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Perception, Knowledge, and Belief:
Magical Realism as an Expression of Cultural Disjunction in the
First Section of Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*

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I. Cultural Perception and the Fantastic

Cuban author Alejo Carpentier's 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo*, published in English translation as *The Kingdom of This World* in 1957, is a work of central importance for the development of the magical realist narrative mode in Latin American literature. An account of the events of the Haitian revolution, the catalysts that preceded it, and its immediate aftermath, the novel emphasizes the role Afro-Caribbean beliefs and cultural practices – including Voodoo spiritualism – played in motivating the initial slave revolt and defining the revolution. Carpentier foregrounds elements of the fantastic against an otherwise realist narrative in attempting to articulate a uniquely Afro-Caribbean cultural consciousness that does not share Western culture's normative rationality.

In his essay “On the Marvelous Real in America,” which was originally published as the novel's preface, Carpentier suggests that the natural and human reality of the New World is intrinsically marvelous and cannot be satisfactorily represented by either modern Western literature's realist narrative mode or the “literary ruse” of Surrealism (Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America” 86). For this reason, his revolutionary-era depiction of the French colony of Saint-Domingue – and later the state of Haiti – includes fantastic elements like witchcraft, animal metamorphoses, and ghostly apparitions, each of which the novel's characters accept as factual. Though Carpentier may have intended that these magical intrusions into the narrative be read as markers of the truly “marvelous reality” of Afro-Caribbean life, they have the additional effect of creating contradictory “rational” and “magical” interpretations of the narrative. The fact that these fantastic elements primarily appear when the narrative adopts the perspective of its black characters highlights the rupture between the novel's respective European and Afro-Caribbean modes of perception. This function of the fantastic in *The Kingdom* exemplifies the magical realist narrative mode's disjunctive capacity to express cultural

difference.

The narrative disjunction created by the existence of two opposing interpretations of the novel's events unravels Carpentier's intended project of depicting the New World's "marvelous reality." The American reality cannot be irreducibly magical if it is torn between contradictory non-Western/enchanted and Western/disenchanted ways of knowing. And as is suggested by the pessimism of *The Kingdom's* latter half, which shows Haiti's new political elite's adoption of the same oppressive social and labor practices employed by the French, the New World's history incorporates the Western and non-Western in equal parts. Neither an Afro-Caribbean nor a broader New World identity can be expressed as just one of the terms of the master-slave dialectic; rather, these identities exist at the pivot of overlapping African and European, or New World and Old World, modes of perception, knowledge, and belief. The liminal quality of the New World experience is expressed most strongly in *The Kingdom* during those instances in which elements of the fantastic – identified with Afro-Caribbean perception – emerge through tears in the novel's realistic fabric.

II. Disjunctive Magical Realism

Critics have struggled to come to a useful definition of the term "magic realism" since the German art critic Franz Roh coined the term in the 1920's to describe the work of certain post-expressionist painters. Though in the past magical realism has been treated as a genre unto itself, there have been recent attempts to identify the specific narrative or structural features that create a text's sense of "magical reality." Fredric Jameson has been a key figure in this effort, and in "Magic Realism in Film" he writes that:

the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type

of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present; or to generalize the hypothesis more starkly, magic realism depends on a context which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features. (Jameson 311)

For Jameson, magical realism is a formal effect that results from a text's juxtaposition of two ways of knowing. Assuming that we agree with Jameson that the realist aesthetic is an artifact of a modern, capitalist phase of economic development, a text that blends this realism with a premodern, irrealist aesthetic can produce the uncanny effect of the fantastic “invading” ordinary reality. This effect – which we term magical realism – thus suspends the reader's expectation that the text should conform to the rules of realist narrative craft. For this reason a magical realist text can effectively bridge separate modes of historical consciousness.

Jameson recognizes that the possibility of magical realist narrative is not confined to the literary space of Latin America; rather, magical realist features emerge in the narrative depiction of specific historical circumstances in which two distinct modes of production – and therefore two fundamentally different worldviews – exist simultaneously in the same physical and temporal space. The magical realist narrative mode's exposition of this socio-historical dichotomy can thus be instrumental in exploring cultural difference and postcolonial themes.

Opposing Jameson's historical conception of magical realism is Carpentier's programmatic aesthetic of *lo real maravilloso*, or “the marvelous real.” The Cuban author would have it that the marvelous real is the authentic expressive idiom of the peoples and cultures of the New World. For Carpentier, the fantastic in the Americas is a very real presence in individuals' everyday lives: “The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the

continent and who left the names that we still carry...” (Carpentier, “Marvelous Real” 87). Christopher Warnes has called this approach an “ontological” magical realism in that it seeks to represent the reality of a particular mode of cultural being (Warnes 13).

Narrative depictions of this fantastic presence in American life thus resonate more authentically for Carpentier than the European Surrealists' “artificial” evocations of the fantastic. A mode of artistic expression that recognizes Americans' engagement with the fantastic would thus be more appropriate to the New World reality. This expression could even assume a concrete historical agency: David Mikics writes that authors like Carpentier “[draw] on the New World's melding or mediation among cultures in conflict to turn a pessimism derived from historical violence into an optimistic hope for imaginative rebirth” (Mikics 374).

But the side-by-side presentation of *The Kingdom's* two modes of consciousness – respectively, a civilized/rational/capitalist mode and an indigenous/magical/primitive mode – undermines Carpentier's claim that the New World is itself intrinsically fantastic. Warnes argues that Carpentier's double presentation of both fantastic and rational explanations of certain events in the novel – see for instance the narrative contradictions during the scene of Macandal's execution – destabilizes the author's ontological magical realism (Warnes 70-72). More directly, the presence of this enchanted-disenchanted dichotomy undermines Carpentier's search for a singular New World mode of being. The magical events of *The Kingdom* would not appear magical if the text's realist element did not throw them into high relief.

In fact, many of the novel's magically-real events serve a metaphorical or didactic purpose. Steven M. Bell notes that protagonist Ti Noël's transformation into a goose at the end of the novel brings him to his moral reflection that “man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the

Kingdom of This World” (Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World* 185). To Bell, this passage indicates that “the text's fantastic elements... function as a sort of literary device, as a means to an end, and not only as an end in themselves” (Bell 40). Ti Noël's frustrated attempt to assimilate into goose society underlines the fantastic's “problematization of the coexistence of two orders,” and his animal metamorphoses help to elucidate meaning in a novel in which “two worldviews or realities are found in delicate juxtaposition” (42).

If the fantastic necessarily implies its opposite, then Jameson is correct in stating that the interaction of these opposed terms creates the effect of magic realism. The fantastic peeks through *The Kingdom's* normative realism at the intersection of these two modes of perception. A close reading of the novel's instances of cross-cultural interaction reveals the integral role the fantastic plays in highlighting and exploring cultural difference. Because it contains such a density of these interactions, the novel's first section is a particularly rich source of examples of magical realist cultural disjunction.

III. Magical Realist Cultural Disjunction in the First Section of *The Kingdom of This World*

The Kingdom of This World's first section, which relates the guerrilla campaign of terror waged by the escaped slave and Voodoo shaman Macandal against the island's French colonists, strongly expresses the cultural disjunction between the French colonial and African slave cultural spheres of colonial Saint-Domingue. Though this opening movement alludes less frequently to apparently magical occurrences than some of the novel's subsequent episodes, Carpentier's frequent juxtapositions of black and European modes of perception make it the work's outstanding example of magical realist disjunction. A close reading of this part of *The Kingdom* explicates the novel's characterization of these two cultures and highlights the mechanism by which the text articulates cultural difference. This

examination demonstrates that the fantastic and the magically-real appear most prominently at those moments at which the two cultures clash over the interpretation of particular events.

The Kingdom's first chapter explores the cultural gap separating the French from their African slaves. In the book's opening passage, the French plantation aristocrat M. Lenormand de Mézy is accompanied by his slave Ti Noël, groom to his master's stables and the novel's ostensible protagonist, to purchase a horse in the colonial town of Cap Français. The slave's reactions to the refinement and decadence of the Enlightenment-era French colonial society – he contrasts the French colonists' culture negatively against the virile, vital and heroic Africa he has received from oral tradition – foregrounds the master-slave cultural chasm. Though there are no unambiguously supernatural occurrences within the realist narrative space of this chapter, Ti Noël's explication of the virtues of African belief in magic and the irrational foreshadow the novel's more overtly fantastic elements.

Carpentier's descriptions of de Mézy emphasize the decadence of French colonial aristocratic culture and the slaveowner's effeminacy is highlighted by his dependence upon the slave. De Mézy clearly puts a great deal of trust in Ti Noël: the gentleman “knew the slave's gift for judging horse flesh, [and] had paid the price in ringing *louis d'or* without questioning his choice” (Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World* 9). The slave's practical knowledge is contrasted with the more esoteric and abstract occupations the Cap's inhabitants. For example, the town's barber “subscribed to the *Leyden Gazette* for the enlightenment of his customers” (10).

De Mézy is emasculated when compared to Ti Noël: the slave mounts a robust draft horse that his master purchases – the big, virile animal's coat gives off an “acid reek” – while the Frenchman rides a “lighter-limbed sorrel” (9). And when de Mézy “emerge[s] from the barber's with heavily powdered cheeks,” the slave finds that he resembles one of the “four dull wax faces that stood in a row

along the counter, smiling stupidly” (15). Bewigged, depilated, perfumed, and beholden to the ministrations of slaves, the French ruling class strikes a poor contrast to the potent and decisive African kings of Ti Noël's myth-memory.

Though Ti Noël can recall the “talking head” employed in a huckster's medicine show act, the first elements of the fantastic enter the novel upon the slave's encounter with a print of an African king receiving a Frenchman. This king is depicted resplendently: he is “framed by feather fans and seated upon a throne adorned with figures of monkeys and lizards,” (10, 12). Though this print serves to reverse the novel's white superiority dynamic, the animal imagery also provides the first occurrence of a human-beast nexus that reappears continually over the course of the novel and which Carpentier shows to be a crucial aspect of the Afro-Caribbean belief system. Ti Noël has learned from the Mandingue slave Macandal that in the ancestral history of his Africa there had been “epic battles in which the animals had been allies of men”; that a certain King Da was “the incarnation of the Serpent, which is the eternal beginning, never ending...”; and that there were “princes who were leopards, and princes who knew the language of the forest” (13, 15).

Against the Europeans' treatment of animals as beasts of burden that are to be exploited for their labor – Ti Noël listens to Macandal “[sing-song] in the sugar mill while the oldest horse on the Lenormand de Mézy plantation turned the cylinders” (19) – the slaves' African heritage recognizes a stronger communion between man and animal. For a modern Western culture for which creating wealth is the overriding imperative, animals' utility as beasts of burden overwhelms human sympathy for animals. But for the slaves the boundaries between man and beast are not so sharply-drawn: humans and animals can seemingly communicate with each other, and one can even become the other. Macandal's repetitive labor of pressing sheets of cane between the rollers, which is not unlike the

horse's endless circling of the mill, further emphasizes his African connection to the animal world.

Knowledge of magic and irrational systems of belief are also key elements of Ti Noël's African historical memory. The African warrior-kings were “made invulnerable by the science of the preparers, and fell wounded only if in some way they had offended the gods of Lightning or of the Forge” (13-14). One dynast had “achieved the gift of tongues” and others are said to have been “lords of the clouds, of the seed, of bronze, of fire” (15).

This succession of natural images – “clouds” and “seed” – placed beside technological images – “bronze” and “fire” – reinforces the elementality of Afro-Caribbean consciousness. Here Africans are portrayed as less alienated from nature than their French masters. They derive a strength from this immediacy, and in Ti Noël's reckoning the African leader who exercises his authority through his own person is far more potent than his delegating French counterpart:

In Africa, the king was warrior, hunter, judge, and priest; his precious seed distended hundreds of bellies with a mighty strain of heroes. In France, in Spain, the king sent his generals to fight in his stead; he was incompetent to decide legal problems, he allowed himself to be scolded by any trumpery friar. And when it came to a question of virility, the best he could do was engender some puling prince who could not bring down a deer without the help of stalkers, and who, with unconscious irony, bore the name of as harmless and silly a fish as the dolphin. (14-15)

There is a suitable contrast in the description of African princes as “leopards.” Ti Noël's African ideal of power is “hard as anvils,” fierce and poised as a jungle cat, and linked intimately to the natural world.

This black elementality is underscored by the Africans' non-Western and sometimes irrational

beliefs. The image of King Da as “the incarnation of the Serpent, which is eternal beginning, never ending,” expresses a cyclical, nonlinear concept of human life and historical time that the author articulates more fully later in the novel – see for example Ti Noël impregnating a “kitchen wench” at the end of the first section, his exile from and return to Haïti, and the recurrence of forced labor and brutality under Henri Christophe and the mulatto aristocracy (53, 116-117, 176-178). Importantly, Ti Noël accepts the reality of African magic and animal transformations on nothing but his faith in his teacher: he learns “these truths by the *deep wisdom* of Macandal” and he is so confident of this secret knowledge that he believes that the French have been “rejected by the *true heaven*, which wanted nothing to do with those who died ignoring the *true gods*” (14, 17, emphases mine).

Though Ti Noël also believes that the whites have their own kind of magic – for example, he thinks that the women “[tint] their cheeks with oxblood” – his certainty in the precedence of the African belief system is a non-empirical leap-of-faith. The slave's belief reinforces the novel's use of the fantastic: in Carpentier's words, “the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith” (“The Marvelous Real in America” 86). Like knowledge and perception, belief is a crucial constituent of the competing colonial and slave realities.

Ti Noël's magical African belief system competes with its European and Christian counterpart. His belief incorporates an idea of racial or cultural purity that is emphasized by his negative impressions of the mulattos he encounters at the Cap. These individuals are Westernized and as decadent as the French colonists: “Many a quadroon, the light-of-love of some rich official, was followed by a maid of her own equivocal hue, carrying her palm-leaf fan, her prayerbook, and her gold-tasseled parasol” (*The Kingdom of This World* 15). Trading the vital essence of Africa for refinement and Christianity, this quadroon is presented as a traitor to her blackness.

The novel's moral unease with hybridity and cultural assimilation is reinforced throughout the text. This is especially true of those sections which reference the royal decadence of King Henri Christophe's reign. In the novel's third section Ti Noël discovers to his surprise that while Christophe's court has all the trappings of the French royalty, it is a "world of Negroes" in which every role from steward to musician is played by a black man or woman (115). But Carpentier seems to warn against mixing as early as this first chapter: witness the perverse hybrid images of "a sailor [offering] for sale to the ladies a Brazilian monkey in Spanish dress," or a priest "[arriving] at the Cathedral riding his donkey-colored mule" (16). These awkward combinations reinforce the separateness of the novel's two diametrically opposed cultures: one refined, rational, and effeminate; the other primitive, mystical, and masculine.

Carpentier's inclusion of the fantastic within the slaves' sphere of experience disjoins these European and African worldviews. But because Ti Noël's experience of magic is mediated through the stories of Macandal, the reader initially encounters the fantastic at a second-hand, supra-narrative level. This presentation of a "hearsay fantastic" stems from Carpentier's anthropological mission to give an authentic voice to the peoples of the New World. The author may have felt that borrowing from oral tradition would be the best way of depicting the dynamics of a pre-literate culture.

But however much Carpentier's representation of Afro-Caribbean individuals' belief in the fantastic may accurately depict Saint-Dominguean slave consciousness, *The Kingdom's* narrative mode makes this ontological excavation impossible. This is because the author is only effectively able to express Afro-Caribbean belief by contrasting it with the Europeans' disbelief. Further, the narrative's perspective is fundamentally situated in a Western frame-of-reference. Through these presentations of Saint-Dominguean slave belief the reader comes to understand that the Afro-Caribbean experience of

life is very different from the modern, Western experience, but Carpentier seldom allows the reader to experience the fictive world of the novel directly through the blacks' lens.

The reader instead encounters a fairly typical realist narrative that is punctuated by unexpected intrusions of the uncanny or the fantastic. We are told that in Africa the drums have “human faces” and that gods sometimes appear “among the canebrakes,” but these deities and anthropomorphized artifacts occur in a supra-narrative level of reality: they are real in the minds of the novel's black characters, but they are not corporeally present in the action of the narrative (20). Instead of recovering an indigenous African expression from the inside, these descriptions only mark the distinctiveness of a Saint-Dominguean slave culture *vis a vis* the West.

For this reason the reader faces the difficult task of determining whether each of *The Kingdom's* overtly fantastic occurrences is a true tear in the novel's realist fabric, or only a product of Africans' culturally-conditioned reception of objective reality. The first incident of this kind occurs in the novel's third chapter, when Ti Noël accompanies the now one-armed Macandal to the wilderness home of an old woman, Maman Loi. This character bears every hallmark of a classic witch figure: her walls are adorned with various wards and trinkets and she seems to have great knowledge of the attributes of the plants in the area. She regales her visitors with more secondhand tales of the fantastic: there are “men whom certain spells turned into animals,” and “women who had been raped by huge felines” (25).

But while Maman Loi's stories are nothing extraordinary compared to Macandal's legends, and herbalism can be understood within the Western scientific framework as a premodern form of medicine, the old woman is capable of unprecedented feats:

In response to some mysterious order she ran to the kitchen, sinking her arms in a pot full of boiling oil. Ti Noël observed that her face reflected an unruffled indifference,

and – which was stranger – that when she took her arms from the oil they showed no sign of blister or burn, despite the horrible sputter of frying he had heard a moment before. As Macandal seemed to accept this with complete calm, Ti Noël did his best to hide his amazement. (25-26)

Here Maman Loi's supernatural powers are presented matter-of-factly, but are given no rational explanation. Readers can imagine that there may be some kind of trickery or sleight-of-hand on the witch's part in the scene, but the absence of any clues to such an effect compels them to concede to the magical explanation.

This scene further demonstrates *The Kingdom of This World's* expression of cultural disjunction. Whereas Ti Noël is taken aback by the witch's display of apparently supernatural physical powers, the African-born Macandal is completely unfazed. Ti Noël's reaction indicates his alienation from the magical reality of black knowledge; halfway between the Africans and the French, his mediation of the two makes him a useful central figure in a novel that explores the incommensurability of their two worlds.

Another example of Ti Noël's intermediate position between European and African forms of knowledge is the acute distress he feels when Macandal suddenly disappears. The one-armed Mandingue's escape is more than just the loss of a friend for Ti Noël – it marks his dispossession of African knowledge:

The disappearance of Macandal was also the disappearance of all that world evoked by his tales. With him had gone Kankan Muza, Adonhueso, the royal kings, and the Rainbow of Whidah. Life had lost its savor, and Ti Noël found himself bored by the Sunday dances... (29)

The young groom is left with the whites' flat, disenchanting reality. Ti Noël realizes that he is not a leader or sorcerer of Macandal's caliber: "he felt that Macandal had thought him too poor a thing to give him a share of his plans." And he is still bound in servitude to the whites: he keeps the animals' "ears and perineums... scrupulously clean" and drowns his tears in the mane of a Norman stallion.

However, Ti Noël aligns himself with African consciousness when Macandal returns to recruit him in his terrorist poisoning campaign. This marks the beginning of the novel's cultural struggle: where once the slave had been tenderly affectionate toward his master's horses and livestock, the text implies that Ti Noël is responsible for poisoning the plantation's cows (32). Given the text's hazy representation of the subsequent poison-plague, the reader can imagine that he also has hand in the death that follows.

Carpentier's depiction of the mass poisoning that Macandal and his slave co-conspirators unleash on the French colonists cements the novel's use of the fantastic as a disjunctive device. The reader is primed in advance of its outbreak in chapter five by Ti Noël's previous encounter with Macandal. Here the shaman works in a cave among his herbal ingredients and alchemical paraphernalia, concocting exacting recipes and recording his results in a stolen account book with "heavy signs drawn in charcoal" (30).

But however striking the visuals of the scene – some potions "gave off a heavy, bitter smell in the damp gloom" and "lizard skins were piled on fern leaves" – Carpentier disenchanting Macandal's ostensible witchcraft:

Ti Noël was reminded of the herbalists' shops in the Cap, with their big brass mortars, their prescription books on stands, their jars of nux vomica and asafetida, their bunches of althea root for aching gums. All that was lacking was a few scorpions in alcohol,

attar of roses, and a tank of leeches. (30)

Ti Noël here poses a Western equivalent to Macandal's herbalist practices. But while the shaman's poisons need not necessarily be understood as magical, they assume an air of the fantastic. The island's flora holds secret powers: Macandal induces seizure in a dog by “[rubbing] its muzzle with a stone that the juice of a fungus had colored a light yellow” (26). For the slaves, Macandal's secret knowledge of these plants invests him with an esteem that magnifies his person to supernatural proportions. Further, the plague's mysterious pervasiveness and the colonists' inability to mitigate its effects or discover its origins causes a characteristically magical realist disruption in the ordinary fabric of reality in colonial Saint-Domingue.

The poisonings appear fantastic because Carpentier in this chapter uses an objective, realist narrative perspective that is aligned with the voice of the French colonists. When he writes “[n]obody knew how it found its way into the grass and alfalfa, got mixed in with the bales of hay, climbed into the mangers,” Carpentier is deliberately excluding the voices of the slaves, many of whom are collaborating with Macandal (33, 31-32). By devoicing the blacks and relegating them to a different sphere of narrative knowledge, the author creates another instance of magical realist disjuncture.

The colonists' mysterious impression of the deaths is underscored by their susceptibility to the poisonings – the whites are picked off one-by-one, but there is never any mention of slave deaths – and by their inability to reverse its course by either science or faith. “The most experienced herbalists of the Cap sought in vain for the leaf, the gum, the sap that might be carrying the plague,” we learn, and neither would “prayers, doctors, vows to saints, [nor] the worthless incantations of a Breton sailor, a necromancer and healer, check the *secret* advance of death” (33, 35; emphasis mine). This episode's tableau of death – “throughout the Plaine the identical prayers for the dead echoed lugubriously,

concerted into a hymn of terror” – and the descriptions of the poison as being “like some irrepressible creeper seeking the shade to turn bodies into shades” magnifies the colonists' fear to a supernatural scale (34-35). One group of French even finds that poison has made its way, as if by magic, into “a keg of cider that they had brought with their own hands from the hold of a ship that had just docked” (36).

The poison-plague is further mystified when the colonists finally ascertain its cause:

One afternoon when they threatened to let him have a load of buckshot in the ass, the bowlegged Fulah finally talked. Macandal, the one-armed, now a *houngan* of the Rada rite, invested with superhuman powers as the result of his possession by the major gods on several occasions, was the Lord of Poison. Endowed with supreme authority by the Rulers of the Other Shore, he had proclaimed the crusade of extermination, chosen as he was to wipe out the whites and create a great empire of free Negroes in Santo Domingo.

(36)

Though the colonists now understand the poisonings rationally, the reader also learns that the slaves are no less convinced of the “crusade's” supernatural origins. Macandal's secret knowledge and his communion with the African gods bestow him with the status of an Afro-Caribbean demigod, and his prophetic plan promises the dawn of the blacks' new history in the New World. Carpentier's juxtaposition of two divergent interpretations of Macandal's poisonings stands as another example of magical realist disjunction in *The Kingdom of This World*.

These respective interpretations underline *The Kingdom's* failure to effect the “transculturation” – or cultural synthesis – of the French colonial and African slave perspectives. Carpentier may wish to express the New World reality as the melding of the New and the Old Worlds, but these worlds' fundamental disagreement prevent them from reaching a point of synthesis. J. Bradford Anderson is

correct that “the novelist who aims to articulate the process of transculturation cannot help but create a new plot that registers the collision of two cultures, the resultant shock... and the new culture that emerges” (Anderson 8). However, the reader never encounters an example of this transcultured Haitian identity in the novel. Those figures who seem most likely to manifest this transculturation – King Henri Christophe and the mulatto elite at the end of the novel – appear more as black-skinned French ciphers than real examples of a cultural synthesis.

The French-colonial/African-slave cultural divergence is further emphasized by each group's respective reaction to the outbreak of the poison-plague. The French take to the countryside in force of arms and drive Macandal into hiding, but incurring so much death has damaged the colonists' confidence in their superiority. Their mortification brings them down to “dark night of the earth, which had become night of the earth for so many of the living,” and they descend into a dance-of-death debauchery:

... the planters gave themselves over to drinking and card-playing, demoralized by their forced association with the soldiery. Between indecent songs and sharpers' tricks and fondling the Negresses' breasts as they brought in clean glasses, they recounted the feats of grandfathers who had taken part in the sack of Cartagena or had lined their pockets with the treasures of the Spanish Crown when Piet Hein, Peg-Leg, had brought off the fabulous attempt freebooters had dreamed of for two hundred years. (39-40)

Here the decadent colonists drown themselves in excess and revel in the glories of the past. While the colonial mythology of the French pirates reaffirms their energy and virility, the self-indulgent plantation aristocrats are a shadow of their precursors. They have been drained of the rugged vitality of the “men with hairy chests who had founded the colony on their own initiative making their will law”

and lack even the energy to fully prosecute their pursuit of Macandal. This passage's depiction of the French colonists' cultural decay attests to Carpentier's debt to the German historian Oswald Spengler's theory of the rise and fall of civilizations. The two figures' affinities run deep: Anderson notes that Spengler, much like Carpentier, "held that each civilization produces a distinct worldview inaccessible to the casual tourist" (Anderson 6).

Conversely, the Saint-Dominguean slaves are ascendant when their masters are at their weakest. "The slaves displayed a defiant good humor," and "never had those whose task it was to set the rhythm for the corn-grinding or the cane-cutting thumped their drums more briskly" (41). These drums, which set the rhythm of the slaves' lives, mobilize them to a common beat and a common purpose. The language of music, especially the beat of the drums, becomes the slaves' means of communicating the news of Macandal and his uprising. The drums' secret language further underlines the novel's distinction between the two different forms of knowledge.

These drums manifest a culturally-specific form of knowledge that appears fantastic because the unique syncopation patterns of Afro-Cuban rhythms cannot be adequately represented by Western systems of musical notation. Paul B. Miller writes that in Carpentier's work:

the "secret" of Afro-Cuban rhythms is a doubly-articulated one: on the one hand, these rhythms are secret because they can communicate specific linguistic messages which are inaccessible to the outsider. On the other, the secret also resides in the fact that the rhythms themselves resist transcription into standard notation... Hence the fascination of this paradox for Carpentier: Afro-Cuban rhythms cannot be written down, and yet at the same time they are themselves a *kind of writing*. (Miller 28, emphases original)

Emphasizing again the French/African dichotomy, the pounding of the drums in this scene represents a

specifically Afro-Caribbean language that is incomprehensible to the whites.

The slaves' belief in Macandal's animal metamorphoses constitutes another facet of secret Afro-Caribbean knowledge. Noting the mysterious appearance of certain animals, the narrative shifts into the Afro-Caribbean point-of-view:

They all knew that the green lizard, the night moth, the strange dog, the incredible gannet, were nothing but disguises. As he had the power to take the shape of hoofed animal, bird, fish, or insect, Macandal continually visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over his faithful and find out if they still had faith in his return. In one metamorphosis or another, the one-armed was everywhere, having recovered his corporeal integrity in animal guise. (Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World* 41-42)

Unrecognized by the colonists, Macandal is able to hide in the shadows of nature and lead his people under their masters' noses. Carpentier's polyvocal narrative jumps between colonist and slave perspectives further enunciates the novel's cultural disjunction.

The designation of the slaves as Macandal's "faithful" reflects their esteem for the shaman as a leader. They acknowledge Macandal to "[rule] the whole island," and his animal disguises reinforce Carpentier's earlier association of African leadership with the powers of nature. Macandal has assumed "boundless" powers for the slaves, and in league with the African gods he will unleash the elemental forces of thunder, lightning and cyclones to finish his work (42).

However, Macandal's transformations exist on the same supra-narrative level as his stories of the African warrior-kings, and there is no in-scene confirmation that his powers are more than popular mythology. Though Carpentier's multiple perspectives prevent him from articulating a uniquely New World culture, his objective presentation underscores the role of belief in shaping each of the novel's

divergent cultural spheres. The colonists believe that Macandal is merely a disfigured man, but their rationalism is weakly matched against the slaves' fanatical faith in the shaman's supernatural powers.

The strength of the slaves' belief is further illustrated by the scene of Macandal's ostensible rebirth during a Afro-Caribbean religious rite four years after the poisonings. Perversely, this scene coincides with the whites' celebration of Christmas. A carved nativity statue of the magi Balthasar, who by Western tradition has dark skin, becomes an uncanny omen of the colonists' dark fate: “the terrible whites of Balthasar's eyes, which had been painted with special care... gave the impression of emerging from a *night of ebony* with the terrible reproach of a drowned man” (45, emphases mine). While the Christmas holiday represents the birth of the whites' lord and savior, Balthasar's grotesque appearance hints at Macandal's imminent resurrection.

The ritual that precedes Macandal's dramatic reappearance is imbued with its own magical aura. Drinking, dance, drums, and incantations combine to whip the slave celebrants into an ecstatic trance that culminates in Macandal sudden entrance (46-47). Ti Noël notes that the man has been in some way transformed, and he seems to bear the marks of his animal metamorphoses:

Something of his sojourns in mysterious places seemed to cling to him, something of his successive attires of scales, bristles, fur. His chin had taken on a feline sharpness, and his eyes seemed to slant a little toward his temples, like those of certain birds whose appearance he had assumed. (47)

What to a Western observer may appear to be the nervous anxiety of a man who has spent years on the run becomes, in the slaves' perception, a manifestation of his magical powers.

The chant with which the slaves greet their reborn savior is a further illustration of the irony of his Christmastime return. Here the slaves burst into a song that is a “recital of boundless suffering”:

“Will I have to go on washing the vats? Will I have to go on eating bamboos?” As though wrenched from their vitals, the questions trod one on the other, taking on, in chorus, the rending despair of peoples carried into captivity to build pyramids, towers, or endless walls. “Oh father, my father, how long the road! Oh father, my father, how long the suffering!” (48)

The power of the ritual gives rise to the slaves' sudden expression of their unenviable condition. Their suffering, toil and deprivation is far from the planters' indolent luxury. Here the “magic” of ritual helps to foreground the divergent French colonial and African slave experiences.

The Kingdom's use of the fantastic to illustrate cultural disjunction is articulated most strongly in the scene of Macandal's execution in the last chapter of the novel's first section. The narrative here reiterates much of the French/Afro-Caribbean split that has already been expressed. The image of the various Saint-Dominguean potentates emphasizes the decadence of colonial planter society: the “ecclesiastic hierarchy” sits in “tall red armchairs in the shade of a funeral canopy” while the women, with “fans in their mittened hands, [chatter] loudly“ (49). And again the slaves express their absolute faith in Macandal's powers, believing that the leader, transforming into an insect, would slip his bonds and “light on the very tricorne of the commander of the troops to laugh at the dismay of the whites” (50). Certainly fire would be no threat to “a man chrismed by the great Loas.”

However, the chapter's schizophrenic narrative perspective provides a more pointed example of magical realist disjunction. The colonists' preparations for the execution in the first paragraph express a resolutely French colonial perspective. In fact, the narrative seems to speak for all the French at once in justifying the expense incurred and spectacle made of Macandal's execution: “this time,” we read, “the lesson was to be driven home with fire, not blood, and certain illuminations, lighted to be

remembered, were very costly” (50). The novel's objective narrative voice bends subtly to incorporate the colonists' collective discourse.

The second paragraph moves abruptly into the collective voice of the slaves that are marshaled to witness the scene. The slaves' thoughts here actively resist the whites' assumptions:

The masters' eyes questioned the faces of the slaves. But the Negroes showed spiteful indifference. *What did the whites know of Negro matters?* In his cycle of metamorphoses, Macandal had often entered the mysterious world of the insects, making up for the lack of his human arm with the possession of several feet, four wings, or long antennae. (50, emphases mine)

The slaves' faith in Macandal's powers foregrounds their resistance to the colonists' order of reality. Their belief in magic establishes the slaves' consciousness as a competing form of knowledge that allows them to resist the imposition of the colonists' reality.

This chapter reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's thesis that a novel may manifest a “diversity of speech types” in which one form of discourse attempts to assert its dominance over other forms (Bakhtin 263). But while *The Kingdom's* magical realist mode foregrounds this struggle, it is unique in that it suspends its resolution. Stephen Slemon comments that this lack of resolution establishes ambiguous meanings in the text:

In magic realism this battle [between social speech types] is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other. This sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation. (Slemon 410)

Because of the dizzying shifts in the language of expression that take place in this chapter, the reader is left unable to determine which mode – French or African – more fully conveys the scene's reality.

Macandal's execution is depicted from a more objective perspective. After the fires are lit “Macandal moved the stump of his arm, which they had been unable to tie up, in a threatening gesture which was none the less terrible for being partial, howling unknown spells and violently thrusting his torso forward” (Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World* 51). There follows a rapid vacillation between African and French points of view. At first the reader believes that Macandal escapes as a mosquito: “the bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square: 'Macandal saved!'" (52).

But the next passage brings the narrative back to the French colonial reality:

Pandamonium followed. The guards fell with rifle butts on the howling blacks, who now seemed to overflow the streets, climbing toward the windows. And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry. (52)

Here the colonists' perspective claims the narrative's factual authority. The subtle insinuation that “very few” were witness to Macandal's death explains away the slaves' belief in his escape and delegitimizes their cultural perception by grounding the narrative in objective realism. This passage effectively affirms the colonists' Western mode of knowledge as the narratives's normative center.

However, the slaves take no notice. Returning home and “laughing all the way,” they rejoice that “Macandal had kept his word, remaining in the Kingdom of This World. Once more the whites had been outwitted by the Mighty Powers of the Other Shore” (52). But their celebrations ring hollow

against the contrapuntal presentation of Macandal's death, and the reader is left to split the difference between two incommensurable forms of cultural perception. The African slaves' faith in the fantastic again highlights the chasm separating the novel's respective black and white consciousness and reiterates magical realism's ability to articulate cultural disjunction.

IV. Conclusion: Magical Realist Disjunction as Postcolonial Expression

The first section of *The Kingdom of This World* is an effective roadmap to the novel's formal and thematic elements. The narrative's subsequent events reiterate these features: Bouckman assumes leadership of the first phase of the Haitian Revolution in a Voodoo ritual that parallels Macandal's resurrection (68); the Saint-Dominguean colonists in Cuban exile are as decadent and dissolute as they were in their pursuit of Macandal (83); Henri Christophe's perverse hybridity results in his downfall (115); and Ti Noël, an old man at the end of the novel who lives in the ruins of his old master's plantation, finally assumes the animal forms of his one-time tutor Macandal (178-179). The unifying formal element of disjunctive magical realism also remains constant: the reader is uncertain whether to take Ti Noël's metamorphoses at face value, or to merely ascribe them to the mad phantasms of a senile old man who styles himself a king, sits on “three volumes of the *Grande Encyclopédie*,” and appoints “any passer-by a minster, any hay-gatherer a general” (172). Though his transformations dramatize a different opposition – here the ordered and rational “Kingdom of Heaven” stands in for the West, while the earthy toil of the “Kingdom of This World” replaces Afro-Caribbean consciousness – the terms' respective ideological alignments remain the same (185).

The figure of King Henri Christophe in particular dramatizes the intersection of Western and Afro-Caribbean modes of being. A “reformer” who “had attempted to ignore Voodoo, molding with

whiplash a caste of Catholic gentlemen,” Christophe attires himself in regal European fashion with “a broad two-toned sash, the emblem of his investiture” (148-149). But he cannot bury his African heritage: he has bulls' blood poured into the walls of his citadel that it might withstand invaders, and he takes fright at the ghost of the archbishop whom he murders (124, 137).

Henri Christophe's hybridity makes him aberrant figure who belongs to neither the African nor the the European sphere. Miller writes that “rather than symbiosis, Henri Christophe's borrowing of European décor for his kingdom results more in a kind of grotesque monstrosity rather than in a cultural miscegenation” (Miller 37). The king embodies the violent conflict and sometimes terrible consequences of blending two incommensurable cultures, and his court musicians, each of whom displays “his professional deformity” parallel the king's mutation.

Overall, *The Kingdom's* fantastic elements and exploration of cultural difference foreground the magical realist narrative mode's ability to convey the postcolonial experience. The dialectic of colonized/colonizer manifests in every aspect of the colonized individual's experience of life, and the contradictions to which this binary gives rise may appear inexplicable by reason. The use of the fantastic as an interruption to the normal course of narrative reality thus adroitly highlights the cultural disjunction of colonial and postcolonial societies. Magical realist texts can serve a constructive function in postcolonial discourse because, in Slemon's words, they “[embed] the binary oppositions of past and present social relations into the 'speaking mirror' of their literary languages” (Slemon 422). Magical realism can thus elucidate the contradictions of perception, knowledge, and belief to which colonialism gives rise. The constant negotiation between two opposed visions of human life that appears in *The Kingdom of This World* reinforces the novel's theme that a postcolonial identity can perhaps never attain a perfect, singular state of hybridity, but may in fact always exist in the

vacillating, liminal space between two extremes.

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