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Forever Everglades: Understanding Magical Realism Through Place

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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University of Vermont, 2020

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Introduction

Magical realism is a literary genre that subverts the normal. Magical realism, as a literary genre, was born in Latin America and has since spread across the world.

Magical realism is written as though it is realist fiction but with a magical twist. A crucial component of magical realism, however, is that the magic is never explained away.

Rather, the characters address the magic with logical reasoning. Accepting the magic in magical realism is necessary for both the fictional characters and the readers themselves.

Magical realism has been defined by numerous scholars and writers, but there are incongruences. Magical realism has proven difficult to define. Even the name and origin of magical realism is murky as there was a tense transition from “marvelous realism” to “magical realism.” People have debated “marvelous realism” vs. “magic realism,” since the difference between the adjectives can allude to different meanings, as the former terminology was originally used by Hispanic writers to rebel against Western writing conventions. Marvelous realism turned local folklore and ancient myths into everyday occasions. Local folklore is a type of magical realism because it makes extraordinary circumstances a part of everyday life. Folklores are especially connected to indigenous cultures whereas Ancient myths are from a different time and place. As time progressed, however, the genre has broadened as writers build off one another. Furthermore, the origin of the term was used to describe art, not literature. The transference from art to literature has, in turn, inspired confusion about what magical realism is, or what it isn't, for modern-day scholars and literary critics.

I will explore magical realism by studying how it relates to place through a literary regionalist perspective. Literary regionalism further contemplates the significance of place by focusing on the characters, dialect, custom, and topography of a place. Literary regionalism, which used to be called "local color" explains how writing a place exposes how sex, race, class, etc. interact. Literary regionalism highlights the realistic aspect of magical realism since regionalism is typically written via realist fiction. Additionally, post-colonial branches off from literary regionalist thought since the politics of a place could carry a colonial history that literary regionalism must reconcile with.

I have selected Florida in part because of its personal significance. I was born in Florida and lived there for nearly two years, however, my connection to Florida is from my parents' memories and photos alone. From this standpoint, magical realism made the most sense for my narrative because of the mystery there. To rectify that, I will interview my parents on their experiences. While my lack of memory might seem like it would hinder my study, I think that it adds to the mystery and magic of Florida. My life in Florida is both real and unreal because while I don't remember, it did happen. Florida's environment is a major aspect for literary regionalists because of how important the Everglades is on an international level. The Everglades is the only place in the world where both alligators and crocodiles roam. The bogs and bayous offer incredible beauty but also danger. A floating log could be a large reptile, or it could simply be a log, or it could be something else entirely. The mystery of Florida inspired writers to wonder about the magical properties of the land. The Everglades has garnered a lot of attention and speculation due to its contribution to the world. The land

and the memory of the land need to be treasured and passed on before it disappears entirely.

To many vacationers, Florida is a popular destination. Disney World and Orlando Studios offer people a break from reality--a place where the make-believe is real. Walt Disney's dream has spread around the world, which resulted in people from all around the world traveling to visit Disney World. The company has produced and acquired staggering amounts of media. Disney produces movies, TV shows, and music under their name, but they also own Pixar, Lucasfilm, Marvel, etc. In so doing, Disney has successfully commercialized and privatized magical characters and stories. Disney has become more prominent in the world, but their magic is only artificial.

Literary Regionalism

Literary regionalism explores every element of a place, from the topography, the cultural norms, language, and idioms, to how a specific place compares to the rest of the world. The genre, which became popularized in the Reconstruction era, provides great insight into social constructions such as feminism, race, and socioeconomics, as well as the environment.¹ Several literary regionalism authors illuminate the zeitgeist by keeping a narrow focus on how a specific place is affected during times of change. For example, during the Reconstruction era, when literary regionalism was in its early stages and was then known as "local color" and was perceived as having an overtly "feminine" focus. Since then, literary scholars have fought to change the name to "literary regionalism," as "local color" proved to be too condescending and problematic to be taken as a serious literary topic.

Florida is no stranger to literary regionalism. The unique state has been actively involved with the literary regionalist canon² for a long time. Such regionalist texts include *Travels* by William Bartram (1791), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937), *Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1938), *Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike (1990), *Florida* by Michael Gannon (1993), *The Wild Heart of Florida: Florida Writers on Florida's Wildlands* by Jeff Ripple and Susan Cerulean (1999), and *Florida Poems* by Campbell McGrath (2002). In 1947, Marjory Stoneman Douglas' *The Everglades: River of Grass* explored both the biology and history of the region in a way that had never really been done before.² *The Everglades* encouraged people to recognize how the land has deteriorated by writing about the human lives who had lived in the Everglades a long time ago. The comparison of what the Everglades used to look like prompted people to realize how much had changed since that time. Although *The Everglades* largely focuses on the people rather than the environment, the book's reception was more impactful to environmentalists:

In prose that appealed to a general audience, Douglas portrayed the Everglades as the lifeblood of an entire regional ecosystem. She was, in fact, the first person to conceptualize the Everglades as a living river, rather than a fetid swamp, one that flowed from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay, around islands and through cypress groves and sawgrass. "That was," her friend and fellow writer Helen Muir declared, "her genius." Her book inspired countless readers, partly because it was released just before President Truman made the Everglades a National Park in 1947. Since then, the Everglades have been under threat, but that is not to say that people do not continue fighting for the unusual ecosystem. One of the biggest threats to the Everglades,

specifically Lake Okeechobee, were the Big Sugar companies that were accused of dumping their fertilizer into the water. This is dangerous to the environment because the fertilizer causes an increase in the algae population, which in turn has killed thousands of fish and made people sick. After years of lobbying and negotiations, the companies have agreed to make the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir, which will divert water flowing to Lake Okeechobee and send water that will go past the treatment area to the southern Everglades marshes.³ As of November 2019, the reservoir was scheduled to be completed in April 2024. Although there are many regions, each housing their own cultural identity, within Florida, the Everglades is important to all. People might not have the same perception of the park, but Florida would not be the same without the Everglades.

Florida is the home to many other bizarre phenomena from a cultural perspective. The infamous presidential election of 2000 brought a flurry of negative attention and scrutiny to the sunshine state.⁴ The election came down to a few hundred votes which left the entire nation in breathless anxiety as both sides declared a preemptive victory. The political mayhem prompted thousands of people to question the local infrastructure's competency and agenda after roughly 6 million ballots, from sixty-six of Florida's sixty-seven counties, were destroyed before they could be counted. Many blame the confusing design of the ballots, later named the "butterfly ballots" for skewing the results in favor of Bush/Cheney. The ballots further proved to be unreliable when "hanging chads" were discovered in lieu of a clean punch to show the vote. The nation was under great turmoil because of the confusion caused in Florida.

The presidential election of 2000 is not the only time when people have looked to Florida as the epicenter of chaos and confusion. The Floridian public is well known for debauchery and head-scratching behaviors. The media has further pushed Florida's reputation with all sorts of insane headlines. The news seems extraordinarily wild due to the "Sunshine Law," which allows public access to official information that was enacted in the 90s.⁵ Since then, the nation has been entertained with the wild antics of "Florida Man," and the headlines such as "Florida Man Threatens to Kill Man with 'Kindness,' Uses Machete Named 'Kindness'" and "Florida Man Sentenced to 10 Days for Dragging Shark Behind Boat."⁶ The "Florida Man" has been laughed at all around the country as the bizarre antics are beyond the pale.

Magical Realism

Compared to other literary genres, magical realism's history is rather unusual. First, magical realism was a term used in art to describe paintings that twist the viewer's perceptions. Franz Roh, a German historian, and photographer inadvertently sparked the genre with his collection entitled *Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Magical Realism: Problems of the Latest European Painting) in the early 1920s.⁷ Roh described the genre as one that is meant to disorient the audience while keeping one foot in reality. Roh describes the genre: "It seems to us that this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and that our real-world re-emerges before our eyes--bathed in the clarity of a new day. We recognize this world . . . we look at it with new eyes⁸." A portion of the art that Roh focused on in his collection was of landscapes. For instance, Franz Radziwill's "The Strike (1931)" portrays a town that is seemingly normal except for the sky, which has a red moon and the clouds appear to be

torn open. Magical realism made its way from art to the literary world, specifically, in Latin America in 1955 when Ángel Flores, a critic of Latin American culture, published “Magical Realism in Spanish American fiction” in *Hispania*. Flores wrote about Kafka and Kafka’s significance to Europe⁹. The publication of Kafka’s work inspired Jorge Luis Borges, who then popularized the genre within the Latin American writing community. Although magical realism has not always been popular, the genre has gained momentum with such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

The critically acclaimed work that we have today was born out of numerous conversations and arguments about what magical realism is, and whether “magical realism” should be used as the name for the genre. Many scholars believe that “marvelous” or “fantastic” would be more appropriate to use. The difference between the terms was slim but important. Each name was meant to allow for impossible events in every-day scenes. Erik Camayd-Freixas studies how magical realism has been shaped by various theories as well as prominent writers.¹⁰ “Marvelous realism” or *lo real Maravilloso Americano* was born under Alejo Carpentier, who was inspired by Cuban *santería* and Haitian *Vodou*. Carpentier sought to find the marvelous in hidden cultural artifacts and practices. Tzvetan Todorov counteracted Carpentier by defining the fantastic as the tension that arises between the explanation and acceptance of the mysterious. Todorov, “defined the fantastic as the tension between the possibility of a rational explanation and the disquieting acceptance of the supernatural—the unsettling prospect that the ‘laws of nature’ have been violated, thereby compromising the reader’s sense of certainty and understanding of the world.¹¹” Magical realism to Todorov

is then the discomfort in not knowing what precisely is real and what is fantasy. That said, “magical” is argued to be the better of the three. Amaryll Chanady argues that magical realism, unlike marvelous, is not restricted to a collective (cultural) perspective. Chanady instead believes that the individual psyche matters because the individual’s perception plays directly into the tension caused by magic in reality. This tension was important to Todorov as well because it makes the reader question their assumptions. Finding similarities and differences in definitions is important to how we understand magical realism. The conversation around what defines magical realism demonstrates how layered the genre is and how small differences can mean a lot. Ultimately, we use “magical realism” as that label has simply become the most widely known.

The history of magical realism is dense, expansive, and multicultural and yet, there is still a lot of disagreement over what magical realism is, who can use it, and what people should write about. Some Latin American scholars believe that only Latin American writers should write within the magical realist genre because the genre is deeply entrenched in Latin American culture. Carpentier claimed a divide between European and Latin American cultures:

Carpentier’s reaction to Neo-Romantic exoticism* was to call upon his peers to abandon all allegiance to European schools and realize that they need not look beyond their own authentic reality to find the marvelous which, lost to Western rationalism, was being artificially invoked, in disbelief, by the cheap “magicians” of surrealism and the avant-garde. By expressing on marvels— he claimed— we will have “something new to offer universal literature.” Carpentier would have been gratified to read this new volume and find out that artists around the world would

* A literary genre popular in Great Britain in the 19th century which often compared “nature” to “civilization” and is criticized for its xenophobic themes.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326541046_THE_BASIC_CATEGORIES_OF_NEO-ROMANTICISM_IN_THE_19th_CENTURY_BRITISH_LITERATURE

heed his advice with respect to their own autochthonous traditions, thereby decentering the codes of fiction and of Magical Realism itself.¹²

Furthermore, various scholars argue that magical realism needs to focus solely on marginalized groups. These arguments are ultimately about preserving one's culture and empowering the people against exterior threats. To many, magical realism is not just a genre, but rather a way to preserve their way of life. Likewise, Camayd-Frexias, in his essay "Reflections on Magical Realism: A Return to Legitimacy, the Legitimacy of Return," argues that magical realism was intended to focus on what he calls "the primitive." Camayd-Frexias defines the "primitive" as marginalized peoples who are juxtaposed against "the modern," or elite peoples. Ultimately, Camayd-Frexias concludes that we need to look past our differences and instead embrace our similarities, that magical realism does not belong to any group of people.

Since literary regionalism is a genre that focuses heavily on a place and cultural markers, it only makes sense that these two genres could intersect. As mentioned earlier, magical realism often draws on political and social issues to illuminate on marginalized people. Magical realism comprises many of the same elements that literary regionalism sees how a place is imbued with its specific identifications. The genres corroborate given that magical realism changes what we know to be real. Looking now to novels will shed better light on how literary regionalism and magical realism agree when they disagree, and the ethics that are involved.

Swamplandia!

Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* intertwines the natural wonders of Florida's environment with fantastical events. Her novel focuses on a family living on an island off

Florida's coast. The family pretends to be Native American and operates an alligator-wrestling theme park called Swamplandia! The story is told through two narratives: the stories of Ava Bigtree and her brother, Kiwi Bigtree, and their attempt to solve the family's problems. Ava struggles to reconcile with her new life after her mother, who was also the star performer, dies and her family struggles to keep the park. Her problems are worsened when her father leaves for the mainland. Afterward, her sister, Osceola, runs away on a washed-up dredge ship to the Underworld, which is a place beyond the Everglades where she believes dead people exist. She leaves to be with her ghost boyfriend, whom she communicates via a Ouija board. Ava decides to go to the Underworld and bring her sister back with the help of Birdman, a mysterious stranger who guides their way. Meanwhile, Kiwi leaves for the mainland in hopes of getting a job and sending money back to the family. He finds himself working for Swamplandia!'s competitor, The World of Darkness and discovers that he is far over his head. The family ultimately learns that they do not need Swamplandia! to be a family and are able to come together to support one another.

Russell creates a striking difference between the island and the mainland. Where the island is authentic, the mainland is fake. Where the island is peaceful, the mainland is chaotic. Where the island is naive, the mainland is sordid. These rules are eventually challenged over the course of the novel, as Ava and Kiwi realize that their perceptions are too simple. By situating these two different places against each other, Russell sets up a fundamental issue within literary regionalism in the search for authenticity.¹² These two places are played off each other so that they both become the "other." Ava idolizes the island, whereas Kiwi prefers the mainland. That difference in perspective

demonstrates how each character only sees a part of the whole. The narrow representation of either place threatens the family since it creates a divide. Yet the paradox allows for multiculturalism to thrive. Even though the family ultimately has to move onto the mainland, the island and their identity are not gone. Ava realizes that the family did not Swamplandia! to exist. The gap between the island and the mainland is then bridged since Ava and Kiwi realize that both place their appeal as well as flaws.

Native American Themes

Evidently, *Swamplandia!* pushes a North American postcolonial narrative but the result is ethically dubious. The reader is taken on a guided tour of the past through Florida's history. As aforementioned, magical realism is widely considered to be a vehicle for postcolonial thought. *Swamplandia!* draws from Native American folklore, which in turn encourages the reader not to hold the novel to realistic expectations. Carpentier had argued that magical realism should stem from an indigenous culture that is otherwise dismissed by colonial powers. Magical realism, within the Native American community, has different names: Nora Baker Barry refers to the genre as "spiritual realism" while Renato Okri uses "shamanic realism." Rose Hsiu-Li Juan summarizes magical realism within the Native American writing community:

Many contemporary Native American writers resort to a magic realist way of writing in their attempt to do justice to the spiritual and the physical realities coexisting in their cultures. In their works this world and the spiritual world are inseparable. Their spiritual tradition, as found in the traditions of a medicine man, vision quest, manito (non-human spirit), allows the texts to transcend »realism« and move into what

might be called »spiritual realism«. By amalgamating the real and the magic, the Native American writers are able to present a more holistic view of Indian reality. ¹³

The definition that Juan provides agrees with the other aforementioned definitions. The magical/fantastical event is situated in reality so that the magical/fantastical event becomes reality, thus suspending the reader's disbelief. Russell manages that by introducing the reader to Birdman and the Underworld. Yet the question that remains is who benefits from *Swamplandia!* The reader believes in Birdman, a character made from Native American icons, and in the Underworld only to be betrayed. That betrayal is one of the ways in which Russell does not align with Native American magical realist writers. The fact that Russell incorporates Native American folklore but does not include any truly Native American voices is disconcerting and goes against Carpentier's idea of magical realism.

Florida's past cannot be ignored and indeed Russell does not ignore it; rather, she capitalizes on its past. Looking specifically at the Native American history of how Andrew Jackson pushed the Seminoles further into the Everglades in the 1800s, Russell acknowledges the past in part by naming a central figure "Osceola" after the Seminole Chief and by writing Ava's awareness of America's history. Yet Russell complicates the family's relation to the land by having them pretend to be Native Americans themselves. This insensitive and appropriative relation is mirrored in white American writers who too often romanticized America's past:

As in the works of Frank Bird Linderman, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and John Neihardt— whose original inclusion in the series to write the book on the Missouri River speaks to these points— the depiction of Indians in Rivers often

participated in the romantic, anti-modern discourse so prevalent during the era.

Indians and their cultures represented a simple, primitive, and natural antipode to the depressed modern condition.¹⁵

Writers in the past have romanticized the lives of Native Americans by reinforcing harmful stereotypes of “simplicity” and “authenticity.” The problem too is that white American writers pretend that Native Americans are a part of the past. The issue with the “vanishing Indian” myth is that it dehumanizes people, erases the Native American peoples who are still very much alive in the 21st century, and conceals the American government’s genocide.¹⁴ The vanishing Indian myth treats people as props rather than real people. Furthermore, the myth separates Native American peoples and makes them the other.

Although the Bigtree family fakes a Native American heritage, Birdman most significantly appropriates Native American culture, by besmirching popular icons. Christopher Rieger further explains Birdman's character when he notices that there is a connection between Birdman and Native American mythology.¹⁶ Rieger examines *Swamplandia!* uses Native American myths as an introduction to adulthood. He argues that Birdman is related to the Northwestern Thunderbird, a man who can transform into a bird, and Kokopelli, a lothario. Furthermore, birds were very important to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) and Mississippian mythology. Birds are used to symbolize the upper world. Their mortal foes are serpents, who are creatures of the Underworld, and who are represented as crocodiles in *Swamplandia!* Again, Russell challenges the reader’s familiarity with stereotypes by making the “good” character tropes amoral and vice versa. Birdman gradually seduces Ava through his infectious

song, by insinuating that his whistle was to attract her (her name is Latin for bird). He eventually rapes her. Rieger additionally points out that sexual violence is a harmful way to propel Ava to adulthood. The idea that Ava is empowered after the rape is extremely problematic, especially given that Native American women are often victims of sexual abuse.¹⁷ Birdman is the most significant, and only, an homage to Native American mythology but he proves to be the antagonist in Ava's journey.

Another reading could suggest that the Birdman symbolizes the degradation of Native American culture. Birdman personifies the Northwestern Thunderbird and Kokopelli in the worst ways. This is not the only time that Russell examines Native American culture in a modern-day setting. Chief Bigtree, after leaving Swamplandia! is found to be working at Pa-Hay-Okee Gaming, which is a Seminole-run casino. The casino is a way for Russell to include Native American culture in a modern context. The transition between the old and new is seen here as Russell takes something known and twists it. Jason Marc Harris focuses on how Russell creates and reinvents the classic fairytale.¹⁸ Birdman, according to Harris, flips the fairytale narrative by acting as a villain rather than a guide or hero as the reader would have expected from a typical fairytale. Birdman is introduced as a fantastical denizen of the island. He is dressed in a feather coat that lends him a false sense of magic and folklore. In reality, Birdman is not Ava's mysterious helper, which is a common trope in fairytales; rather, he is her kidnapper, abuser, and eventually rapist. Russell hints at his true nature in their conversations, when Birdman deliberately taunts Ava, thereby testing her naivety in a battle of wits. Birdman and Ava's dynamic on the first read seems to be innocuous enough given the unusual circumstances but his true intentions become clear on the second read when

the reader knows what Birdman will eventually do. These two different perspectives are like Birdman and Ava's conversations since they are not saying the same things, even though Ava does not realize that Birdman is lying. The reader too is disoriented by knowing the truth of their conversations but looking at the situation through Ava's perspective, which warps the world around her.

Russell balances out the narrative by adopting the cowboy trope before she ultimately proves the inherent flaws within the idolized caricature. The cowboy has frequented TV shows, movies, books, and cartoons, personifying the ideal "American Man" and "Wild West" spirit.¹⁹ He was one with nature, grounded, alone, and most importantly, free. The popular cowboy song "Don't Fence Me In" puts equal emphasis on his desires for both nature and independence. Kiwi most strongly represents the mythological cowboy in *Swamplandia!* as he independently sets out to find success. Kiwi, who has gone to work on the mainland, finds himself a stranger in a strange land. Kiwi attempts to study the social behavior he observes like an anthropologist, but he is often the butt of the joke. He believes that he can do better alone only to realize that he wants his family. After seeing his father at Pa-Hay-Okee Gaming, Kiwi imagines a scenario when he could be with his family again:

It would be a moment of savage forgiveness. No words required. It would be barbaric and a little gross, eating that lobster, but it would have the transformative effect of a new ritual on them. After the meal, they would be reconciled. They would make plans to return to Ava and Ossie and Swamplandia! They would bring Grandpa Sawtooth home, possibly they would go downstairs and gamble together, and win (360).

Russell changes the cowboy myth in that Kiwi yearns for the urban mainland instead of their rural island. Typically, the Cowboy is at home in the wide-open plains, but the opposite is true for Kiwi. This twist suggests that the mainland has a more feral nature than one might assume given the mainland's foil is the island, a truly natural place. Russell drives this point further when Kiwi is nick-named Margaret Mead by fellow World of Darkness employees. This nickname is significant because Margaret Mead famously studied the South Pacific islands, whereas Kiwi is studying the mainland. The cowboy is proved to be only a myth when Kiwi realizes that the mainland is not what he thought it would be and that he cannot be independent.

Swamplandia!'s reckoning with the past is demonstrated with both physical and symbolic gestures that attempt to put the family on a similar footing to the Seminole people. Ava notes the land around was once inhabited by the Seminole people as a direct result of President Jackson's aggressive stance against the Native American inhabitants of Florida. Yet Ava portrays her family in a similar light. Her family may pretend to be Native American but what they really have in common is their attitude towards the government. Ava details that the government had made attempts to turn the Everglades into harvestable land and then sell that fake promise. The Bigtree family moved to the island thinking they would make a fortune harvesting crops, only to find the land was nearly uninhabitable. Furthermore, the land was only getting worse after the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse, named by Russell, planted invasive species on and around the island. Robert Tristram Coffin, author of *Kennebec: Cradle of Americans*, drew a parallel between the Native American peoples and European settlers:

[The old ice harvesting tools] were dark with rust and covered with cobwebs... They had joined the flint arrows and the bows that once bent to men along the ancient Kennebec ... Someday our own sons' far great-grandchildren may find among the timers of my friend's house the rusted shards of the electric refrigerator that serves the house today.²⁰

Coffin suggests here that the European Settler life had disappeared as the Native Americans had before and eventually our modern ways will as well. This sentiment is the disappearing Indian trope because Coffin places the blame not on people, but rather more vaguely on time. Yet Coffin goes further by making a connection through eras to show a connection. Russell creates a similar narrative that bridges the gap between the seemingly two very different groups: the Bigtree family and the Seminole people. Like Coffin, Russell suggests that the Native Americans and the Cowboy are not too different by suggesting that the family, as the Seminole people, are victims of the government. Of course, the Bigtree are not victims of genocide nor were they forcibly pushed into Everglades. However, Russell draws a connection between the two groups. Coffin differs from the other writers by not romanticizing either the Native American tribes nor the pioneers; rather, Coffin argues they both suffered at the hands of modernity and time. *Swamplandia!* informs the reader that the island had not always belonged to the family and soon the family would not have their home on the island due to the choke weeds that grew and threatened the native flora.

Folklore and traditional storytelling play a major role in *Swamplandia!* as they set up the situation for magical/fantastical events to occur. The reader has certain expectations for how characters will adhere to their given roles: Kiwi as a cowboy and

Birdman as a navigator, but the characters break from these roles. On a wide scale, Russell changes our Western narrative by changing these narratives of cowboys and fairytales. She does so, however, by focusing on a small region without making generalizations to the rest of the country or even Florida. Russell most notably reflects on Native American culture by the characterization of Birdman and the paralleled dynamic between the Bigtree family and the Seminole people. Yet the reader discovers that Birdman is just a man and the Underworld is just another part of the Everglades. These twists threaten to upset the created fantasy but don't because there is still the possibility of 'what-if' even when the characters question their experiences. Russell utilizes the Everglades and the island to create the setting for the story to take place. Here, magical realism and literary regionalism work off each other because Russell uses the history of the Seminole people and the regional culture to separate the reader for their reality.

Ghost

Death is inevitable. It is a universal truth that everyone will die someday. Our attitudes towards death, however, are not all the same. There are countless beliefs regarding what happens afterlife and if there is life after death. Ghosts, specters, ghouls, and phantoms often appear in literary works because they symbolize the past. Additionally, ghosts are neither dead nor alive, rather, they uncomfortably hover in the in-between. Ghosts are defined as "a soul or specter of a dead person usually believed to inhabit the netherworld and to be capable of returning in some form to the world of the living (EB 1995: 242)." Typically ghosts appear when there is something amiss because according to Derrida, "Spirit is the name given to the entity from which

lawfulness proceeds (Specters of Marx).” Meaning, their presence becomes known when there is a rift in society. Their authoritarian role forces people to think more about their lives in a way that may expose uncomfortable truths.

Swamplandia! too grapples with death and the significance that that death has on the Bigtree family. The ghosts in *Swamplandia!* connect the family to the environment and work to dismantle the patriarch. Ghosts are introduced to the novel when Ava and Ossie turn to a Ouija board after their mother’s death in hopes of communicating with their mother’s spirit. Eventually, Ossie becomes obsessed with the Ouija board, and everything occult-related as she even believes that she has a “ghost” boyfriend, Louis Thanksgiving, whom she eventually departs with on the washed-up dredge barge. These ghosts haunt the pages since the reader is constantly reminded of the loss which propelled the characters forward.

How their presence is presented is important to defining the story as magical realist, as opposed to horror. Ghosts, for example, in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have a political significance as a reference to the town’s refusal to disappear into conformity. Here, the ghosts act as political resistance because the citizens live in a town that is not officially recognized by the national government. In a similar vein, *Beloved* in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* personifies “not only the spirit of Sethe’s daughter; she is also the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people.²¹ *Beloved* operates on several dichotomies, being both a child and adult, live and dead. Russell depicts ghosts as a way to move the story forward and to motivate the characters. There are two major ghosts in *Swamplandia!* the ghost of Lois Thanksgiving and their mother. These ghosts, however, do not have the same agenda.

Russell writes both magical realism and literary regionalism with the addition of the ghosts because ghosts are often used in magical realist fiction, and sometimes appear in the foreground of literary regionalism.

Ghosts in literary regionalism bring attention to a place by juxtaposing the familiar to the strange. The setting needs to be clearly described in order for the introduction of ghosts to make sense since that setting is then twisted with the inclusion of a fantastical event. Additionally, ghosts insert another perspective as something that is there but not really there. Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Stranger", which is a short regionalist story, is an example of how a ghost can make the familiar landscape strange.²² The eponymous stranger in the novel is the French wife of a local captain who is at odds with the other locals who cannot understand her and barely even recognize her as human. The strange woman falls ill and in her last moments, her neighbor sees the stranger's late mother sitting at the stranger's bed. The neighbor's gaze places her in the role of "the watcher" while the presence of the ghost brings in an alternative narrative. "The Stranger" emphasizes the fact that the outsider is made even more obvious to the insider since the outsider is not fully recognized by the insider. The main reason why the outsider is cut off is that they are unfamiliar with the history and the cultural norms. *Swamplandia!* uses ghosts in a similar way by making the familiar unfamiliar. The landscape that the family thought they knew is changed with the introduction of ghosts.

Ghost towns occasionally appear in literary regionalism because the towns are imbued with a great sense of history even though there is no one living there. Birdman and Ava come across a ghost town, Stiltsville, on their journey to the Underworld. Stiltsville is a real housing area, however, the town of sorts is located in Biscayne Bay,

not in the Everglades. They approach Stiltsville knowing the not very exciting history of the sudden desertion and expecting to find ghosts. “Do you think anybody lives here anymore?” I asked the Bird Man. “Do you think there are any ghosts here?” “We’ll find out (231).” Ghosts are most often found at ghost towns, which are abandoned towns where structures remain but are deserted. American artist Muriel Sibell Wolle famously depicted Western mining towns as ghost towns.²³ Her art drew a lot of criticism from the local people who did not want to see their towns decrepit and empty. Wolle’s aim, however, was not to denigrate the current town, rather, to preserve the past by creating historical relics from her understanding of the town’s history. Her work drew a lot of attention and inspired people to visit American ghost towns; “Her drawings predicted the structural collapse and anticipated a mountain landscape in which only ghosts and ghost aficionados roamed.” The ghosts in *Swamplandia!* further, create a sense of place because the reader is reminded of Florida’s history and how easily places can fall apart without the human presence.

The most notable time when ghosts are used to inform the reader of Florida’s past is when Lois Thanksgiving Auschenbliss reveals his past life and how he died in the 1930s. The dredge barge washes ashore on the family’s island and Ossie soon falls in love with Lois after communicating via a Ouija board. Lois never takes physical form; rather, he possesses her and takes control over her body. Ava witnesses these “love possessions” as she calls them, but Kiwi dismisses these episodes as sexually charged acts. However, the love possessions seem to be more real than Kiwi thought since Ossie was able to operate and navigate the dredge barge under Lois’ control. Ossie’s possession strips her of her humanity and her identity because she has taken on a

spectral identity. Derrida examines in his book, *Specters of Marx*, how ideologies become specters and spirits postmortem:

Once ideas or thoughts (*Gedanke*) are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghosts by *giving them a body*. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in *another artifactual body, a prosthetic body*, a ghost of spirit, one might say a ghost of the ghost if, as Marx sometimes leads one to think, the first spiritualization also, and already, produces some specter. But a more acute specificity belongs to what could be called the “second” ghost, as incorporation of autonomized spirit, as objectivizing expulsion of an interior idea or thought (158).

Derrida is referring to the afterlife of concepts. The change that happens when information moves from its original source mirrors that of ghostly possession. Derrida reasons that neither the passed along thought nor the host is quite the same after the exchange, rather, they become a new thing, the “second” ghost. Likewise, Ossie becomes that “artifactual” and “prosthetic body” when Lois possesses her, yet she is not entirely Lois Thanksgiving either, rather she is a blend of herself and the ghost. She embodies him because he is then able to use her body to operate and navigate the dredge barge. In this regard, Ossie has now lost her identity as another spirit and ideology has usurped hers. Derrida refers to this process as “second incarnation,” which is a religious term and refers to the human acceptance of the Divine Christ or the Holy Spirit. The altered usage for the term allows for other types of spirits because Derrida has taken the term out of its original context. This distinction is important because

Swamplandia!'s ghost does not carry a significant religious meaning; rather, they seem more interested in their own agendas.

The transformation from spirit to tangible form, Ossie to Lois, is how her journey to the underworld begins. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* mirrors Ossie's desire for a new way of life.²⁴ *The Famished Road* is about a Yoruba family who sacrifices everything in order to save their child, Azaro, from the land of the dead. Azaro's dad's desire is to mesh the dream world with the real world, saying, "We can redream this world and make the dream real. Human beings are gods hidden from themselves" (498). Dad's saying that "Human beings are gods hidden from themselves" theorizes that humans already pertain to a spiritual force. Furthermore, Dad envisions a Utopian like a place where the family is free from all the troubles of reality like hunger and exhaustion. Likewise, Lois promised Ossie they would be together in the underworld. She realized, however, that he was navigating her through the swamp on the same route that the dredge barge had traversed when he was still alive and that she would not be joining him in the underworld after all.

Ghosts in *Swamplandia!* are feminine. Ava and Ossie are the only people to have direct contact with ghosts. Not only that, but the ghosts are dismissed by the male characters as well. The fact that the ghosts interact solely with the female characters creates a divide. Gendering supernatural abilities and senses, however, is not new. Isabella Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is a feminist and magical realist novel that centers around three women, all of whom have supernatural abilities.²⁵ In *House of Spirits*, the women use their gifts to fight back against the oppressive patriarch:

In this way [*House of Spirits*] reasserts the primacy of the feminine, and shows how “female intuition” is underpinned not only by a sixth sense (clairvoyance, premonition, and telepathy) but also by a sense of political justice.

Allende connects feminism not only to supernatural events but to justice as well. As mentioned earlier, ghosts appear when there is something wrong. The ability to recognize ghosts in *The House of Spirits* is a strictly feminine activity. As mentioned earlier, Jewett’s “The Stranger” focuses on a female relationship, so it is not surprising that the ghost embodies the matriarch. Russell too makes the ghost feminine because the ghost is Ava’s mother. Hilola’s ghost or spirit appears when Ava is in trouble. Ava had run away from Birdman and was able to evade him by diving into an alligator hole. Her decision meant that she was able to escape Birdman, but she then had to flee from an alligator. In that moment of danger Ava feels a force greater than herself save her:

I believe that [my mother] was the pulse and bloom that forced me toward the surface. She was the water that eased the clothes from my fingers. She was the muscular current that rode me through the water away from the den, and she was the victory howl that at last opened my mouth and filled my lungs.

Ava’s encounter with her mother’s spirit changes her perspective on the island and the mainland. She realizes that she does not need the island to have her mother. The transformation that Ava goes through was because she was bolstered by her mother’s spirit and had an encounter with the marvelous real.

A distinguishing feature that ghosts possess is that they belong to neither the living or the dead, rather, they are stuck in between. From this perspective, the reading takes on a postmodernist perspective as the reader questions social structures.

Capitalism is certainly featured in *Swamplandia!* since Chief Bigtree struggles to keep the park open after Hilola, the star of the show dies. Most notable was how the tourists reacted to the news of her death. Ava describes that, in a desperate plea to placate the tourists:

The Chief made up a “shut-your-crone-face” conciliation package that we were supposed to give the outraged senior people seeking refunds. The conciliation package contained: a foam alligator hat designed to look like it was eating your head, a crystal flamingo necklace, fifty green and amber Seth toothpicks in a collector case, and a souvenir flipbook of our mother. If you turned the pages quickly enough, Mom moved like a primitive cartoon: first she dove, then her body tore a green seam down the center of the artificial lake... For some reason, the tourists seemed depressed by this trick (26).

The Chief's attempt to recreate his wife fails and eventually people stop going to the park altogether. The family is thus separated after the park dwindles and the family needs new ways to make money. The rupture inspires new developments in character and plot as the family must reconcile with their loss. Kiwi's noted separation to find independent success models that of the Cartesian individual, which is akin to the Cowboy trope. Their individualism is broken when they ultimately come together, as a result of the ghosts. Lois Parkinson Zamora articulates the significance of ghosts to modernity as such:

At the core of this literary system would be the slippage from lamentable instances of individualism to restorations of collective universal subjectivity, which is magical realism is signaled by the spectral presence and in Jungian psychology become

archetypes of the collective unconscious. Phantasms thus become postmodern as implicit critiques of modern excesses lodged in the psyche and literary traditions of Western ontology; their counterrealist ciphering is meant to reclaim the universal collective subject as archetypes of a lost harmony.²⁵

The universal subjectivity that Zamora describes is eventually achieved in *Swamplandia!* when the family is reunited and have left the park. Their departure from the park marks a break from capitalist excess, of which Zamora bemoans. Ava went from believing that leaving the park would mean disappointing and abandoning their late mother to realizing that the park and her mother's spirit was always with her, "Our Seths are still thrashing inside us in an endless loop (413)."

Ghosts in literature draw a connection to the two genres, literary regionalism and magical realism, because it introduces a new element. Literary regionalism focuses on the difference between the "insider" and the "outsider," but the inclusion of ghosts distorts the difference between those identities. The role that ghosts play in literature is crucial to our understanding of social laws and ethnic codes. As mentioned earlier, ghosts are used to point out when there is an error in society, one that people either purposefully or unconsciously ignore. Using ghosts as a plot device points to an aspect of a place that we might not have been aware of and with power that transcends explanation.

Conclusion

Russell structures *Swamplandia!* as both a magical realist and a literary regionalist novel. She draws on Native American folklore that reflects the place as well as imbuing the story with a marvelous tone. Although *Swamplandia!* incorporates

Native American folklore, Russell does not directly reference Native American culture to a credible degree, which proves to be problematic in how Russell presents authenticity. Additionally, Russell's inclusion of ghosts asks the reader to suspend their disbelief. The ghosts enhance the setting of the novel because the past has made itself present. I think that Russell successfully intertwines the two genres.

Ultimately, there is a strong indication that magical realism and literary regionalism intersect. The dynamic between the two genres, however, is not equal. Magical realism is literary regionalism but literary regionalism is not magical realism. I would conclude my essay by saying we should identify the similarities between the genres in order to reach a better conclusion of magical realism because then we would have a better idea of how the genres relate to one another. The earlier scholars looked at magical realism separated from other genres. In my work, I believe that we should instead read the genre and see how it intersects with other genres. Although I narrowed my study to how magical realism and literary realism are related, I think that is evidence that there are many other genres simultaneously involved.

I believe that magical realism has a long future ahead and I am eager to read and discover what comes next. Although defining the genre is not a simple task, I believe that instead gives writers freedom to how they chose to interpret the genre. Of course, knowing the history is important but I think that ultimately, magical realism should be used by anyone who wants to.

I chose to place my thesis in Florida because I was drawn to the state's vibrant culture and because of my personal connection. I greatly enjoyed writing the fictional pieces. I had interviewed my family members to find out what they remembered. I was

not surprised that they had a rather blasé attitude but I was glad that they had a lot of fond memories. I recently visited Miami and the neighborhood where we had lived. The experience was not as inspirational as I thought it might be, perhaps because so much has changed since when we used to live there, myself included.

Upon completing this project, I have decided that my search for a more holistic definition of magical realism is inconclusive. Ultimately, this is an ongoing project.

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