military-industrial complex, she has also been effectively erased.

The absence of Esperanza’s body does not, however, translate into the absence or
silencing of her spirit. Conversely, her disappearance enables her to perform her
haunting. In fact, Avery Gordon talks about the “desaparecido (disappeared)” as a
specific kind of haunting, arguing that the reappearance of a disappeared person through
haunting is one way “something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself
known or apparent to us” (63). Taken to its logical conclusion, then, haunting at once
evokes the absence of the disappeared by confirming their bodily death while
simultaneously marking their presence through their spectral existence. In Esperanza’s
case, her physical disappearance is the catalyst that leads to her increased involvement in
her family’s political lives. Only as a disappeared woman can her spirit make her death
known and push her living family members toward political transformation.

Once she haunts, Esperanza becomes a highly political figure in Tome. Whereas
in life she is relatively uninvolved with her family, in death her politics replace her career
and she spends her time engaging in political discussions with her friends and family. She
talks with them “about the war, about the president’s misguided policies, about how the
public was being fooled about a lot of the things that were going on behind that whole
war business, how people could get some results by taking such measures as refusing to
pay taxes” (163). Her continued interest in politics – discussed mostly with women –
manifests itself in the feeling by many who knew her in life that they are closer to her in
death (204). Her ectoplasmic appearances are indicative of her persistent interest in the
welfare and success of her people. As a ghost, she appears to be able to affect more
change from the privacy of people’s homes than she was able to in the public sphere
through the American news media.

Esperanza’s haunting, which mostly affects the community’s women, undermines
the military’s attempt to erase her. She is not placated by the posthumous medal they
award her, and despite the fact that she died a martyr, she is not silenced by death. She
continues her crusade for social justice in the afterlife, inspiring her friends and family to
take up positions of power, protest in any way they can, and reach for the successes they
have been denied.

The Disposability and Erasure of Fe

Fe’s desire for the American dream ultimately leads to her death. Unlike her sister
Esperanza, Fe does not cherish her culture or race; she values what every “good”
American is supposed to: the American dream. She is preoccupied with her appearance,
taking care to always have manicured nails and nicely done hair, and always denying her
culture both physically (erasing all traces of it from her body) and socially (taking care to
maintain a deep separation between her family and friends). She appreciates the social
cache Esperanza’s early newscasting career lends her, but expresses an explicit disinterest
in La Raza politics (29). Her erasure of her own mestizaje is the product of her
investment in the dominant culture, and her participation in de-racializing herself begins
a process of erasure that will be taken up by the dominant culture, which will consume her entirely.

For Fe, the first step toward attaining her dream is marriage. When her first plans of marriage with Tom fall through, Fe nearly loses her mind to the extent that “her bloodcurdling wail became part of the household’s routine so that the animals didn’t even jump or howl no more whenever Fe, after a brief intermission when she dozed off, woke up abruptly and put her good lungs to full use” (32). Traumatized by the failure of her relationship so close to marriage, Fe almost screams herself right out of her own life. However, upon her miraculous recovery, she goes right back to work at the bank and once again finds a man to marry – this time, her cousin Casimiro, who goes by Casey and has the peculiar habit of bleating like a sheep. Upon their marriage, Fe “got the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR” (171), and she and Casey “settled into a three-bedroom, two-car-garage tract home in Rio Ranch with option to buy. They furnished it all new, sold Fe’s car and bought a brand-new sedan model” (176-7). They were embarking on the American dream, filling their new house with new furniture and new appliances – being the good consumers every American is expected to be – when her voice becomes a roadblock to obtaining the American Dream.

Her voice, a marker of the trauma she suffered, becomes a marginalizing factor. The bank Fe has worked at for most of her adult life passes her over for a promotion, telling her that “although the company did not want to discriminate against her new ‘handicap,’ her irregular speech really did not lend itself to working with the public” (177). Fe quits this white collar job which refuses to allow her voice – a distinctly Chicana voice marked as Other by trauma, but easily understood by her mother, sisters,
and husband; a voice her bank recommends speech therapy for; a voice deemed unsuitable for public – to be heard. Instead, she takes a job in a factory rumored to allow for the possibility of bonuses given to hard workers.

At Acme International, Fe “took on every gritty job available, just to prove to the company what a good worker she was” (178). Acme employs mostly uneducated Chicana, Mexican, and indigenous women, and when they work there for any extended period of time, they discover that their ability to bear children has been taken away from them. Castillo’s portrayal of the factory highlights the careless misuse and poisoning of these women who are viewed as disposable to this large corporation. While Castillo’s novel was published around the time the Ciudad Juárez murders began happening, the scholarship surrounding those murders – many of which involve maquiladoras (women who work at factories much like Acme International) – is relevant to a larger discussion of the implications of Fe’s final year of life.

In her 1999 essay “The Dialectics of Still Life,” Melissa W. Wright argues that, in the eyes of the factory administrators in places like Acme International, the female worker “takes shape in the model of variable capital whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to one of waste,” explaining how in this model, the maquiladora’s value to the company deteriorates over time until eventually it is more valuable to the company to hire a new maquiladora to replace her (454). Wright goes into further detail, explaining that most factories measure their employees along a spectrum, with “value” being the most desirable quality (since a valuable employee is one who, through training, will result in a fiscal gain for the company) and “waste” being the least desirable quality (since a non-valuable or untrainable employee will diminish in value the longer she
remains with the factory, therefore resulting in a fiscal loss); these factories often deem women “untrainable labor” and therefore the maquiladora “personifies waste in the making, as the materials of her body gain shape through the discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskillable, and always a temporary worker” contrasted to men (like the “rotating foremen” in Castillo’s novel) who are considered potentially skilled employees worthy of training because they will ultimately increase in value (455). The most important (and devastating) connection between value/waste and the maquiladora, according to Wright, is that the “wasting of the [maquiladora]—through both her literal and her corporate deaths—represents for those invested in the discourse of her as a cultural victim immune to any intervention” (456). In other words, the perceived inevitability of the maquiladora’s transition from value to waste translates to not only the expected event of her leaving the company, but also to the acceptance of the maquiladora as a doomed victim.

With this in mind, Fe’s fate was an inevitable one. This is where her death diverges from Wright’s argument, since Fe’s death is not caused by a person-to-person assault, but instead is a direct result of the work she did at Acme International while still considered “valuable”: “She had cancer on the outside and all over the inside and there was no stopping [this] cancer she [had] undoubtedly gotten from her chemical joyride at Acme International, which was eating her insides like acid” (186). Despite this, she continues to go to work “whenever she felt well enough because of all the payments due on all the things that she and Casey had bought on credit” (187). Her dream of American materiality pushes her even closer to death while everyone around her is blatantly unconcerned about her. As she dies in a slow and torturous process, Fe wonders how
everyone “could be so concerned about who was to blame for the illegal use of a chemical” while remaining “not the least bit concerned about her who was dying in front of their eyes because of having been in contact with it” (187). Her lack of “value” could hardly be more apparent. She has outlived her use to Acme International, and has been discarded before she can become a “waste.” She’s human, but replacably so because of her race, gender, and social class. At this point, she has become more of a problem than a useful resource, and what the company wants more than anything is to erase her existence (and all the legal problems that could go along with it). In other words, Acme International is simply awaiting what Wright articulates as the inevitable victimhood of Fe.

In life, Fe is disposable; in death, she is erased. This becomes even more clear when Acme International pays for her cremation (186) – a permanent and irreversible erasure of her body, which might have proven legally dangerous to them if left intact. In order to ensure that she does not become more of a “waste” in death, they eliminate her body and render her so thoroughly dead that she does not even return to haunt her family. This lack of a haunting is conspicuous, especially in light of Esperanza’s constant and multiple hauntings. However, even though on several different occasions the narrator reports that Fe is just too dead to return in ghostly form, Fe does haunt the thoughts and memories of the inhabitants of Tome: “when the pungent, nostalgic aroma of roasting chiles filled the air again in following years, that month would always be remembered by everyone who had known her as the one in which la Fe died right after her first anniversary” (171). For the people who knew Fe, her memory is forever tied up with this annual tradition and therefore her sad tale of misplaced faith (hinted at by her name’s
meaning) and poisonous employment will be in people’s minds as they prepare this culturally significant food for their own families.

Fe’s inability to appear to her family and friends after death – an inability so thorough that even her sister Caridad, a medium, can’t channel her (205) – is illustrative of her violent erasure from this world. Her erasure is so systematic – beginning when she attempts to get answers from Acme International’s foremen and is ignored, continuing as her personal wellbeing is overlooked in favor of monetary gain, and ending with the cremation of her physical remains – that her meager memory-based “haunting” will only continue as long as she is remembered by her community. It is only a matter of years before even this olfactory reminder is also erased.

The Un-Death of Caridad

Unlike Esperanza and Fe, Caridad’s untimely end is not a death, which imparts a particular kind of value to her life. Instead of dying, Caridad is swallowed into a kind of immortality after experiencing a frightening haunting of her own. The prejudices and cruelties of the world constantly seek Caridad out, repeatedly attempting to snuff out her generous spirit. For Caridad, many of her woes are caused by intense heartbreak. When she gives her heart to someone, she does so without holding back, and is therefore devastated when she loses the object of her affections.

Caridad loses her heart on three occasions, and is punished for it each time. The first time she gave her heart away was to Memo, her high school sweetheart and husband (for two weeks). His chronic cheating led her to annul the marriage, but for years after their relationship ended Caridad still sought Memo out in other men who served as one-
night substitutes for her former lover: “Caridad no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo and only to Memo whenever he wanted it and loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo […] whose name[s] the next day would be as meaningless to her as yesterday’s headlines were to Esperanza la newscaster” (27). Her promiscuity with anyone who “vaguely resembled” her former lover results in a lot of talk among the locals. Shortly after the novel opens, Caridad is brutally attacked on her way home from the bar one night: her nipples are bitten off, she is branded like livestock, and she is stabbed in the throat.

Caridad’s lifestyle puts her outside of socially accepted norms, and she is “punished” for it by her attacker and the men who refuse to track down her assailant. Although she survives the attack, Caridad is only “half repaired by modern medical technology, tubes through her throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together flesh that was once her daughter’s breasts” (38). Yet despite the brutality of this attack, Castillo’s narrator points out how “there are still those for whom there is no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who has enjoyed life, so to speak. Among them were the sheriff’s deputies and the local police department; therefore Caridad’s attacker or attackers were never found. No one was even ever detained as a suspect” (33). Caridad’s generous heart, in its longing for Memo and its attempts to find love in the arms of Memo-substitutes, led her to a level of promiscuity that is condemned by society. The policemen’s refusal to investigate this attack is indicative of their resentment of Caridad’s sexuality. Her “enjoyment” of life is treated as a criminal act so that her attack is read as justice by the authorities and no serious attempt to find her assailant is ever made.
Of course, Caridad’s attacker is a folk figure which comes out of two patriarchal cultures: American and Mexican. Her attacker, which the policemen would have trouble tracking down if they bothered to try, is identified as the malogra. In dreams Caridad shares only with Loca and Doña Felicia (her mentor in the arts of the curandera), it takes “the shape of sheep’s wool, large, voluminous, not in animal form but something just evil” – a “wicked wool spirit” that “only comes out at night” (78). The three women alone know the following about Caridad’s attacker:

[…] it wasn’t a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down rabbit. Nor two or three men. That was why she had never been able to give no information to the police.

It was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force.

(77)

The malogra (also called la malora – a contraction of the words “mala” and “hora” to literally mean “the evil hour”), as it appears in traditional Chicano folklore, is “an evil spirit which wanders about in the darkness of the night at the cross-roads and other places. It terrorizes the unfortunate ones who wander alone at night, and has usually the form of a large lock of wool […]. It is also generally believed that a person who sees la malora, like one who sees a ghost […], forever remains senseless” (Espinosa 25).
Significantly, Caridad is attacked by a folkloric figure (one specific to New Mexico, according to Espinosa); therefore, her sexuality is condemned by not one, but two cultures, represented by the malogra that attacks her and the policemen who refuse to investigate the attack. Caridad’s miraculous recovery from the attack, attributed both to Loca’s prayers (38) and Caridad’s own innate healing powers (55), is indicative of the resiliency of the mestiza who is judged by the harsh patriarchal standards of two cultures and still finds the strength to heal herself. Of course, this is not the only time Caridad loses her heart and suffers the consequences.

When Caridad loses her heart a second time, she is once again punished for it by some of these same patriarchal systems. Interestingly, this time she loses her heart to an animal: her horse. Once she is healed after the malogra’s attack, she moves out of Sofi’s house and into a trailer next to Doña Felicia, taking her horse with her. The horse is named Corazón, which is Spanish for “heart” and makes for a lot of double meanings such as “Caridad’s Corazón, however […] was easily frightened by strangers” and “Just make sure she remembers to keep her Corazón tied up, so it don’t take off” (44, 45). This horse, symbolic of her heart while simultaneously being a real horse, becomes Caridad’s closest companion: “Caridad spent a lot of time with her horse, who stuck its head into whatever window she left open, trying to follow her from room to room while she went on telling Corazón whatever it was that she didn’t tell no one else. Which was quite a bit, because Corazón had become her best friend” (51). On the symbolic level, Caridad is once again talking to her heart; but on the literal level, her best friend (and only love, at the time) is an animal. Once again she has broken from social norms – this time by giving her heart to an animal rather than a human, and a female animal at that.
The consequence of this love is also a violent one: Corazón escapes one night, afraid of the drunken men at a nearby party, and is injured on the road between Caridad’s trailer and Sofí’s house. The “sheriff’s deputy was waiting for Caridad when she came home the next morning. He said that he and his partner had found the horse lying by the road having broken its hoof jumping over the cattle guard. They did what they thought they had to do and shot it. One bullet just above its left nostril” (53). Once again, the authorities have stepped in and violently wounded Caridad’s “heart.” In case the reader might fall under the impression that this could, in fact, have been a mercy killing, Doña Felicia says, “‘Esos salvages del sheriff’s department did not have to shoot your horse […]. If it’s true where they say its bone was broken, it could have been mended’” (55). She reinscribes the label “savages” onto the police, and also names the shooting for what it was: an unnecessary act of violence. The authorities literally police Caridad’s emotions, using their power to punish her when she loves in ways they consider unfit for a woman of her age and race. With the malogra, they policed her love through a lack of action after deeming her assault a natural conclusion to her numerous love affairs; with her horse, they policed her love through a violent act that in no uncertain terms indicates their disapproval of her love for an animal – and a female animal, at that. After this second policing of Caridad’s love, Caridad believes she has an “apparently fatal touch” and which eventually makes her reluctant to put the final object of her affection – a woman named Esmeralda – at risk by making contact with her (205).

Caridad’s final love occurs suddenly and unexpectedly when she glimpses Esmeralda (then a stranger to her) at a religious ceremony. This love affects Caridad profoundly, and ultimately results in her spending a year living in a cave in the desert.

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When Doña Felicia’s godson, Francisco el Penitente, stumbles upon Caridad in this cave, he and his male companions attempt to remove her only to find that she is impossibly heavy and cannot be moved (87). At this point, Caridad is widely considered to be a saint, and she becomes a foil to Francisco el Penitente. The moment he attempts to move her against her will, the two are set in opposition to each other: Caridad represents the indigenous beliefs kept alive largely by female curanderas, while Francisco el Penitente represents the fundamentalist Catholic beliefs kept alive by fanatics like himself.

Francisco el Penitente quickly becomes more and more ghostly after this encounter. First, he begins mixing ashes with his food to dull his sensory experience of the world (191), erasing his engagement with the physical aspects of life. As his obsession with Caridad grows, his human qualities diminish until Doña Felicia likens him to a zopilote (vulture; 204) and he becomes indistinguishable from the crows who smoke his unfinished cigarettes as he stalks Caridad (199). Finally, he starts dressing entirely in black from head to toe (200), which makes him look more and more like a shadow (206) until he is easily overlooked because he’s so much like a shadow that he is “more elusive than a strand of hair” (209). In other words, he has become something between a carrion bird, always waiting to taste death, and a predatorial shadow of a man who stalks (read: haunts) Caridad as she watches over Esmeralda.

Representing a longstanding patriarchal tradition within the Catholic church, Francisco el Penitente reacts violently to Caridad’s lesbian desire for Esmeralda. Upon interviewing his godmother and figuring out why Caridad watches over Esmeralda, Francisco el Penitente “knew he could not ever let himself set eyes on Caridad again” as his mind went “haywire” (204) with his discovery. However, he then begins pursuing
Esmeralda instead of Caridad. He abducts her from the Rape Crisis Center where she works, and the narrator cryptically states, “the worst was what had happened. Well, maybe not the worst, that would have meant that Francisco el Penitente would have left off a dead body” (207), implying none too subtly that he raped Esmeralda. More patriarchal punishment for Caridad’s love, which once again falls outside the social norm. In this case, Francisco el Penitente chases them to the Acoma reservation where, upon recognizing the “tall, lean, lonely coyote trying to camouflage himself as a tourist” (210) Caridad and Esmeralda link hands and run, jumping off a cliff in a scene reminiscent of the 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* – with the crucial exception that Caridad and Esmeralda don’t die. Instead, “the spirit deity Tsichtinako [was] calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds, but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever” (211).¹⁷

In Caridad’s case, her mortal life comes to an end after years of the malicious policing and haunting of her desires. Her indiscriminate promiscuity, inter-species companionship, and homosexual desire are constantly checked by violence and the spectral presence of a variety of American, Mexican, and religious patriarchal figures. Like Fe, she does not return to haunt her family. However, this is not due to a death so thorough it cannot be transcended, but rather to the fact that Caridad has been granted immortality rather than death. In this way, Castillo endorses Caridad’s life in a way that she doesn’t endorse Fe’s. While Fe is so thoroughly destroyed that she cannot return in spectral form, Caridad is the only one of Sofi’s daughters who doesn’t actually die. The granting of eternal life indicates an implicit approval of Caridad’s ability to love outside
the narrowly defined and strictly enforced kinds of love considered “allowable” in the contemporary United States.

**The Transcendence of La Loca Santa**

While Caridad attains immortality at a young age, Loca’s ability to transcend death changes her entire relationship with life and death – and therefore haunting. Loca literally passed through hell, purgatory, and heaven after her first death at the age of three. Sofi recognizes that Loca is “more ghost than of this world” (34), and indeed, having already experienced death makes her return a kind of haunting all on its own. Loca also has what some jokingly refer to as an “allergy” to people that causes her to spend most of her time in the margins of human existence. Significantly, the names of Loca’s sisters seem to indicate each woman’s fatal flaw. In other words, Esperanza has an abundance of hope, and this quality leads to her downfall because her continuing hopes put her in a dangerous situation. Similarly, Caridad’s abundance of charity manifests itself in her perceived promiscuity, which makes her the target of violent retaliation. Finally, Fe’s abundance of faith in the factory where she works – and through this, in the values of the dominant culture – leads to her demise. Loca is the only one whose name doesn’t signify an excess, but instead a defining characteristic that allows her to be herself. Since her given name was forgotten, Loca’s nickname carries a different weight than her sisters’ names and instead of highlighting the characteristic that will lead to her downfall, Loca’s name highlights her personality and individuality, as well as society’s inability to understand her.
Part of her illegibility to society comes out of her inability to interact with people in what’s coded as a “normal” way (hence her name: Loca). Her only friends are the household animals, a neighbor’s peacock, and La Llorona. In some ways, Loca herself becomes a Llorona figure since she, too, hangs out by the water and seems more ghostly than flesh-and-blood. When seen in this light, Loca can be viewed alongside other “contemporary Llorona figures [who] are characterized by various degrees of lostness, […] Lloronas who are isolated or alienated from their own community and the dominant culture. The women here embody in particularly interesting ways varying degrees of Llorona-like lostness, suffering either from prejudice, violence, abandonment, or assimilation into a racist society” (Pérez 231). In Loca’s case, her isolation from society is self-enforced, but her alienation from the community and the dominant culture would occur with or without her “people allergy.” For her, La Llorona is one of her only companions.

Loca doesn’t know La Llorona’s name, only that she wears a white dress (159) and has been visiting Loca at her acequia since she was a little girl (162). Castillo describes La Llorona as a woman “who has existed under many names, who has cried over the loss of thousands but who was finally relegated to a kind of ‘boogy-woman’” (160), and goes on to offer a variety of alternative readings of this folkloric figure:

Once, La Llorona may have been Matlaciuatl, the goddess of the Mexica who was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Ciuapipiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles and left in their place an obsidian blade, or Cihuacoatl, the patron of women who died in childbirth, who all wailed and wept and moaned in
the night air. These women descended to earth on certain days which were
dedicated to them to appear at crossroads, and they were fatal to children.

(161)

Each of these women, lurking in the margins of history and in the unlit spaces of
childhood, is looked upon as abject in some sense. Loca’s relationship with La Llorona,
who in this case embodies several different figures, places her even further outside the
normal boundaries of society so that, like La Llorona, she is almost relegated to the
sidelines. At the same time, after Esperanza’s death, the three women – one flesh and
blood, one ectoplasmic, and one the stuff of legends – often hang out together in the
acequia and chat. We can only assume that Esperanza is talking politics to Loca and La
Llorona because of her track record with the other women she speaks with. Regardless of
the subject matter, the fact remains that Loca is spending her time with ghosts and
folktales, rendering her more ghostly through the lack of separation between her and
these two intangible women.

Loca’s other uncanny abilities illustrate her connections to Mexican and Chicano
culture. These abilities (on top of her flying, her healing prayers, and her journey through
the afterlife and back) take the form of skills and talents that nobody taught her: horse
training, playing the fiddle, delivering babies, embroidery, and becoming a “one hundred
percent manita cook” so that she’s better at cooking than her mother, who taught her how
to cook. (164-5) Each of these skills is an important cultural marker. Horseback riding
has a long history in Mexico and the southwestern United States, most visibly among the
vaqueros. The horse was introduced through European colonization, but after over half a
millennia it (like so many other things) has become an important part of Mexican and
Chicano heritage. Similarly, the fiddle was brought over in conjunction with Catholic missionaries, and it was quickly incorporated into Mariachi culture so that now it is an essential part of the Mariachi band. Loca’s skill at embroidery ties in with a long history of embroidered clothing in indigenous Mexican and Native American cultures. In other words, Loca has mysteriously amassed a significant amount of skill pertaining to a wide variety of traditions in mestiza culture. Add to this her thorough culinary knowledge of traditional Mexican dishes – a knowledge surpassing even her mother’s – and Loca becomes an incontrovertible symbol of Chicana and mestiza culture.

Her death from HIV/AIDS is even more disturbing because of this. Since HIV/AIDS is an auto-immune disease – meaning the body’s protective defenses (the immune system) are progressively broken down until the afflicted individual is left susceptible to opportunistic infections – Loca’s contraction of the disease is symbolic of an entire culture’s vulnerability to harm. Through Loca, Castillo illustrates the beauty of this culture, and also the dangers it faces in a world that renders it abject, as Loca’s name (the Crazy One) and behavior renders her. This is not to say that Castillo portrays an entire race and culture as endangered, diseased, or dying. On the contrary, she shows us the death of Loca but offers a rather optimistic conclusion despite this death. Like Esperanza, Loca continues to visit Sofi as a ghost, influencing her mother in significant ways; unlike Fe, Loca has not been utterly destroyed and erased. Instead, she continues to live in a kind of ghostly immortality – bodiless, but very alive in spirit. Loca’s ability to live on in death places her in a kind of borderland between the living and the dead. Gloria Anzaldúa conceives of la frontera as a space that is marginalized between the United States and Mexico: unvalued by one, and no longer part of the other. She describes la
frontera as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” a place that “is a constant state of transition” (25). Loca, by being able to continue living after her life has ended, embodies this borderland condition by existing between life and death.

Perhaps more important are the implications of Sofi’s gradual transformation – a transformation which takes place throughout the novel. Sofi is a clear example of a woman once firmly bound by a series of traditions imposed upon her by rigid patriarchal structures, such as her family and the Catholic church. When she first kicked Domingo out, Sofi opted not to divorce him because she feared her family’s and church’s reaction. However, when Domingo gambles away her family land, which she views from a matrilineal perspective as the birthplace of her and all of her daughters, she seeks a formal divorce once and for all.

She creates MOMAS, an organization that performs one of the duties of the Catholic church (determining sainthood), but without consulting the Catholic church with regard to their decisions. MOMAS undermines the authority of the church by pronouncing Loca a saint and recognizing her and innumerable others like her as saints without any involvement from the Catholic church. By forming MOMAS, Sofi casts off the religion that refuses to see the value of her daughters and people like them.

It’s not just religion that has ceased to protect Sofi and the women like her; social structures ranging from domestic roles within the home to leadership roles within the community and even capitalist principles have been failing the residents of Tome for decades. From the very beginning of the novel, Sofi’s unique domestic role has been recognized by the narrator: “by anyone’s standards it was unfair to call her […]
unambitious, since Sofí single-handedly ran the Carne Buena Carnecería she inherited from her parents. She raised most of the livestock that she herself (with the help of La Loca) butchered for the store, managed all its finances, and ran the house on her own to boot” (28). In Domingo’s absence (and later in his presence, too) Sofí fills all the domestic roles in the house, as well as all the business roles in the carnecería. When Esperanza goes missing, Sofí decides to run for “mayor” of Tome. With the help of a comadre – and without so much as running the idea by Domingo – she runs for and becomes mayor of the unincorporated city of Tome. Singlehandedly, Sofí organizes a community co-op that involves sheep-grazing, wool weaving, childcare, education, organic farming, hormone-free livestock production, and more (147-8). This co-op creates a space where the women can bring their children to work with them, and it helps the community of Tome become self-sufficient while providing cheap and local products for its residents. By the end of the novel, Sofí exemplifies Roland Walter’s argument that women are the “driving force” in their communities, and that the magical realism in Castillo’s novel ultimately allows Sofí to become the epitome of female activism in Tome (297-8). Without Loca haunting her in bodily form, and Esperanza haunting her in ectoplasmic form, Sofí would never have started the co-op or MOMAS. It is the “magical realism” that changes Sofí and makes her “the epitome of female activism in Tome.”

Conclusions

The ghosts in both Howe’s and Castillo’s novels emphasize the need for people to help culture grow and change rather than allowing it to stagnate and grow stale. Haunting “is not compelling because it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is
appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces” (Parham 3). In Howe’s novel, we can see that while Ezol is performing the haunting and is undeniably between times and spaces, Lena is really the one who is struggling with that in-betweenness. Her early attempts to disguise herself, exploiting her physical appearance to pretend she is part of other racial groups, is illustrative of her inability to embrace her true self. This is a very different struggle than the one we see Sofi’s daughters grappling with as they attempt to come to terms with life in the borderlands. With Esperanza, the act of haunting becomes a method of exploiting her own liminality in order to help others navigate the social and political borderlands in Tome. Both in life and in death she finds herself between cultures. However, in death, she uses her liminality to help her living relatives navigate their in-betweenness. In the case of Ezol and Esperanza, existing “in between” life and death is what allows them to help their living counterparts survive between cultures and nations. The act of haunting becomes an act of loving guidance, helping the living negotiate the injustices they failed to overcome themselves. Sofi’s other daughter’s hauntings (or inability to perform them) make a variety of statements about their own in-betweenness. For these women, in life and in death they find themselves between cultures. However, it is only in life that they struggle with being in-between; in death, they use their liminality to help their living relatives navigate their in-betweenness.

Between these two novels, a pattern of reconciliation begins to emerge – reconciliation between past and present, individual and community, and even dominant and marginalized cultures that is facilitated by the ghosts contained within the novels. To return to the idea of the magical realist ghost as a signal of the shift from individual to
community, the ghosts in Howe’s and Castillo’s novels blur the lines between “easy”
categories like life and death, past and present, individual and community. Their status as
ghosts makes them dependent on living people in that they lack the ability to change
things themselves – being exceptionally marginalized in death – and they therefore
become catalysts for change.

At this juncture, it is helpful to revisit Derrida’s and Gordon’s ideas about ghosts
as agents seeking transformation – specifically, transformation to move away from
oppressive systems of power or injustice. These novels both utilize ghosts-who-represent-
complex-histories as the agents of change for the living characters. Through Ezol, Howe
proposes a digital oral tradition for the twenty-first century, which honors the tradition of
oral storytelling while leaving a written trace in the world. Castillo employs several
spirits to haunt Sofi until she adapts her views in order to survive in today’s world. These
novels use hauntings in order to offer sometimes revisionist, sometimes futuristic, and
always complex perspectives and solutions on issues that continue to plague
contemporary society today.

While both Howe and Castillo come from cultures where ghosts are thought of in
ways that break from Western “rationalist” thought and mainstream scientific narratives,
they use these ghosts in ways that are at once drawing upon larger cultural ideas
regarding spirits while also altering these spirits in significant ways. These novels are not
typical ghost stories. They are not filled with angry and vengeful spirits. There are no
graveyards that come alive at night or chains that rattle in the dark. They are haunted in a
very specific way: by ghosts who focus more on the living than on the dead. And these
ghosts have no interest in harming their living relatives. Instead, they are concerned for
their well-being. Hauntings are one form of magic that continues to serve a variety of different functions in contemporary literature by American authors of color. Ghosts highlight the condition of liminality that is so often at the heart of marginalization. These ghosts serve in a political capacity, acting as agents who draw attention to the abundance of problems that continue to surround America’s internal borders, international policies, and everything “in between.”
Chapter 3
Telling Tales: (Re)Visualizing Culture Through Folklore and Mythology

Authors of magical realism often incorporate mythology and folklore into their fiction, most especially the mythology and folklore with deep roots in pre-contact or pre-colonial culture. Scholars have observed the importance of the oral and folkloric traditions to magical realism (Aldama 9) and have pointed out that the use of cultural mythology is one method authors use to work against Western hegemonic beliefs (Ouyang 16). In fact, many authors of contemporary magical realism place cultural folklore at the heart of their works, and it is certainly true that these authors sometimes employ more traditional cultural beliefs in their literature as a way of opposing dominant narratives of history.

However, not all of these authors are “writing back” against the empire, as it were. To label all magical realism – or all literature by authors of color – as reactionary would be widely dismissive. When authors of magical realism bring folklore and mythology into their stories, there is often another dynamic at work: adaptation. Folk tales and myths are part of a culture, and as such, they necessarily grow and change with it. With the popularization of writing as a method of recording oral (hi)stories, many of these stories have been frozen in time – captured in much the same way a photograph captures its subjects without allowing them to grow or age within its confines, even
though they continue to do so outside of the stationary image. However, because many myths reach outside the boundaries of literary realism, magical realism lends itself as a space in which these myths can continue to grow and adapt.

However, just as it would be reductive to say these authors are all “writing back” against dominant narratives, it would also be reductive to claim that their novels serve the simple purpose of recording changes in a body of folklore. There is, of course, more to it than that. Maggie Ann Bowers makes a point that begins to get at the heart of what is happening with folklore in magical realist literature when she says that authors of magical realism “employ the mode not only because they wish to repeat folkloric mythologies from their cultural community, but because they wish to promote a greater depth of understanding of the present circumstances in which the texts were written” (94). Through the folklore, these authors add depth and complexity to the reader’s understanding of contemporary culture by building on larger storytelling traditions.

Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* is a good example of this phenomenon. The novel portrays a young boy named Azaro, who is an *abiku*: a spirit child who, once born, is torn between living his life and returning to the spirit world. He lives in an unnamed contemporary (and presumably Nigerian, in the same way Márquez’s Macondo is presumably Caribbean) community. The novel’s premise – that Azaro was born, but is interested in staying alive rather than returning to his friends in the spirit world – comes out of the well-established Nigerian folk figure of the *abiku* but updates it for contemporary life and politics. In a less traditional way, Laura Esquivel does something similar in *Like Water for Chocolate*, only in this novel Esquivel uses traditional Mexican recipes (culinary folk traditions rather than mythical folk traditions) to provide the basis
for the protagonist, Tita’s culinary adventures. When Tita cooks, she imbues her food with her emotions – emotions which are magnified and felt by everyone who eats that food. These strategies are not unique to Okri and Esquivel; some American authors of color also use magic to modernize and alter folklore.

I argue that magical realism’s foundations in anti-imperial political discourse translates to an interest in reviving mythological figures within the borders of the United States in a way that causes friction between cultural folklore and social injustice in the United States. Considering the history of anti-imperialism in the genre, Barbara Webb uses the work of three Caribbean authors – Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Edouard Glissant – as evidence that these writers are using literature to disrupt colonialist narratives of identity and history. She claims that their use of myth and folk imagination results in what she terms a “creative act of repossession” (25). Webb opens her book, *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction*, with a discussion of the potential of mythology and folklore to create a counternarrative that questions and destabilizes dominant narratives, especially dominant *historical* narratives. Her argument that these authors “view the folk traditions and history of the Americas as the source of a new form of fictional discourse in which they attempt to reshape traditional literary values associated with the colonial past, while at the same time proposing an alternative to ‘fossilized,’ static conceptions of New World history” (4) parallels my own claims regarding the role of myth in contemporary US ethnic literature. I argue that these American authors of color are, as Webb argues, using history and folk traditions to create a “new form of fictional discourse,” but that in so doing they are addressing not only the “colonial past” and its litany of histories, but also the social and political environment of the times. The
result is that in addition to using folklore as the catalyst for writing alternate histories as authors like Vizenor and Rhodes are definitely doing (as I discussed in Chapter 1), these authors are writing additional realities. Using magical realism to breathe new life into myths and folk tales, they bring those stories into the contemporary United States.

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between more conventional magical realism produced in the Third World and post-Cold War magical realism produced in the United States is the way cultural lore is employed by the authors. Many of these authors are playing with the relationship between magic and history – whether or not that relationship is manifested through a haunting – and they are using myth as a connective tissue between the politics of the past and those of the present: “When the past is treated as myth, its meaning is governed to an overwhelming extent by the concerns of the present. As the center of gravity of present concerns shifts, therefore, the meaning of the past necessarily shifts along with it, sometimes to a quite extraordinary degree” (Cohen 238). This mythologizing of the past based on the concerns of the present is one of the central themes I explore in this chapter.

There are three major forms of engagement with myth I have noticed that recur in magical realist fiction:

- **Myth Evolving.** Myth evolving happens when authors take folklore from the culture of ancestry and evolve it to increase its relevance to life in the contemporary world. In *Water Ghosts* (2007), Asian American author Shawna Yang Ryan uses the Chinese myth of the water ghost to comment on the immigrant experience in northern California in the early 1900s. The three water ghosts in the novel are women who grapple with racism,
sexism, and gender roles in the small community of Locke near Sacramento.

- **Myth Merging.** Myth merging happens when authors create hybrid myths that consist of both folklore from the culture of origin and folklore from the contemporary United States. Ana Castillo does this with her La Llorona figure, who is simultaneously the woman from Mexican folklore and a friend and messenger to misunderstood and ill-treated women everywhere. Dressed all in white and acting as a messenger to the dead, she merges with images of angels in popular culture.

- **Myth Making.** Myth making happens when authors take historical, archetypal, or cultural figures (such as literary characters) and present them in a manner that mythologizes them. Gerald Vizenor engages in myth making as he rewrites Christopher Columbus. By portraying Columbus the way he does, altering his past and lending him a larger-than-life presence in the characters’ lives in contemporary America – he remakes the historical “explorer” into a damaged and relatable myth.

  In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison engages in myth making with a familiar archetype of evil. Schoolteacher, the man largely responsible for Sethe’s intense physical and psychological trauma, is an archetype often seen in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives like *Beloved*. He is the inhumanly cruel, thoroughly reprehensible slave owner. Morrison mythologizes this character so thoroughly that his appearance at the end of the novel is every bit as terrifying as it seems intended to be.
Like Morrison’s novel, the novels I turn to in this chapter are all deeply invested in histories of oppression. In the case of Dominican American author Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this takes the shape of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. African American author Touré’s novel *Soul City* (2004), like *Beloved*, pursues the lasting legacies of slavery and ongoing institutional racism toward African Americans. Alternately, Chinese American author Marilyn Chin’s novel *The Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009) explores the history of Chinese immigration to the West Coast and the continuing stereotyping and discrimination against Asian immigrants and Asian Americans in the United States today. All three of the novels this chapter focuses on were published after 9/11 and each one engages in the mythologization of the past as well as the adaptation of myth and folklore in their several attempts to address social and political issues in the present.

In these three novels, as in many contemporary magical realist novels by American authors of color, the authors use this body of cultural lore to enliven the political undercurrents that make up the foundation of their stories. Broadly speaking, they adapt this lore to contemporary life as people of color in the United States, and in so doing translate the political connotations of the myths and legends they draw upon to make sense in the social climate during which their novels are written and published.

**Oscar Wao and the Curse of Culture**

Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was published in 2007 to widespread critical acclaim. Audiences raved about it, with reviewers calling it “genius,” “exhilarating,” and “shot through with wit and insight.” Scholars have written
about the narrative voice as resistance, the use of comic-book references as reflective of
the immigrant experience, and the writing style as a creative blend of sarcasm and
fantasy. What I’m most interested in touches on all of these things, but focuses mostly
on the way various mythologies are incorporated into the narrative and adapted for the
specific situation of being a Dominican American nerd in the US today.

Perhaps the most in-your-face myth the reader encounters in Oscar Wao is that of
the colonial curse referred to as the “fukú” – a kind of curse that was born at the precise
instant Columbus made contact with the “New World.” The fukú has been at work in
protagonist Oscar DeLeon’s family for multiple generations resulting in assassinations,
enslavements, imprisonments, and brutal beatings of Oscar’s maternal family members.
Díaz draws on Dominican folklore in this novel, updating existing mythologies and
merging them with contemporary American sub-cultural figures to form a new kind of
folklore grounded in Dominican folk tales and American “nerdery.” Diaz engages in
myth evolving to present the fukú as a manifestation of the underlying and very real
threat of imperialism constantly simmering just beneath the surface of the characters’
lives.


The fukú is the most obviously prevalent Dominican folk concept that permeates
the pages of Diaz’s novel. It is there from the opening passage all the way through to the
final pages, and serves not only as a cultural concept that has very real effects on the
characters’ lives, but also as an organizational principle that continues to draw attention
to the theme of colonization’s ongoing symptoms. The novel begins not by introducing
one of the characters, but by introducing the fukú as if it was a character:

They say it came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims […] (1)

Personifying the fukú gives it a unique presence: by describing the fukú as a demon that was birthed like a human child, midwife and all, Díaz portrays the fukú as something with agency. The result is a curse that acts more like a character than anything else. Since Díaz situates the roots of the fukú not only in the African and Taíno cultures, but also specifically in the suffering of slaves brought to the New World from Africa and the deaths of the indigenous peoples of the Dominican Republic (the Taínos) resulting from colonization. By attributing the fukú to the Admiral, Christopher Columbus, and saying that he delivered the curse like its midwife, Díaz defines the fukú as a curse that resulted from the moment Columbus set foot in the New World – in Santo Domingo, to be precise.

Díaz enlivens a longstanding cultural belief in this passage. In the foreword to the book *The Discovery of America & Other Myths*, Alastair Reid explains that a “fucú is something ill-omened, likely to bring bad luck, something in a person or a place or a happening that has doom about it” (xxvii). He goes on to explain that the “most
interesting fucú of all” is the “superstition that has existed for centuries that bad luck would dog anyone who spoke aloud the name of Cristóbal Colón” – a name that was hard not to speak as the quincentennial came and went in 1992. However, Díaz doesn’t simply include this myth in the novel, he also evolves it. When Beli immigrates to the United States, the fukú immigrates with her; when Oscar grows up, a second-generation Dominican American, the fukú takes on a new form befitting its evolution into a second-generation curse, too. The second paragraph of the novel follows up on the ideas introduced in the first paragraph, but with a twist: “No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (1-2). The idea that the fukú started in Santo Domingo but has given birth to people all over the world is a concept not far removed from science fiction tales of aliens coming to our planet and mixing with humans to create a new species. In other words, Díaz has begin the novel by introducing a folk take specific to one region of the world but opening the door for that tale’s adaptation into something new in other regions of the novel.

For the next three pages of the novel, Díaz introduces the dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina as a “hypeman of sorts, a high priest” of the fukú (2). By combining the concept of the fukú with a specific cultural and historical trauma – and Díaz’s portrayal of the Trujillato throughout the novel leaves no doubt as to the severity of the national trauma of the era of Trujillo – Díaz resituates the fukú in the twentieth century. This move connects the period of contact and colonization to modern times, updating the fukú while leaving it in the Dominican Republic (for the first part of the novel, anyway). More
than that, the significance of an oppressive ruler calling the fukú onto his nation’s people becomes especially interesting when we consider that Oscar grew up during the Reagan/Bush era and Díaz wrote the novel during the second Bush administration. With a war in the Middle East and injustices occurring in places like Guantanamo Bay at the hands of the US military, the relevance of the fukú seems even more important.

The fukú, brought into existence at the moment of contact, is believed by many characters to either be silly superstition, or to be something belonging to their parents’ generation – the generation that was born and raised in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo regime. In “Comic Book Realism,” Daniel Bautista’s essay on form and genre in this novel, Bautista argues that the “The young characters in *Oscar Wao* all grow up in a transnational space thoroughly saturated by the pop cultural detritus of late twentieth-century American culture. The fact that they are all Dominican-American means that they are even farther removed from the older Dominican traditions of their parents. Nonetheless, Díaz is not ready […] to give up entirely on the possibility of magic, either as a fictional resource or as a real cultural influence. Despite the doubts expressed about the fukú over the course of the novel, for example, the idea that there just might really be a curse still has a certain currency for his characters” (51). In fact, since the characters become more and more convinced that there is a fukú as the novel progresses indicates that perhaps they are less “removed” from their parents’ traditions than they might believe they are. Bautista’s claim that Díaz is not ready to abandon the possibility of magic “as a fictional resource or as a real cultural influence” is also interesting considering that the fukú continues to play out in the characters’ lives throughout the entire novel. The fact that this curse is not limited to the Third World or to
the generations of people born there illustrates its nature as a larger symptom of colonization, and its ability to adapt to the specific situation of the US where it continues to thrive. The implications of this are that the US is a colonizing force despite the dominant narratives of the US as an arbiter of freedom and democracy, and that the curse inflicted upon non-Europeans as a result of contact is still very much alive. Through the fukú, Díaz plays with folklore to highlight America’s role in today’s world through a culturally specific lens. He evolves that folklore to better fit the context of life in America by taking Dominican concepts out of the Dominican Republic and into the United States. More than that, bot only is Díaz updating the myth for to make sense in a new context, but he’s also bringing a concept from Dominican culture into the United States in a way that levels a critique at the nation’s foreign policy and its history of ongoing imperialism.

**La Jablesse: Understanding Female Sexuality Through a Mythological Lens**

Similarly, the characters encounter a Caribbean folk figure called La Jablesse who Díaz has updated to make sense in the cultural context of the college dormitory. Before the fukú grows and evolves in the novel, Oscar is confronted with this figure who embodies a myth intended to illustrate the dangers of female sexuality:

Jenni Muñoz. She was this Boricua chick from East Brick City who lived up in the Spanish section. First hardcore goth I’d ever met—in 1990 us niggers were having trouble wrapping our heads around Goths, period—but a Puerto Rican goth, that was as strange to us as a black Nazi. Jenni was her real name, but all her little goth buddies called her La Jablesse, and every standard a dude like me had, this diable short-circuited. Girl was
luminous. Beautiful jibara skin, diamond-sharp features, wore her hair in this super-black Egypto-cut, her eyes caked in eyeliner, her lips painted black, had the biggest roundest tits you’d ever seen. (182)

The description of Jenni as enchantingly beautiful and also as a diabla (devil) is enough to indicate her role as an unattainable temptress, generally speaking. However, the specific use of the name La Jablesse ties her to a very specific figure in Caribbean folklore:

La jablesse (French la diablesse – the devil woman) is seen both within the forest and along paths and roads. She is conceived of as a beautiful woman with a broad hat who attracts men and leads them astray in the forest. Her identification mark is a sweeping skirt which conceals a cloven foot. She engages a besotted man in conversation and leads him astray. By morning he finds himself in a bed of piquant (thorns) or he may be discovered to have fallen over a cliff.

While to my knowledge there is no precise African equivalent for la jablesse, one notes a number of features which unite the sukuyâ [witch] […] and la jablesse. For example, abnormality – that is, their non-human or spirit essence – is signified by an inversion of some human physical attribute. […] In addition, a profoundly African suspicion of beauty of appearance is expressed in the personalit[y] of la jablesse […]. Many African proverbs and folk tales warn against being attracted and obsessed by physical beauty, as it usually conceals evil, bad luck, or death.

(Warner-Lewis 179)
The dormitory La Jablesse in *Oscar Wao* is, like the Caribbean folk figure, incredibly beautiful. However, rather than a cloven foot concealed beneath her skirts as a symbol of her evil, this La Jablesse dresses in contemporary “goth” garb. While the goth look is not explicitly evil, the prevalence of black leather, dark black hair and makeup, pale white skin, blood-red lipstick, and metal crosses are intended to create a dark and sinister appearance that acts as an “inversion of some human physical attribute.” Jenni/Jablesse does not dwell in the forest, but lives in another kind of jungle entirely: college dorms. As an updated and Americanized La Jablesse, Jenni lures college boys to her with very different, culturally specific means: her body (large breasts, trendy attire, nice body, etc.); her demeanor, for instance, the ability to look askance at Oscar while balancing her cafeteria tray; her thick sarcasm, and her Jersey accent (183-4). She and Oscar have long conversations, go to movies, hang out together, and develop what would ordinarily be the beginnings of a romantic relationship.

Jenni’s means of attracting her victims are different from the La Jablesse of Caribbean folklore, but the result is similar enough. The traditional figure “engages a besotted man in conversation” and leads him to harm, or even to death by falling off a cliff, and Jenni/Jablesse engages with Oscar in a similar manner, but one that gets him to the cliff’s edge (so to speak) in a roundabout way. When she abandons Oscar for another boy, he stops writing (one of the most stable aspects of his identity) and falls into an abnormally deep depression. This is already a significant downturn for Oscar, but after he finds Jenni/Jablesse in bed with the other boy, he gets violent and as a result is further isolated from his dorm-mates. This isolation is a modern-day equivalent of waking up and finding oneself in a bed of thorns. When Yunior decides not to room with Oscar the
coming school year, Jenni/Jablesse’s death blow is put into action:

What he did was this: drank a third bottle of Cisco and then walked unsteadily down to the New Brunswick train station. With its crumbling façade and a long curve of track that shoots high over the Raritan. [He] tumbled out toward the river, toward Route 18. New Brunswick falling away beneath him until he was seventy-seven feet in the air. Seventy-seven feet precisely. From what he would later recall, he stood on that bridge for a good long time. […] Reviewing his miserable life. Wishing he’d been born in a different body. Regretting all the books he would never write. […] And then the 4:12 express to Washington blew in the distance. (189-90)

The modern-day incarnation of La Jablesse in the United States is no less effective at leaving a string of broken men in her wake than the Caribbean folk figure, but Díaz has rewritten her for contemporary times. In a college setting, Díaz’s La Jablesse is perhaps less lethal to most of her victims, but continues to perform the role of the devilish temptress intent on punishing men for their sexual interest in her. Interestingly, she maintains her outward marker of abjection (here the goth exterior), but the new La Jablesse is appropriate for her new environs.

Both the fukú and La Jablesse are revised to make sense in the context of the United States. Díaz’s characters, while no longer living in the Dominican Republic, continue to experience its mythology in very real ways. Conversely, the mythologies of the Dominican Republic have followed its diasporic subjects to their new land and Díaz has updated them in a way that maintains their original purposes while altering the way
they carry out their intended functions. In order to remain relevant to the characters, the folk tales take on more familiar form.

**American Nerd Culture: A Different Kind of Folklore**

Despite their Dominican roots, Oscar and Yunior are most familiar with American nerd culture. Yunior disassociates himself from this sub-culture, but frequent allusions and blatant references to canonical “nerdery” pepper the pages of this novel. Yunior is constantly likening himself to the Watcher from the comic book series *The Fantastic Four*, comparing Trujillo to Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, naming Dominican thugs after assorted DC Comic villains, and making literary allusions to all manner of novelists.²

In fact, there is so much nerdery in the pages of this book that these references are more of an obstacle to readers unfamiliar with them than the Spanish words sprinkled about are to non-Spanish-speakers. They are not, however, terribly different in nature. Many critics argue that the use of words and phrases in another language alienates the reader. In *Oscar Wao*, the presence of Spanish functions in this way, but so do the sci-fi and fantasy references. These references are, in effect, acting as a kind of neo-folklore for a specific sub-culture of American youth growing up during the 1980s and 1990s. Daniel Bautista argues that this sub-culture does two significant things for the Dominican American characters: it uses the dark and evil forces in nerdery (such as Sauron) to emphasize the dark aspects of the Trujillato, and it also illustrates the relevance of this nerdery to the immigrant experience.
This inability to believe in the original incarnation of the fukú forces the fukú to take on a more accessible form – in this case, science fiction, fantasy, and comics. For Oscar and Yunior, the fukú can only be understood through these generic lenses. This is why Oscar names the two men who beat him and kill him after comic book villains, and why he uses the villains from *The Lord of the Rings* and the hero from *The Watchmen* to help him make sense of the roles being acted out by himself and those around him.

Bautista argues that this use of pop culture is Díaz’s way of portraying the immigrant experience and that their presence in the novel are an “appropriate expression of the peculiar mixture of change and tradition that marks [Oscar’s] immigrant experience” (45). He goes on to point out that these references also do the work of conveying Díaz’s “particular vision of Dominican and Dominican-American reality and history,” offering a “wealth of parallels” to the experience of Dominican Americans (45). I would take this a step further to argue that this is one way immigrants – Dominican or otherwise – and their offspring translate the realities of folklore (such as the fukú) in a culture that systematically denies the existence of anything remotely supernatural. The sci-fi and fantasy genres, as well as comic books, endorse worlds where supernatural, magical, and otherwise “unrealistic” people, places, and events can exist. Because of this, there is room in these genres for the kinds of “unrealistic” things that exist in folklore as well. In fact, comic books and sci-fi both tend to take place in worlds that parallel our own world (or the perception of our world that “rationalist” scientific dogma endorses) in much the same way folk tales do.

During an era of strict political correctness resulting in what Vijay Prashad terms “the color blind,” Oscar and Yunior turn to a sub-culture that seems more reflective of
their life experiences than mainstream American culture – a sub-culture that isn’t explicitly invested in race. I see it accomplishing something else in addition to these two feats: the nerdery in Díaz’s novel creates the space for the sub-culture of sci-fi and fantasy lore to mix with Dominican American culture and form a neo-Dominican-nerd folklore that flows throughout the novel. This new (sub)cultural perspective changes the reader’s understanding of events by adding a new layer that merges Dominican folklore and American nerd culture.

**Neo-Dominican Folklore: Merging Traditions**

When Dominican folklore and sci-fi/fantasy nerdery come together in Diaz’s novel, we start to get larger-than-life characters who commit larger-than-life (but in the case of the Trujillato, historically consistent) acts. The products of these acts of myth merging are figures who embody both traditions in a way that makes sense with the world Oscar inhabits.

One of the recurrent figures in the novel is a faceless man. He appears in different time periods, but always in connection with brutal violence. One theory, presented by Daniel Bautista, is that this man is akin to the character Rorschach from the comic book series *The Watchman* by Alan Moore. This argument is extremely convincing, and when coupled with the idea that this faceless character is the physical embodiment of the fukú, the implications for Diaz’s novel are very interesting. Essentially, the merging of the Caribbean myth of the fukú with the contemporary character from a popular graphic narrative creates a new folkloric figure with the power and pervasiveness of the fukú and the moral depravity of Rorschach’s character. This has the effect not just of updating a
folk concept, but also of revising the relevancy of the fukú for entirely new audiences.

However, while Rorschach was a vigilante intent on justice, no matter what the cost, the faceless man in Díaz’s novel is not. In fact, he is an agent of oppression and violent injustice. The major difference is that Rorschach has a real face beneath his mask, but has covered it with a fabric that shows shifting shapes like ink blots that the criminals he punishes see. The faceless man in Díaz’s novel is described as quite literally having no face. Since Rorschach’s face is merely obscured from his victims, the implication is that beneath his mask he has humanity; the faceless man’s lack of a face illustrates his characteristic lack of humanity. I would like to suggest that this conclusion can be taken one step further to consider that the faceless man may not actually be human at all, but instead a physical embodiment of the fukú.

The faceless man’s involvement in violence during and after the Trujillato suggests that he’s not an agent of either of those governments but is, instead, a free agent. He is there when Beli is being driven to the cane fields (141), he appears to Socorro in a dream the night that Abelard is taken (237), and he joins in on Oscar’s first beating in the cane fields (299). In other words, he is too timeless to work for any specific government, and instead appears to be the fukú itself as it follows the characters around. Facelessness actually appears to be a symptom of a person’s complicity with the fukú. When Abelard says The Bad Thing about Trujillo, he is in the car with his friend and neighbor, Marcus:

At first Marcus said nothing; in the darkness of the Packard’s interior his face was an absence, a pool of shadow. A worrisome silence. Marcus was no fan of the Jefe, having more than once in Abelard’s presence called him un “bruto” y un “imbécil” but that didn’t stop Abelard from being
suddenly aware of his colossal indiscretion (such was life in those Secret Police days). Finally Abelard said, This doesn’t bother you?

Marcus hunched down to light a cigarette, and finally his face reappeared, drawn but familiar. Nothing we can do about it, Abelard.

(220-1)

Marcus is only faceless for a very specific period of time – the precise moment that Abelard’s discretion fails him. As soon as his face reappears, he behaves just as he always had. However, during his moment of facelessness, he becomes a fearsome man who Abelard senses is dangerous. The words Abelard spoke during Marcus’ facelessness were the words that caused his destruction at the hands of Trujillo. This quality of facelessness could be mistaken for a characteristic of those loyal to Trujillo, except that toward the end of the novel we encounter another faceless man who has nothing to do with the Trujillato. If we look at more of the faceless man’s appearances, a pattern begins to emerge.

When Oscar is being driven to the cane fields for his first beating, they stop at a colmado where he sees “a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face” (298). After a short drive past this colmado they arrive at the cane field wherein Oscar receives his penultimate beating. As he is being beaten by the men he calls Gorilla Grod and Solomon Grundy, “there were moments Oscar was sure that he was being beaten by three men, not two, that the faceless man from in front of the colmado was joining them” (299). Since it is clear that the man from the colmado did not join them on the final leg of their drive to the cane field, the presence of a third (faceless) man during Oscar’s beating highlights the
characteristic of facelessness as symbolic of a universal destructive force. The only time faceless men appear in Díaz’s novel is in moments preceding or coinciding with extreme and unjust violence against the Cabrals/DeLeons. The fukú follows them, and when they set foot on Dominican soil, it takes on corporeal form to aid in their downfall.

Significantly, the fukú is still able to make it to the US. If the fukú, as it exists in the Dominican Republic, is the embodiment of a system of violent oppression – started with Columbus and colonization, and perpetuated through leaders like Trujillo – then it makes sense for Díaz’s characters to discover that it has followed them to the US. The US, with its history of imperialism and far-reaching wars, is the perfect place for the fukú to migrate to.

It is important to note that the fukú only takes human form in the Dominican Republic. Despite the fact that characters continue to be plagued by it in the US, the fukú is somewhat diminished there. In a culture dominated by the dogma of science and rationalism, the fukú is relegated to the realm of superstition – something the immigrants believe is a remnant of the “old” culture. The fukú is not as strong in the US, and most second-generation Dominican Americans think of the fukú as something that belongs to their parents. Yunior even admits that when Oscar tells him he’s cursed, he wasn’t “old-school” enough to believe him (171). However, Yunior was raised in a culture that values tangible evidence, so the elusive fukú is not something he believes in until it’s too late.

When Yunior explains that this novel is his “fukú story,” he says, “I’m not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation. Fukú story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles? But
now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?” (6). This rhetorical question draws a direct connection between sci-fi/fantasy and the fukú. By comparing real places and real situations to these stigmatized genres of fiction, Yunior blurs the lines between reality and fiction, causing them to bleed into each other. His use of folklore acts as the connection between the real and the fictional.

The role of that folklore becomes crucial since it brings the real and the imaginary together in this way. In a discussion of the role of folklore in Caribbean author Alejo Carpentier’s canonical magical realist novel *El reino de este mundo*, Barbara Webb posits that the “mythic or folk imagination may play either a conservative or revolutionary role in historical consciousness” (28). She goes on to say that “Carpentier emphasizes the revolutionary transformative potential of myth” (28) – a claim that is echoed in Monica Hanna’s article on the narrative style of Díaz’s novel. She argues that the “novel strives for a ‘resistance history’ which acts as an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres.” She goes on to posit that Díaz’s use of nerd genres is how he develops a historiography that allows for alternate representations of national history and resists the “conformity and univocality insisted upon by the national power structure best personified by the figure of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo” (500). While Hanna restricts her claims to a discussion of form, I think a combination of Webb’s and Hanna’s arguments is most convincing when it comes to *Oscar Wao*. Díaz’s use of cultural mythology such as the fukú and La Jablesse, coupled with Yunior’s almost overpowering narrative voice not only illustrates the “transformative potential of myth” that Webb talks about, but also results in the “resistance history” Hanna sees emerging.
The concept of writing as an act of resistance is reinforced when Yunior admits, “as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). The idea of writing as a counter curse recurs throughout the novel. Abelard writes a book – an exposé of the Trujillato – that he thinks will rid them of Trujillo, but which is destroyed by them before he can finish it (245-6). The fact that he wrote this book while fearing that he was in trouble with Trujillo indicates that he felt there was something to be gained by writing it, despite the heightened danger to himself. Furthermore, after the book is destroyed, Yunior writes, “Strange, though, that when all was said and done, Trujillo never went after Jackie, even though he had Abelard in his grasp. He was known to be unpredictable, but still, it’s odd, isn’t it?” (246). It appears the book may have functioned in the capacity of a zafa, sparing Abelard’s daughter from the lecherous Trujillo. Similarly, Oscar writes another book that goes missing, and he refers to it as “the cure to what ails us” (333). The idea of writing as zafa further embeds the fukú in a literary tradition of sci-fi, fantasy, and comics. Yunior, Abelard, and Oscar all attempt to fight the fukú with words of their own. Their writing is a defensive act that they engage in as a protection. All three of these men see their books as counter curses that have the potential to stop the fukú from pursuing the ones they love. In Abelard’s case, it appears his book-zafa worked, since his daughter was spared. Similarly, Yunior views his writing as something that can arm Isis, Lola’s daughter, against the fukú when it eventually comes after her. As for Oscar, his book was lost or destroyed, but his family and Ybón remain safe.

In the Dominican Republic, the fukú is such a powerful myth that it takes over any person in close proximity to the cursed person, albeit erasing their face while it
inhabits their body. However, as Díaz shows through Abelard, Yúnior, and Oscar, when the fukú travels to the US it gets translated as literature. In a culture so dominated by rationalism that the sight of a faceless man would likely be attributed to a trick of the light, the fukú adapts, occupying a space in which it can be understood: the realm of sci-fi and fantasy literature, and superhero comics. The translation of Dominican folklore into a pop culture artifact – a kind of Neo-Dominican mythology that becomes part of an American subculture where it can be understood on its own terms – is itself a reimagining of a cultural concept that keeps the fukú accessible to Dominican American youth.

This kind of cultural translation evolves the Dominican folklore Díaz is working with in a way that simultaneously cooperates with and subverts Western literary genres. If the fukú is real, but the only way it can be understood in the US is through fiction, then doesn’t that “fiction” become less fictional? Díaz’s own disruptions of Western literary conventions extend this theme into the novel. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a novel, and yet its use of footnotes is highly unconventional. The novel, a form traditionally considered a Western form of writing, is generally expected to tell its story in a specific way – one that does not include footnotes.

Díaz intertwines so many different kinds of narratives, and plays with so many formal and generic conventions, that he creates his own kind of reality. Yúnior’s story, told to the reader in a style that is so filled with “voice” that it has the feel of oral storytelling, makes folklore and fantasy into reality at the same time that it turns reality into myth.
Soul City and Its Culture of Myth

A similar phenomenon exists in Touré’s 2004 magical realist novel Soul City. In Soul City, history and popular culture also play an important role, although their employment saturates the novel in an entirely different way than in Díaz’s novel. They are embedded in nearly every page of Touré’s novel, alongside folklore and allusions to African American literature, critical theory, and activism. He weaves these elements together to form a new African American folklore – one steeped in various aspects of African American culture and focused on masculinity. The novel is set in Soul City, a fictional city in contemporary America inhabited entirely by African Americans.

Soul City is, at the beginning of the novel, a Black utopia in its celebration of African American culture and history. It is a city where politicians are elected for their prowess as DJs, the latest drug enhances how the user experiences music, and the streets have names like Nappy Lane and Juneteenth Boulevard. The narrative jumps around from character to character, introducing a series of archetypes, many of whom appear only once in the novel. Repeat-characters represent distinct “types” of characters – sketches of positive or negative Black masculinity that Touré reinforces with his new African American folklore. Touré’s creation of a new cultural folklore makes a strong statement about Black politics and masculinity in its advocacy of specific politics and theories, and its rejection of others.

History in the Soil: The Role of Slavery in the Founding of Soul City

Soul City is portrayed as an African American utopia situated vaguely in the US so that it becomes an “Anytown, USA.” The story of its founding is one of triumph over
slavery through religious and cultural folklore, delivered in a manner that reads like a fable of the city’s creation – a fable that entrenches the city’s politics in African American folklore, culture, and theory. Similar to Díaz’s opening passage, which tells of the birth of the fukú, Touré gives the reader this story of the founding of Soul City in a way that emphasizes histories of African American politics and resistance. The story parallels the form of a fable: it begins by introducing the characters and their setting; it presents a primary conflict and climactic event; and it concludes with a symbolic and moralistic act of violence. The tale uses language that is characteristically simple so that it sounds as though it comes out of the fable tradition of oral folklore:

Many years ago Granmama, Fulcrum, and Sweetness Serendipity were slaves on a plantation that had a giant party every fourth of July. Every slave’s stomach turned watching the whitefolks celebrate their mendaciously titled Independence Day. But in 1821 Granmama, Fulcrum, and Sweetness decided the insult was too great and that death was preferable to witnessing their fraudulent holiday even one more time. So after midnight, as the party roared on, they escaped on foot, running faster than they ever had. But a slave named Ignoramus Washington saw them getting away and screamed out. He ran after them, leading the search party, which chased them for miles. Granmama, Fulcrum, and Sweetness began to tire and their pace slowed. The three were just about to be caught, guaranteeing a grand lynching to help celebrate Independence Day, when suddenly a flock of Negroes emerged from the sky.
The flying Negroes were led by Moses Djembe, an ancestor of Mahogany Sunflower, the former chief of an African flying tribe and a recent runaway, or flyaway, himself. [...] As they coasted above the trees considering a return to Africa, they saw a band of runaways and flew down.

Hundreds of whitefolks saw Moses and six other Negroes fly down from the sky. They looked at these flying Negroes and tried to comprehend how inferior beings could have magical powers. There were implosions in their minds. Them whitefolks ran. But Moses didn’t let Ignoramus escape. The entire group of runaways walked and flew together for weeks, all the while dragging him along. He kept yelling out for Massa in the same tone children use to call for their mommies. They finally found acres of secluded, uninhabited land, and though they didn’t know what state they were in, they decided to make camp. Granmama said, “It don’t matter none where we are. All that matters is the fuckin whitemare is over.” They named their new home Soul City.

First thing they did was grab Ignoramus and hold him down. Fulcrum took a knife and opened the Judas’ throat. As his blood seeped into the earth, Moses said, “This blood will purify this soil and allow us to live confined only by the boundaries of our dreams.” (111-2)

The storytelling method of this history renders it its own kind of folklore. Beginning with “Many years ago” it reads as though it were being told – as if it’s being transmitted orally, having been passed down from generation to generation. In this sense, Touré uses
this story to build the folklore of Soul City, while at the same time supporting the idea that conciliatory politics (such as those many scholars and social critics have argued were endorsed by Booker T. Washington) are virtually criminal; for Ignoramus, those politics are punishable by death.

Touré’s Soul City fable highlights some key injustices in American history. Most obvious is the hypocrisy of white Americans celebrating independence while African Americans are held in slavery. Compounding this injustice is the significance of the year 1821: the year the Missouri Compromise was finalized, establishing certain states as free states while slavery remained legal in others. That the characters in Soul City “decided the insult was too great and that death was preferable to witnessing their fraudulent holiday even one more time” is especially significant because the fourth of July in 1821 would have been the first Independence Day since the Missouri Compromise took effect. As such, the selection of this date emphasizes the injustice of slavery, especially given the somewhat arbitrary nature of the way the law determined where slavery would be allowed.

Even more blatant than the injustices the fable highlights is the violent death enacted upon Ignoramus Washington. His namesake is most likely Booker T. Washington, criticized by W.E.B. DuBois for his “propaganda” which promoted conciliatory politics in the Southern states and which, while having good intentions at heart, placed the burden of responsibility for inequality on the shoulders of African Americans. Ignoramus, who called “out for Massa in the same tone children use to call for their mommies” (112), is ridiculed by the narrative; Touré portrays him as foolish and dangerous, his treachery nearly costing the escapees their lives. When Moses Djembe
slits Ignoramus’ throat and proclaims, “This blood will purify the soil and allow us to live confined only by the boundaries of our own dreams” (112), he violently disavows the ideas Booker T. Washington promoted in his career. The implication of the second half of Moses’ proclamation is that Booker T. Washington’s ideas confine African Americans by limiting them to the expectations and approval of white America.

Touré complicates these historical politics with the Biblical allusions in this passage. Moses Djembe, whose first name recalls the Biblical Moses and his act of freeing the Israelites in Egypt, makes his proclamation immediately after Fulcrum took a knife to “the Judas’ throat” (112). By associating Ignoramus with Judas, the religious connotations take on even more significance and Booker T. Washington’s ideas become not only ignorant (as delineated by the name “Ignoramus” to replace “Booker T.”) but also treacherous because of the Biblical Judas’ act of betrayal. Additionally, the name “Djembe” ties the character to West African culture. A djembe is a kind of drum with special cultural significance to the Mandinka people, approximately one third of whom were brought to the Americas as part of the slave trade. The combination of Biblical and West African connotations makes Moses Djembe not only a figure of African liberty and culture, but also a figure associated with resistance and cultural pride.

In addition to the political and religious allusions in this scene, Touré’s use of the trope of the Flying African calls upon a tradition of strength and resistance in African American history and folklore since this trope holds special significance in tales of escaped slaves. Other contemporary African American authors have also called upon this myth at times; for instance, critics have examined Toni Morrison’s use of Flying Africans, arguing that this African American myth connects characters to “their own
distinct culture; one that developed through adaptation to their circumstances in America but which retained certain similar cultural traits to West Africa and which was brutally suppressed by slave owners and by the continuation of racist segregation laws into the twentieth century” (Bowers 94). Touré presents the reader with a full-blooded African chief and six other flying Africans,

Touré brings the trope of the flying African to life in Soul City. As discussed above, Soul City was founded by a small group of escaped slaves, seven of whom were flying Africans. Mahogany Sunflower is the descendent of “African ancestors from flying tribes that ate fruit from the tops of the trees, spoke with the birds, and buried their dead in caves in the mountains. When Europeans arrived they chained down the flying people and carted them to America, only to find that the moment the chains came off, they escaped into the air” (86). Touré works hard to connect the characters who live in Soul City to the history of slavery, but he does so in a way that neither glorifies nor diminishes in the hardships of this history. Instead, the novel focuses on the strength and resourcefulness of African Americans throughout difficult circumstances.

**Modifying Myths: Updating Folklore in the Creation of a New Mythology**

Throughout the novel, Touré draws on folklore to create a contemporary Black mythology that privileges resistance and pride. He connects traditional folk figures to African American historical figures, producing a body of folklore that is “told” to the reader through vignettes in a style that mimics the oral tradition. The most straightforward example of this comes in the character called Shiftless Rice. Shiftless Rice is a classical African American trickster figure in his utilization of language.
Winston Napier argues that “the first line of available systematic counteraction by Africans in the Americas […] involves a traditional self-conscious play with language, a ready reception of signifying freeplay as a survivalistic tool of life” (7). Shiftless’ story is conveyed to the reader through Revren Lil’ Mo Love, who tells it in the style of call-and-response preaching:

“So today, as usual, we here to talk about our favorite savior…Shiftless Rice!”

“Tell it like it is, Revren! Tell it like it is!”

“Last week I told you the story of how Shiftless turned the slaves’ water into wine…!”

“Thass right!”

“…while turning Massa’s wine into water!”

“Hallelujah!”

“Well, this week we gon pick up where we left off, with Shiftless still on the Jerusalem, Lose-ce-anna, plantation of Massa Utterly Unctuous!” (56)

Revren Lil’ Mo Love goes on to tell the story of how Shiftless Rice was told by his master to beat another slave in a fight using any means necessary. Shiftless, who was far smaller than his opponent, outsmarts everyone by slapping Massa Unctuous’ wife. His opponent runs away without fighting him because, in Shiftless’ words, “e’ry nigger know any nigger bad enough o slap a white woman is damn sho bad nuff to murder a nigger!” (60). Shiftless is unjustly killed for his cunning, excels at the acrobatic aspects of being an angel, is kicked out of heaven for his flying prowess, grows bored of Hell, and finally
escapes the afterlife with his new bride (56-66). Shiftless’ story is consistent with Napier’s point – which echoes Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s point about language in *The Signifying Monkey* – that “African American slaves […] constantly had to deform signature, sign, and context in order to undermine and survive in a world where, leaving them at the mercy of tyrannical whimsy, laws negated the racial equality of black being” (7). This is precisely what Shiftless does when he finds the hole in Massa Unctuous’ command and “wins” the fight by slapping his wife. In these ways, Touré builds on a rich tradition of trickster narratives with this character, creating a trickster who is smarter than his slave-owning master, God, and Satan alike.

Despite the fact that *Soul City* is a novel, and is necessarily a written work, Shiftless Rice’s story is related through the oral tradition by having Revren Lil’ Mo Love preach the story. In this way, the reader becomes audience to the performance of this telling. His story, while humorous and entertaining, is not unusual for a trickster story. However, what *is* unusual about Shiftless Rice is that when the young pastor finishes telling his story, the reader discovers that Shiftless Rice is alive and well in Soul City, where he is an elderly but beloved fixture in the community (66). His continued existence, despite the “paper-thin skin stretched so taut over his bones and muscles that you could see every vein and tributary and the blood pulsing through them” (66), makes a strong statement about the persistence and importance of the trickster figure in African American culture. Shiftless Rice embodies characteristics such as intelligence, resistance, athleticism, and persistence. His inclusion as a living, breathing inhabitant to Soul City – and a well-loved person at that – makes the point that the trickster is still part of African American culture and identity.
From Man to Myth: Mythologizing Contemporary Figures

While violent opposition to slavery is in the very earth Soul City stands on, it is no longer a tangible reality in the time during which the novel is set. However, this is not to say that racism is over; even in Soul City, mayor Emperor Jones recognizes the need for a military presence to defend against outsiders wishing the Soulful harm. That presence takes the form of a single man: Hueynewton Payne: “The Soulful hated the way Hueynewton embarrassed them, made them a national laughingstock sometimes, but Emperor kept telling them that if they wanted Hueynewton as their army they had to tolerate him as their thug” (36). The Soulful’s simultaneous need for and embarrassment by Hueynewton takes on larger significance when his namesake and ancestry are factored into the equation. The name Hueynewton is a transparent reference to Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party. The idea that Hueynewton sometimes embarrasses them with his criminality speaks to bell hooks’ ideas regarding black power activists: “Many black power activists started out as angry disappointed disenfranchised males who […] made themselves visible by unacceptable criminal behavior, by doing violent deeds. But when they were given the opportunity via legitimate socially acceptable civil rights struggle to bring positive purpose and meaning to their lives they sought to do so. And there was a difference between the violence they had enacted for criminal behavior and the violence they deployed in the interest of civil rights” (58). More than this, when the civil rights movements ended and their resistance served no clear-cut purpose in the public eye, their ideals were forgotten but the image of the violent Black man remained (hooks 59). Hueynewton represents this faction of the African American population, but with relative peace having been achieved in Soul City
(and no whites living there at all), the Soulful believe they have no use for what they perceive to be Hueynewton’s “unacceptable criminal behavior.” However, his criminality comes out of a rage rooted in a history of inequality and injustice, and while he is violent, his violence is constantly seeking the kind of “positive purpose” hooks talks about.

Despite this, Hueynewton’s character is linked to a form of militant and aggressive activism – something Emperor Jones recognizes as necessary in dire times. Interestingly, it’s not Hueynewton’s name alone that links him to violence: “He was the great-grandson of Nat Turner, who rampaged through Virginia in 1831, chopping sixty white people into pieces, the bloodiest slave uprising of all time. The urge to be insurgent, to rebel, to revolt was not in the Payne blood – it was their blood” (32). His ancestry, specifically Nat Turner and his involvement in the 1831 Virginia Slave Rebellion, at once reinforces Hueynewton’s connection to the history of slavery and situates him in the political role of the militant rebel/activist. Arlene R. Keizer’s monograph Black Subjects makes the following claim:

The figure of the rebellious slave is thus particularly important to an investigation of the black subject, because the black slave in rebellion against white domination is the prototype for a black resistant subjectivity, a founding model of African American […] subjectivity. As a response to the overvaluation of direct, armed slave resistance or successful escape, the contemporary narrative of slavery demonstrates how fraught with difficulty resistance is and has been. (9)

Touré builds on the concept of the rebelling slave as the “prototype for a black resistant subjectivity” through Hueynewton, portraying him as a conflicted character who
struggles with that balance between resistance and subjectivity. When Hueynewton signs up for the Slavery Experience, a “yearlong odyssey that men volunteered for as a way of showing reverence for their slave ancestors” where they “live in shacks out in the fields at the edge of the city, picking cotton and getting whipped from dawn to dusk” (46), he further strengthens the connection Touré makes between the Black Panthers’ brand of agitating in the 1960s and 70s, and violent slave uprisings in the 1800s.

Soul City’s need for his intervention during difficult times implies the novel’s endorsement of aggressive and sometimes violent politics. His necessity is proven when Soul City falls prey to the Devil’s scheme with John Jiggaboo and his evil shampoo: popularize the shampoo, made from the DNA of a “race traitor,” so that the Soulful use it and it infiltrates their brains until they lose all sense of pride in themselves. However, his demise is the ultimate commentary on the role of Hueynewton’s politics in the contemporary United States.

In the war against the Devil, the Soulful rely fully on Hueynewton Payne and his militancy in order to survive, thus implying the need to be prepared to use violence if necessary in the struggle against oppression. By the time they need Hueynewton, only Emperor Jones is cognizant enough to seek him out in the Slavery Experience and ask his help against this enemy. Hueynewton returns to a Soul City “in the midst of a meltdown. […] Everyone stumbled through the city in a stupor as if suffering from mental leprosy, their minds falling apart as they moved along. Soul City was fading into dull sepia despite everyone’s glowing dream hair” (141). The image of Soul City “fading into a dull sepia” indicates not just the dulling of the once-glorious community, but also the city’s devolution toward the past. The shampoo, coupled with a leader who doesn’t value
African American culture or race, has reversed the progress begun by Granmama, Fulcrum, and Sweetness Serendipity and put the city on track to return to a bygone era of inequality and rampant racism.

The involvement of good and evil – in the form of the Devil and Granmama (who by this point in the novel has died and is cheering Hueynewton on from heaven) – adds a mythological element to this battle. With Granmama in Heaven backing Hueynewton, the novel not only endorses but glorifies everything he stands for. In essence, he becomes a soldier of God fighting against an agent of the Devil. In this way, surviving slavery and fighting against oppression become mythical events, and Hueynewton is converted into the hero of a larger story: the epic of African American history that continues to be played out in the United States even today. Jiggaboo, already an obvious symbol of hatred, is imbued with the danger and menace of a supreme evil, thus embodying everything the hero of a myth is expected to fight against: treachery, greed, and spite. Hueynewton’s death later in the novel serves as a warning against abandoning the politics he stands for – politics largely exemplified by organizations such as the Black Panthers.

Significantly, Hueynewton is a “weapon” the Soulful only call on in dire circumstances; when they are not in need of his help, they often condemn him for his militant tendencies. In part, this is why Hueynewton returns to the Slavery Experience after defeating Jiggaboo, where he reaches a breaking point after several more months, escapes, and heads for The City – thirsty for white blood. The new mayor of The City, Jack Hitlerian, had “campaigned on legalizing racial profiling, tripling the police presence in Rhythmtown, building new jails, and arresting Black men as quickly and vaguely as possible” (159-60). Because Hitlerian is Black, he knows nobody will accuse
him of racism (160); despite this, he “was already hungry for a nigger to lynch” (159) when Hueynewton escaped from the Slavery Experience and headed to The City looking for blood. In other words, Hitlerian recognizes Hueynewton as a source of potential violence. In her work on Black masculinity, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “Racial profiling is based on this very premise—the potential threat caused by African American men’s bodies. Across the spectrum of admiration and fear, the bodies of Black men are what matters” (153). This idea of the potential threat linked to Black male bodies is important for thinking about Hueynewton Payne. When he goes to The City, he is seen only as a healthy, well-muscled Black body that threatens the citizens who live there. Hueynewton is arrested for punching a man in the face, which leads to his demise:

> Mayor Hitlerian told the assembled media that […] Hueynewton] was a descendant of Nat Turner and had come to The City for another killing spree, but that they’d stopped him before he started. […] All of Soul City marched and protested for Hueynewton’s freedom, but he was too big a trophy to be let go. As the battle stretched on outside, Hueynewton sat in his cell and watched the world going on without him. For him, time stopped. Then one day, his watch stopped. The battery was fine. The watch was being honest. Then pieces of him began flaking from all over his body like leprosy in miniature, or the bit-by-bit crumbling of an ancient, dying statue. Each day another piece flaked off. Each day another person forgot him. (161)

Hitlerian uses Hueynewton’s ancestry against him in a move that illustrates how institutionalized racism continues to play out in today’s justice system. Hueynewton has
essentially been jailed for crimes his ancestor committed – crimes he is deemed to have the potential to commit, but has not actually committed. In line with Arlene Keizer’s idea that contemporary African American writers have a tendency to portray resistance as “a variety of strategies that come with their own problems, rather than as a straightforward solution” (9), Touré portrays Hueynewton as a savior in the war against Jiggaboo and the Devil, but as an abandoned hero who is easily caught in Hitlerian’s campaign to arrest Black men “quickly and vaguely” in The City. For this reason, Soul City’s protests are also significant. First, and on the more obvious level, they illustrate the Soulful’s recognition of the importance of a person like Hueynewton. Second, when juxtaposed to everything Hueynewton stands for, they also highlight the potential ineffectiveness of peaceful protests against large-scale systems of oppression.

Hueynewton’s slow erasure – a death by molting – is very interesting when Hitlerian’s motives are recalled: he was “hungry for a nigger to lynch,” someone who he could make a “spectacle” of (159-60). The concept of lynching as spectacle is essential to an understanding of how important Hueynewton’s slow wasting-away is. Jacqueline Goldsby’s 2006 critical text *Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* examines the way lynching in the late 1800s and early 1900s was made into a spectacle, especially with the advent of the portable camera by Kodak in 1888. She explains how portable cameras allowed for innumerable spectators to take a large number of photographs of lynchings – photographs which were then widely shared and distributed – and later the popularization of lynching postcards allowed for an even wider distribution of these images (265-7). The images, shared among whites but also used as visual reminders for African Americans, not only made lynching (and the threat of
lynching) visible to a wider audience, but they also couldn’t help but display the
gruesome nature of the crime – a characteristic of photography and film that can’t be
helped, given its visual properties.

One side effect of Hitlerian’s strategy of keeping Hueynewton locked away in
prison, out of the public eye, is that the media portrayal of Hueynewton’s arrest becomes
the spectacle rather than his actual death. In this manner, the media – which would
typically be the disseminating agent for the images of lynching – becomes the perpetuator
of fear instead. “Media representations of African American men as thugs grew in the
post-civil rights era.” Collins goes on to say that “revolutionaries and thugs alike share a
worldview in which flipping the economic order is the reason for social rebellion. They
both see problems and they both want change. Yet thug logic undermines the society that
the revolutionary seeks to change” (Collins 159). Hueynewton, the novel’s “thug,” has
revolution in his blood; his desire for change wells up inside him as anger, and when he
acts out the media uses him as its image of the Black brute. Hitlerian feeds the media the
information about Hueynewton’s ancestry, and that is the message the media focuses on –
the killing spree that was heroically stopped before it could be started. Whereas Goldsby
argues that the circulation of images of lynchings causes fear, modern media’s modus
operandi of fear-mongering results in a reversal of this equation: by not making the
images of Hueynewton’s lynching available, the media creates a fear of what might have
been (instead of what supposedly was, as in the case of historical lynchings in the early
1900s) and then discards the story when the potential for sensationalism diminishes.

Since the novel makes Hitlerian’s desire for a lynching clear, as discussed above,
but doesn’t follow through on its heavy-handed hints of this impending event, Touré

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engages with the *absence* of the spectacle of lynching in literature written by African American authors – an absence that causes the focus to shift onto the effects of the lynching rather than the act itself. The idea of lynching as non-spectacle, when coupled with Goldsby’s theories on how whites used the spectacle of lynching, is useful when we consider Touré’s decision to portray only the beginning of Hueynewton’s end. By denying the Soulful the visual confirmation of Hueynewton’s death, Hitlerian eliminates his potential for martyrdom. His apparent inaction results in an act of forgetting. In this case, Hueynewton and everything he stands for is forgotten by the Soulful, leaving an opening for future threats that remains unresolved by the end of the novel. bell hooks argues that “While the hypermasculine black male violent beast may have sprung from the pornographic imagination of racist whites, perversely militant anti-racist black power advocates felt that the black male would never be respected in this society if he did not cease subjugating himself to whiteness and show his willingness to kill” (50). She goes on to articulate the paradoxical situation of the Black man who engages in violence as a means of going against the system: men who do this are “not defying imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy; unwittingly, they [are] expressing their allegiance” (50). In this way, Hueynewton Payne’s violent resistance – and his subsequent demise at the hands of The City’s mayor – becomes a form of complicity when removed from Soul City, where there is no “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to resist. Once he enters such a society, his behavior becomes what hooks terms “allegiance” and therefore ceases to serve the purpose he once served as the one-man army of Soul City.

Hueynewton is a hugely symbolic figure who represents different things to the Black and white communities. To the Soulful, he is an embarrassment who serves an
important function in dire times: self-defense. His presence is tolerated because the gains he accomplishes in times of need are too valuable to ignore. Conversely, his existence is perceived as a constant threat by whites in The City who see him as a one-dimensional criminal who has the potential to endanger their lives on a whim. Because of this view of Hueynewton and everything he represents, the white City dwellers’ solution is erasure. Only by erasing him and not martyring or publicly lynching him can they eliminate the threat they perceive him to be – a threat with historical roots spanning nearly two centuries of oppression and inequality. Through this character, Touré makes a bold statement about the time and place for violence in activism. His statement is mediated by the community in which the violence takes place, and the reason for enacting that violence.

**Reexamining Black Masculinity Through Cadillac Johnson**

Minor characters such as Unicorn Johnson, Hueynewton Payne, Cool Spreadlove, Emperor Jones, John Jiggaboo, and Revren Lil’ Mo Love act as models of Black masculinity – some portrayed as better than others – that inform Cadillac Johnson’s masculinity in the novel. This is not to say that he views these other characters as embodiments of characteristics he may or may not desire for himself, but instead that Touré uses them to illustrate a wide variety of problems African American males face. Since these peripheral characters tend toward extremes, Cadillac’s moderate nature and mild demeanor stand out in stark contrast.

As Cadillac’s relationship with Mahogany develops, he behavior remains in opposition to many of the males in the novel. He does not exhibit hypersexual behavior
(like Cool Spreadlove or even Emperor Jones), instead patiently “taking” what he fondly
describe as Mahogany’s “bitchiness” and “crankiness.” He determines that despite her
difficulties, he loves Mahogany and is willing to put up with what would ordinarily be
considered emasculating behavior. Unlike Cool Spreadlove, whose masculinity revolves
around his ability to have sex with as many (white) women as possible, and Hueynewton
Payne, whose masculinity is expressed through violence and rage, Cadillac Johnson’s
masculinity is moderate. His status as an outsider to Soul City implies the “newness” of
this model of masculinity to the African American community. Through Cadillac, Touré
presents an image of Black masculinity consistent with bell hooks’ call for the need for a
new version of masculinity. hooks posits that “collectively black male survival requires
that they learn to challenge patriarchal notions of manhood, that they claim nonviolence
as the only progressive stance to take in a world where all life is threatened by patriarchal
imperialist war” (64). hooks takes this idea further to advocate for “a partnership model
that posits interbeing as the principle around which to organize family and community”
(66). This partnership model is precisely what Cadillac and Mahogany have. Cool
Spreadlove and Hueynewton Payne were unable to challenge “patriarchal notions of
manhood” – Spreadlove with his oversexualization, and Hueynewton with his persistent
and eventually pointless violence and rage. But Cadillac, who was not born and raised in
Soul City, is able to move beyond imperialist patriarchy and engage in a romantic
relationship that is based on love and non-violence.

His relationship with Mahogany is endorsed by the novel with the birth of their
first child, Hero. Mahogany’s flying gene is especially important to Soul City in that
there is not only a genetic connection between her family and African nobility – a link to
African ancestors that is especially important when it comes to the flying gene – but there is a connection between Mahogany’s flying gene and the fate of Soul City itself. It takes two flying parents to make a flying baby, and there is a prophecy that says “if a firstborn Sunflower has a child who can’t fly, that’ll signal the beginning of the end of Soul City” (100). Since Cadillac can’t fly, their child will not be able to fly, and Soul City – this space in which African American culture is celebrated and honored – will come to an end. When Hero is born, he immediately falls asleep; however, after about twenty minutes, he actually flies: “They would never know that for the first twenty minutes of his life Hero Jackson was unable to fly. He hadn’t gotten the flight gene, just as [Mahogany]’d known he wouldn’t. But Soul City needed that baby to fly, and when it really matters [God] always comes through for Soul City” (177). God’s interest in the fate of Soul City and her interference in Hero’s ability to fly is the ultimate indication of the novel’s investment in Cadillac and everything he stands for. The decision to change Hero into a flying child illustrates God’s personal vested interest in Soul City’s welfare, and the fact that Hero makes his father a hero in the eyes of the Soulful further establishes Cadillac as a model of Black masculinity. He contradicts the negative stereotypes of African American men and fathers, and through his character Touré creates a model of a man who engages in what bell hooks calls the “partnership model” that emphasizes nonviolence and “interbeing.”

 Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen as a Neo-Immigrant Narrative

Both Díaz’s and Touré’s novels engage with cultural mythologies through popular culture in ways that allow the authors to create a hybridized folklore. Marilyn Chin’s
2009 novel *The Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen: A Manifesto in 41 Tales* takes up folklore in a different manner, although his purpose parallels theirs: to update the folklore so it makes sense in the contemporary United States. Chin’s novel draws its inspiration from a variety of mythologies: fables; religious parables; Zen and Buddhist tales; Confucian philosophy; and other wells of cultural folklore. The overwhelming and constant presence of these texts creates an underlying web of religious and cultural references that portray the United States as a country rife with racial tensions and immigrant dreams. Given its publication in 2009, this portrayal complicates the post-9/11 rhetoric of unity in the United States surrounding the “War on Terror.”

The novel revolves around immigrants and their children, focusing on Moonie and Mei Ling Wong, as they grow up on the West Coast. The twins’ parents immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong, and their paternal grandmother – alternately referred to as Grandma Wong, Granny, and the Great Matriarch – takes on the responsibility of raising these girls since their parents are busy working in the family restaurant. Organized into seven non-chronological parts, each containing a variety of vignettes, the novel relates the adventures of Moonie and Mei Ling in a non-linear fashion.

Chin uses Chinese folk culture to complicate our understandings of the American immigrant experience. Throughout the novel, Moonie is associated with the moon and Mei Ling is connected to canines of all kinds (foxes, dogs, wolves, etc.). In addition to this, Grandma Wong is tied to the kung fu tradition, and all of the Wong women participate in tales from Chinese fables, religion, and philosophy with the result that they take on the traits and abilities of these mythologies, thus bringing the contemporary
United States into the murkier realm of folklore. By blurring genre lines, Chin erases the distance between Western realism and Eastern storytelling traditions.

Like Díaz and Touré before her, Chin modifies classical (Chinese) mythology to increase its relevance in and illustrate its connections to contemporary life as a racial minority in the United States. Where Díaz’s biting sarcasm builds on Caribbean folklore to paint the picture of an immigrant existence dogged by centuries of oppression and cruel injustice, Chin’s use of humor and eroticism adapt the myths that lie at the roots of her novel so that the text engages in a form of literary activism that explicitly builds on a cultural history of social and political activism.

Immigrant Realities: Rage and Helplessness in First-Generation Immigrants

Alongside the adventures of Moonie and Mei Ling, we get a host of immigrant tales. Chin provides us with narratives of first-generation immigrants alongside the stories of second-generation Moonie and Mei Ling. In Grandma Wong’s first vignette, “Monologue: Grandmother Wong’s New Year Blessings,” Grandma Wong and the twins visit several of Grandma Wong’s friends. All of these friends are, like Grandma Wong, the parents of immigrants who are struggling to take care of themselves or their own children. Her friends are Mrs. Faith from Africa, Mrs. Gonzalez from Mexico, and Mrs. Goldstein from Germany. All of them came to the United States in hopes of escaping larger dangers and tragedies in their home countries. Mrs. Faith explains that her son and his wife were killed by Janjaweed, so she brought her grandchildren to the US hoping for safety. Unlike her, Mrs. Gonzalez’s daughter is still alive, but she is slaving away trying to earn enough to support the children that Mrs. Gonzalez is raising for her. Finally, Mrs.
Goldstein – a survivor of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany – has a son who is divorced and childless, and spends all his time chasing after blond white women. Their stories are stories of pain, loss, and hardship. Chin’s novel refuses an easy celebration of immigration, questioning merits of immigration to a country that is hostile to immigrants.

This line of interrogation is present also in the “Beasts of Burden” section of the novel. In the tale “Beasts of Burden,” the donkey exchanges skins with a tigress for a day, and upon returning to his donkey self he is beaten to death: “Finally, when I could stand no more, I collapsed onto the hard ground and closed my eyes to my beastly suffering. The villagers carved up my body and ate every inch of me: my bones made soup; my flesh made stew; my hide they stretched into a giant drum and each night they beat the drum. Even in death I would not escape their beating” (138). In the case of the donkey, staying where he was instead of leaving resulted in death, which was followed by eternal suffering. Staying clearly did not pay off.

Later on, after Grandma Wong’s death, we hear a different side of the story through the cockroaches. In “Cockroach Late-Song” the insects sing:

*Our kind is hard, our kind is patient, hold the door, hold the door.*

*Our cousins are coming. Here come the uncles. We have our green cards, our underground passes, our fake photos. Ho, Ho, Ho! Our ancestors are older than your ancestors! One dead cockroach is a tragedy, ten million is a statistic! Ho, Ho, Ho!*  

*Our kind will be patient. We’ll crawl in and out of her ears, in and out of her nostrils, in and out of her eyeholes. Ho, Ho, Ho! We are courageous, we’re bold,*
The cockroaches – a breed of insect commonly considered simultaneously indestructible and repulsive – form a community. Their philosophy of quiet revolution as evidenced in the statement “First we’ll take over the restaurant, then take over the world” illustrates their *modus operandi*: bring your relatives and friends to join you, form a community, and through patience and hard work you will prevail. This message is generally supportive of immigration, but by likening the immigrant to a cockroach it also refuses to gloss over the kind of life the immigrant will live in the United States. The life of a cockroach is neither pleasant nor desirable, and that is exactly the kind of immigrant experience Chin portrays in her novel.

Moonie and Mei Ling’s father, who remains nameless throughout the entire novel, is a perfect example of the hardships of immigrant life. He works in a relative’s restaurant as exploited labor, working hard to provide for his family. However, instead of being the picture of the hard-working immigrant, he responds to his station with an intense rage: “My father loved to bitch and mutter and spit his venom into the giant wok of chop suey—into that great noxious swill they called Suburban Chinese American food. He would spit and swear [...]. He would shovel and toss unidentified chunks of flesh and veggies into his giant sizzling wok” (21). Contrary to the image of the hard-working immigrant who keeps his nose to the grindstone and fills his head with dreams of his children’s futures, the twins’ father pours his rage into the food that will be consumed by Americans wanting Chinese food. His cussing and, more importantly, his spitting into the chop suey is a way of putting himself into the food. When the customers consume his food, they are unknowingly consuming him as well. In this way, he becomes not just the...
chef, but the food itself. While his spitting makes him the consumed commodity, in life, the twins’ father is always identified with his work, and he takes that work with him on the few occasions that he ventures into the world. When Mei Ling is bullied at school, her father confronts the principal, Mr. Comely, about the lack of punishment for the bullies and demands that they be suspended: “my father just happened to have a giant spatula in his pocket that day. He pulled it out and started slapping Mr. Comely with it, making tiny red marks the size of chop-suey chunks all over his face. […] What a sight, my father waving his spatula and Mr. Comely backing up, defending himself with a wooden chair and his gold Cross pen” (24-5). The scene is simultaneously comic and tragic. The father wielding his giant spatula is a caricature gone wild. However, the fact that the father has only his food to offer as a payment (or as a bribe) for the Vice Principal’s assistance, and has only his spatula to use as a weapon against the Vice Principal’s expensive gold pen, reinforces his helplessness in the face of the power structures at work against him and his family. His use of the cooking utensil as a weapon illustrates his attempt to turn Mr. Comely into the one thing he has control over: food. However, Mr. Comely cannot be made consumable by Mei Ling’s father and father Wong’s failure to avenge his daughter’s exploitation exposes his powerlessness.

Even with all of his spitting and cussing, the Wong father functions in a subversive capacity. His rage boils over and he deposits it – as foul language and saliva – into the food he prepares for white Americans to consume. Even with his death, the twins’ father inserts himself into the food by dying “facedown in a tub of fermenting tofu” (177). His final act – death – is a spiteful move against those who would consume
him through his labor.

The father’s attempts to undermine the position allotted to him as a Chinese immigrant are echoed in the mother’s refusal of the role of the stoically suffering wife/widow. Having come from a position of comfort in Hong Kong, she is unable to take on the role society would like her to occupy as a Chinese immigrant. Grandma Wong explains that all she does is cry and talk about returning to Hong Kong, where she was wealthy and didn’t have to work (40). Grandma Wong interrogates the mother’s desires, saying, “don’t you know? This what you suppose to do in America? Work day and night. You think Jesus or Buddha give you free money?” (40). The mother resists the stereotype of the hard-working and uncomplaining immigrant, longing not for a better life for her children, but for an easier life for herself. When her husband dies, she returns to her former life in Hong Kong, abandoning her children to the life she never wanted (178). Chin’s immigrants are antithetical to the image of immigrants mainstream America touts in its narrative of itself. Instead, they are selfish and angry, unwilling and unable to accept a life of servitude and degradation.

The immigrant narrative this novel tells is one of tragedy and defeat. Grandmothers and mothers fleeing dark pasts only to find the present equally dark; parents who try to sacrifice it all for their children, but can’t quite do so; children who don’t want what their parents have to offer. These characters undermine the myth of the Chinese immigrant, and replace it with a reality that is hard to like and hard to valorize.
There’s Dog Meat in the Moogoogaipan: Gossip, Stereotypes, and Magical Realities

Grandma Wong is the most thoroughly explored representation of the Chinese immigrant in this novel. In many ways, her character fits the mold of the stereotypical Chinese immigrant: she doesn’t speak fluent English, she operates a mediocre Chinese restaurant, she has some knowledge of kung fu, and she works hard to provide for her granddaughters. Despite the fact that there is much more to her than this, this is all her American customers see in her.

In fact, her enemies use stereotypes and gossip to create a negative image of Grandma Wong that will allow them to eliminate her from the community. As a result of their attempts, there is a constant cloud of gossip surrounding Grandma Wong. Patricia Meyer Spacks identifies three different kinds of gossip: gossip as a harmful form of “distilled malice” that circulates information about its subject in a way that situates the gossiper in a position of power and damages the personal, political, or social ambitions of the subject; gossip as “idle talk” that is not inherently harmful to the subject, but serves to protect the gossiper from having to engage with those they are gossiping with; and “serious” gossip that is the product of shared intimacy and focuses on how the subject of the gossip can inform the gossipers’ own lives (4-5). A majority of the gossip that surrounds Grandma Wong is of the “idle talk” variety – gossip her customers engage in that reinforces a very specific image of her: an exoticized cliché of the Chinese immigrant made by non-Chinese Americans. There are rumors of her “kung fu hocus pocus,” that “she was chopping up people’s dogs and eating them,” and that she used her knowledge of herbs to curse people (150-1). These rumors reinforce Grandma Wong’s status as a perpetual foreigner, creating a social separation between her (and, by default,
her family) and the rest of the community members.

Additionally, they lead to the creation of more harmful “distilled malice” gossip that grows out of hackneyed negative stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. One of her employees, Big Boy, doesn’t like Grandma Wong and even fears her a little bit. He decides to convince his friends that Grandma Wong is a vampire, and that they should kill her by putting a stake through her heart, and he goes about convincing them by adding his own rumors to the gossip mill:

You know, she sort of body-snatched the Dude, Eric and Marcus. They never come out anymore. […] So I said to Buz, maybe she’s a vampire, and she turned all those guys into baby vampires. I told some lies, that I saw her fly up to the giant tree and catch a squirrel in her teeth, suck its blood and throw its carcass in the garbage can. I found a roadkill and showed it to Ralphie for proof. Then when Patsy and Ratsy’s dog disappeared, I said that I saw the chink chop him up into moogoogaipan. When Eric’s father disappeared, too, I said that I saw the old lady chop him up, put him in the meat-grinder and make dumplings out of him. I said that every night she sucks blood from the necks of her granddaughters and that’s why they don’t age like white people do. They stay pretty. (155-6)

Big Boy’s lies conflate vampirism and food stereotypes in an interesting way. Stereotypes of Chinese chefs putting various meats into their dishes are one manifestation of xenophobia. Combining those fears with the vampire myth, which can be read as a fear of having one’s life consumed to support another’s, Big Boy uses disgust and fear to turn the community against Grandma Wong. Significantly, Big Boy’s issues with Grandma
Wong actually stem from his “body-snatched” friends; the real fear here is not that he thinks she is a vampire, as he claims, but rather that she is taking his friends away from him. Similar to historical fears of a Yellow Peril in the early 1900s, Big Boy is afraid that Grandma Wong is threatening his quality of life. Whereas the fear of a Yellow Peril in the United States arose from the mass immigration of Chinese “coolie” laborers and subsequent fears by the white population that these laborers would eventually destroy their way of life and values, Big Boy’s fears arise from the fear that “that chink” will destroy his way of life by usurping his friends. His description of his friends’ relationship with Grandma Wong as a “body-snatching” indicates his perception of Grandma Wong as an aggressive invading force.

The vampire myth conveniently allows Big Boy to extend his fear of Grandma Wong to Moonie and Mei Ling. His comments about the twins’ good looks, specifically the fact that “they don’t age like white people do,” illustrates that he views them as Other. They are not likewhites, so they’re Other – and not just outsiders, but baby vampires at that. In order to come to terms with his fears, Big Boy has to mythologize the Wongs; he can’t understand them as human since he sees them as Other, so he conflates them with a myth he’s familiar with: vampires. Big Boy’s fears are one thing when kept to himself, but when his goal becomes murder he must convince his friends to go along with it. Interestingly, he uses gossip to accomplish this; Spacks argues that “Gossip creates its own territory […], using materials from the world at large to construct a new oral artifact. […] The remaking that takes place as gossipers pool and interpret their observations expresses a world view” (15). Big Boy bases his gossip in real events such as a dog that goes missing and the beauty of the Double Happiness twins to construct a “new oral
artifact” about Grandma Wong. Only through the invention of multiple rumors involving Grandma Wong putting dog meat and human flesh into her food can Big Boy draw others into his plot. He “remakes” her by building on the stereotype of Chinese cooks using dog meat in their dishes, adding murder and dismemberment to the mix.

Ironically, while characters like Big Boy are busy spreading rumors, Grandma Wong is going about her life as a living anti-stereotype. Far from being a miserly woman who either sends all her money to relatives “back home” or gambles it away in lengthy games of mahjong (opposing negative stereotypes about Chinese immigrants), Grandma Wong is a selflessly generous woman. After disarming and restraining two would-be robbers who attempted to rob the Double Happiness, she made the Surfer Dude take the credit – and the $10,000 reward – for their capture (152). She took in a Cambodian refugee named Ming, legally adopted him, and sent him to college (166). She also used the restaurant as a front for helping the Singing Waitress escape a life as a sex worker in Hong Kong, securing false papers for her and bringing her to Oregon to help out in the restaurant (162). In her will, she named all of these employees (and more) and Moonie and Mei Ling equal partners in her businesses (166). In life as well as in death, Grandma Wong’s compassion and generosity extends beyond the limits of family to include those members of the community who were able to see beyond the stereotypes and rumors.

Grandma Wong’s character complicates and debunks many of the social myths surrounding Chinese Americans and she is tied to over a century of activism and subversion spanning two continents through her larger-than-life connection to Chinese history and mythology. Grandma Wong “had survived a series of natural and man-made disasters: the Sino-Japanese War, famine, drought, flood, torrential rain, bloodthirsty
warlords, the Nationalist debacle, Communist tyranny, even a long bout of the cholera epidemic” (25-6), as well as the Rape of Nanking and the Cultural Revolution. Grandma Wong also claims that she was “the star of the Boxer Rebellion” (153), which was thusly named because of the “so-called ‘Boxers,’ a name taken from the martial arts ritual, or boxing, that they performed” (Schoppa 115). The use of “boxing” – or, kung fu – by the revolutionaries in the Boxer Rebellion is only part of a long history of the relationship between activism and kung fu. Scholar and activist M.T. Kato argues that “to the British imperial subject, the Boxer Rebellion […] exists as one of the most decisive historical instances of the anticolonial struggle waged by a colonial subject” (140). Her apparent magical abilities (such as flying, heightened senses, and the deadly use of her giant cleaver) are consistent with the assertion that the Boxers utilized “magicoreligious” acts to increase their power and the fear their enemies felt for them (Cohen “Humanizing the Boxers”). Grandmother Wong’s magical kung fu abilities, therefore, draw upon a mythos of magic with deep roots in a history of activism.

Grandma Wong’s mastery of kung fu and her role in various historically significant events paint a very different image than the stereotype most people see when they look at her. As the “star” of the Boxer Rebellion, she was an active participant in a war against imperial forces – a cause she continues to fight in the United States by taking in refugees, illegal immigrants, and US citizens who have been mistreated or rejected by other Americans. She engages in subversive acts of kindness, such as adoption and cooking, to cover up her more aggressive acts of rebellion and activism.
Foxy Lady: Mei Ling and the Fox Trickster

In classical Chinese folklore, the fox is a trickster figure, a creature often considered to be an “ill omen, long-lived […], cunning, cautious, sceptical [sic], able to see into the future, to transform himself (usually into old men, or scholars, or pretty young maidens), and fond of playing pranks and tormenting mankind” (Werner 370).

Mei-Ling’s sexuality is connected to the figure of the fox in Chinese folklore when Grandma Wong warns one of her employees to stay away from Mei-Ling because she is a fox girl who will doom any man that touches her (165).

In the vignette called “Fox Girl,” Mei-Ling is a graduate student who has been instructed to pick up a famous poet from the airport – a poet known for his lecherous enjoyment of exotic young grad students. When he propositions her, she agrees on the condition that he help her get a tenured teaching job in California. He agrees, at which point Mei-Ling transforms into a fox right there on his lap. The professor is extremely aroused, but before they can have sex she transforms into a skunk and sprays him in a “foul yellow varnish” (133-34). By spraying him yellow, Mei Ling not only gives him the stink of a skunk, but also in essence gives him the “yellow” skin he found so possessable in her. The poet’s interaction with Mei Ling leaves him permanently afraid so that at the end of the chapter, when he catches sight of a fox in his back yard, “he feels a small renaissance in his pants; then he is stricken with an overwhelming fear and repulsion, putting to flight the triggering aftertaste […] of nostalgia” (135). Mei Ling’s dangerous fox girl sexuality induces a permanent fear in the poet, undermining his ability to exploit and manipulate the “exotic” women he comes across. In fact, the stink of her yellow varnish causes him to stop going into public, which ultimately turns him into a literary
pariah instead of a celebrated national poet. The trickster roots of the fox in Chinese folklore are brought to life through magical realism in this vignette, and are modified to address contemporary issues of exoticization and exploitation.

This series of animal transformations allows Chin to level a critique at the ways exoticization continues to function in contemporary American society as well as in the academy. She attributes a significant amount of power to Mei Ling by illustrating how the poet’s failed sexual encounter leaves him permanently scarred. The magical turn to the animal in this moment indicates the need to reconceptualize the Other. Chin plays off of Chinese folklore via the fox girl, but while she portrays female sexuality as animalistic, she does not do so in a way that renders it monstrous or negative. When Mei Ling turns fox-then-skunk, she does so to protect herself against sexual exploitation. Chin reconstructs Chinese American female sexuality through myth, and while her sexuality is certainly dangerous to her sexual partners it is never portrayed as a negative thing. Instead, it is celebrated through the beginnings of a new mythology born from myth and popular ideas of Chinese women, American women, and female sexuality in general.

**Was It Worth It?: The Second-Generation’s Inheritance of Opportunity**

Mei Ling disrupts the immigrant narrative throughout the novel, but in a different way than her first-generation counterparts. As the second-generation, the twins are supposed to have better lives than their parents. As second-generation Chinese girls, this means they are supposed to become the model minority, succeeding in the business world as high-power executives. Unsurprisingly, Chin works against this expectation. Mei Ling may have multiple advanced degrees from Ivy League universities, but when all is said
and done she ends up divorcing her husband, leaving academia, and returning to the restaurant industry. She opens a restaurant called Wong’s Double Happiness Café which becomes wildly successful until these restaurants “would dot the landscape of America over three thousand franchises, and our once dreamy, idealistic, failed poet/novelist would become a willy-nilly late capitalist bitch in her middle years and be resigned to living a superficial petty bourgeois life with her adopted spoiled-rotten Russian children, two Cairn Terriers, three Siamese cats…happily ever after. Or, not!” (194). Like her father before her, she caters to mainstream America’s taste buds. Unlike her father, she successfully exploits their consumption of herself and her culture, profiting from their gluttony. Ironically, the life she leads is not the life of constant hardship the immigrant is “supposed” to live. She gives up her dreams in favor of money, refuses the heteronormative family model, and opts for an ending other than “happily ever after.” Nevertheless, the tone of the above passage is celebratory. Mei Ling’s transformation into a “willy-nilly late capitalist bitch” is portrayed as a positive change. She makes her own ending, one based on her wits and entrepreneurial drive. Significantly, her success is grounded in her family’s history; she takes the restaurant’s name from her grandmother’s business and makes her living by becoming the owner of the chain instead of an employee in it, like her father was.

Similarly, Mei Ling’s twin, Moonie, achieves financial success without happiness. She points out the lack of “empirical evidence that our parents’ sacrifice was worth it” (178). After Grandma Wong dies, she haunts Moonie; initially she simply calls for Moonie to “rise up” and “change the world” (168). However, as Moonie continues to live a lonely life filled with work and solitude, Grandma Wong appears in “a soy sauce-
stained wife-beater T-shift, flannel Mickey Mouse pj bottoms and waving her favorite forge-iron cleaver” (184). The Disney icon and the plain white undershirt are both representative of American culture; however, the soy sauce-stains on the wife-beater are an outward sign of her cultural roots bleeding through her American attire in ways that make it impossible to ignore. Like Mei Ling’s father wielding his giant spatula, Grandma Wong uses her cleaver as a weapon, albeit a far more lethal one than the spatula. This ghost, a small, aggressive Chinese woman dressed in common American clothing, haunts Moonie from age thirty onward. Moonie never understands what her grandmother wants, but Mei Ling’s unhaunted success indicates that Moonie – who lives the more stereotypical life of the model minority – has lost her way.

Despite her advanced medical degree and her job at a high profile biomedical company, Moonie is unable to attain the alternate ending her sister found for herself. She is caught up in the dominant culture’s immigrant mythology and Grandma Wong’s haunting is an ineffective attempt to push her toward an “Or, not!” ending for herself. Grandma Wong berates Moonie with an endless stream of insults:

Beetle dung on the bottom of my slippers, when will you rise up and help your people? […] You learned nothing from feudalism. […] You call that Chinese cooking? […] The Rape of Nanking was your fault! The Boxer Rebellion was not quite a rebellion, was it? […] A thousand years of bound feet and still, you don’t know the escape route! […] Have you ever been stoned to death for a crime you didn’t commit? Have you ever been torched in flames because your husband desires a better dowry? […] Have you placed your body over your baby, so that the bullets would hit you
first? [...] Have you ever been sold by your own heroin-addicted father to the sex trade? Tell me, American brat, what do you know about sacrifice?

Grandma Wong’s insults are grounded in a long cultural history of oppression and violence in China. Her final question, “what do you know about sacrifice?”, focuses her postmortem rage so that it can be read as a rant against Moonie’s complicity in the same system that historically brutalized her ancestors. Ultimately, Moonie remains tormented by Chinese history; her lack of happiness and her acute loneliness undercut the dream of a better future that her parents had for her. More than this, her quiet compliance goes against Grandma Wong’s call for her to rise up and change the world. She has faded into a comfortable position within the systems of oppression, failing to become the agent of change Grandma Wong hoped she would become. The Double Happiness twins had the opportunity to change things. Mei Ling’s success is a foil to Moonie’s “success” according to the model minority model, and the result is the novel’s underscoring of Moonie’s loneliness.

Through its use of mythology and folklore, Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen undermines popular immigrant narratives in dominant US discourse. The immigrant in Chin’s novel rarely behave as expected, and Moonie and Mei Ling offer the ultimate opposition to participation in these proscribed narratives. Grandma Wong’s haunting of her wayward granddaughter leaves the novel hopeful of a possible change for Moonie, whose loneliness may be overcome if she can extricate herself from the model minority myth and rediscover the raucous girl who showed off her pink penis and her hairless kitty to the Churchlady and the Pastor. Grandma Wong offers cultural remembrance as a starting point for Moonie.
By rewriting kung fu myths, animal folklore, and Buddhist tales to accommodate Moonie and Mei Ling, Chin engages in an act that is simultaneously cultural celebration and revisionist storytelling. Whereas Díaz and Touré revitalize cultural mythology and adapt it to the contemporary US, Chin brings her characters into the myths to change them from the inside. Instead of translating the folklore into a form that makes sense in the US today, these vignettes transform the US in order to support the mythology. Chin’s work rejects dominant narratives and myths about Chinese immigrants and their Chinese American offspring, using traditional folktales to expose the flaws of these narratives and to alter them to open up great possibilities for success and happiness.

**Conclusions**

As bell hooks writes of people like Malcolm X, there are individuals who “have courageously decolonized their minds and invented identities in resistance that transcend stereotypes” (xiii). These novels begin to create a new mythology of race and resistance in the US, transcending hackneyed stereotypes and restrictive images of race by bringing them into contact with more established cultural narratives that allow for positive racial identities. The magical undertones of each of these novels is essential to the creation of a new racial mythology in the US. Not only does this magic help bring the folklore to life in very real ways, it also functions in opposition to the discourse of stark realism and so-called Rationalism that have historically been used to portray cultural mythologies as irrational, superstitious, and demonstrative of primitive intelligence. It the case of cultural mythology, the magic becomes a tool through which these authors celebrate that mythology. Rather than exhibiting embarrassment of the foolishness of these tales, as is
expected by dominant discourses of reality and scientific possibility in the US today, these authors reincarnate these bodies of cultural lore and put them in communication with the mythology and folklore of science and Rationality in the contemporary US today.

These authors all use a combination of cultural mythology and dominant narratives of racial minorities in the US to metamorphose what it means to be “ethnic” in America. Since the possibilities the dominant culture offers non-white Americans are extremely limited and often negative, Díaz, Touré, and Chin draw on the wealth of traditional stories from their own cultural backgrounds to create new narratives for Dominican Americans, African Americans, and Chinese Americans, respectively. Each author uses the cultural folklore in his or her own way to open up space for new models of Americanness. The turn to literature as a space in which these mythologies can live and breathe, and a space in which political ideas can be explored, is critical.

In the political climate of post-Cold War America, conversations about race are stifled. The race-taboo is born, and activism begins to wither. Vijay Prashad explains the paradox of race in the late 1990s succinctly: “The problem of the twenty-first century, then, is the problem of the color blind. This problem is simple: it believes that to redress racism, we need to not consider race in social practice, notably in the sphere of governmental action. The state, we are told, must be above race” (38). If the state is deemed so far “above race” that any discussion of race is considered inherently racist for even acknowledging the concept of that race exists, what happens to activism? The creation of the race-taboo led to a transformation of what “activism” meant. Michael Liu, et al., argues that the 1990s saw massive changes in the face of activism: the scope of
activism narrowed, wide-reaching campaigns challenging social structures evaporated, and expectations were lowered (163-4). More than that, activism “also adopted the mainstream conventions of competitive, pluralistic interest groups and an agnostic perspective toward classes” (153). After 9/11, the social climate did not become any more receptive to activism than it was in the 1990s.

In the absence of a public platform for more familiar forms of activism, some American authors of color turned to a genre of literature with deep roots in activism: magical realism. Magical realism is situated as an anti-colonial form, and has historically been used to address all manner of issues from exploitation to social unrest to cultural change. Its strong bonds with folklore – a storytelling tradition that is often intended to supply the listener/reader with edifying examples of good and bad, right and wrong, what to do and what not to do – make it an ideal form for reconceptualizing culture and analyzing injustice. “Social movements arise when injustice, inequality, and exploitation exist. Yet these grievances do not guarantee mass upsurges; the action must be deliberately constructed through popularizing alternative frameworks and mobilizing forces” (Liu, et al., 179). American magical realist authors of color are drawing on folklore’s instructive tendencies to address “injustice, inequality, and exploitation” through literature in a time when widespread social movements are difficult to arrange. In a sense, their novels are a form of literary activism. To mimic Yunior’s words, what’s more deliberately constructed than a novel? What’s more suited toward popularizing alternative frameworks than fiction?
Chapter 4
Moving Lines: Avant-Garde Poetics and Literal/Literary Borders as Sites of Change

“What are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?” – so asks Bobby Ngu on the final page of Karen Tei Yamashita’s 1997 novel Tropic of Orange. Bobby refers to the severed Tropic of Cancer he holds in his hands – a boundary that has become entangled with the US-Mexico border and one that Bobby struggles to keep together even as the line slips through his fingers. This thin line embodies the intersection of magic and politics; it physically manifests two intangible borders: one defined by the path of the sun, the other defined by the power of nation-states. The physical and symbolic space where magic and politics collide is the focus of this chapter’s juxtaposition of two novels set in Los Angeles, each heavily invested in imagining different configurations of borders and borderlands in southern California and in the regions surrounding the US-Mexico border.

So, as Bobby asks, What are these goddamn lines anyway? This is the question at the center of both Yamashita’s work and Salvador Plascencia’s 2005 experimental novel The People of Paper. These texts, set in and around Los Angeles, use magic to interrogate the personal and communal effects of political boundaries. Yamashita’s novel is so full of thematic and literal borders that most of the scholarship written on Tropic of Orange thus far focuses on its intersections with geography and cartography.¹ More
specifically, as the US-Mexico border is pulled north, the ensuing chaos underscores the novel’s overarching interest in social activism and immigration. *The People of Paper* also plays with the effects of dragging the US-Mexico border north, but the movements of borders are paralleled by movements on the page as Plascencia experiments with avant-garde poetics. While Yamashita’s novel ends with Bobby Ngu struggling to hold one border together as he questions the very nature of these “goddamn lines,” Plascencia’s novel ends with the words “They walked south and off the page, leaving no footprints […]. There would be no sequel to the sadness” (245), followed by two blank pages with a large black dot in the bottom corner of the page (246-47). The final sentences indicate the characters’ ability to cross borders freely, whether political borders or the material reality of the page. The black dot protects them from the reader, and its movement “south and off the page” visually reinforces their freedom. Comparing these two final scenes emphasizes the distinct methods Yamashita and Plascencia use to reimagine what it means to navigate borderlands in southern California. Through a deeper comparison of the authors’ differing approaches to enacting borders on the page, I analyze how both novels create intersections between magic and politics, using magical realism to conduct a form of literary activism that critiques social injustice and imagines alternatives to current immigration politics.

**Cultural Contexts: Borderlands, Activism, and the Post-Cold War Era**

Since the late 1980s, many scholars have focused on the regions bisected by borders and the cultural impact these invisible lines have on the communities through which they run. In the spirit of Bobby’s questions, “What do they connect? What do they
divide?” I turn to two theoretical constructs: borderlands and contact zones. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa introduces the concept of the borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary [which is] in a constant state of transition” (25). This definition gestures toward an answer about what borders *divide* – in this case, cultures and communities. Focusing on how the “unnatural boundary” produces a borderland space defined by its harmful qualities highlights the sense of emotional division caused by the rupture of communities on either side of a border. Conversely, Mary Louise Pratt thinks of the regions surrounding the formation of borders in terms of her own concept of “contact zones,” which she defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). This explanation of contact zones emphasizes the coming-together of cultures, albeit imagined through visions of opposition. All the same, by taking the moment of contact as its central focus, Pratt’s idea of the battle between cultures speaks to Bobby’s question about what borders *connect*. The concepts of borderlands and contact zones highlight the material repercussions of making and moving borders.

**Pushing Boundaries: Magical Realism’s History with Politics**

Magical realism has a long history with the politics of form, and the use of magic in the employment of revolutionary poetics. Some scholars argue that magical realism is inherently postmodern², pointing out that its “attraction for postmodern writers may be its willfully oxymoronic nature, its exposing of the unrepresentable, its activation of differences (Faris 185). The relationship between form and content is an important aspect
of magical realism’s social imperative. Along these lines, Stephen Slemon argues that the “representation of social relations […] can be seen to be template into the text’s language of narration and into the text’s thematic structure, and in magic realism these social relations tend to be thematized” in related ways (411). Theo D’haen takes this idea one step further to argue that magical realism decenters oppressive discourses “to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this ‘reality’ depends upon,” and in so doing “reveals itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)” (195). This idea of magical realism as displacing dominant discourses in order to correct “reality” and right the wrongs at its foundation holds true not only with regard to the content of magical realist novels, but also its form. In her essay on magical realism and postmodernism, Wendy B. Faris emphasizes magical realism’s play with form, concluding that the magic of the language itself in magical realist fiction is part of the point of the genre: that the art of the storytelling is as significant as the magic that fills the pages of the text (186).

Magical realism is not, in and of itself, inherently experimental. Despite this fact, the subversive political tendencies of the genre and its long history of engaging with the politics of form lend themselves quite readily to experimental aesthetics. In the introduction to his book Race and the Avant-Garde, Asian American literary scholar Timothy Yu traces the history of avant-garde aesthetics in white and Asian American poetry coming out of the social and political tensions of the 1960s, with ethnic avant-gardes resulting directly from the revolutionary politics of social activism (3-8). He traces the use of avant-garde poetics as an extension of the politics of revolt through to the
eventual use of the avant-garde as a means through which authors approached concepts of identity and community.

The permeability of cultures and the relationships that exist across racial lines are reflected in the form of literary texts. Timothy Yu posits that “the aesthetic and the social are inseparable. An avant-garde is an aesthetic and a social grouping, defined as much by its formation of a distinctive kind of community as by its revolutionary aesthetics. As such, it can serve as a corrective to essentializing views of any kind of artistic community” (2). Even though Yu is speaking specifically of poetry, his ideas about the avant-garde as a counter-essentialist mode hold true for experimental fiction as well. In a multiculturalist moment that flattens cultural difference, a form (such as the avant-garde) that refuses essentialism was indeed revolutionary. Formal experimentation in contemporary magical realist novels produced by authors of color in the United States from the Cold War to the present can be roughly divided into two main types:

- **Genre-bending Magic.** This is magic that blurs the distinctions between different kinds of writing. It can look like Mexican author Laura Esquivel’s novel *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) in which the use of recipes to open each chapter reflects the protagonist’s ability to cook emotion into food, overwhelming the eater with powerful (and often unwanted) feelings. In this case, the novel’s recipe-book form highlights the protagonist’s magical ability to imbue food with emotion. This genre-bending magic might also look like Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston’s famous text *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), where Kingston’s use of magical realist moments complicates the non-fiction memoir genre (despite the book’s title), but the text’s
obvious autobiographical roots defy the explicit fictionality of “the novel.” It could also take the shape of texts such as African American author Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Voodoo Dreams* (1993); in Chapter 1 I offered an extended analysis of Rhodes’ use of italics to capture moments of magic, as well as her use of fictionalized historical documents (newspaper articles, journal entries, letters, etc.) to lend the novel a sense of congruity with the conventions of the historical novel.

- **Overtly Avant-garde Magic.** This overtly avant-garde is literary form (to varying degrees) that is innately tied to the magical occurrences in the text. African American author Ishmael Reed engages with this kind of experimentation in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). From the very beginning, he disrupts the conventions of published texts, beginning the first chapter of the novel before the copyright page. He includes photographs, artwork, typewritten reports, poems, and footnotes in his novel to supplement the magical Jes Grew epidemic – a “psychic epidemic” based on African American culture. A similar example of avant-garde magical realism could be Native American (Choctaw) author LeAnne Howe’s novel *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007), discussed in-depth in Chapter 2, in which the abundant use of pastiche often hijacks the primary narrative thread to loop back and forth through personal, communal, and national histories in a way that parallels the time-traveling/haunting performed by one of the characters.

Mild genre-bending and overt avant-garde in magical realism both appear in African American author Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987). In the middle of Morrison’s novel there is a five-page passage where the prose becomes rather overtly
avant-garde (248-52). The passage is eerie and haunting and can be read as an account of
the voyage across the Atlantic commonly known as the Middle Passage:

some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin
bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot
see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I
can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to
sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had
more to drink we could make tears (248)

The lack of punctuation makes it read as if it were a horrible dream. In fact, the form
conveys the confusion and horror of the Middle Passage. The simplistic language and the
defamiliarizing images, such as the “men without skin” (white men), only add to the
eeriness. Interestingly, Morrison encapsulates this moment within a single chapter,
containing it in a small segment within the larger, more formally-conventional narrative.
In this way, it is present but is also limited in what it can accomplish. Similarly, it draws
attention to itself because of its difference from the rest of the text.

Mild genre-bending and overt avant-garde are strategies that work in tandem with
moments of magic to make larger social and political statements. This literary trend
becomes especially important for authors of color in the post-Cold War United States
because of the increasingly hostile political climate. Both of the novels I focus on in this
chapter are set in Los Angeles, California; both focus on the magical movements of and
across the US-Mexico border; and both portray large-scale social activism that is caused
and accomplished by magical events.
Toeing the Line: Pushing the Borders of Literature and Politics

As Anzaldúa and Pratt emphasize, borders have tangible repercussions in people’s lives – and so I find myself back where I began: *What are these goddamn lines anyway?* The answer depends on what kinds of borders are in question. Thus far, I have focused my inquiry on the borders between nations and communities. I want to expand this question to look at the concept of borders more broadly – a move enabled by *Tropic of Orange* and *The People of Paper*. Taking my cue from Kandice Chuh, who argues in favor of reading Asian American literature as theory (19), I am interested in what happens if we blur not only the border between literature and theory, but also fiction and activism, as well as magic and reality in the imagined/imaginary contact zones within the pages of fictional texts. As scholar and activist T.V. Reed suggests, “the boundaries between literature and politics are themselves fictive and political,” and theory is interwoven with “acts we call literary and political” (*Jugglers* xii). These groupings – literature/theory, fiction/activism, magic/reality – are not binary opposites, nor are they intended to be. And nor, for that matter, are the communities typically divided by political or social borders. Instead, they are pairings which already have relationships to each other and which might help answer Bobby Ngu’s question about what *exactly* these lines separate.

Yamashita’s and Plascencia’s novels combine literary activism with magical realism to confront the politics of immigration. Both texts depict Los Angeles as the center of social change; both focus on magical movements of and across the US-Mexico border; and both portray large-scale social activism that is caused and accomplished by magical events. Both novels suggest ways the shifting landscape facilitates new models
of identity and community (Cooney 218). As noted above, most scholars have discussed
*Tropic of Orange* in terms of its representation of geography, specifically the relationship
between (re)mapping, transnationalism, globalization, and social justice; the same can be
said for some of the scholarship on *The People of Paper.*3 The novels’ use of magic and
genre to explore race and inequality are also widely acknowledged.4

As these previous discussions of magical realism, global capitalism, and social
justice illustrate, Yamashita and Plascencia imagine social activism around borders
through intersections of magic and immigration politics. In *Tropic of Orange,*
Yamashita’s moments of magic promote a cross-cultural approach to activism and social
organizing. The novel was written in the aftermath of the Rodney King assault and trial,
the LA Riots, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement
(NAFTA), and the passing of California’s Proposition 187 (a ballot initiative designed to
locate and remove illegal immigrants). Both NAFTA and Prop 187 were indicative of
rising anti-immigration hostilities and a growing paranoia – especially in California –
regarding legal and illegal immigrants (Suárez-Orozco). Accordingly, the magic in
Yamashita’s novel interrogates racial oppression, class inequality, and the militarization
of the border. In *Tropic of Orange,* magical realism becomes the “formal embodiment of
boundary-crossing” that parallels the movement of people across national borders (Rody
131). It is precisely this literary “boundary-crossing” that, when paired with moments of
magic, Yamashita uses to problematize border politics in the mid-1990s. Similarly, *The
People of Paper* experiments with form to criticize imperialist exploitation of farm
workers and immigrant laborers in the early 2000s. Written after 9/11, Plascencia’s novel
focuses explicitly on undocumented Mexican immigrants and the social injustices they
face in the United States. Using complex (and, at times, chaotic) avant-garde poetics, the text enacts an intellectual “strike” in the vein of farm labor strikes of the 1930s.

Genre-Bending Magical Realism in *Tropic of Orange*

The form of *Tropic of Orange* changes in tandem with the moments of magic in the novel, rejecting multiculturalist ideals of race in favor of an intercultural approach to activism and social organizing. As mentioned above, the novel was written in the wake of the LA Riots, NAFTA, and Prop 187. It makes sense, then, that the novel’s form works with its content to push against racism, labor rights, and the militarization of the border.

Yamashita’s novel follows seven protagonists who either live in or make their way to Los Angeles over the course of one week. Each of the novel’s seven chapters (one for each day of the week) is divided into seven subchapters (one for each protagonist).

Two characters in particular make for a particularly compelling comparison: Rafaela Cortes and Bobby Ngu. They are married to each other, and at the beginning of the novel, they are estranged: Bobby is in LA, and Rafaela has gone to Mexico to do some thinking. Throughout the novel, Rafaela carries a magical orange – “magical” because the Tropic of Cancer is entangled in it – with her from Mexico to LA, pulling the Tropic of Cancer along as she goes. As the orange moves north, the form of the novel reflects the ensuing social and geographical changes.

When the novel begins, each character’s subchapters read like individual texts: they are narrated in such distinct voices and styles that they seem quite separate from one another. For instance, Rafaela’s sections are written in a conventionally magical realist mode that calls Gabriel García Márquez to mind. To give an example of the style, the
first sentence of her first chapter reads: “Rafaela Cortes spent the morning barefoot, sweeping both dead and living things from over and under beds, from behind doors and shutters, through archways, along the veranda—sweeping them all across the deep shadows and luminous sunlight carpeting the cool tile floors” (3). The abundance of “dead and living things” that need to be swept away is described for an additional page after this, with special attention paid to non-realist details. Since Rafaela’s section opens the novel, the form foregrounds the magical elements still to come. Her chapter continues on for eleven pages, making it the longest chapter in the first section, retaining the sense of timelessness and whimsy illustrated by this first sentence. Significantly, the magical orange makes its first appearance in this chapter as well, and initially remains confined to Rafaela’s chapters. In other words, Rafaela’s chapters contain the magic…at least, in the beginning.

Conversely, Bobby’s first chapter comes immediately after Rafaela’s, and is completely devoid of magic. Instead, the fast-paced, choppy style of his sections creates a sense of constant motion that unfixes Bobby from a stable identity, instead enveloping the reader in his overwhelming cultural and racial hybridity. The sparse use of punctuation and the extremely brief sentences break the narrative up into small, easy-to-digest fragments. The following passage appears early in his first chapter:

If you know your Asians, you look at Bobby. You say, that’s Vietnamese. […] Korean’s got rounder face. Chinese’s taller. Japanese’s dressed better. If you know your Asians. Turns out you’ll be wrong. And you gonna be confused. Dude speaks Spanish. Comprende? So you figure it’s one of
those Japanese from Peru. Or maybe Korean from Brazil. Or Chinamex.

[…] Wrong again. (15)

The abrupt, utilitarian style here is a stark contrast to the meandering descriptions and complex syntax of Rafaela’s sections. The use of second person narration also draws attention to the impulse to put a label on people like Bobby who are too culturally diverse to fit neatly into a box.

As the novel progresses and the characters come into contact with and are influenced by each other, their narrative modes begin to bleed together. By the time we get to the end of the novel, each character’s individual narrative style has merged with other characters’ styles paralleling the way the characters themselves have entered each other’s lives. In the final chapter of the novel, Rafaela and the magical orange have entered Bobby’s section, and the abruptness of his prose has taken on a less rushed rhythm. This is not to say that the slang and choppiness that marks his style are absent. Instead, they have mixed with some of the formal characteristics of Rafaela’s sections to create a new style. For example, in this scene Bobby is holding onto the Tropic of Cancer, which has been cut in half, and watching his wife and son on the other side of the line, and the narration concludes:

What are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect?
What do they divide? What’s he holding on to? What’s he holding on to?

[…] That’s when he lets go. Lets the lines slither around his wrists, past his palms, through his fingers. Lets go. Go figure. Embrace.

That’s it. (268)
This ending not only signals the parallel between form and content, since the physical and narrative borders between Bobby and Rafaela have been broken down, but it also questions the purpose of borders more broadly. By interrogating the nature of these dividing lines, the novel shifts attention onto political borders, such as the US-Mexico border, as sources of anxiety.

Yamashita’s novel reflects this atmosphere of paranoia, and the merging of narrative styles toward the novel’s end pushes against it by celebrating hybridity (rather than multiculturalist isolation) and literally moving the US-Mexico border northward into California. Yamashita uses magical realism in a way that blends formal experimentation with magical characters and plot events in order to critique US immigration policy.

This coming-together of separate styles is also echoed in the subchapter titles. Yamashita gives the reader two different tables of contents: one called “Contents” that presents the subchapters in chronological order, arranged in groups of seven for the seven days of the week that the novel’s seven chapters are organized around; and one called “Hyper Contexts” which is really a table listing characters on the left, days of the week/chapters across the top, and each character’s subchapter in the row next to their name. In this way, the “Hyper Contexts” page allows the reader to see each character’s subchapters listed together, thus making clear the organizing construct of their subchapter titles. For instance, Rafaela’s subchapters are called “Midday,” “Morning,” “Daylight,” “Dusk,” “Dawn,” “Nightfall,” and “Midnight.” When they are listed together, it becomes clear that her chapters are organized according to different times of the day. Each character’s subchapters are centered on a different theme (finances, television, traffic
patterns), but as the novel comes to a close, each subchapter also reflects the impending end of the chaos and the strife within the novel.

Yamashita’s use of genre-bending might be considered what Wendy B. Faris, a prominent scholar of magical realism, calls “verbal magic—a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience” (176). The novel’s “linguistically motivated fictional moments” are reflected not only in the dual tables of contents, but also in the initially-separate and eventually-indistinguishable narrative styles of each character’s subchapters. Yamashita uses magical realism in a way that blends formal experimentation with magical characters and plot events in order to critique US immigration legislation and labor exploitation.

Orange Agents: A Symbolic History of Latin American Labor and Immigration

Yamashita levels a critique of NAFTA and the exploitation of Latin American labor through, of all things, oranges. Not just any oranges: toxic oranges that lead to a Vietnam-style offensive led by US military forces against a burgeoning community of the homeless. It is not a coincidence that the title of this section, “Orange Agents,” evokes histories of violence between the US military and civilians in Vietnam. However, in addition to this relationship, my argument centers on Yamashita’s use of oranges as agents of imperial anxiety. Specifically, the repeated instances of oranges in this novel exemplify how the repetition of images representing dual or opposing ideas “serve[s] to enlarge that space of intersection where magically real fictions exist” (Faris 178). In the case of Yamashita’s oranges, there is a single magical orange and a large shipment of drugged oranges. The Tropic of Cancer is literally wound through the magical orange,
which is carried from Mexico to LA by a character called Arcangel. As Arcangel moves north, the Tropic of Cancer is pulled north with him, bringing Mexico with it. At the same time that the magical orange is en route to LA, a shipment of drug-impregnated oranges leads to a massive freeway accident isolating a one-mile stretch of highway, trapping the cars already on it and forcing the drivers to abandon their vehicles. The fires also burn a community of homeless people out of the brush by the overpass, so they move onto the freeway and take possession of the abandoned cars. When juxtaposed, the toxic oranges and the corruption they embody highlight the beauty of the magical orange and the people it represents.

The toxic oranges are defined by their connection to corporate globalization and the import and export of produce and their link to the exploitation and destruction of Mexican people. Both of these aspects come together in Mazatlán, Mexico, where Rafaela Cortes and her son Sol stay in a house owned by Rafaela’s coworker Gabriel Balboa, a newspaper reporter in LA. In Mazatlán, Rafaela discovers that Hernando, the son of the woman who lives next door to Gabriel’s house, oversees the import/export of oranges and illegally harvested children’s organs. He is behind the importation of oranges from Brazil to the United States (116) – oranges that are also part of a larger drug trafficking operation. His shipment of oranges reaches grocery store shelves in LA and people begin dying. At first, two people from an impoverished neighborhood die from eating the oranges, and the coroner insists that their deaths are drug overdoses even though neither character did drugs. The chapter “You Give Us 22 Minutes – The World” chronicles a news program’s evolving coverage of the deaths deemed “worth” reporting (which do not include the two aforementioned deaths); the coverage initially warns of a
“spiked orange scare” when two Van Nuys residents die, then upgrades it to an “illegal orange scare,” followed by an “illegal alien orange scare,” and finally dubbing the oranges “death oranges” (138-41, original emphasis). The oranges become agents of fear as they change from “illegal” oranges to “illegal alien” oranges, and finally “death oranges” that lead to the investigation of “Everybody down South.” The charged term “illegal alien oranges” explicitly connects the oranges to immigration, and the resultant investigation into all of Latin America is portrayed as both a gross overreaction and a familiar and easy shift: once they have “illegal aliens,” they can scapegoat all the countries south of the US-Mexico border, effectively shutting down an entire industry on little more than paranoid suspicion.

On the unpublicized side of these reports is the more sinister aspect of the agricultural import/export business: exploitation. Hernando, the character responsible for the import of toxic oranges to the United States, exploits Mexican children through his involvement in importing human organs. Specifically, Hernando oversees an illegal organ-farming operation that sells organs from Mexican newborns, infants, and toddlers to rich American parents. In one particularly dark scene, a “trio of homeless” men squats around a fire surrounded by small coolers, toasting infant hearts on sticks like marshmallows (264-65). The homeless men serve a dual purpose: they represent the growing poverty within the United States, and they illustrate the way even the poorest Americans are literally feeding on Mexico’s future. The parallel between the import/export of organs and oranges is not subtle; the infant hearts are imported in the same way and by the same person as the oranges. Since NAFTA made commerce between the United States and Mexico actively harmful to Mexican farmers and
indigenous Mexican farming co-ops, it is not difficult to conclude that the homeless trio’s barbecue symbolizes the cold-blooded exploitation and destruction of Mexico in a manner that leaves few options for a healthy future.

Through the trafficking of oranges and organs, Yamashita portrays the harmful realities of the import and export of commodities in an era of corporate globalization. From the very beginning of the novel, Yamashita foregrounds the history of Latin American immigration to the United States in relation to agricultural labor. Published in 1997, three years after NAFTA’s implementation, the novel’s focus on the problems surrounding labor and immigration presents a timely critique of the damaging effects of NAFTA on small farms and indigenous landholders in Mexico (Montejano 251). Yamashita delivers a history of immigration through the history of imported oranges. Sweet oranges originated in Asia and were brought to Europe by Portuguese and Italian merchants in the mid- to late-fifteenth century. Portuguese colonizers brought the orange to Brazil in the sixteenth century and a few hundred years later the navel orange was born in Bahia, Brazil – most likely the result of a genetic mutation (Morton 134-35). In the novel, oranges illustrate the history of migration surrounding agriculture, and in the following passage the emphasis on hybridity indicates Yamashita’s tendency to value racial and cultural hybridity as an essential aspect of cultural evolution:

> Over the years, Gabriel had planted an orchard full of different trees. […] He tried not to be discouraged when they died, telling Rafaela, “They gotta take care of themselves. Survival of the fittest.” […] But Rafaela was only concerned about one tree in particular. […] It was a navel orange tree, maybe the descendent of the original trees first brought to California
from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbetts. This was the sort of historic detail Gabriel liked. Bringing an orange tree (no matter that it was probably a hybrid) from Riverside, California to his place near Mazatlán was a significant act of some sort. [...] The tree was a sorry one, and so was the orange. [...] It was an orange that should not have been. [...] Perhaps it had been the industriousness of the African bees [...] that had quickly mated the flower to its future, producing this aberrant orange—not to be picked, not expected, and probably not very sweet. (10-11)

This specific orange’s history is innately connected to the colonial history of agricultural import and export. As Gabriel states, it is the “fittest” fruit because it survived global warming and unfamiliar soil to be the only fruit on all the imported trees. Rafaela’s assumption that the tree is “probably a hybrid” descended from L.C. Tibbetts’ navel orange trees from Brazil emphasizes the fruit’s history of migration, and her speculation that African bees helped the magical orange into existence reveals a deeper layer of hybridity involved in this unlikely fruit’s creation, a layer that calls to mind Lisa Lowe’s idea of the “intimacies of four continents.” Lowe uses the phrase to analyze the complex and multifaceted relationships between the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (192). In her discussion of the abolition of slavery in Europe and the United States and the subsequent use of Asian laborers in the Americas, she explains the importance of studying the histories of trade, culture, labor, and immigration comparatively rather than in isolation in order to understand political and social circumstances more fully (205). Similarly, Yamashita’s oranges ask us to look closely at the “intimacies” among five continents (South America being the addition to
Lowe’s model) because of their complex transnational histories. The brief history of oranges near the novel’s beginning may seem out of place, but its importance lies in the implied histories of labor (slavery, exploited “free” labor, and labor migrations) that are inextricably tied up in the movement of oranges from Asia to Europe and then to the Americas during colonization, the African slave trade, and through to the present moment. By using oranges – toxic and magical – as a consistent symbol of the hybrid human who survives both because and in spite of the “intimacies” of the past and the politics of the present, Yamashita places the hybrid product of colonization, labor, and corporate globalization at the center of her text.

Of course, none of these facts about the orange relate explicitly to its magical properties. Unlikely as this fruit’s existence is, it is even more remarkable because the Tropic of Cancer passes directly through it. In this case, the Tropic of Cancer is both the invisible and intangible line that marks the northernmost edge of the “tropics” and also “a line—finer than the thread of a spiderweb—pulled with delicate tautness” that stretches “east across the highway and west toward the ocean and beyond” (12) that has wound itself through the orange. The Tropic of Cancer is the northern boundary used to define the world’s tropics, which are so often associated with the concept of the “third world.” That this line is bound up in this “aberrant” fruit forges a connection among immigration, agriculture, and the tropics. The Tropic of Cancer, as a border determined by the course of the sun, is supposed to be immovable in a way political borders are not; therefore, its movement destabilizes the US-Mexico border. After all, if an imported orange can shift the tropics up from Mexico into the US, then what’s to stop the flow of immigrant labor and keep the Third World and its people from entering and overtaking the First?
Imperial Anxieties: Enacting Aztlán and Reapportioning Lands to Mexico

This question is at the heart of border tensions in *Tropic of Orange*. Yamashita’s novel is intimately bound to California, especially Los Angeles, so the history of oranges and their role as agents that provoke imperial anxieties surrounding Mexican immigration are not immediately apparent. Shifting attention onto the US-Mexico border as a source of anxiety in California during the 1990s helps bring this connection into focus. In the 1990s, legislation such as California’s Proposition 187 – the infamous “Save Our State” (SOS) ballot initiative passed in November of 1994 and attempted to locate and remove undocumented immigrants through tactics echoed by Arizona’s more recent SB 1070 legislation. Prop 187 was deemed unconstitutional before it could be widely enforced – and rising anti-immigration hostility was indicative of a growing paranoia regarding legal and undocumented immigrants from Mexico (Suárez-Orozco). Fears of a Mexican racial majority in the state were widely publicized, and there was a statewide push against the perceived threat of a “takeover” that only increased anti-immigration sentiment.

Yamashita’s novel reflects this atmosphere of paranoia and pushes against it in two significant ways. The first pushback comes in the form of the novel’s celebration of hybridity. As the accident on the freeway brings people together in unexpected ways, borders created by cultural difference, race, and class break down. The second pushback is a more aggressive tactic that engages with the concept of Aztlán as both the historical-mythological location of the original land of the Mexican people and as a concept taken up by the Chicano Movement of the 1970s, which added to the myth a prediction of a return to Aztlán as part of a Chicano activist rhetoric. In a “brilliant piece of political poetics,” students at the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in 1969 introduced the
idea of a return migration to Aztlán (Menchaca 23), creating a philosophical foundation that argued for the rightful presence of Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States, and against the rhetoric of Mexicans-as-foreigners (and unwanted ones, at that).7

Yamashita’s portrayal of the return to Aztlán is carefully constructed to embed multiple layers of meaning. The magical orange is the primary agent through which the return to Aztlán is accomplished. The orange is a symbol of hybridity and resistance that carries the Tropic of Cancer in it, and as characters carry the orange to LA and the Tropic moves north with it, the land begins to warp. Characters notice the geographical changes in several ways: a drive that should have taken six hours only takes five, the streets of LA expand and shrink, the sun is suddenly always directly overhead, and LA experiences tropical afternoon rainstorms. In a move that recalls the magical realist tropicalization of England in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), LA becomes a tropical location resembling parts of Mexico. The most significant change is that as the orange pulls the Tropic of Cancer (and the associated tropics) north, it also pulls the US-Mexico border north. The warping of the land implies large-scale geographical changes; the unusually short distance some characters traverse between the border and their arrival in LA is indicative of the condensing land between LA and the US-Mexico border. If the land between LA and the border is shrinking, then the land south of the border is expanding. This phenomenon is reinforced by the tropicalization of LA, which suggests the metropolis is actually being pulled southward, thereby reapportioning land back to Mexico.

While the magical orange is largely responsible for this reapportionment, the characters carrying the orange also have symbolic significance. Arcangel carries the
orange and Sol accompanies him. Arcangel is no ordinary man; in addition to the fact that he is headed to LA where he will perform as the Mexican wrestler “El Gran Mojado” (“The Great Wetback”) against the villain SUPERNAFTA, he is also just as magical as the orange. He represents Latin America from the moment of “discovery,” embodying the complex history of contact zones resulting from European colonization, and is less a human man than the physical embodiment of Latin American culture and revolutionary politics. Yamashita’s initial description of Arcangel reveals his affiliation with political revolutionaries such as Che Guevara and Porfirio Díaz and anti-imperialist authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda. That this figure carries the orange northward connects the fruit to a long history of revolution. Since Arcangel is making his way north to battle it out with the evil robot called SUPERNAFTA, Yamashita implies that revolutionary measures need to be taken against NAFTA.

Arcangel’s allegorical act of border crossing lays out a history of Mexican immigration, and lays bare California’s dependence on Mexican laborers – especially in the aftermath of NAFTA (Montejano, Suárez-Orozco). It also reads as a return, echoing the language of the revised myth of Aztlán. Arcangel defies Border Patrol agents by not presenting documentation, carrying an orange with him when there is a statewide ban on oranges, and responding to questions in Spanish despite the agents’ insistence that he speak English (198-201). Arcangel’s battle with SUPERNAFTA and his resultant death (and implied reincarnation) make the return to Aztlán possible, since without Arcangel and the magical orange he carries, the border would not have moved and the thousands of Mexican immigrants in his wake would not have been able to cross the border.

Additionally, the reader witnesses one of Arcangel’s final acts twice: the moment where
he gives Sol the magical orange (261, 267), passing him the proverbial baton. Sol is the embodiment of racial hybridity: his mother Rafaela is described as “Afro-Mayan” (45) while his father Bobby is “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15). Yamashita depicts the future of the United States through Sol, a racially mixed child whose parents were born outside the borders of the US. Born in the United States, taken to Mexico by his mother, and returning to the United States under the care of Arcangel, Sol has enacted the return to Aztlán. And while Arcangel – the embodiment of Latin American revolutionary politics – has returned to Latin America, Sol remains in LA where he will presumably continue Arcangel’s revolutionary mission within a different context of contact zones, borderlands, and colonization.

**Contemporary Activism: On the Heels of Rodney King, On the Eve of the Battle of Seattle**

The shifting border echoes the Chicano Movement’s refrain that much of the United States was once Mexico and that the immigration of Mexicans to California is both a right and an inevitable occurrence. However, Yamashita’s political employment of magical realism reaches beyond this single issue to focus on the larger problem of corporate globalization and the way its promotion of human exploitation and socioeconomic injustice creates underdeveloped communities within the overdeveloped “First World.” Another way of looking at it is that Arcangel’s battle with SUPERNAFTA and the implied history of “intimacies” given through the oranges are only a small piece of the larger puzzle of exploitation and injustice flourishing in the post-Cold War United
States. Yamashita levels a critique at US society and the resultant elimination of public services in the aftermath of the Cold War in the overdeveloped world of the United States through the colorful homeless population that illustrates the harm our own legislation inflicts upon US citizens as a byproduct of unchecked capitalism.

The magical orange’s movement and the resultant distortion of the LA grid facilitates the creation and destruction of a vibrant homeless community that demonstrates the extent to which corporate globalization has padded the pockets of a few people and left the masses increasingly destitute. After the accident on the freeway, the homeless form a temporary community on the freeway that defies stereotypes. They start a community garden, care for the cars that have become their borrowed homes, establish a choir, and host a series of captivating television programs when the media begins broadcasting coverage of the accident zone.

The homeless community grows into a grassroots movement promoting social justice, and its destruction at the hands of the US military recalls scenes of imperialism and war. This developing community displays a richness of culture unexpected by any of the other characters, so when a media blackout is issued in order for a massive airstrike to eradicate the homeless encampment without news coverage, it implies that this community is viewed as a terrible threat. The government’s reaction is the “coordinated might of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the Coast and National Guards, federal, state, and local police forces of the most militaristic of nations looked down as it had in the past on tiny islands and puny countries […] and descended in a single storm” (239). Not only does this call up images of the Vietnam War and other imperial endeavors on “tiny islands” around the globe (the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc.), but with the
novel’s publication in 1997 it would also have brought to mind all-too-recent memories of the military response to the LA Riots in April of 1992 that followed the announcement of the not-guilty verdict in the Rodney King trials. This literal war on poverty as portrayed in the novel depicts the military response as disproportionately violent and seems designed to stir up feelings of injustice and disbelief in the reader. In the post-Cold War social climate where large gatherings of people asking for social change are viewed with hostility, Yamashita’s depiction of a utopic grassroots movement enacts activist politics through moments of magic while promoting the same kind of anti-globalization, anti-corporatization message some activists underscored during the 1999 Battle of Seattle. While Yamashita’s novel obviously did not actively contribute to the Battle of Seattle, the novel deploys moments of magic – mostly surrounding the magical orange – and literary activism to advance an anti-imperialist and anti-corporate agenda in the unreceptive social climate of the era.

The Politics of Form: Columns and Silences as Resistance

The experimental elements of The People of Paper are innately tied to the novel’s political agenda. Plascencia has made it clear that in this text the “columns, the blackouts, serve an integral narrative function” (Benavidez 23), and the issue of power lies at the heart of these narrative strategies. For example, the EMF carnation pickers are part of what Mae M. Ngai refers to as “a kind of ‘imported colonialism’ that was a legacy of the nineteenth-century American conquest of Mexico’s northern territories” (129). Their economic centrality as agricultural workers parallels their intellectual centrality as Plascencia’s characters: without them, the harvest/story cannot happen. To be clear, I am
not arguing that Plascencia’s novel has tidy symbolic ties between fiction and history; instead, the characters in Plascencia’s novel, by going on strike against Saturn’s exploitation of their sadness, engage in acts of protest that parallel the kinds of strikes utilized by agricultural labor organizations in the twentieth century.10

A significant portion of this protest occurs in the columned chapters. Nearly one-third of the chapters are formatted in columns, with Saturn’s narration taking up the entire verso (left-hand page) and two other characters sharing the recto (right-hand page). The first column on each recto typically belongs to Little Merced while the second column changes characters on each new page. The fact that Saturn gets an entire page to himself illustrates his position of power by privileging his voice: he is allotted more physical space and his words’ position on the verso ensures that they will be read first. Since the characters on the recto often retell parts of the story Saturn has told on the verso – but with more detail and a different perspective – the organization of the columns subordinates the other characters’ voices by making them secondary to Saturn’s voice. In this way, Plascencia creates a visual representation of social inequality through his use of columns. The division of literary real estate coupled with EMF’s position as a Chicano gang composed of agricultural laborers points toward the history of immigration and Mexican labor in the United States, specifically California where the novel is predominantly set. Incidentally, the columns also resemble the rows of a field that has been prepared for planting or is ready for harvesting. Either way, the unequal distribution of space, with the smaller portion being divided among the characters being used for their stories, mirrors the socioeconomic inequalities of farm laborers and the farm owners who exploit them. It also turns the gutter in the middle of the open book into a physical border
that separates the powerful Saturn and his spacious verso from the exploited characters of EMF and their restricted recto.

Beginning early in the novel, there are hints of impending rebellion in the characters’ uses of their allotted columns. Federico de la Fe instructs the members of EMF to “attack” in the columned chapters (55). Rather than engaging in a physical battle akin to Arcangel’s battle against SUPERNAUTA, EMF-member Pelon breaks out of the space allocated for his words by continuing to narrate until he is cut off not by the margins but by the physical limitations of the page itself (91). Rather than keep his narration within the limits of the designated space, he narrates until his words bleed into the bottom margin, eventually narrating himself off the page. In an attempt to provide Saturn with uninteresting narration, Pelon forces himself to think about the mundane details of his labor: “the brown dirt, the black ashes that […] stick to the rake,” “the stalks of carnations that suck the minerals from the soil […], the chapped hands of the flower pickers that gather the flowers on tarps and drag them to the scales and from the scales to two-ton trucks” (91). This strategy, suggested by Federico de la Fe, is intended to thwart Saturn’s commodification of EMF’s sadness. In the early twentieth century, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants were popularly associated with misery (González 194, Ngai 149), so Pelon’s strategy of iterating his knowledge of field labor denies Saturn the ability to profit from his assumed misery/sadness. Details about agricultural labor and the work of field hands are not presented as worthy of inclusion by the novelist, just as the deaths of people in low-income communities in Yamashita’s novel were not considered worthy of coverage by the news media. Thus Pelon’s narrative rebellion is an act of passive resistance, providing Saturn with plentiful narration while
simultaneously giving him nothing interesting enough for his novel.

On the same recto where Pelon enacts his narrative rebellion, Little Merced engages in her own version of rebellion by abstaining from narration, which results in increasingly large sections of white space where her thoughts are supposed to be. In her first attempt at this resistance, she drastically shortens her column on the same recto where Pelon’s words spill off the page. She also parallels one of Pelon’s strategies by refocusing her thoughts onto carnation farming. Her next two columns remain extremely short, one of them consisting of a single sentence, and after that her column is entirely blank. The absence of thought creates a chunk of white space in Little Merced’s column. Since her column is sandwiched between Saturn’s large column on the verso and another character’s slender column on the right half of the recto, the result is a visual imbalance that highlights Little Merced’s refusal to narrate.

Conversely, the prophetic character called Baby Nostradamus aggressively uses black space to inhibit Saturn’s omniscience. He places solid black rectangles on top of his passages, thereby blocking his thoughts from Saturn’s – and consequently the reader’s – view. These black rectangles, which Louis Lüthi refers to as “a preclusion or annulment of communication” (96), are arguably acts of resistance as well as visual manifestations of “the metaphysical relationship between character and author” (99). In other words, they draw attention to the artifice of the novel. The Baby Nostradamus is exceptionally skilled at annulling Saturn’s abilities and teaches Little Merced how to use black space so that she replaces her passive resistance of non-narration with the active resistance of hidden narration. Initially she is only able to produce small bits of black space that partially shield her narration from Saturn. However, in the span of three columns spread
over six pages, Little Merced cultivates her power to block Saturn’s access to her thoughts, first producing a square approximately 1.25 x 1.25 inches, then a rectangle approximately 3 x 5.5 inches, and finally a rectangle so large that it blocks the entire recto rather than only her own column (187-191). In this way, her power becomes a significant threat to Saturn. As the only character who regularly gets a column on the recto, Little Merced’s voice is already somewhat privileged like Saturn’s is on the verso. Her ability to block Saturn’s reception of other characters’ thoughts goes further than the Baby Nostradamus’ use of black space: Little Merced not only shields her own consciousness from exploitation, but begins extending that protection to others. In other words, her individual resistance takes on the form of group resistance. Like striking field laborers, Little Merced is concerned for the welfare of others in her position. By watching out for others, her resistance begins to resemble collaborative organizing.

She is not the only character who engages in collaborative resistance, since Federico de la Fe initiated the community-wide strike against Saturn through the columned chapters (55). Most of Saturn’s characters have little agency in the telling of their own stories, and they rebel against Saturn by refusing to operate within the confines of the columns he has provided for their words. Essentially, they exercise their agency by going on strike against Saturn, thwarting his desire to profit from the exploitation of their problems. In this way, the characters’ self-censorship is a refusal to conform to Saturn’s use of their intellectual labor. As the novel progresses, EMF gains momentum until eventually thousands of onlookers gather to participate in or witness the war against Saturn. If, as Víctor Muñoz argues, union organizing is the first step toward Hispanic empowerment, which in turn leads to political power and the potential to influence
positive change for agricultural laborers (101), then Plascencia’s novel recreates a large-scale social protest in a manner that calls for similar measures to be taken in a post-Cold War, post-9/11 climate that portrayed such movements as un-American until (or perhaps including) the Occupy movements. On the pages of *The People of Paper*, this protest functions similarly to the one in *Tropic of Orange* except that instead of opposing capitalist globalization it opposes US empire within the context of immigration and labor.

**Silencing Characters Through Broken Codes and Physical Absences**

Just as Plascencia’s characters fight against exploitation by mobilizing an intellectual strike against Saturn, so do the avant-garde poetics push against standard literary form by playing with literary conventions. Plascencia includes a complex system of broken communication systems in the novel, creating his own versions of codes that appear to be Morse Code, sign language, and binary code – but turn out not to be – in a move that frustrates attempts at translation.11 For instance, the table of contents includes an odd collection of words, dots, lines, and sign language. While the dots and lines initially look like a version of Morse Code, they are actually Plascencia’s own system for indicating whether chapters will be narrated in conventional prose paragraphs by a single character (single dot), narrated in conventional prose paragraphs by a rotation of three characters (three dots), or narrated in columned prose by three characters (three vertical lines – or two, in the case of Chapter 10). As for the sign language, no explanation is given in the novel.12 In the table of contents, one hand signal is shown next to each of the novel’s three sections. Each hand signal appears again at the beginning the indicated section later in the novel, with a short caption beneath it. Despite the captions, which
resemble section titles more than subtitles, these hand signs remain indecipherable. As for the binary code, one character – a mechanical tortoise – narrates in an unbroken string of 1s and 0s that look like binary code, but turn out to be untranslatable strings of numbers. The broken systems of communication invite the reader’s curiosity, but refuse any attempts at decoding them.

By not disclosing all the details of these sign systems, Plascencia leaves the reader to try (impossibly) to decode them on their own, thus creating a secret code system that places the reader outside of the novel’s language. This creates a kind of language barrier that the reader cannot cross. In the case of the mechanical tortoise who speaks in a “mute language” of broken binary code, “a homogeneous wall of information, not the information itself, is clearly the overriding aim” Lüthi (107). This is consistent with the explanation Plascencia provides in his interview with Matthew Baker: “The mechanical tortoises communicate and operate in an accessible code we don’t understand their logic, so I tried to represent their language as seemingly simple but ultimately inaccessible” (NP). In other words, the illusion of accessibility invited by all of these code systems serves as a reminder of the failures of communication. While Plascencia is talking about the mechanical tortoise here, the idea that these broken codes are meaningful in their brokenness carries over to the apparent Morse Code and the invented sign language as well. By creating untranslatable code systems, Plascencia reinforces the concept of cultural and linguistic boundaries as potentially insurmountable.

This insurmountability is aggressively reinforced through the erasure of one character’s name throughout the novel: the white man Saturn’s ex-girlfriend, Liz, left him for. In the first edition of the novel, his name is physically cut out of the page. However,
in later editions of the novel, this man’s name appears crossed out, rather than cut out, each of the four times Liz attempts to speak it (117, 119, 244).14 There is nothing but a three-eighths-inch by one-eighth-inch hole where his name would appear. Not only is he denied an identity, he is actively denied space – white space, black space, or words of any kind – on the page. His presence is literally an absence. In the first two instances when his name is excised from the text, only blank space shows through from the next page. However, in the final two cut-outs of his name, small bits of text show through from the other side, creating a palimpsest that replaces his unspoken name with other words.15 Saturn’s concern that white men “colonize everything: the Americas, our stories, our novels, our memories” (117) is expressed through the holes where this particular white man’s name would be. The act of physically cutting his name out of the page prevents him from colonizing this novel by removing him from it. Lüthi argues that the use of black pages, text pages, image pages, and other non-standard visual elements in contemporary novels reflects “the desire to react, or, rather, simply to act in accordance with the superabundance of visual information around us” (109). What, then, are we to make of the use of the removed name? More than simply a visual device, this technique is both visual and physical. The creation of holes in the page is at once surprising and startling. This kind of violent erasure illustrates Dworkin’s point that “even the most illegible marks are positive contributions to the content of a text” (143). Plascencia’s removal of pieces of the pages in the original edition replaces the unknown name with such a noticeable emptiness that while the name is missing, the anger Saturn feels toward the man (and everything he stands for) ends up being the most clearly communicated message to the reader. While this action certainly prevents the unnamed man from
gaining any real agency within the novel, it also places Saturn more concretely into a position of power by illustrating his ability to eliminate characters through erasure.

Crossing “Impossible” Borders

In Plascencia’s novel, borders that should be impossible to cross become navigable in a way that contradicts dominant discourse. When it comes to political borders and “cultural interaction, borders are both lines and spaces where contradictory tendencies complement each other. As dividing lines of spatiotemporal and cultural differentiation borders distance the inner from the outer of the other, and as shared spaces in between they link both to each other” (Walter 16). In Plascencia’s novel, two impossible borders are traversed, thus linking worlds that should not be linked: the worlds of the living and the dying, and the worlds of fictional characters and their real-life authors.

The border between life and death is one of the most permanent borders, in that once a person crosses the line from life into death, there is little hope of crossing back into life. Little Merced’s death and subsequent resurrection contradicts the permanence of the border dividing the living from the dead, and is one of the strongest examples of the characters’ abilities to cross borders of all kinds in Plascencia’s novel. Significantly, Little Merced dies of citric poisoning from her lime addiction – a habit she inherited from her mother, Merced. Limes, like oranges, originated in different parts of Asia and the Middle East. The “Mexican Lime” is actually indigenous to the “Indo-Malayan region,” and was “undoubtedly introduced into the Caribbean islands and Mexico by the Spaniards” (Morton, Lime 168). Like the navel orange, the Mexican lime has its own
“immigration” history that connects the Americas with the “intimacies” of slavery and imported labor Lisa Lowe traces in her discussion of “coolie” labor. While Plascencia does not use limes in the same way Yamashita uses oranges in Tropic of Orange, which is to say as symbols of a larger history of immigration and exploitation, Little Merced’s lime addiction is nonetheless significant for its effects on her. The citrus of the limes leaves her with “peeling skin” on her tongue that not even the local curandero, Apolonio, can cure. Along with her knowledge of her mother’s whereabouts, it is also the only part of her life she hides from her father. The damage to Little Merced’s tongue is indicative of the silencing effect of this fruit. Given the history of limes and Little Merced’s position as the daughter of an agricultural laborer, her lime-induced death can be viewed as more than simply Saturn’s attempt to silence her. While Plascencia may not be trying to attribute her death to the larger history of immigration and labor, I think it is reasonable to recognize the connection between Mexican limes, Merced’s abandonment of Little Merced and Federico de la Fe, and Little Merced’s death as her entire community is consumed by its war against Saturn. That the instrument of her death is a fruit grown in Mexico for use in traditional Mexican cuisine as well as export to countries like the United States seems significant for its ties to cultures on both sides of the US-Mexico border.

Suspiciously, Little Merced’s sudden death-by-limes occurs immediately after she covers both her own and the Veteranos’ narration with black space (191; see right-most page spread in Figure 4.1). The next time the reader sees Little Merced following this powerful act of resistance, she is “lying on her back, surrounded by lime skins” (195) having died of citric poisoning. While Little Merced’s lime addiction was arguably
growing from the very beginning of the novel, this implausible death hints at a more sinister motive on Saturn’s part. Given Little Merced’s considerable control over Saturn’s novel, the implication is that he killed her character and thereby eliminated the power of her black space in order to maintain his omniscience. However, she only remains dead for five days and a few hours (198), at which point she is brought back to life by one of Apolonio’s potions. Upon being resurrected, the only side effect Little Merced experiences is “the horrible stench of her breath [which] was not the remnant of death but simply an oversight on Apolonio’s part: forgetting to add peppermint to his potion” (201). The magic of Little Merced’s revival is tainted by her stinking breath. After her resurrection, Little Merced’s power is significantly diminished – in part because of her breath, which distracts her – rendering her blocking abilities largely ineffective and her columns almost entirely visible. However, her ability to traverse the border dividing the living and the dead merges with the novel’s larger preoccupation with border crossings.

Another strategy Plascencia uses to interrogate boundaries is metafiction. One member of EMF, a young man named Smiley, opposes Federico’s politics of resistance. Unlike Federico and the rest of El Monte Flores, Smiley desires nothing more than to eliminate the barrier standing between himself and Saturn so that he can grant the planet full access to his life and thoughts. He goes so far as to obtain a map and travel to the peaks of the San Gabriel mountains where he peels “at the deteriorating glaze of blue, collapsing part of the sky and exposing a layer of papier-mâché,” using his field knife to saw through the sky until he has created a “manhole in the California sky” large enough to pull himself through” (103). When he climbs through the hole, it turns out he has climbed into Saturn’s apartment, and Saturn turns out to be an author named Salvador
Plascencia who is writing a novel called *The People of Paper*. This metafictional twist deconstructs the boundary separating him from the recognition he seeks. He breaks down an impossible border in a desire to allow Saturn to exploit him, thus undermining Federico’s position that EMF should fight against the commodification of their sadness (53). More than that, his actions destabilize the concept of borders. Since the border between earth and sky should be impossible to penetrate, the ease with which Smiley breaks through this barrier ultimately disproves the notion of borders as impermeable lines.

The novel’s use of unusual formal elements coupled with metafiction enters into relatively unique terrain as far as magical realism is concerned. While the form is (of course) not magical on its own, Plascencia’s use of columns and code systems highlights the magical content of the novel. Similarly, even though metafiction is not a uniquely magical realist technique, some scholars argue that magical realist authors use metafiction in a way that highlights the non-realist aspects of their texts (Faris D’Haen Slemon). This novel’s specific brand of metafiction is inextricably tied up with its moments of magical realism in a way that does just that.

**Lines in the Sand: Unnatural Borders vs. Forces of Nature**

The overtly magical elements in the text are highlighted by the novel’s form, blurring not only fictional boundaries, but also physical borders. While the form interrogates “the nature of nation- and community-formation, the ethos of justice, and the crossing of symbolic borders and inhabiting the transnational imaginary” (Saldivar 578), it also uses the abstractness of symbols and imaginaries to highlight the flaws in reality.
The novel’s concern with boundaries manifests itself in explicit deconstructions of the concept of borders as stable, definitive lines. The physical borders in *The People of Paper* are constantly changing; the most obvious example of this is the US-Mexico border. In the contexts of the increasing militarization of the US-Mexico border,\(^\text{16}\) rising anti-immigration sentiments in California (Ngai 266, Montejano 247-49), and post-9/11 fears of terrorism, Plascencia’s portrayal of the changing US-Mexico border is especially important to consider. The first time we see this border, Little Merced describes it as “a white chalk line that ran from the Pacific shore to the Rio Grande, [which she and her father] stepped over” (31). The next time this border shows up, another character crosses it through “a gap in the three-hundred-mile-long fence where the steel had corroded, allowing her to pass into the other side” (49). In its final appearance in the novel, yet another character describes a “chain-link fence and cement barriers that marked the border” (82). The border’s changing appearance subtly comments on the way this manufactured divide must be maintained and reinforced in order to continue its existence. However, the characters’ consistent ability to cross the border without incident or difficulty undermines any semblance of solidity the border has by revealing its permeability despite the measures taken to prevent passage across it. In fact, where agricultural labor is concerned, the militarization of the border in the decades following the creation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1924 served to cement public conceptions of Mexicans and Chicanos as law-breakers while simultaneously increasing the rate of undocumented immigration due to the effects of “tightening” the border on legal immigration (Ngai 160).\(^\text{17}\) The relative ease with which Plascencia’s characters cross the border demonstrates the pattern of continued immigration regardless
of measures taken by the United States government to restrict movement across the US-Mexico border.

Alongside representations of the increasingly stringent national border, Federico de la Fe draws a border of ash around El Monte. Created by building a circle of kerosene, tires, and oil-soaked wood around El Monte and igniting it, this border serves two purposes: “The first was for the smoke to cloud the view of Saturn. The second was to mark the town [as] the town that had engaged in the most impossible of wars” (56). In this case, EMF creates a border in hopes that it will serve as a reminder of their great victory. However, like most borders, this circle of ash only isolates one community from another – in this case, El Monte from the rest of LA. The ash border around El Monte recalls the chalk border Little Merced crosses with her father at the beginning of the novel, but its creation signals the beginning of the city’s decline. Drawn within the borders of the United States, this border diminishes the significance of national borders. At the same time, since the circle of ash and the US-Mexico border are artificially drawn onto the land, they exemplify Anzaldúa’s description of borders as unnatural. Being against nature, these lines in the sand only cause harm to the communities they divide.

However, when the land itself is moved, the fulfillment of the return-to-Aztlan mythology promoted by Chicano activists in the 1970s also comes closer to fruition. Similar to the magical orange in Tropic of Orange, Plascencia’s novel features a magical mechanical tortoise that pulls the US-Mexico border north. The mechanical tortoise disguises itself in the earth and proceeds to move “scoops of soil from south to north, compacting land with its legs and then lurching through the rises of furrows. Official measures said San Diego was now half a mile closer to Los Angeles than the week before
“[…] and every hour [it was] bringing El Monte and the border ten inches closer to each other” (156). By compressing the land, this tortoise is doing more than dragging the border north toward Los Angeles. It is also diminishing the distance between cities and countries, bringing communities physically closer to one another by changing the geography of the land and pulling Mexico into the United States. The machine is dragging the militarized US-Mexico border north by condensing the US land mass. This symbolic reversal of the historical redrawing of the US-Mexico border during the 1800s reapportions land back to Mexico, just as the moving Tropic of Cancer does in Tropic of Orange.

The permeability of literary and physical borders through avant-garde poetics and magical realism destabilizes these “goddamn lines” and the politics behind them. EMF’s turn to activism in their refusal of Saturn’s attempts to profit from their hardships highlights how the complex dynamics of immigration politics and the lingering effects of labor exploitation become the primary focus of their war. Plascencia engages with magical realism and literary activism in order to rethink the nature of the US-Mexico border, the divisions between communities within the United States, and the vast divides that exist even between neighbors and family members.

By blurring the boundaries between life and death and relocating physical borders, Plascencia opens up space for questioning other dividing lines. The ever-changing US-Mексico border and the mechanical tortoise’s compression of land appear as minor instances in the novel, but when considered alongside the novel’s avant-garde poetics, they call into question the stability, permanence, and reality of these borders. Plascencia’s novel breaks down borders and moves beyond the realm of fiction and into
the form of the novel itself. In this sense, The People of Paper’s aggressive formal techniques can be interpreted as politically motivated stylistic devices intended to counter the generic conventions of the dominant discourse.

Conclusions: Off the Page and Into the World

Yamashita and Plascencia are both invested in challenging injustices surrounding race, class, and national identity, and their portrayals of social movements imagine activism in a political climate that widely disallows protest. Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper represent two very different ways of incorporating moments of magic in the borderlands of southern California through their use of allegorical characters, magical oranges and tortoises, and avant-garde poetics. Ultimately, they do so for similar reasons: to mobilize activism within the confines of the novel in order to keep activist discourse alive when it may not be feasible to engage in on-the-ground activism. The magic in each text strives to deepen conversations around race, class, and labor, supporting revolutionary politics by imagining social movements during a time when such movements seemed to have faded into the past. Interestingly, both novels depict activist movements that ultimately fail. What, then, is the purpose of this aspect of the literary activism in these novels? Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper place their hope in the future. Through moments of magic, each novel engages in literary activism by exploiting the genre’s “political consciousness-raising powers” (D’haen 202) and playfully delivering activism within the covers of a book in hopes that, like Pelon’s words in The People of Paper, it may gain enough momentum to spill off the page and into the world.
Conclusion

Creating Progress: The Contribution of Literature to Activist Politics

In February 2013, the United States Supreme Court began hearing a case disputing the constitutionality of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This act was written with the intention of ending racial discrimination and violence at the polls so that all US citizens could vote and could do so in safety. The rhetoric in support of striking down the Voting Act largely revolves around popular ideas of “progress” having been made in the decades since the Civil Rights Era. One Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, called the law “a perpetuation of racial entitlement.” Another Justice, Anthony Kennedy, leaned on the “times change” argument, saying that other laws passed during that era also ran their course. Arguments like these simultaneously feed into and come out of colorblindness. In the contemporary moment, the United States likes to refer to itself as a post-race, forward-thinking, egalitarian nation in which racism and race-related discrimination and violence have been eradicated.

Voting rights have consistently been under attack, recent decades being no exception, and laws like the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were designed to protect racial minorities so that they could, in fact, exercise one of their most basic citizenship rights by casting their vote for representatives and political leaders. The fact that this law is being brought before the Supreme Court again is not an isolated incident. Affirmative Action is
also under attack, as are other aspects of various civil rights acts and related legislation. With this in mind, it seems clear that it is important to continue conversations around race and social justice. Since the social climate is still largely inhospitable to these conversations, it is logical that people are finding other spaces in which to have them – and one of those spaces is in literature. In many ways, magical realism presents an ideal literary forum for authors to explore the histories and implications of race in the United States because the magic can be used to disrupt historical and contemporary realities in order to imagine alternate possibilities. However, not all authors of magical realism are interested in using magic in this manner.

In fact, many authors of magical realism do not use their novels to express an interest in the politics of social justice. Throughout this project I have focused on works by *US ethnic authors* and have examined the many ways in which magical realism by authors of color in the United States enacts a form of literary activism. What I haven’t talked about yet are mainstream white-authored texts that don’t use magic for political purposes. In popular culture, this manifests itself in the success of such movies as *Pleasantville* (1998), *Big Fish* (2003), and *Midnight in Paris* (2011), to name just a few. In literature, books like Alice Hoffman’s *Practical Magic* (1995), Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), and Sarah Addison Allen’s *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* (2011) are indicative of the continuing interest in a particular brand of magical realism in which the magic functions in a highly personal manner.
Mainstream Magic: A Brief Exploration of Magical Realism and the Personal

In the interest of a truly comparative study, I want to turn to four examples of mainstream magical realism by white American authors to illustrate the most noticeable difference between magical realist literatures produced in the contemporary United States. To be clear, it is not my intention to essentialize white American authors or to say that what I observe in these four texts is universally applicable to all white-authored magical realism. Instead, I want to illustrate the way magical realism tends to be used to accomplish very personal objectives in texts that gain a popular following or catch the attention of the mainstream. That a majority of these kinds of texts happen to be written by white American authors is an important fact to observe and perhaps tells us just as much about the audience as it does about the authors.

Perhaps one of the most popular American authors of magical realist novels is Alice Hoffman, whose most widely recognized novel to date is the 1995 favorite *Practical Magic*. The novel tells the tale of Sally and Gillian Owens – sisters whose aunts were witches and who have, for various reasons, spent their lives running from the magic that courses through their veins. Ultimately, the magic in this novel serves the very personal purpose of bringing the estranged adult sisters back together and helping them each find love again. Sally is literally haunted by the ghost of the abusive lover she accidentally killed in self-defense, and needs her sister’s help to rid herself of his spirit so she can move forward and find true love. Similarly, Gillian is so traumatized from having read omens of her beloved husband’s eventual death that she needs to reconnect to her roots in order to experience love again. Both sisters have to come home and face each other and their ancestry in order to find love in their lives. In other words, Hoffman uses
magic as the connective tissue that binds the Owens sisters together. It is their family legacy, passed down to them through their aunts and passed on from them to Gillian’s young daughters. At its heart, the story is about two women who are running from their family’s past and who must find a way to reconnect with their heritage in order to fully love themselves so they can be loved by others. The magic in Hoffman’s novel aligns with the concept of exceptionalism that so many of the authors of color explored in this study refute through magic. The Owens sisters’ magical gifts are what make them special and different from the other characters in the community, who appear rather dull by comparison. These same gifts are given the agency to function on their own, helping the women find love when they are incapable of doing so for themselves.

Similarly, Sarah Addison Allen’s novels use magic largely to connect the female protagonists to their love interests. More specifically, *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* (2011) uses magic to foster romantic relationships. One character in particular, Julia Winterson, bakes so that her food wafts its rich aroma into the air and calls her loved ones to her. Through her sweet treats, Julia literally scores herself a Win – a man named Win, to be precise. After years of loneliness and heartache, the glittering sugar of her baking creates a trail that Win follows and the two of them fall in love. At the same time, her baking also calls a young woman named Maddie Davis to her. Maddie, as it turns out, is Julia’s long-lost daughter. Like Win, she is attracted to Julia because of her baking, although in Maddie’s case it’s the smell rather than the sight that attracts her. Nevertheless, the magic of Julia’s baking has only one function: to (re)unite her with two people she loves who will make her happy on the most personal and individual of levels.
Shifting away from literature that uses magic as a romantic assist, Neil Gaiman’s 2001 novel *American Gods* is another example of a different personal function for magic. The protagonist, Shadow, is newly released from prison at the beginning of the novel and immediately encounters a man who turns out to be the Norse god Odin. Like Díaz’s, Chin’s, and Touré’s mythological evolutions, Gaiman alters a series of multinational deities from India, Africa, and Russia, portraying them as flesh-and-blood humans. These gods were brought to the United States by immigrants from all around the world, only to be forgotten as the immigrants assimilated and replaced them with the new American gods: the Fast Food Kid, Media, and Technology (the key players in the war between old and new gods). However, unlike the authors I focused on in Chapter 3, Gaiman’s updated gods serve a twofold purpose: they entangle Shadow in their elaborate and petty schemes to regain their lost power, and they draw him along on a sort of neo-Everyman journey of self-discovery.

*American Gods* engages with multiple cultures, but it is ultimately uninterested in the politics of immigration. Instead, Gaiman uses the magic to comment on contemporary US obsessions with fast food, media, and technology. Shadow is caught between living mythologies from several other countries, which serves the purpose of highlighting the quest at the heart of this novel: Shadow’s search for himself. By portraying Shadow as a man with no preferences of his own (a “shadow” to those he consorts with), Gaiman depicts him as a lost soul wandering the earth aimlessly. Shadow only begins to discover his true self after he experiences a mish-mash of characters drawn loosely from popular perceptions of Native American belief systems, including a talking buffalo and thunderbirds. The novel concludes with Shadow discovering that Odin is his father, at
which point he finally exercises some agency and the reader understands he has come into his own, so to speak. Gaiman’s use of multicultural mythologies creates an interesting commentary on American cultural values and on the importance of identity in a person’s life. Significantly, this use of folklore is very different from the ways Díaz, Chin, and Touré use folklore. While their texts engage with folklore in order to critique social injustice, histories of discrimination, and ongoing systems of oppression, Gaiman’s novel brings these mythologies together to highlight the hollowness of contemporary value systems and the importance of the individual in the face of cultural assimilation. Interestingly, this cultural assimilation is already complete when the novel opens – the old gods having been long forgotten – so that cultural reclamation is not portrayed as desirable or even possible.

Finally, Mark Z. Danielewski’s cult classic *House of Leaves*, originally published in online installments before being published as a book in 2000, is an avant-garde novel that uses magic to explore the psychology of its protagonists. The book engages with elements of the horror genre, relating the story of Will Navidson and his family. With their relationship on the rocks, Will and his partner Karen moved their family to the Virginia countryside in an attempt to spend more quality time together. However, after a short vacation they return to their new home to discover that it has grown a new room. Before long, the room has grown into a hallway that continues to lengthen throughout the novel, ultimately becoming so cavernous that various characters manage to get lost, injured, and killed within its depths. The creepy plot is reflected in the narrative structure, which includes creative uses of white space, text that appears backwards as if reflected in a mirror, the intermittent use of colored ink, and other irregularities in font size, direction,
and placement on the page. Like Plascencia’s novel, Danielewski’s text uses columns and white space in unusual ways. However, whereas the columns reflect certain colonizing efforts in The People of Paper, the formal experimentation in Danielewski’s novel parallels the characters’ psychological state of mind. When they feel isolated, the words on the page appear amidst a sea of white space. When they are lost, the text is printed in multiple directions. Where they feel fear at the thought of the house, the text recreates the sense of eeriness through the use of colored ink each time the word “house” appears.

Alongside the avant-garde format of the novel, Danielewski uses magic to enhance the horror-story elements of the novel and to dramatize the characters’ psychological states. The hallway contains all of the magical elements of the text, which range from the menacing growl of a beast echoing throughout its depths, to an inexplicable and pervasive coldness, to spaces that grow and shrink as the hallway shifts. Eerie as these occurrences of magic are, they all serve the same purpose: to force the characters to plunge into the depths of their own psyches in order to experience a journey of self-discovery and personal growth. While I’m oversimplifying a little bit, the magic-infused hallway essentially acts as a psychological black hole that draws individual characters into itself for various reasons and forces them to confront their deepest fears. Like Gaiman’s novel, the magic in House of Leaves facilitates the characters’ personal journeys.

These four novels are only a small sample of the vast body of white-authored magical realism written in the post-Cold War United States, but by examining their versions of magic side by side, a pattern begins to emerge. The pattern is one in which magic serves the purpose of accomplishing individual, personal gains. Unlike the magical
realism penned by US ethnic authors, these works are invested in the personal journeys of their protagonists. They’re interested in love. They’re interested in happiness. They’re interested in loneliness and the ways in which it can be combatted. They simply do not have a deep investment in larger social, political, or communal issues – especially not those related to race.

**Messy Magic: Using Magic to Unsettle and Cause Discomfort**

I am not saying that there is something wrong with literature that is not invested in broader issues of race, sexuality, or class. This literature exists and, in the case of the four novels I’ve used as examples here, I enjoy it. However, what I *am* saying is that magical realism has a longstanding relationship with certain political ideals because of its history in postcolonial nations. To return to Franz Roh’s use of the term to describe paintings so realistic that they appeared otherworldly, this body of literature can be used to examine the reality of life in the United States. In many ways, this reality seems almost unreal in its own right given various histories of cultural genocide, enslavement, assimilation, colonization, exclusion, deportation, and redrawn borders.

By looking across racial and cultural lines, an interesting image comes into focus. What comes into focus is not an image of exotic otherness, cultural superstitions, or mystical relics – in other words, it is not an image of fetishized stereotypes. Instead, when we look at this body of literature in its contemporary and historical contexts, the image that emerges is an unsettled, unfixed one. Yes, there are histories in these pages that never were and will never come to be. There are ghosts and myths, given physical form in the stories they inhabit. And there are borders that refuse to stay put (although how
magical is that, really, in light of the history of the United States to date?). But there is also an underlying sense of ongoing injustice, ongoing inequity. There is a thematic compatibility between all of these works. Whether, like Touré, these authors are creating a utopia or, like Vizenor, they are projecting into the future of science and medicine, the undercurrent remains the same: we need change.

When we explore these texts alongside one another, one prominent theme that emerges is the theme of brokenness. The characters in these novels live in a broken society. Castillo’s novel highlights the extent of the damage with regards to women, Chin’s and Plascencia’s novels showcase the trickle-down effects of the exploitation of immigrants, and Díaz’s and Howe’s novels center on the continued effects of past traumas on present lives. Interestingly, despite the whirlwind of magic that unsettles each of these texts, one thing remains consistent: these novels offer no easy solutions. Unlike their white-authored counterparts, there is no Disney ending in sight. There may be a little bit of happiness or a lessening of hardship to be found, but the magic in novels by US ethnic authors tends to leave things unsettled. Messy. Uncomfortable.

Creating discomfort in a historical moment that pretends to be a “post-race” moment makes sense with the kind of anti-racist, anti-imperialist politics magical realism is rooted in. Silence is a sneaky political strategy, after all, and colorblindness is particularly adept at “discouraging discussions of racial matters and presuming that the best practice is to ignore the realities of racism, [which] makes it more difficult to challenge [racism] and thus increases the likelihood of discrimination” (Wise 18). In this climate, magic can be just as sneaky. The magic in these texts brings race back into the
conversation. Whether it acts as hyperbole or understatement, the magic suspends verisimilitude and allows authors to rupture the silence surrounding race.

This literature has a tendency to end on an open note with the world all messy and everyone’s lives unsettled, which is just what I aim to do. After all of this, I think when we juxtapose these texts it becomes painfully obvious that no matter what we would like to pretend, our reality is not a post-race reality. On the same day African American president Barack Obama unveiled a statue of civil rights activist Rosa Parks, the United States Supreme Court began hearing a case on the constitutionality of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was intended to protect African Americans and other racial minorities so they could vote safely. As if this wasn’t just the kind of unrealistic-realism Roh was referring to when he coined the term “magical realism,” in an argument against the constitutionality of the law, Justice Scalia argued that the law only remains on the books because of “a phenomenon that is called perpetuation of racial entitlement.” He continued, “It’s been written about. Whenever a society adopts racial entitlements, it is very difficult to get out of them through the normal political processes.” While Scalia’s understanding of reality may be one in which the racial entitlement belongs to people of color, his words ring true in an understanding of reality in which the racial entitlement belongs to the dominant (white) culture. There is a perpetuation of racial entitlement in the United States, and it has been very difficult to get out of. But even in these times of post-race colorblindness, people are trying, and one way they are trying is through the unsettling power of moments of magic in literature.
Notes

Notes to Introduction

1 The significance of the mode of representation is equally important to magical realism in literature. As Catherine Bartlett explains in her 1986 article on magical realism in Chicano literature, “the way in which the story is told becomes as important, if not more, than the actual story itself” (27).

2 The Latin American Boom (often simply referred to as “the Boom”) was a literary movement in the 1960s and 1970s. During the Boom, Latin American authors – mostly novelists – gained international recognition, and magical realism was established as a literary convention many situated in Latin America. Authors often considered Boom writers include: Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Pablo Neruda (Chile), and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico).

3 Pranav Jani discusses a related problem whereby “theoretical assumptions about postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism […] associate these terms with postnational perspectives, magical realism, and postmodernist epistemology” (6-7). I want to be clear that when I say that magical realism tends to be associated with postcolonial literature, this is simply a popular perception of the genre. While canonical magical realist literature does have a strong foundation in postcolonial literature and politics, it is certainly not the only kind of postcolonial literature (not that there is any such homogenous body of
work). In fact, much of my argument involves broadening popular perceptions of magical realism to include literature produced in the United States.

4 Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) goes so far as to coin his own term to describe this genre in Native American writing: “Verisimilitude is the appearance of realities; mythic verism is discourse, a critical concordance of narrative voices, and a narrative realism that is more than mimesis or a measure of what is believed to be natural in the world” (190, emphasis added).

5 Many of these terms are fairly widespread terms, and as such cannot be “credited” to any one individual; however, a few of them are not. Magic(al) realism was coined by Maggie Ann Bowers; mythic verism is Gerald Vizenor’s creation; and fantastic realism was popular with Mikhail Bakhtin (who recovered it from François Rabelais’ writings, where it may or may not have originated). Brian Norman argues for the use of telenovela realism in relation to Ana Castillo’s novel So Far From God. Jeanne Delbaere-Garant claims to have coined the terms psychic realism, mythic realism, and grotesque realism in an attempt to create concepts “that could eventually be applied to other magic realist works of fiction as well” (250), although the logic as to why one would need three different concepts to talk about different aspects of the same thing seems a bit circular to me. Gabriel García Márquez, arguably the most well-known author of magical realism, “insists that he is a social realist, not a magical realist: one of his characters in One Hundred Years of Solitude confirms this amplification of the realm of the real by observing, ‘If they believe it in the Bible…I don’t see why they shouldn’t believe it from me’” (quoted in Magical Realism, Parkinson and Zamora 4)
The troubled past of the term “magical realism” reminds me of the disagreements surrounding the label “postmodernism.” While there are admittedly a great number of potential flaws with both terms, they are also highly recognizable labels that are popular enough to have staying power. Most people recognize them and have a general sense of what kinds of works they typically refer to. I don’t think anyone would say “postmodernism” is a perfect term, but despite its flaws it carries a certain amount of visibility with it.

I use the phrases “authors of color” and “US ethnic authors” to refer to African American, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American authors.

The term “literary activism” is typically used in one of two ways: to refer to a form of protest aimed at corporate publishing houses for discriminatory publishing practices, or to refer to activist literature, also called protest literature (specifically, literature produced in tandem with an organized social movement). I am using the term in a different way, to describe a phenomenon in literary fiction wherein activist strategies are deployed within the text, or activist agendas are promoted through the characters and plot events.

This statement belies a contradiction within Bowers’ logic: she makes a clear distinction between the European and Latin American brands of magical realism – locating the former in the surrealist tradition and the latter in mythology – while I would argue that they are part of a larger tradition that is more coherent than this.

Lisa Duggan, Vijay Prashad, and George Lipsitz all trace the shifts in social and political consciousness in the United States from the 1970s to the 1990s, exploring the
different ways that the political climate changed during these decades, resulting in the retrenchment of (neo)conservative ideology.

11 The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, religion, and national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 enacted federal regulations designed to thwart discrimination and violence at the polls so all US citizens can vote. The Fair Housing Act, also known as the Civil Rights Act of 1968, made discrimination based on race, religion, and national origin illegal in the sale, rental, and financing of housing.

12 Many thought the days of large movements were gone for good, and were surprised when 1999 saw the Battle of Seattle gather crowds in excess of 40,000 (Reed 240-42).

13 The response to the 1996 Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California embodies the effective silencing of conversations around race during the 1990s. What was intended to be a language movement acknowledging cultural roots in order to more effectively instruct school children turned into a national laughingstock as media portrayals of Ebonics largely ridiculed the concept of speech patterns based on African languages and passed down through generations of African Americans, African Caribbeans, and other groups of people with African ancestry whose family history was touched by the slave trade in the Americas. The degree to which Ebonics was ridiculed (even today it’s nearly impossible to have a serious conversation about Ebonics without being laughed out of the room at the mere mention of the word) is illustrative of the effective shutting-down of racial discourse.

14 Charles Gallagher explores the relationship between the color-blind, the concept of a post-race society, and the reinforcement of white privilege in his 2003 essay “Color-
Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-Race America.”


16 Vargas Llosa elaborates on this by discussing the novel as a form that has historically been repressed and banned, explaining that “[l]eading lives through fiction that one does not live in reality is a source of anxiety, a maladjustment of existence that can turn into rebelliousness, an unsubmitting attitude toward the establishment. One can well understand why regimes that seek to exercise total control over life mistrust works of fiction and subject them to censorship. Emerging from one’s own self, being another, even in illusion, is a way of being less a slave and of experiencing the risks of freedom” (221). The political potential of the novel, for Vargas Llosa, is a very real and dangerous potential to corrupt and controlling models of government. If we consider his station as a prominent author of magical realist fiction, the implication is that magical realism is an especially “dangerous” genre of fiction, which (to me) stems from its political history.

17 In his book Race and the Avant-Garde, Timothy Yu articulates the ways in which the poetics of different revolutionary movements in the 1960s and 1970s influenced each other: “Asian Americans in the 1970s found the rhetoric of black identity both exemplary and chastening. It provided a model for an Asian American identity but at the same time suggested, at least to some writers, how far Asian Americans had to go in defining their
own racial consciousness” (75). These kinds of interethnic connections are essential to my inquiry regarding magical realism.

Notes to Chapter 1

1 For a detailed explanation of the difficulties of researching Marie Laveau’s life and history, see Martha Ward’s introduction to her 2004 text *Voodoo Queen* (xi-xiii) and Carolyn Morrow Long’s introduction to her 2006 text *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (xvii-xix).

2 Rhodes has taken some liberties with Marie Laveau’s biographical history. While there is much controversy surrounding this historical and legendary woman, a few details are generally considered to be known fact: she was the daughter of a free woman of color and either a white man or a free man of color, and was the first Marie Laveau (not the daughter of a Marie Laveau who was also the daughter of another Marie Laveau); her grandmother and mother were not named Marie (her mother was named Marguerite, and her grandmother was either named the same, or named Catherine); she was born a *femme de couleur libre* (free woman of color) in the early 1800s; she married Jacques Paris (a carpenter, not the sailor Rhodes portrays in her novel) in August of 1819; Jacques Paris disappeared a short time later, and Marie Laveau began going by the name “the Widow Paris” as little as a year after their marriage; she had a long-term conjugal relationship with a white man named Christophe Duminy de Glapion, with whom she bore some children; one of her children with Glapion was Marie Laveau the Second; Marie Laveau the First died on June 16, 1881. Robert Tallant’s 1946 work *Voodoo in New Orleans*,

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while admittedly problematic in many ways, includes many primary source documents to support these basic biographical histories. Martha Ward’s *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (2004) gives a carefully researched and far less biased account of the lives of Marie Laveau and her daughter, Marie Laveau the Second.

3 For more on the performative aspect of lynching, see Koritha Mitchell’s book *Living With Lynching* and Jacqueline Goldsby’s text *A Spectacular Secret*.

4 Rhodes IDs these 3 Guédé as the Death Gods: Baron Samedi, Baron Cimetiere, and Baron La Croix.

5 Like Antoine DeLavier, whose incestuous relationship with his sister is an outward manifestation of his irredeemably perverse nature, John’s history of sexual exploitation and molestation makes him a symbol of the wrongs of exploiting one’s cultural heritage and hoping to profit by fooling others. If, as per Claude Levi-Strauss’ ideas regarding the incest taboo, marriage is defined as a trade of women between men, Marie’s act of murder is a systematic elimination of a system that would oppress and trade in women. Marie and Brigette are both married to other men: not only are John and Antoine violating the incest taboo, but they’re also violating the trade of women – a double violation that pathologizes them and illustrates how the whole system is broken and needs to be erased (hence Marie’s murder of both men).

6 Vizenor explains only that the wiindigoo (spellings vary, so I use Vizenor’s when not quoting others) is an evil cannibal. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, he takes the form of a charming white man. John Robert Colombo’s 1982 anthology on the wiindigoo (which is admittedly outdated and sensationalist, rather in the style of early Twentieth Century
ethnography) offers the explanation that the wiindigoo “may take one of a number of forms. The Windigo may assume the shape of a supernatural devil or demon of the woods. It may appear as a personality disorder or disturbance which finds expression in crazed actions and acts of cannibalism. The demon of the woods is an object of terror; the blood-thirsty cannibal, an object of horror. […] So the Windigo may be regarded as both a creature of legend and a living reality, whose doings are documented in fact and fantastic fiction” (1).

7 Vizenor doesn’t stop with civilization: he also indigenizes Christianity and Judaism by claiming that Jesus, too, was Mayan. This move fundamentally alters the relationship between Christianity and Native Americans, which is often fraught with historical conflicts and misunderstandings (to put it mildly). On another note, what Vizenor does with regard to resituating western civilization echoes what Ishmael Reed does in his 1972 novel Mumbo Jumbo. In this novel, Reed re-centers all of western civilization onto Africa and African culture.

8 It’s hard not to read “no name man” as a reference to Maxine Hong Kingston’s famous unnamed character, “no name woman,” who appears in the first chapter of The Woman Warrior (1975). Kingston’s text – officially classified as a memoir, but often discussed as a novel, a collection of short stories, and even a postmodern text that refuses easy classification – is generally considered to be an example of American magical realism.
Notes to Chapter 2

1 Since Christian missionaries were among the first European settler-colonists to travel to North America and interact with the indigenous people inhabiting the land (often rather aggressively, given their desire to convert Native Americans), Christianity has long been a presence in Native American culture.

2 The Carlisle Indian School – the first off-reservation boarding school in the nation – was opened in 1879. More schools subsequently opened, and they were part of an aggressive assimilationist trend in the US during the late-nineteenth-century. For a firsthand account of the boarding schools, Zitkála Ša (Yankton Dakota), also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, wrote about her experiences in “School Days of an Indian Girl” published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1900.

3 At one point, Ezol writes “1 plus 1 = 4” four time sin her journal, and explains, “My mother plus my father equals 4, accounting for my sister and me. My sister and I are palokta humma. Split red. Twins. Therefore numbers may split and remain unaccounted for as in one plus one equals four” (140). This explanation illustrates that numbers are not always what they appear to be. The equation “1+1” asks for an answer, but Ezol illustrates alternate ways of approaching what appears, at first glance, to be a straightforward equation with only one correct answer.

4 In Thomas King’s collection of essays on storytelling, The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative (2003), King talks about the differences between a Native creation story and the Christian one. His articulation of the reasons for the division between the two makes things exceedingly clear:
In our Native story, we begin with water and mud, and, through the good offices of Charm, her twins, and the animals, move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete. […] in Genesis, the post-garden world we inherit is decidedly martial in nature, a world at war – God vs. the Devil, humans vs. the elements. Or to put things into corporate parlance, competitive. In our Native story, the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance.

So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides toward chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation. And there’s the problem.

If we see the world through Adam’s eyes, we are necessarily blind to the world that Charm and the Twins and the animals help to create. If we believe one story to be sacred, we must see the other as secular. (25)

5 Louis Owens articulates this problem as follows: “In fact, the Indian in today’s world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people” (4).

6 Louis Owens describes the Dawes Act as a “historical catastrophe” (30).
7 For a concise and detailed explanation of Allotment, see Joy Porter’s essay “Historical and Cultural Contexts to Native American Literature” in The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature (2005).

8 For instance, at one point Howe includes three pages consisting entirely of newspaper articles and their publication dates. While the reader can begin to understand some emerging motifs – racism, crime, mainstream American views of Native Americans – they remain unconnected without Ezol’s accompanying narration. In many cases, these newspaper clippings betray the views of their presumably-white authors. In the case of one of these clippings, which bears the heading CREEK INDIAN OBJECTS TO BURIAL ON HIS LAND, the reporter writes: “A peculiar instance, which shows the ignorance and prejudice of the Fullblood Creek Indians, happened here recently” (150) and goes on to tell the story of how a white farmer leasing land from a Creek Indian died and was refused burial on the leased land. Even without an explanation of the incident, it is clear that the reporter of this story sympathizes with the dead white farmer and harbors and open prejudice against Native Americans, as evidenced by the declaration that all Creek Indians are ignorant and prejudiced. Shortly after this, in one of Ezol’s journal entries, the ignorance and prejudice of the presumably-white reporter is revealed when she explains her uncle’s situation: “Early this morning Uncle visited the courthouse and was told that, indeed, the wife of the squatter buried on the little prairie was suing us. She claimed that Uncle had promised her the land, and the proof of this verbal agreement was the fact that Uncle and Leon Bonaparte had buried her husband ‘on said prairie’” (180).
Pastiche in literature is traditionally defined as either a work created entirely from the combination of pieces of other works, or (in a more figurative sense) a work of literature that has many layers of meaning. I tend to adopt a definition that lies somewhere in between these two. For all intents and purposes, I define pastiche as a work of literature that incorporates multiple mediums (visual and/or written) in a manner that contributes to the story being told in the main narrative.

Gloria Anzaldúa talks about the way globalization has the potential to create what she calls a *raza mestiza* (a mixed race) where because of “racial, ideological, cultural, and biological crosspollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*” (99).

Castillo’s chapter titles are also reminiscent of *Don Quixote*, stylistically grounding them in both classical Spanish literature and what some critics consider one of the earliest magical realist texts.

The full quote, typically attributed to Porfirio Diaz, is: “Poor Mexico! So far from God, and so close to the United States.” The removal of the first exclamation allows for a broadening of meaning by delocalizing the statement so it can be applied to a less specific geographical region.

I say Sofi was “abandoned” because that’s the story Castillo gives the reader until the novel is nearly over and we get the following passage: “As her memory came back to her, Sofi la Mayor now relayed the whole story to her comadre […] how back in those early days Domingo was little by little betting away the land she had inherited from her father,
and finally she couldn’t take no more and gave him his walking papers. […] Yes! It had been Sofia who had made Domingo leave” (214).

Interesting, Esperanza sends Sofi word of her death through “La Llorona, Chicana-international astral-traveler” (162). La Llorona is a folk figure whose story goes something like this: La Llorona (originally a woman named Maria, by some accounts) had several children, but she drowned the children so she could be with the man she loved. When she went to him, he rejected her and, devastated, she committed suicide. When she arrived at the gates of Heaven, she was denied entrance until she could produce her children. Now she searches the earth at nighttime dressed in white, wailing mournfully, and stealing children near rivers or water (since she drowned her children). In an essay exploring the appearance of La Llorona figures in contemporary Chicano cinema, Domino Renee Pérez articulates how “La Llorona is the woman of our dreams and nightmares who wanders through the landscapes of our imagination, crying, searching, nurturing, always calling out to us. She is the wronged mother, lover, or woman who murders or abandons her children, though she will never stop searching until her children are brought home. La Llorona’s prominence within Chicano popular culture has given her iconographic status” (229). Ironically, Castillo’s La Llorona is depicted as a messenger, bringing news of a lost daughter (Esperanza) to her family. Instead of appearing as a threat, this La Llorona helps the lost child communicate with her family. Castillo uses Esperanza to contradict traditional depictions of La Llorona. Esperanza’s selection of messengers indicates a significant shift in her marginalization by society: not only is she a Chicana more popular absent than present, she is now a dead Chicana who
communicates not via mass media, but through a folkloric figure who is widely feared and despised. Pérez contends that “La Llorona folklore is a dynamic reconfiguration of the diversity of Chicano life and experiences, reflecting regional, economic, social, sexual, and political concerns;” she goes further to argue that “traditional and contemporary Llorona images […] illustrate the expansion of the mythology to reflect a wide range of Chicana experiences” (230, 246). Castillo’s incorporation of the Llorona figure, and her revisionist depiction of La Llorona as a character who helps bring a lost child home rather than removing that child from her home, seems to do what Pérez sees Llorona figures in Chicano cinema doing: reflecting the concerns of specific communities in a manner that expands the mythology to reflect these new experiences. In So Far From God, La Llorona is used to undo Esperanza’s diaspora and counteract the disappearance of successful and educated Chicanas at the hands of a dominant culture that places little to no value on them. Contrary to popular folklore, Castillo’s La Llorona helps Esperanza find her way home.

15 The Ciudad Juárez murders, also known as the feminicidios, are a string of murders that began in 1993 and continue even today. The victims are almost all young (brown) women in their teens or very early twenties, many of whom are maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez. For more information on these murders, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán edited a volume called Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera (published by the University of Texas Press) that deals with the Ciudad Juárez murders from many angles. There is also a novel by Gaspar de Alba, published in 1993,
called *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* which has a corresponding website with more up-to-date information and helpful links (www.desertblood.net).

16 Here, Caridad is also compared to a folkloric figure named Lozen in the following passage:

The stories grew until some began to say that she was the ghost of Lozen, Warm Springs Apache mystic woman warrior, sister of the great chief Victorino who had vowed “to make war against the white man forever.” And Lozen, among the last thirty-eight warriors, was the only woman. It was Lozen who alerted the others when the enemy approached, being warned herself first by the tingling of her palms and her hands turning purple.

When left by herself, Lozen turned toward the four directions and sang to her god Ussen to guide her through the wilderness.

Yes, perhaps this mountain woman was not the one the Penitente brothers thought her to be, but a spirit-memory, and that was why she was not overcome by them. (88)

It is interesting that Caridad, the only sister who does not display the “flat butt of the Pueblo blood undeniably circulating throughout their veins” (26) and therefore is not explicitly tied to her partial Native American (Pueblo) heritage, is the one who is likened to Lozen. Add to this Caridad’s “death” where she and Esmeralda (who is also Native American [Acoma]) are returned to Tsichtinako, and it becomes clear that Castillo is doing something interesting here with Caridad’s character. I speculate that her depiction of Caridad – not only tying her in with these myths, but also making her a curandera – is
intended to highlight the indigenous aspect of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* figure, just as Esperanza’s character highlights the Chicana aspect and Fe’s highlights the American(ized) aspect. Through these sisters, Castillo provides us with a variety of “types” who struggle with different aspects of society and who define themselves in different ways.

17 The popularly reprinted Acoma creation myth originates from the written text by Matthew W. Stirling called *Origin Myth of Acoma and Other Records* published in the Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 135 in 1942. He “obtained” the myth from a group of Acoma who visited Washington in 1928. I found it in several books (including *American Indian Literature: An Anthology* edited by Alan R. Velie (1991), and *The Greenwood Library of American Folktales* edited by Thomas A. Green (2006)) and saw it referenced in several more (including Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*). Castillo shortens this version of the Acoma creation myth, which begins, “In the beginning two female human beings were born. These two children were born underground at a place called Shipapu. As they grew up, they began to be aware of each other. There was no light and they could only feel each other. […] After they had grown considerably, a Spirit whom they afterward called *Tsichtinako* spoke to them” and eventually had them help her create the earth, come up to the surface, and begin mankind. Castillo’s truncated version of the Acoma creation myth, complete with commentary on who is and is not receptive to it, is presented in the following passage:

*Tsichtinako was calling!* Esmeralda’s grandmother holding tight to her little grandson’s hand heard and nodded. The Pueblo tour guide heard, cocking her ear as if
trying to make out the words. The priest at the church, who happened to be performing baptisms that morning, ran out and put his hands to his temples. Two or three dogs began to bark. The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female, although no one had heard it in a long time and some had never heard it before. But all still knew who It was. (211)

Castillo’s version of the myth is consistent with Stirling’s transcription. Her claim that “no one had heard it in a long time and some had never heard it before” is her way of anticipating and rebutting any arguments about the validity of this version of the myth, specifically the claim that the first two humans were both female, and of reminding her readership that some things may have been forgotten – among them the status of women in society.

18 In a discussion of Julia Kristeva’s use of the term “abjection,” Judith Butler talks about how “abjection” is used as “a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion.” Butler goes on to discuss Iris Young’s contribution to this conversation, in which she uses “Kristeva to understand sexism, homophobia, and racism [wherein] the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation [sic].” Butler then makes her own claims about abjection coming out of Kristeva’s and Young’s ideas, articulating the ways in which Young’s idea of “repulsion” creates an Other “through exclusion and domination.” (All these discussions take place in Judith Butler’s
Gender Trouble, on pages 181-2 in the 2007 Routledge edition of the text.) I use the term similarly to how Butler uses it, except that when it comes to these folkloric figures, I am not only using “abjection” to think about sexuality, but also any deviation from social norms governing the role of women with regard to men, children, domestic responsibilities, etc. La Llorona is abject because she murdered her children to chase a man she loved; this deviates from proscribed maternal behavior in a rather obvious way. Matlaciuatl preys upon men (and penetrates them), becoming the aggressor rather than the victim. Ciupipiltin, like La Llorona, preys on children (and leaves a weapon in their place – very unwomanly). Finally, Cihuacoatl deals with women who have failed to become mothers – a grievous failure by society’s standards. When it comes to Loca, she can also be thought of as abject because of her perceived mental illness, her relationship with her animals, and her refusal to conform to societal norms regulating social interaction. In these ways, Loca is considered Other and is certainly abject.

Notes to Chapter 3

1 I’m thinking specifically of Monica Hanna’s article “‘Reassembling the Fragments,’” Daniel Bautista’s article “Comic Book Realism,” and Anne Mahler’s article “The Writer as Superhero” respectively.

2 At various points, they reference authors such as Salman Rushdie, Joseph Conrad, Octavia Butler, Alice Walker, and (most obviously) Oscar Wilde. These are just a few, but the trend that appears when you look at their names side-by-side like this is interesting. You have, on the one hand, authors such as Conrad and Wilde who are part of
an earlier tradition – and in the case of Conrad, and author who is part of the colonial
tradition. On the other hand, you have contemporary authors who question the colonial
and imperialist drive – these would be authors like Rushdie, Butler, and Walker – and
who, in some cases, are the creators of important magical realist texts themselves.

3 Stephen E. Henderson explains how the term “soul” was appropriated and diminished
by mainstream white America, and how African American people defined the word as
“the Black lifestyle, the Black wisdom of the race, born in suffering, but proud, flexible,
hip, shrewd, loving, tough, lyrical, patient, tender, and full of virtuoso elegance” (98). He
goes on to argue that there is a pattern in the whitewashing of African American words:
“A Word which has special significance for the Black community becomes useful or
titillating to the white community. Then a process of justification and sanitizing begins.
The media, the critics, and eventually the scholars take their roles. The chief thing,
however, is to deny the original Blackness of the new usage out of ignorance or by
design” (98). He discusses the apparent harmlessness of this kind of verbal diminishing,
but articulates its role in the grand scheme of things: the devaluing of anything inherently
African or African American, and the rewriting of words, myths, and culture as
dependent on or originating from white America. These ideas are especially interesting
with regard to this novel since Touré is very obviously invested in illustrating how
African Americans culture has strong roots in African culture, the history of slavery, and
the very specific experiences of African American people in the US. His novel disavows
any possibility of “whitewashing” this experience, and instead is a testament to the
strength and beauty of African Americans and African American culture.
4 There is a Soul City, North Carolina that was proposed by African American business leaders as a planned community in 1969, and which received funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1972. However, development did not go as planned, and while the community remains to this day, it is small and underdeveloped. Touré’s Soul City does not appear to be the real city in North Carolina, however I think the argument could be made that Touré’s version of the city could be interpreted as a version of what Soul City, North Carolina could have become. I also think that his Soul City could be an imagined community entirely separate from any reality.

5 I use the term “Black” as a racial descriptor (similar to “African American”), but also with specific social and political intentions. My understanding of the word “Black” comes out of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. articulates in a discussion of “the move from blackness as a physical concept to blackness as a metaphysical concept,” about which he says “this movement became the very text and pretext of the ‘Blackness’ of the recent Black Arts movement” (“Preface to Blackness” 149-50). The term “Black” (with a capital B) has its roots in the Black Arts movement, and the politics of that movement are especially relevant to my study of Black literature here. So for me, “Black” is a social, political, cultural, and racial term.

6 The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was thusly named because in the years leading up to Missouri’s 1819 request for admission to the Union as a slave state, there were 22 states – 11 of them slaveholding, 11 of them free. When Missouri was admitted, it was admitted as a slave state. However, to “compromise,” two additional conditions went into effect:
Maine was admitted as a free state and slavery was excluded in all lands in the Louisiana Purchase north of latitude 36°30’ (with the exception of Missouri). The Missouri Compromise didn’t take full effect until 1821 – the year Moses Djembe helped lead escaped slaves from harm’s way in Soul City.

7 It’s important to point out that Mahogany is descended from Moses, because as her relationship with Cadillac – a Soul City outsider – develops, her status as not just a born-and-raised Soulful, but also a direct descendent of one of Soul City’s founders, becomes increasingly significant.

8 It seems pertinent to point out that “Shiftless Rice” rhymes conspicuously with “Jesus Christ,” and this character possesses significant similarities to Jesus’ (such as turning water into wine and living/dying in Jerusalem).

9 Jack Hitlerian’s last name is, like Hueynewton’s name, relatively straightforward. The reference to Hitler marks him as an extremist and a racist, and the generic moniker “Jack” ensures that the focus falls on his last name. Since his surname takes the form of an adjective, we can assume that this character is, in fact, Hitlerian in his style of governance.

10 Touré is very specifically genders God, portraying her as a woman.

11 The twins’ father calls to mind the characters Bak Goong, Ah Goong, and BaBa in Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1980 novel China Men. Like Mooncake Vixen, China Men uses myth in unusual ways, embedding it into each of the characters’ stories as well as rewriting various myths and folktales in short segments that appear between the chapters. Both novels center on the Chinese immigrant experience in America, but they differ in
that Kingston’s novel focuses on first-generation Chinese men. Even still, there are many similarities between Bak Goong, Ah Goong, and the Double Happiness twins’ father. Bak Goong, who works on a sugar plantation in Hawai’i, chafes under the no-talking rule the plantation imposes on its laborers. Rather than remain silent, he gets his words out by disguising them as coughs, spitting them out as curses and insults aimed at his overseers. When it comes to Chin’s father Wong character, instead of coughing his disgust at his oppressors, he spits it out. Similarly, Bak Goong’s son, Ah Goong develops the habit of aggressively masturbating off the side of a basket while shouting “I am fucking the world.” This masturbation is a way for Ah Goong to reverse the power structure so that rather than being “fucked” by the world, he does the “fucking.” His anger is very similar to that of the Double Happiness twins’ father, whose bitterness manifests itself in a constant stream of cussing. Both outpourings serve as a means of rejecting oppression and subverting the restrictions placed upon Chinese immigrants. Finally, Kingston’s BaBa character is silent except for outbursts of cursing directed at women. Scholars connect these curses as curses against the effeminization of Chinese men in the US – so BaBa is effectively lashing out against the stereotypes applied to him. In Chin’s novel, the twins’ father fills his cooking with curses. Unlike BaBa, father Wong’s curses are not directed at women (although he uses female-related language in his insults), but at the food he slaves over and those who will consume it.

12 There were two Sino-Japanese Wars: one that lasted from 1894-1895 and was fought over control of Korea (China lost), and one that spanned 1837-1945 and was the result of Japan’s attempt to occupy China. It’s unclear which one Grandma Wong is referring to. If
she is talking about the second Sino-Japanese War here, this would be consistent with her connections to anti-colonialist activism since this war was largely considered a war against imperialism. However, the first Sino-Japanese War marked the beginning of the end of the Qing Dynasty, which was criticized for allowing “aggressive foreign imperialism” during the 1890s (Bickers xi). Half a decade after the first Sino-Japanese War ended, the Boxer Rebellion occurred as a result of heavy anti-imperialist sentiment. Furthermore, the vagueness of this reference could also be meant to indicate her supernatural age.

13 Paul A. Cohen provides the following through explanation for the origins of the term “Boxer” in his book A History in Three Keys: “One of the first myths about the Boxer movement that must be dispelled has to do with the term – ‘Boxer’ (or its European-language equivalents) – that Westerners use to designate it. The Chinese term for ‘boxing’ – quan or quanshu – refers to a range of martial arts practices, many of which have little to do with what we think of as ‘boxing’ in the West. Since quan is a generic term, it is rarely if ever used alone in Chinese writing on the Boxer movement. In contemporary writing hostile to the movement the term most often encountered is quanfei, literally ‘boxer (or boxing) bandit.’ Nonhostile Chinese writing on the Boxers generally modifies the term quan with the phrase ‘United in Righteousness’ (Yihe), which was the name that first appeared in northwestern Shandong in the spring of 1898 and remained the name of the movement (along with the alternative and more official-sounding Yihetuan or ‘Militia United in Righteousness’)) throughout its expansionist phase. Yihe Boxing referred to a particular method (or style or school) of Chinese
'boxing.' It was thus distinguished from other forms [...] that were also practiced in western Shandong in the last years of the nineteenth century. Without in any way detracting from the uniqueness of the Boxer movement of 1898-1900, in other words, it is fair to say that this uniqueness does not inhere in the term ‘Boxer’” (16-7).

14 Kato also points to the relationship between kung fu films and widespread social unrest in Hong Kong as its populace agitated for decolonization through more conventional forms of activism (10).

15 Interestingly, the fox is typically considered a male figure in Chinese mythology, and while he can transform himself into a human woman, the implications here get even more complex when we consider that Mei Ling could be read as a male character. Suddenly, her hypersexuality pushes against expected norms in even more ways than if she was simply a woman through-and-through. However, I don’t feel that there is necessarily sufficient grounds within the novel to warrant this reading in more detail than shallow speculation like this.

Notes to Chapter 4

1 Several critics have written about the significance of geography in Tropic of Orange. Most recently, Jinqi Ling explores the re-mapping that occurs in Yamashita’s novel in chapter 5 of her book Across Meridians where she argues that the text’s “transnational agenda” is reflected in the spatial reconfiguration caused by the orange. Along these lines, Ruth Hsu’s essay “The Cartography of Justice” focuses on the relationship between shifting borders and changing perspectives with regard to social justice. In the fourth
chapter of her book *The Interethnic Imagination*, Caroline Rody argues that Yamashita rejects the limitations of borders in *Tropic of Orange*. On a related note, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Sue-Im Lee each look closely at the breaking down of borders between communities and the formation of what they respectively refer to as “post-national spaces” and a “global village.”

2 Theo D’haen, Wendy B. Faris, Stephen Slemon all articulate different aspects of the mutually beneficial relationship between postmodernism and magical realism.

3 In addition to scholars such as Ling and Hsu (mentioned earlier), Kevin Cooney’s essay “Metafictional Geographies” offers an in-depth analysis of the intersections of metafiction and mapping in *The People of Paper*.

4 In “The Ends of Postmodernism, the Ends of America” and “Beyond Blank Fiction,” Rachel Adams and Delphine Bénézet (respectively) analyze the relationship between form and transnationalism in Yamashita’s novel, noting how the text’s genre-defying characteristics parallel changing understandings of nation and community. Similarly, in his essay “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction” Ramón Saldívar uses the term “historical fantasy” to talk about how Plascencia’s novel reflects the need for a new literary form in what he calls the “postrace era in American literature” (574).

5 More specifically, the title “Orange Agents” recalls the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.
David Montejano’s conclusion to his 1999 edited collection *Chicano Politics and Society* presents an intelligent analysis of NAFTA’s impact on Mexican laborers, immigration, and border militarization.

For a detailed overview of the historical, mythological, and political aspects of Aztlán, see Chapter 1 in Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race*.

The Battle of Seattle was a protest movement that took place in Seattle, Washington on November 30, 1999, in which activists attempted to delay negotiations by the World Trade Organization as part of the anti-globalization movement.

Ngai’s concept of “imported colonialism” intersects with Lisa Lowe’s argument about the mid-nineteenth century use of “coolie” labor as “a fantasy of ‘free’ yet racialized and indentured labor” (194). The shift from slavery to the use of “coolie” labor Lowe is interested in is followed by the shift to (il)legal Mexican labor Ngai is interested in wherein Mexican immigrant labor is the next step in an ever-shifting cycle of labor exploitation in the United States.


In a 2010 interview with Matthew Baker, Plascencia addressed the issue of the “broken” binary code: “Understandably, the tortoise binary flusters human decompilers. It’s a very mammal-centric view of the universe to expect mechanical amphibian language to conform to our computers.”
The first sign is labeled “El Monte Flores” in the novel. Plascencia’s explanation for it in Benavidez’s interview is: “This is the hand sign for El Monte Flores Gang. The backward ‘F’ signifies Flores. This sign is commonly used to denote gang affiliation and when posing for pictures” (27). The second sign simply reads, “Cloudy skies and lonely mornings” in the novel. The explanation Plascencia gives: “This sign means clean drains but lonely mornings. Once used by Froggy the day after Sandra left him. On that day his bathtub remained unclogged and here was none of her hair to pull from the drain” (27).

The third and final sign bears the caption “The sky is falling.” in the novel, but has this explanation in the interview: “This is sign for The sky is falling. This sign is used on those perilous mornings when the sky has been broken and blue debris fall from above” (27).

In a discussion of her use of the Cherokee syllabary in Pushing the Bear, Diane Glancy explains that “certain words appear in the Cherokee for a sense of the language. They can be viewed as holes in the text so the original can show through” (239). If we think of Plascencia’s use of illegible codes as “holes” that allow something else to “show through,” the question becomes one of what he is trying to show the reader that can’t be accomplished through a less experimental use of signifiers.

On page 117 of the first edition, the man’s name is cut out of Liz’s sentence and Saturn responds, “Don’t say his name. I don’t want him in here. I will cut him out” (my emphasis). However, in later editions when his name has been crossed out, this passage reads “Don’t say his name. I don’t want him in here. I will scratch him out” (my emphasis).
Taken on its own, this passage would ordinarily read “She sat with [ ] on their painted porch swing. He was of meat, his skin wrinkled at the eyes and brow, but still she said, ‘[ ] all these years and I still love you,’ and she touched his face with her paper hands” (244). However, reading it as a palimpsest by incorporating the words on the page behind it into the sentences, it reads, “She sat with [that] on their painted porch swing. He was of meat, his skin wrinkled at the eyes and brow, but still she said, ‘[urning], all these years and I still love you,’ and she touched his face with her hands.” While relatively meaningless, referring to him as “that” further dehumanizes him, while naming him “urning” (a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century term for homosexuality) might be intended to portray him as a mismatch for Liz’s heterosexual desire. While this particular reading seems like a bit of a stretch to me, it would be consistent with Saturn’s petty attitude toward the man, and his intense hatred for all white men who “steal” Chicana women away from their Chicano lovers.

By the early 1990s legislation had rendered the agricultural labor industry inhospitable to laborers (Decierdo 83, 103). The gradual implosion of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and NAFTA in 1994 also contributed to increasingly stringent border controls.

It wasn’t until 1933 with the creation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) that the US government officially cared about who crossed the border and in what quantities. After that, INS initiatives such as Operation Wetback (1954) and Operation Gatekeeper (1994) restricted movement across the US-Mexico border and attempted to promote and expedite deportations.
Notes to Conclusion

1 All four of her published novels to date engage with magical realism, but *The Girl Who Chased the Moon* (2011) is a nice example to juxtapose with Laura Esquivel’s canonical magical realist work *Like Water For Chocolate* (1989) because of its use of magic in relation to cooking. While *Like Water For Chocolate* uses magic to enhance the drama in the characters’ lives, complicating their relationships alongside its commentary on the politics of the Mexican Revolution, Allen’s novel uses magic for far more personal reasons.

2 While Neil Gaiman was born in the UK, I include him here in my discussion of American authors because he has lived in the United States for over two decades, has children who were born and raised in the US, and is married to an American (his second American wife, actually). Perhaps more importantly, his biography on his website, [www.neilgaiman.com](http://www.neilgaiman.com), begins: “Neil Gaiman was born in Hampshire, UK, and now lives in the United States near Minneapolis.” His nationality seems murky enough that I feel comfortable including him in this discussion.


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Bibliography of Magical Realist Fiction


