

Latin American Magical Realism and the  
Native American Novel

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The paradoxical bond between the real and the imaginary in many contemporary Native American novels may bear some surface resemblance to another more familiar literary genre, Latin American magical realism, and although there are some similarities, it is important to distinguish magical realism and the contemporary Native American novel because they are different species. In addition to avoiding errors of interpretation, it is also important to distinguish between Native American literature and the non-Native genre of Latin American magical realism because of the history of implicit racially-tinged rhetoric and ideology associated with magical realism.

A long-accepted and familiar definition of Latin American magical realism is found in Amaryll Chanady's *Magical Realism: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, published in 1985. Chanady asserts that a dichotomous way of thinking is expressed in magical realism, which she characterizes as the juxtaposition of the "primitive," "archaic" American Indian mentality and the mentality of the "erudite," "rational," "empirical," "supercivilization" of Europe. Next, she assumes an exclusive white Western reader for magical realist narratives. As well, Chanady bastardizes Kant's and Quinn's widely-used definition of antinomy in order

to bolster her dichotomous definition of magical realism. It is important to note that Chanady does not cite Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or W.V. Quinn's *The Ways of Paradox*, or provide any explanation for her unconventional use of the term antinomy. Additionally, Chanady's shunning of the more accurate term *dialectic* in her analysis of magical realism is puzzling. *Dialectic* more accurately describes the relationship between contesting world views that Chandry attempts to define. Whatever the explanation, inaccurate use of some analytical terms and bowdlerizing others lead to confusion. Therefore, it is important to discuss each one of these terms in turn as they relate to Latin American magical realism and the Native American novel, beginning with antinomy.

The concept of antinomy was developed by Kant in response to issues that are unresolvable via conventional dialectical processes or reasoning. The term "antinomy," as it is conventionally used, first appears on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant examines four paradoxes which, not coincidentally, are in one form or another, found in most contemporary Native American novels. First, "The world has a beginning in time and is spatially limited": Second, "Every composite substance consists of simple substances": Third, "There is a kind of causality related to freewill and is independent of the causality of laws of nature": Fourth, "There exists either as part of the world or as its cause an absolutely necessary being" (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy* "Antinomy"). Paradoxes, it is important to keep in mind, are not true contradictions. Antinomy is the acceptance of two, not necessarily contradictory, but disparate truths. Thus, to discuss magical realism under the auspices of a dichotomous relationship of conflict between European and American Indian world views is an abuse of the notion of antinomy as it is conventionally used in scholarly vernacular.

Chanady's use of antinomy also violates Quinn's definition of the concept in *The Way of Paradox*. Quinn elaborates and refines Kant's

definition to include paradoxes which "produces a self contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning" (5). Quinn also asserts that true antinomy necessarily involves a revision of "trusted patterns of reasoning" and "nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage" (9). Quinn cites, for example, the Copernican revolution and Einstein's theory of relativity (9). Chanady, however, makes no mention of changes in trusted patterns of reasoning or repudiation of conceptual heritage of the readers of magical realism. In fact, Chanady claims just the opposite. She asserts that the magical realist narrative has minimal impact on its, presumed white, reader because "the reader considers the represented world as alien" and she further proposes the "impossibility of complete reader identification in the case of a magico-realist work about American Indians" (163). She claims that "while the [white] reader accepts the unconventional world view [of the American Indian], he does so only within the contexts of the fictitious world, and does not integrate it in his own perception of reality" (163). This is consistent with her notion of magical realism as dichotomous, but not as antimony, at least not as Kant coined the term, and not as Quinn delineated the term to mean a paradox which produces new ways of thinking by revealing flaws in the way we have been taught to think about things; in other words, dialectical.

Even the title of Chanady's text, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, reflects that she is using the term antinomy incorrectly because true antinomy is unresolvable by definition. Quinn's text, for example, gives instances of paradoxes mistaken for antinomy. These paradoxes are generally of two varieties: *veridical* or *falsidical*. A veridical paradox is a paradox which "packs a surprise, but the surprise quickly dissipates itself as we ponder the proof" and a falsidical paradox is one that also "packs a surprise, but is seen as a false alarm [to our way of thinking] when we solve the underlying fallacy" (9). Thus, Chanady's *resolved* antinomy is no antimony at all.

However, Kant's and Quinn's definitions of antimony are applicable to many Native American novels, particularly those Native American novels intended to subvert hegemonic ideas about reality by multifarious means. In other words, it is deliberately antinomous. And, it is not the antinomy of the text that is resolved rather than unresolved, but a realignment of the reader's conceptual universe. These Native American novels trope conventional Modernist notions via postmodern literary techniques which are not "alien" to the non-Native reader but play, even rely, on the non-Native and the Native American reader's familiarity with postmodern texts, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-five* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Within this postmodern genre, the Native American author embeds unique Native American cultural types, epistemologies, teleologies, etc. in order to create a primarily dialogical and secondarily dialectical, though notably not dichotomous, relationship between the author and reader.

Consequently, the Native American novel is fundamentally different from Latin American magical realism. Magical realism is premised on spurious racist notions of an "erudite," "rational," and "empirical" European "supercivilization" juxtaposed to a "primitive" and "archaic" American Indian mentality. Optimally, of course, magical realism may be the product of the synthesis of the dialectical relationship between the two. Less optimally, magical realism is a dichotomous juxtaposition of an alleged superior and inferior relationship between two peoples analogous, symbolically speaking, to the long-lived dichotomous hierarchical relationship between men and women in Western society wherein men are the privileged, superior, and normative category by which women are measured.

Chandry notes that magical realism assumes an exclusive non-Native audience. Why would authors of magical realism assume that their readers are non-Native? Are contemporary indigenous people illiterate?

Or, do we simply have an aversion to reading novels? These racist, unscientific, and irrational aspersions are simply not acceptable. It is simply indisputable that all people are capable of rational and irrational thought, rational and irrational behavior, empirical and metaphysical reasoning. People and races simply cannot be said to be one or the other. Chanady's characterization of mentalities according to racist notions is reminiscent of the dark age of anthropology when evolutionism reigned. Evolutionism is the:

classifying of different societies and cultures and defining the phases and states through which all human groups pass . . . some groups progress more slowly, some faster, as they advance . . . from irrational to the rational. (*Encyclopedia Britannica* "Anthropology")

However, twentieth-century anthropology recognizes the unscientific and imperialistic premise of evolutionism and formally renounced its practice, at least on contemporaneous cultures, decades ago.

Furthermore, Chanady claims that antinomy exists in the attitude of the reader vis-à-vis the contradiction between the semantic and textual levels. For example, she asserts that the reader, who is presumed to be white, will somehow suspend all his preconceived and culturally embedded notions of what is real and accept the "primitive, archaic" American Indian mentality as an equal to his own, the realist, which results in a contradiction between the reader's denial of the supernatural on the semantic level and the reader's acceptance of it on the textual level (106). However, she is once again using antinomy in an unconventional sense, referring to a contradictory thesis and antithesis in the reader's attitude

that results in tension that is resolved through synthesis. Again, this is not antimony.

However, Chanady does make an astute observation in relation to the role of language, the technology of storytelling, to facilitate understanding the *mystery of reality* that is pertinent to many contemporary Native American novels. Chanady writes:

The mystery of life does not exist in objective reality, but in the subjective reaction to and interpretation of the world. By presenting various different perceptions of reality . . . the narrator allows us to see dimensions of reality of which we are not normally aware . . . the amalgamation of realism and fantasy is the means to an end, and this is the penetration of the mystery of reality. (27)

Another pertinent observation of Chanady's is the role of the focalizer in narrative. In magical realism, for example, the focalizer is European: "The Indians are the object, not the subject, of focalization" (35). This is important because the "focalization, conveyed by the narrative voice, also determines the reactions of the implied reader" (36). For example, would *Dances With Wolves* have been as successful if the focalizer were not a white man? Julia Goodfox, a Pawnee colleague of mine, stated that she hated the movie because her nation, the Pawnees, were depicted as "savages" once again, but she understood why white people and even Sioux would like the movie, because their point of view (focalization) are depicted. Noting, of course, that "Indians" are the objects, not the subjects of the focalization in magical realism certainly distinguishes it from contemporary Native American novels. In Native American novels Native Americans are, as a rule, the focalizers, the subjects, of the narrative.

Focalization and the subject position of the real-life people portrayed in magical realism is a pertinent point that needs to be addressed as a distinguishing point between the genre of Latin American magical realism and Native American literature. Jimmie Durham in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, writes that such distinguished and Nobel Prize-winning magical realist authors as Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez lived in the countryside where most of Columbia's indigenous population live, and notes at the period during which his novels are set, the indigenous people became politically organized and were consequently hunted down and murdered by the Colombian government. Yet, Marquez makes no mention of these facts in his writing. Likewise, the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo ignores crimes against the indigenous people in his country. As well as, the literary giant Miguel Angel Asturias, as an official of the Guatemalan government, participated in the razing of Maya villages and the murder of the residents. Other authors, such as Chile's Isabelle Allende, simply label the indigenous population of their countries as "placidly evil" (430-2).

In effect, magical realism is more similar than dissimilar to a longstanding practice of European novelists, such as Jane Austen, who do not want to look too closely at the source of their prosperity. As William James writes:

we divert our attention away from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-house and indecencies without end on which our life is founded and huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is. (90)

Edward Said, more to the point, writes that the fictional myopia of the real-life suffering of real-life people is simply a continuing white tradition (55-62).

Willful myopia of others' suffering and exploitation is different from authorial reticence. Authorial reticence is a prominent feature of many contemporary Native American novels. Authorial reticence is the "withholding of information and explanations" (121). Chanady explains that "one of the factors that distinguishes stories of the fantastic from magico-realist narratives such as Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* is the absence of essential information about certain occurrences within the fictitious world" (135). In magical realism:

it serves the purpose mainly of preventing the reader from questioning the narrated events, as no attention is drawn to the strangeness of the world view. The unnatural is naturalized by commenting as little as possible on it, and reducing the distance between the narrator and the situation he is describing. (160)

Authorial reticence serves a similar function in Native American literature. For example, in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, no special attention is drawn by the narrator to the supernatural powers of the Trickster characters.

The difference between magical realism and Native American literature is much more than the cultural baggage Chanady tags to it. Magical Realism is fundamentally about the real juxtaposed to the unreal. However, Native American novels often contain within them pre-modern, modern, and postmodern sensibilities. Each of these is a world-view and a rhetorical strategy. The pre-modern contributions to literature include epic and heroic narratives like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*. The

Modern created, according to Daniel Ammam in his essay *Modernist Mysteries: Cracking the Code*, a generation of readers who read:

beyond the semantic interpretation of the text, suspect yet another code written into the inner message: subtexts, intertexts, subliminal messages, compositional codes and lexical patterns, chiasmic structures and what not . . . it is this form of artistic appreciation and critical interpretation modernism has cultivated. (16)

Postmodern refers to self-referential use of language, self-consciously created context, splicing together of different contexts, characters who are self-conscious, and contains multiple levels of meaning, to name only a few of the most prominent characteristics.

Isenhagen makes an important comment on Momaday in relation to modernism and postmodernism in the introduction to his collection of interviews with N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and Jeannette Armstrong. He notes that while Jeannette Armstrong would be labeled a realist, N. Scott Momaday a modernist, and Gerald Vizenor a postmodernist, the "discussion of postmodernism is shot through with references to the impossibility of clearly separating postmodernist and modernist strategies of writing, as well as the constant reemergence of realism in both genres" (5). These are three contemporary authors "sharing a historical moment of great complexity" (5). He specifically cites Momaday as an example, he has made modernism deal with specific, urgent questions of material and political life . . . in this context he has often had to resort to an almost postmodern gesture of deconstructing established stereotypes and debilitating points of view (6.)

Not *almost*, Momaday, in fact, uses postmodern writing strategies. Larry Lundrum writes in "The Shattered Modernism of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*": "The text's strategy is not to infuse a modernist structure

with an overlay of realism as most critics imply but to shatter the modernist display-case that represents cultural diversity without cultural substance" (764).

Or, as J. J. Healy notes in his essay "Wrestling With White Spirits: The Uses and Limits of Modernism and Postmodernism in Aboriginal and Native American Literary Contexts": "Modernism and postmodernism no longer matter at Ragnarok or Wounded Knee . . . it is a survival literature, written by survivors, about surviving" (46).

Realism in Native American literature refers to more than the real or "simple mimesis." In fact, there has never been "simple mimesis." Literary mimesis today is very complex, as it was in Aristotle's day. Recall, if you will, that Aristotle's *Poetics* is the first recorded attempt to define the concept. Erich Auerbach explains some of the fundamentals of mimesis that were present in Aristotle's time in his classic text, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. He says, "look at Homer and you will find fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, . . . unmistakable meanings, . . . elements of historical development and of psychological perspective," and an examination of Greek drama, Sophocles, for example, demonstrates other early characteristics of mimesis, such as "certain parts are brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the inexpressed, background quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of historical becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic" (23). Of course, Auerbach goes on to examine mimesis as it is expressed in literature until the early twentieth-century and comments on those relevant changes too. Lukács' brilliant work on mimesis takes up where Auerbach leaves off. In addition to his insights on the use and development of mimesis in contemporary literature, Lukács also explains the socio-

political reason for the shunning of mimesis today. He points out that it is not simply a coincidence that those who shun realism (mimesis) also tend to embrace fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism, both Soviet and American varieties.

It is precisely those missing historical and particularly Native American experiential elements that distinguished magical realism from Native American literature. The different historical and cultural matrices from which the Native American novel springs and that of European magical realism is succinctly illustrated by David Harvey's explanation of the process of "creative destruction" in modernism. Harvey explains that:

The image of "creative destruction" is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the practical dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a *new world* be created, . . . without destroying much that had gone before? (emphasis added, 16)

At this point, Harvey cites Berman's and Lukács's example of Faust: "Prepared to eliminate everything and everyone who stands in the way of the realization of his sublime vision, Faust, to his own ultimate horror, deploys Mephistopheles to kill a much loved old couple who lived in a small cottage by the sea-shore for no other reason than the fact that they do not fit in with the master plan . . ." (16). Thus, according to Berman, "the very process of development, even as it transforms the wasteland into a thriving, physical and social space, recreated the wasteland inside of the developer himself. This is how the tragedy of development works" (16). In America, Native Americans are the ones displaced and killed in order to create this "New World," while Euro-Americans are the ones who are dealing with the psychic cost of burning down "the cottage by the sea. . . and killing." These different historical and

cultural matrices have resulted in different literary traditions, and it is a mistake to confuse the two.

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