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A Postcolonial Symbiosis:  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Historical Fiction in Canada.....	7
Magical Realism as a Literary Mode.....	16
Magical Realism as Subversive Postcolonial Discourse.....	24
“The three most short-lived traces”? Magic, History and Postcolonialism in Jane Urquhart’s <i>Away</i> .....	30
“Not magic, Frances. Miracle.” Rethinking the Relevance of Magical Realism for Ann-Marie MacDonald’s <i>Fall on your knees</i> .....	52
“Ghosts are not shoes”: <i>When Alice Lay Down With Peter</i> and the Fear of not Being Haunted .....	76
Of Randomness and Organization .....	96
Attempt at a Conclusion.....	106
Works Consulted.....	110
Index.....	115





## Introduction

Will Bloom: “Unbelievable.”  
Senior Ed Bloom: “The story of my life.”

*Big Fish*, Tim Burton (2003)

This quotation is taken from Tim Burton’s *Big Fish*. Besides *The Science of Sleep*, *Being John Malkovich* and the film adaptation of *The Perfume*, *Big Fish* is one of my favorite movies. *The Perfume* is also one of my favorite books, besides *Brother of Sleep* and *100 Years of Solitude*. When I look at this selection now, it is beyond me how I could overlook the obvious similarities between these films and books. Only recently have I learned that they are all canonically categorized as magical realist pieces of work. I have never deliberately looked for this label; I have simply been lured in by the very particular atmosphere that these movies and texts share. And this particular atmosphere also caught my attention when I read the novels that became the basis for the present thesis. I simply wanted to get behind this: what does this particular atmosphere constitute? And so my interest in this topic was born.

Also, I have always been interested in Canadian literature. And over the time, I have found more and more novels that, in one way or another, conjure up this particular atmosphere. I have picked three of them—the structurally most similar texts—and decided to investigate if, and if yes how and to what ends the mode of magical realism is applied in these texts. Interestingly, all three of these novels can be categorized as historical fictions, and all of them have been written by English Canadian authors within the last 20 years: Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993), Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on your knees* (1996) and Margaret Sweatman’s *When Alice lay down with Peter* (2001). All three of these novels trace the history of the Canadian nation in the form of immigrant family genealogies that constitute a substantial element of magic.

However, there are very few critical works about magical realist fiction in Canada. Generally, the field has received critical recognition only relatively recently. Earlier works about magical realism focused mainly on Latin America (e.g. Alejo Carpentier),

while more recent texts argue for magical realism to be considered a “contemporary trend in *international* fiction” (Faris 1, emphasis added). With this development, the concept of magical realism has become of increasing interest for scholars in the fields of literary as well as cultural studies, particularly in its formulation as a postcolonial discourse. Considering this, it is particularly perplexing that the only book-length that distinctively deals with magical realism in Canadian literature, *Magic realism and Canadian literature. Essays and stories.*, was published in 1986. Apart from this gap, however, a plethora of secondary literature about magical realism has been generated during this recent surge of critical interest.

After having familiarized myself with a relevant theoretical and critical framework, I established a set of hypotheses for this research project. First of all, I believe that it is not enough to categorize my selection of novels as historical fiction. Much rather, I suggest that they belong to a very particular strand of contemporary historical fiction: they move way beyond the scope of the historical novel, but their flirt with postmodern techniques is much subtler than in the novels so prevalent in Canada during the 1970s/1980s, which have commonly been categorized as historiographic metafiction. Secondly, I argue that these novels, in one way or another, constitute elements of magical realism. But not only that, I am also of the opinion that these novels are representative of a certain kind of symbiosis that has developed between the mode of magical realism and the abovementioned strand of Canadian historical fiction of the 1990s and 200s – even though, in this context, the mode of magical realism seems to be used, just like the postmodern strategies, in an attenuated and altered way. And, eventually, I argue that this symbiosis perfectly combines the subversive potential of both its partners in an investigation of the intricate Canadian (post)colonial situation.

The first chapter of this thesis outlines the concepts that provide a frame for the following chapters, starting with an introduction to the common ground that the selected novels share, namely the fact that they belong to the genre of historical fiction and deal with historical Canadian figures and events. I outline the development of historical fiction in Canada and, in doing so, I point at how the most recent strand of historical fiction differs from its predecessors. Nonetheless, I describe some key textual strategies that authors of much critically acclaimed Canadian postmodern historical fiction have repeatedly made use of, because they have undeniably influenced the authors of the

texts under investigation. Subsequently, I introduce magical realism as a literary mode. I start by giving an overview of the development of magical realism as a critical concept, and continue with a detailed depiction of its key features, for I have, as mentioned above, set out to investigate what the magical realist atmosphere actually constitutes and how it is textually encoded. The next part of the theoretical chapter is dedicated to the concept of “Magic Realism as a Postcolonial Discourse”, which has been picked up by many critics since it has first been formulated by Stephen Slemon in his article of the same title.

In the following chapters, I analyze the three novels separately by making use of the theoretical tools outlined in the theoretical chapter. Chapters II to IV each concentrate on three major aspects, with variable emphases: first, I examine if and how magical realism is textually traceable in the respective novels and how the use of this literary technique differs from what has been regarded as ‘canonical’ with regard to magical realism. In a second step, I focus on the impact that magical realism has on the representation of history in this text. Finally, I discuss what my findings suggest concerning the authors’ engagement with a Canadian (post)colonial identity. The fifth chapter, then, constitutes a discussion of the findings formulated in these chapters, analyzing similarities and differences between the respective authors’ ways of incorporating magical realist traits. Eventually, the outcome of this discussion will be summarized in a concise concluding section.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In the introductory chapter, I have commented on the hypotheses that have motivated my research. The following chapter provides the theoretical basis for a close investigation of these hypotheses. It comprises an examination of several, on various levels interwoven theoretical concepts relating to history, historiography, historical writing, historical fiction and historiographic metafiction, as well as to magic realism, magical realism and the marvelous real. I am deliberately listing a multitude of confusing and often confused terms here, in order to illustrate that one of the main issues this chapter is meant to address is the lack of terminological clarity. Particularly in the context of magic(al) realism, but also when it comes to (theories of) history and historical writing, the number of terms that are used in the respective critical field is amazing, and often problematic. For this reason, one goal of this chapter is conceptual and terminological clarification: I intend to disentangle the net of terms in order to arrive at a workable terminology that suits the particular context of this investigation, and can subsequently be deployed throughout the following chapters. Simply put, the aim of this chapter is to create a theoretical frame for what follows by providing and defining the tools and terms for a close examination of the three novels under investigation.

In order to do so, I have opted for a three-part structure that implicitly organizes this chapter according to the basic concepts of this work: the first part is devoted to a discussion of the genre to which the three novels analyzed in this thesis belong, i.e. historical fiction, and its development and critical resonance in Canada. This part also deals with postmodern as well as postcolonial perspectives on history, for these schools of thought have significantly informed this critical discourse, particularly in its reworking in Canadian fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. Because these postmodern historical fictions have been highly influential for further literary generations, this section also includes a discussion of textual strategies applied in these postmodern texts.

The second part of this chapter is intended to explore the notion of magical realism as a literary mode. The aim of this section is, on the one hand, to delimit the terms that dominate this critical field by giving a brief outline of its historical development; on the

other hand, this second part provides a number of characteristics that organize magical realism as a literary mode, as well as a set of textual strategies that configure these features.

Eventually, in a last section, I discuss—as the title of this part serves to underline—the strong ties between magical realism and the postcolonial project. In this context, I comment on the subversive potential of magical realism on a more general level, as well as on the pervasive thrust of postcolonial magical realist texts in particular. Finally, this chapter also comments on postcolonial magical realist texts in Canada and, by doing so, sheds light on the country’s particular postcolonial situation.

## Historical Fiction in Canada

“History is a party to which Canada has not been invited.”

(qtd. in Colombo 1)

This quotation by Canadian journalist Robert Fulford clearly conveys the idea that Canadian history is intrinsically unspectacular, and there are numerous other quotations in John R. Colombo’s *Famous Lasting Words: Great Canadian Quotations* that would back up this statement. Canadian history has frequently been considered as fraught with imperialist overtones and, in general, as too nutrient-poor for a firm and distinct Canadian identity to set roots in. Nonetheless, and maybe exactly because of this obsession with (the lack of a) Canadian history, what Patrick Watson calls “a hunger for narrative about the past” (qtd. in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 4) has developed, particularly in the 1970s. In the following section, I attempt to render intelligible the complex discourse around and the textual features of these ‘narratives about the past’. On the basis of this discussion, I then explain my choice of terminology with respect to this critical field.

The question of what Canadian history does, or should constitute is highly pertinent<sup>1</sup>, and also highly contested. But not only historians have engaged in this debate; from the

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<sup>1</sup> Herb Wyile, for instance, elaborately comments on this debate in *Talking in the past tense* and in *Speculative Fictions*.

19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, authors have also explored this question. The traditional form of the historical novel, for instance, was figuratively present in the delivery room at the birth of the Canadian nation: authors like William Kirby, Gilbert Parker or Rosanna Eleanor Leprohon have most prominently contributed to the establishment of this genre in a Canadian context throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wyile, Andrews and Viau hold that these early Canadian historical novels were

of tremendous importance in the formation of “a distinct national identity” over the course of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century; the contribution of historical fiction to the surge of nationalism in Europe impressed upon Canadians “that the development of a recognizable literary tradition was inseparable from the establishment of a distinctive historical identity.” (Wyile, Andrews, and Viau 3, referencing Carol Gerson)

Thus we can see that, from the very beginning onwards, Canadian literature has tended to look towards the past. But, as Wyile puts it in another publication, “just as in health care, the fact that the patient is getting a lot of attention doesn’t necessarily mean that he or she is well” (*Talking in the Past Tense* 2). This statement becomes particularly relevant when looking at historical fiction in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Where many of the early historical novels helped generate rallying points for a collective national imagination of the past, more recent historical fictions of the 1990s and 2000s have largely taken an entirely different stand in relation to the ‘patient’ Canadian history. In a fundamental shift, the idea of the past as one linear narrative fostering a historical national identity has largely been discarded.

This paradigmatic change has its roots in postmodern and postcolonial contestations and discussions about historiography and historical writing. Interestingly, these debates can be seen as a point of convergence between these two schools of thought. In order to follow up on the question of how these theories affect our perception as well as the representation of the past, I begin with the concept of scientific historiography as it goes back to Enlightenment thought. In the introduction to the chapter “Periphery and Postmodernism” of his reader entitled *Postmodernism*, Thomas Docherty states:

To be enlightened, by definition, is implicitly to construct an idea of oneself as a subject-in-time; one has a present, characterized by light, which is distinguished from something dark, which is necessarily prior to the moment of Enlightenment. A specific model of historical narrative is thereby put into place. (*Postmodernism* 445)

What is established here can be seen as the temporal equivalent of an asymmetrical discursive power relation: everything that lies on this single path leading the enlightened subject-in-time into its future is part of a positive progression towards “a good ethico-political end – universal peace” (Lyotard, qtd. in Vautier 33), while everything that lies on another way or behind the “hero of knowledge” (Lyotard, qtd. in Vautier 33) is intrinsically inferior or regressive. This ideology has shaped a whole narrative of world history, with the imperial as the enlightened subject. This concept is based on indubitable belief in progress, cause and effect succession, morals and the authority of the enlightened subject; and it is this very claim to scientificity, reason and rationality that renders it perceptible as objective.

This concept constitutes a metanarrative, the designated enemy per se in postmodern thought, and—in this specific form as an imperial construction—also in postcolonial theory. Within postmodern theory, one of the few agreed-on factors that make its elusive nature more feasible is the tendency to work against any totalizing constructions that assert an essential truth claim. As Lyotard puts it: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives” (qtd. in Vautier 33). The postcolonial project, on the other hand, is mainly denoted by a former colonial society’s search for a distinct post-colonial identity. Due to the fact that most of the ex-colonial countries’ histories have been written so that they accord with the imperial metanarrative, an important postcolonial “goal is to revise, reappropriate, or reinterpret history” (Vautier, 33). Thus both schools of thought obviously work against Enlightenment historiography. Their focus and underlying intention, however, appear to differ: “while post-colonialism takes the [imperialist subject] as its object of critique [...] post-modernism takes the [subject of humanism]” (Hutcheon, “Downspout” 130).

This idea of deconstructing the essentialist truth claim of the historical metanarrative—for postcolonial as well as postmodern ends—entered Canadian fiction in the novels of several authors of the 1970s. The authors who have gained the most critical attention in this context are George Bowering, Joy Kogawa, Timothy Findley and Rudy Wiebe. Mary Vautier, for instance, builds the argument in her 1998 publication *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*

around a discussion of the novels by Bowering, Kogawa and Wiebe<sup>2</sup>. Herb Wyile also mentions Kogawa and Wiebe and adds Findley; in his *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (2002), he discusses these authors as initiators of a “largely postcolonial, revisionist illumination of Canadian history and historiography” (xii), while Linda Hutcheon illustrates her concept of historiographic metafiction by discussing Bowering, Findley and Wiebe in the chapter entitled “Historiographic Metafiction” of her 1988 work *The Canadian Postmodern*.

In their above-mentioned works, these contemporary critics mainly concentrate on an analysis of the textual strategies employed by the above-mentioned authors, and the impact that these techniques have on the representation of the past. The result in all these critical works is the proposition of a certain postmodern poetics of which Wiebe, Bowering, Kogawa and Findley can be regarded as the originators. As such, they have substantially influenced subsequent generations of Canadian authors. In the following paragraphs, some of the main textual strategies and their effects on the representation of history are illustrated in more detail. In doing so, it makes sense to follow the three-part structure Wyile proposes in *Speculative Fictions*, particularly because he takes into account and acknowledges Vautier’s as well as Hutcheon’s insights. He groups the textual strategies that are applied in these novels in three categories, according to their particular impact on the representation of history: first, he considers metafictional devices; secondly, he traces strategies connected with the representation of orality within writing; and third, he investigates the use of mythological structures and motifs.

A key argument in the postmodern debate about the nature of history and historiography is “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”. This may be taken literally, but it is also the title of an article by Hayden White, one of the seminal theorists in this field. Towards the end of the article, White concisely states that the

value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. (27)

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<sup>2</sup> One of the strengths of this study is the fact that it deals with French as well as English-speaking Canada, as the other three novels she discusses are from the French-speaking authors Jacques Godbout, Jovette Marchessault and Francois Barcelo.



This desire for coherence, integrity, fullness and closure is perfectly fulfilled in narrative structures, and probably only there. Therefore, the role that narrativity plays in all human processes of meaning making can hardly be overestimated. Largely, we even organize our own memory according to narrative principles, for it seems to be the most conclusive way to make meaning of our past. And this basic process of organizing the past seems to work along similar parameters within individuals as well as within collectives. Referring to the strong ties between the writing of history and narrativity, White states that

[t]he historical narrative ... reveals to us a world that is putatively “finished,” done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience. (24)

Thus what White ultimately points out here is that historical writing necessarily involves narrative construction. Consequently, historical writing is not as far away from fiction as it may seem.

Coming back to metafictional devices, the prevalent question is what does the use of such devices entail in the context of historical fiction. As Patricia Waugh puts it, metafiction

suggests, in fact, that there may be as much to learn from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a hypothetical ‘human nature’ that somehow exists as an essence outside historical systems of articulation. (11)

This implies that instead of trying to represent some ‘hypothetical’ signified, metafiction draws attention to the ‘representational structure’ of the signifier. Consequently, given that both historiographic as well as fictional writing are—in their way of representation—dependent on narrative principles, the use of metafictional strategies in historical fiction also draws attention to the representational structure of history “as it is being constructed by some interpreting agent”<sup>1</sup>. In doing so, metafictional devices make the reader realize that history as it is brought down to us can never be taken as a given—or, as Wyile puts it, “If for empiricist historians history is a given, all of these [metafictional] novels look this gift horse in the mouth” (*Speculative Fictions* 141).

In the abovementioned novels from the 1970s are various strategies that contribute to this metafictional—and, by extension, “metahistorical” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions*

140)—effect. Most importantly, there is the prevalent theme of conducting research, and the processes involved in bringing the results of this research to paper. According to Linda Hutcheon, two different narrational strategies are used in order to discuss this issue: on the one hand, the author may choose the perspective of the researcher only, revealing his/ her doubts and uncertainties in a dialogical discourse, so that the researcher is clearly designated as the narrating and interpreting agent who is responsible for the act of representing the past. This narrator does not attempt to resolve issues that arise in the process of “translating knowing into telling” (White, “The value of narrativity” 5), but rather stresses the complexity of and the problems connected to this process. This includes—and here we come back to what White suggests in the above statement—“underlining the act of selection, interpretation, and construction behind representations of the past” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 141). On the other hand, Hutcheon suggests that other authors adopt a way of narrating in which there is no overt narrating voice, but which reflects a sense of multi-vocality. In this case, the readers are “left to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view [...] and must make an evaluation and interpretation of all [they] have been told” (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 65). Whereas the first perspective underlines the narrative construction of each individual’s account of the past, a multi-vocal narration points at the fact that there can never be one ultimate, essentially true representation.

Hand in hand with this theme of historical research goes the questioning of historical sources. What features prominently in regard to historical sources is the incorporation or description of photographs. The photograph itself is already a form of representation that is far from being objective; it is a static frame chosen by photographers, put around a selection of their reality. According to Wyile, photos in historical fictions “at once evoke a historical context and atmosphere, and yet are static, requiring interpretation, a reading beyond the frame, and a consciousness of the effect of freezing and framing” (*Speculative Fictions* 142). Ultimately, the incorporation of photos raises questions about the relation of and the border between fact and fiction, as well as about the notion of truth and representability. Another strategy that similarly contributes to the questioning of historical sources is the self-conscious use of intertexts. Many novels incorporate written sources like newspaper articles, transcripts or journey reports and consciously mingle them with fictional constructions, thus challenging “the basic and

misleading assumption [...] that fiction is an antonym of reality” (Wolfgang Iser, qtd. in Hutcheon *The Canadian Postmodern* 68).

The next issue that is of key importance for many writers of historical fiction is the negotiation of the written and the oral. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong argues that, without writing, “the literate mind would not and could not think as it does ... More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (qtd. in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 162). Ong implies here that there is a fundamental difference between the literate and the oral consciousness, which consequently triggers various associations: the oral is linked to primordial cultures, to memory and myth, whereas the written is associated with “an alienating modern, technological society”, the “closure of official history” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 162), and, eventually, with the imperialist project. As MacLuhan elaborates,

The written (the visual) was cool, indifferent, causal, civilized. It was private and static. On the other hand, the oral (the auditory) was hot, empathetic, magical, mythic. It was public and dynamic. (qtd. in Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 52)

Many authors of historical fictions try to “come to terms with the potential for stasis and the need for kinesis implicit in the written/ oral opposition” (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 54). However, this discussion implicates a significant danger, namely, to quote Terry Goldie, that the “split between literate and non-literate is often used as the defining point for an absolute division between white self and indigene other” (107). Hutcheon, however, argues that the Canadian historical novels of the 70s/ 80s are acutely aware of this danger. Consequently, they tend to “set up and investigate [...] an unresolved and unresolvable dialectic between the written and the oral” (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 53).

Again, various different strategies are employed in order to contribute to the debate concerning the orality/writing dichotomy. Maybe the most notable technique is the establishment of an oral frame narrative. This is, of course, a quite common device, often used to very different ends. Generally, however, it can be said that, at least in this context, it draws attention to the relation between writing, telling, history and memory. Additionally, there are often characters that are constructed to embody either the one or the other, i.e. literacy or orality, like, for instance, an oral historian in Hodgkin’s *The*

*Invention of the World*, or a Métis bard in Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People*. Another strategy that affects the fundamental structure of some of these novels is to "[polarize], and then [privilege], one of the poles in order to investigate the space in between" (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 53).

The third debate is concerned with the negotiation of two different attitudes towards the past: history and myth. For a long time, the two concepts were regarded as binary oppositions: History was seen as objective, representational and scientific, while myth was considered as moralizing, poetic and symbolic. Structuralist myth critic Mircea Eliade, however, sees history and myth as "merely different kinds of culturally conditioned knowledges" (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 188), reflecting different concepts of time: whereas myth reflects "'sacred' Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable" (Eliade 1), history is "grounded in profane, chronological time" (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 188). Later, with the rise of postmodern sensibilities, theorists as well as authors have been keen on drawing the attention to the (moralizing) implications of narrative strategies and mythologizing processes in historical writing. Also, the notion of universality, which is traditionally connected to the concept of myth, has been subject to investigation and experimentation in historical novels that play with and incorporate mythical structures. Whereas myths have long been "employed as teleological and transhistorical master narratives in literature" (Vautier xi), as Marie Vautier suggests in *New World Myth*, this is—particularly in the context of North American novels<sup>3</sup>—not necessarily the case anymore. Instead, novels that work with what she refers to as New World Myth explicitly situate themselves historically. Additionally, in its particular geographical location—the 'New World'—this mode "involves a reclaiming of the past that frequently works against "original"—that is to say, European—versions of past events," (Vautier xi) thus, again, hinting at the postcolonial overtones of this debate.

Necessarily, the deployed textual techniques connected to this debate are linked to the notions and ideas mentioned above regarding the literacy/orality opposition. In many recent Canadian historical fictions, there seems to be an attempt at reinstating "myth—as the residual trace of preindustrial, premodern, oral cultures and their

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<sup>3</sup> Marie Vautier defines the concept of New World Myth in the context of Canadian literature.

knowledge—as a corrective or alternative to history” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 187). In this context, some of the strategies mentioned above, as for instance the oral frame narrative, often turn up. When it comes to drawing attention to the constructedness and the moralizing tendencies of Western historiography, some of the metafictional/metahistorical devices are used in this context as well. However, the novels that play with the history/myth relation often show particularly distinctive features: on a thematic as well as on a structural level, they work with repetition and recurrence, and, stylistically, they are often very lyrical. This textual incorporation of myth within a historical novel eventually contributes to an illustration of “the tension between the specificity and temporality of the historical and the ahistoricity and archetypicality of the mythical” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 200f).

I have now traced the textual strategies employed by Canadian authors of the 1970s and 1980s. The present thesis, however, deals with historical fictions from approximately the last one and a half decades. Therefore, it is important to note that the stylistic direction seems to have slightly changed. While Wyile argues in 2002 that “contemporary Canadian historical novels undeniably reflect the influence of postmodern poetics” (139), he also continues to suggest that

English-Canadian historical fiction published in the last decade and a half, however, seems less radical and more ambivalent in its challenging of the underpinnings of empiricist historiography and the form of the traditional historical novel. (xiii)

In detailed discussions of recent English Canadian historical novels, chapters three to five of this thesis reveal how far this statement can be supported by textual evidence, and if, or how, textual strategies have changed.

Now that I have outlined the development and characteristics of historical fiction written in Canada during the last three decades, I want to clarify the terminology used in this thesis. Whereas ‘historiography’ refers to the study of history as a discipline, and ‘historical writing’ to the process of putting this historical research down to paper, ‘historical fiction’ is used as an umbrella term for the genre of fiction that incorporates “a number of ‘historical’ events, particularly those in the public sphere, mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters” (Fleishman, qtd. in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 5). With this very basic description, Avrom Fleishman actually

refers to the historical *novel*, but I want to reserve the term of the ‘traditional historical novel’ for a particular kind of historical fiction, namely for novels that do not openly display a concern with the notion of linear history as a given. As such, the traditional historical novel is at the one side of the genre spectrum as I perceive it; on the other end is the postmodern concept of ‘historiographic metafiction’, referring to a kind of historical fiction that is “both self-consciously fictional but also overtly concerned with the acts (and consequences) of the reading and writing of history as well as fiction” (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 7). Whereas the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors of historical fiction, who were present at the birth of the nation, contributed to the genre of the historical novel, the category of historiographic metafiction subsumes many of said novels from the 1970s and 1980s. The novels I analyze in my thesis, however, do not belong to either of the two; instead, they are situated somewhere within this genre-spectrum. Thus I refer to them, for a lack of a better term, as (Canadian) historical fiction of the 1990s and 2000s.

## **Magical Realism as a Literary Mode**

“The magical is factual and the historical is impossible.”

(Faris 12)

This quotation taken from Wendy B. Faris’ *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* leads us into the realm that magic(al) realism opens up for readers and critics: a space of possibilities, of blurred boundaries and conflicted realities. In the following section, I take a closer look at how this space of possibilities is textually encoded, and how critics have, over the time, developed various—some slightly, some considerably—different concepts to navigate within this very broad and vague literary field.

When reading up on magic(al) realism, one mostly comes across three terms: magical realism, magic realism and marvelous realism. In order to illustrate the different connotations of these terms, a closer look must be taken at their historical development. Basically, this development constitutes three different stages, with the

first episode taking place in Germany in the 1920s, the second on the way to Latin America in the 1940s and the third after 1955, starting in Latin America and spreading out internationally. The first of the three terms, 'Magischer Realismus', translated as magic realism, was coined in 1925 by the German art critic Franz Roh in order to describe a

form of painting that differs greatly from its predecessors (expressionist art) in its attention to accurate detail, a smooth photograph-like clarity of picture and the representation of the mystical non-material aspects of reality. (Bowers 9)

Roh also claims that, even though there are considerable similarities, magic realist painting significantly differs from contemporary surrealist practice, because magic realism incorporates "the material object and the actual existence of things in the world, as opposed to the more cerebral and psychological reality explored by the surrealists" (Bowers 12).

Roh's deliberations notably influenced two different literary developments. The first to mention is the one instigated by Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli. He was heavily influenced by Roh's ideas, but his literary as well as theoretical works do more openly reveal political and ideological overtones. Magic realism, according to Bontempelli's conception, serves to "create a collective consciousness by 'opening new mythical and magical perspectives on reality'" (Dombroski, qtd. in Bowers 14). The second development leads to Latin America. Two Latin American writers, who were at the time living in Paris, took up on Roh's ideas and brought them back to their continent in the 1940s: Arturo Uslar-Pietri and, most significantly, Alejo Carpentier. Uslar-Pietri brought Roh's ideas to Venezuela; he did incorporate Roh's concept, but basically regarded his own form of writing as a continuation of modernist Latin American traditions. Carpentier, on the other hand, established a completely new term and concept: when he came back to Cuba, he established "lo realismo maravilloso" (marvelous realism) as a distinctly Latin American form. He used the term to refer to a

mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality in Latin America. (Dombroski, qtd. in Bowers 15)

Fundamentally, Carpentier considers the marvelous real as a natural condition, existing "by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics – not by manifesto" (Zamora and Faris 75).

When Uslar-Pietri and Carpentier returned to Latin America during the 1940s, they were not alone: with the fall of the Spanish republic and the Second World War, many people emigrated to Latin America in the hope for new beginnings. What followed was a “time of maturation for many Latin American countries and consequently they sought to create and express a consciousness distinct from that of Europe” (Bowers 16). In this era of revolutionary and nationalist sentiment, literary critic Angel Flores coined a new term in his 1955 essay entitled “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction”. He roughly describes a mixture of magic realism and marvelous realism, containing elements of both. But even though he stresses influences of Spanish literature, he does not acknowledge the contributions of Carpentier or Uslar-Pietri. Instead, he mentions Jorge Luis Borges as the first Latin American magical realist writer. After this essay, there was a renewed interest in the ideas connected to magic(al) realism, which triggered a second wave of magic(al) realist writing. The texts written during this second wave are now mainly referred to as magical realist, even though they do not exactly conform to the conceptualization that Flores came up with in his 1955 essay. Very concisely put, these second-wave magical realist texts are “most notable for [their] matter-of-fact depiction of magical happenings” (Bowers 18).

These boom years produced some of the texts that are still considered prime examples of magical realism, most notably the novels and stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even though, throughout the last decades, a multitude of authors have adopted magical realist strategies, the idea of magic(al) realism as a Latin American monopoly is still prevalent. This may be due to Carpentier’s conception of marvelous realism as intrinsically Latin American, or due to the enormous international success of Latin American novels in this field. This geographical limitation, however, means to not only “ignore both the Latin American connections of early twentieth-century European art and literature and the very different related German art movement known as ‘magic realism’” (Bowers 18), but also to disregard the claim of contemporary critics that magical realism “now designates perhaps the most important contemporary trend in *international* fiction” (Faris 1, emphasis added).

To wrap up this historical outline, I want to conclude with a final juxtaposition of the three different terms. Most significantly,

each of the versions of magic(al) realism have differing meanings for the term ‘magic’; in magic realism ‘magic’ refers to the mystery of life: in marvelous and



the magical realism ‘magic’ refers to any extraordinary occurrences and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science. (Bowers 3)

Or, to put it in the words of the originators or representatives of the respective term and concept: Roh describes magic realism as depicting the “mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (qtd. in Bowers 92). Carpentier claims that “our own marvelous real is encountered [...] in all that is Latin America. Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace” (qtd. in Bowers 122). Salman Rushdie, in turn, one of the few authors who embraces the label of magical realism in connection with his novels (cf. Bowers 47), very concisely describes his mode of writing as “commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (Rushdie, qtd. in Bowers 12).

I have chosen to adopt the last of these three terms, i.e. magical realism, for my discussion of recent Canadian writing. However, even the critical studies in the field of magical realism are not at all homogeneous with regard to the fundamental concept they refer to. Most significantly, there has been an ongoing discussion as to which literary category magical realism constitutes. Shall it be analyzed as a genre, a literary mode, or as something entirely different? In her 2004 publication *Magic(al) Realism*—the most up-to-date evaluation of the critical discourse around magic(al) realism—Maggie Ann Bowers argues that the most popularly applied of these conceptions is that of magical realism as a literary mode, and I pick up this choice for two main reasons. To begin with, it is generally extremely tricky to conceive and theorize the different applications, locations and contexts in which magical realism arises under the umbrella of one unifying genre, and few critics dare doing so<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, and most importantly, even

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<sup>4</sup> Even though Janet A. Walker argues in her review of Wendy B. Faris latest book-length publication *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* that the most outstanding innovation of Faris work is that it proposes magical realism to be considered as a genre, I do have my reservations. *Ordinary Enchantments* is undoubtedly a seminal study in the field, and I do agree with Walker’s point that Faris portrays magical realism as “possessing a social function grounded in a specific narrative mode and characterized by a ‘textual poetics’ and ‘cultural politics’”. However, there is only one chapter (“From A Far Source Within”: Magical Realism as Defocalized Narrative) in which Faris explores the notion of what may constitute magical realism as a genre: she states at the beginning of this chapter that “I have coined the term defocalization to take account of the special narrative situation that seems to me to characterize magical realism as a genre” (43). Nonetheless, for the rest of the book, she continuously uses the term ‘mode’ or ‘style’ without further explication as to how or if there are different conceptions involved. In the very description of her research project at the beginning of the study, for instance, she states: “My basic aims in this study are to explore the importance of magical realism in contemporary literature and its power as a postcolonial narrative style.” (2) Additionally, the chapter

though there may be room for speculations about whether common textual features and socio-political functions allow for the establishment of magical realism as a genre, I am nonetheless of the opinion that the novels I investigate in this paper do *not* allow for such speculations. Concerning their use of magical realist techniques, the texts can by no means be put on the same level as ‘traditional’ magical realist texts like Garcia Marquez’ *100 Years of Solitude* or Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*. Also, the prevalence of the historical project in these novels is, as I argue in the following chapters, far too strong as to allow for them to be considered anything but belonging to the genre of historical fiction.

As it pertains to formal and textual strategies that characterize magical realism, I want to take Faris’ *Ordinary Enchantments* as a starting point for further discussion. This 2004 study is one of the few that gives a set of characteristics that structure and organize magical realism, describing—for each of these characteristics—a set of textual strategies. In brief, Faris describes these characteristics as follows:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (Faris 7)

The irreducible element is the first—and maybe the most significant—of the key elements designating magical realism. It refers to the substantial textual presence of occurrences, events or qualities that “cannot [be explained] according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse” (Faris 7). The instances when this irreducible element turns up, however, are described realistically, hardly evoking comments by narrator or character. Nonetheless, its ‘magic’ is not entirely assimilated into the realistic narrative, so that it stands out and is recognizable “like a grain of sand in the oyster of that realism” (Faris 8-9). This has a significant effect on the readers, because it disrupts their reading habits and thus “contributes to the postmodern proliferation of writerly texts, texts co-created by their readers” (Faris 9), which goes hand in hand with the fact that the real often seems more

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about defocalization is rather vague as regards the analysis of concrete textual patterns, which is why it is not particularly relevant for the present paper and thus not taken into closer consideration.

magical than the actual irreducible element. Additionally, the irreducible element often disrupts the Western readers' received logic of cause and effect relations, so that the reader is forced to question whether the irreducible element is the cause or effect of other events or occurrences.

The second characteristic, i.e. the strong presence of the phenomenal world, refers to the realistic way of description mentioned above. Ian Watt describes literary realism as based in the assumption "that truth can be discovered by the individual through his sense" and that "the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it" (qtd. in Bowers 21). In magical realism, description lies within the norms of realism, thus creating "a fictional world that resembles the one we live in" (Faris 14), for instance by making extensive use of sensory detail. However, it extends realism because these extensively detailed depictions also pertain to the irreducible element; and, usually, the narrator as well as the characters accept this without hesitation. According to Amaryll Chanady, this is one of the main differences between the fantastic and the magical realist:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematic by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist. (24)

Connected to this matter-of-factness is an often naïve, almost childlike narrative stance, because "magical events are accepted by the narrator as children seem to accept such events in stories, without questioning their reality" (Faris 94).

The third characteristic that Faris mentions is a sense of unsettling doubt on the side of the reader. This concept is somewhat difficult to grasp, particularly in the context of what has just been stated about characters and narrators *not* expressing doubt. Faris argues that, exactly because narrators and characters adopt such an attitude towards the magical events, "magical realism expands fictional reality to include events we used to call magic in realism" (17). This brings the—contemporary Western—reader in a situation of doubt: the irreducible element is presented and perceived by characters and narrators as a matter of fact—but can it be real? How can it be real? As Faris argues,

The contemporary Western reader's primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character's dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle. (17)

Thus Western readers try to incorporate the irreducible element into their received belief system forcibly. Seen from another perspective, they are led to at least consider for a moment the chance that the magical events could actually be true, because they are described in such a realistic and detailed way. In any case, the recipients are often instructed by the text to hesitate for a moment and reconsider their own way of making sense of their surroundings.

According to Faris, a fourth characteristic of magical realism is the merging of two realms, opening up “a space of the in-between” (Rodgers, qtd. in Faris 21). As mentioned before, magical realism merges the fantastic and realism, thus creating a narrative space in-between. This hybrid narrative space questions notions of scientific empiricism by blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. A textual strategy that, according to Faris, perfectly illustrates this blurring of boundaries and merging of realms is “a kind of verbal magic, whereby the metaphorical is imagined to be literal, connecting words and the world” (110). Faris calls this “linguistic magic” (110) and presents an example from Garcia Marquez’ *100 Years of Solitude*, where the saying ‘blood is thicker than water’ is literalized through José Arcadio’s blood that travels independently to his mother’s kitchen. Another way of symbolizing the merging of different realms in magical realist texts is through characters that are situated on the brink of, or wander between, life and death, so that the “voice [can move] from one persona to another, from death to life to writing, from remembering to imagining, blurring boundaries between them” (Faris 108).

Additionally, within this hybrid narrative space, the voice seems to come from “radically different perspectives at once” (Faris 43), and sometimes the origin of these voices is hardly, or not at all, determinable<sup>5</sup>. What contributes to this sense of indeterminability is, on the one hand, the circumvention of recognizable pronouns, which results in a net of shifting references, in which perspectives are hardly attributable. On the other hand, these texts often play with narrative distancing strategies: within the same text, the narrative perspective can alternate between, on the one hand, the direct address of a second person point of view, in which the reader is

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<sup>5</sup> This is what Faris refers to as “defocalized narration” in “From A Far Source Within”: Magical Realism as Defocalized Narrative”; however, as mentioned above, a detailed discussion of this notion will not be relevant for the present paper.

almost incorporated in the text, and, on the other hand, intricate narrative Chinese box constructions that make a “definite authority difficult to establish” (Faris 126). As an example, Faris quotes the phrase “I think my mother said” (126) from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Here, the reader is much further detached from the narrative than in situations when the narrator may even address the reader; the narrative authority is hidden.

Faris’ final characteristic of magical realism is the disruption of received ideas about time, space, and identity. Often, the narrative voice can hardly be localized spatially or temporally. In this context, it is interesting to observe that many magical realist texts make considerable use of the future perfect tense, “situating us in a temporal realm [...] where all is ended but all is also possible” (Faris 98). Additionally, on a structural as well as on a thematic level, there are traces of cyclic temporal progressions, which, together with the future perfect tense, “detaches the reader from the concrete time of linear progress and the literary realism that frequently utilizes it” (Faris 99). Connected to this incorporation of circular structures is repetition as a narrative principle, which often helps creating reverberations from the past within the present. Many texts contain recurring lines from poems or songs, or motives like reflecting surfaces. With regard to the questioning of individual identities, the most important aspect is a sense of radical multiplicity that is also often expressed textually and structurally. The aforementioned pronominal scrambling also contributes to the representation of fluid identities and interconnectedness.

On taking a closer look, these characteristics and textual features reveal a striking resemblance with some of the postmodern historical techniques mentioned in the previous section. Thus, even though within the textual realm of some of its novels, the historical may come across as less possible or plausible than the magical, the mode of magical realism is definitely not incompatible with a distinct historical project, particularly as it pertains to postmodern challenges to historiography, and, as the following chapter illustrates, also to postcolonial agendas.

## Magical Realism as Subversive Postcolonial Discourse

“Now jokes become daggers and rhymes become bullets.”

(qtd. in Faris 145)

This quotation is taken from the drama *Iranian Nights* written by Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali in response to the conflict surrounding Salman Rushdie’s notorious novel *The Satanic Verses*, a text that is often critically considered a prime example of magical realism. In response to this novel, Iranian religious leader Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie for the alleged blasphemy expressed in the text. In the following section, I attempt to outline how a text like Rushdie’s can evoke such strong reactions and how magical realism can assert its subversive potential positively in postcolonial situations. Eventually, I then comment on the particular cultural and literary situation of magical realism in Canada.

The merging of realms discussed on a textual level as a fourth characteristic of magical realism in the previous section can also be discussed in terms of cultural theory. In itself oxymoronic, the concept of magical realism necessarily has to negotiate two polar oppositions—and this negotiation does not only take place on a textual level: magical realism does not only engage in blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, the fantastic and the real, but it can also be seen as a hybrid cultural discourse. Due to the fictional creation of a third space and the consequent potential for cultural negotiation, magical realism obviously qualifies as a cross-cultural discourse. For this reason, Maggie Ann Bowers argues that “many writers whose cultural perspectives include varied and sometimes contradictory cultural influences are drawn to magical realism as a form of expression” (Bowers 83).

On the basis of this cultural potential, critics have established a fundamental distinction within magical realist practice, namely between an ontological and an epistemological—or the largely coinciding distinction between a mythic and a scholarly—variation of magical realism. The ontological version of magical realism has its roots in what Carpentier described as marvelous realism. It is considered to be growing out of its cultural context, and the main sources for its magic are beliefs, myths, folk stories and practices of the cultural sphere in which the text is set. On the

other side of the spectrum lies the epistemological form of magical realism, in which, as Faris puts it, “the magic inheres in the words and the vision rather than in the world” (Faris 28). The source of its magic can therefore not necessarily be found in the cultural environment of the text, and neither in that of the author. Often, this distinction is also seen as a geographical one, with epistemological magical realism prevalent in Europe and North America and ontological magical realism in the Southern spheres of the American continent.

There are, however, various problems that arise when drawing such a distinction. Apart from the fact that geographical categories are intrinsically problematic, particularly in the context of magical realism as an international mode, it is very difficult to ultimately ‘match’ texts to either the one or the other of these two categories. Garcia Marquez, for instance, acknowledges both, the substantial influence of his cultural background as well as his knowledge and admittance of the influence of literary traditions and conventions on his texts. The situation becomes even more difficult if the cultural sphere described in the text does not correspond with the cultural context of the author. But even though this categorization is, due to the reasons mentioned, fraught with problems, it is nonetheless interesting to note that there are observable differences that can at least roughly be admitted to a certain geographical distribution. One might, as Faris notes, “speculate about the existence of a tropical lush and a northerly spare variety of the magical realist plant” (Faris 27).

One thing that all variants have in common concerning their cultural work, however, is a strong subversive potential. In an introduction to their 1995 collection of essays on magical realism, Wendy Faris and Lois Zamora state that “magical realist texts are subversive: their in-between-ness, their all at oneness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures” (Zamora and Faris 7). In this context, the Bakhtinian concepts of the carnivalesque and of heteroglossia have generated considerable critical interest within magical realism studies.<sup>6</sup> As I have mentioned in the last section, many magical realist novels rely on a reversal of categories, so that the magical becomes real and the real magical. This, in combination with an atmosphere of festive exuberance that is also often conjured up in magical realist texts, is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s study of the traditional form of carnival, “in which those deprived of power

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<sup>6</sup> Critics like Brenda Cooper, Stephen Slemon, Lloyd Davies, Amaryll Chanady.

enacted the roles of those with power, such as a donkey being cast as a priest” (Bowers 70). This reversal of categories and with it the reversal of power relations has enormous revolutionary potential. Another aspect that has been mentioned in the preceding discussion of magical realist textual characteristics gains relevance when looked at from a Bakhtinian perspective, namely the particular mode of narration that does not seem to come from one defined point of view, but rather from different positions at once. This resembles Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia; several—sometimes conflicting—voices mingle, putting the assumption of there being only one essential truth at stake.

For this reason, magical realism has often been considered to operate on the fringes of literary production, and to engage in the process of making audible otherwise marginalized voices. Bowers, for instance, argues that a key characteristic of many magical realist texts is the fact that they “tell the tales of those on the margins of political power and influential society” (33). However, it has become a shared belief among critics of magical realism that the subversive potential of this mode is preferably directed towards a dominant imperial authority, thus yielding a number of sometimes aggressively postcolonial texts. Stephen Slemon, who in 1995 published the seminal article entitled “Magic Realism as a Postcolonial Discourse”, argues that many magical realist texts have

echoes in those forms of postcolonial thought which seek to recuperate the lost voices and discarded fragments, that imperialist cognitive structures push to the margins of critical consciousness. (13)

In this function as a postcolonial mode, magical realism—as a literary mode in which the fantastic and the real share the same narrative space—decidedly works against the totalitarian truth claim of realism. Even though Faris stresses that “realism itself is not inherently authoritarian,” it “has served bourgeois political agendas [and] the fact that realism is a European, or First World, export, in conjunction with its claim to portray the world accurately, has tended to ally it with imperialism” (144). Slemon argues that, because within the oxymoronic conception of magical realism the

ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the “other”, a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences. (“Magic Realism” 10)



For this reason, Slemon holds that magical realism contains three important postcolonial elements: first, through its oxymoronic narrative structure, it portrays both sides of the colonial encounter and is thus situated “in what Homi Bhabha and others have theorized as the indeterminate zone of the colonial encounter, a ‘place of hybridity’” (qtd. in Faris 134); second, the produced text traces the difficulties of representation in this context, revealing gaps and tensions; and third, it can eventually help filling these gaps by re-introducing elements and voices of the colonized, marginalized cultural sphere. Thus the mode of magical realism is considered to participate on various levels in processes of transculturation as well as de-colonization.

In many magical realist texts, a strong historical project is connected with this process of de-colonization, for “if the category of the real is not definite then all assumptions of truth are at stake,” (Bowers 68) and so is the notion of objective and scientific historical truth. By including narrative structures within the text that are based on pre-Enlightenment folklore, myths or practices, and by adopting narrative strategies that often resemble the postmodern techniques mentioned in the first part of this theoretical chapter, the authors of much magical realist fiction openly challenge Enlightenment historiography and its claim to rationality and scientificity. Thus some of these texts can be said to engage in the postmodern endeavor of challenging the meta-narrative of post-Enlightenment historiography by drawing attention to its constructedness and by questioning its scientificity. They stress the significance of storytelling and fictionalizing processes in each approach to the past, distort the idea of a single truth through their multivocality, and through their incorporation of mythical structures and perspectives toward time, they pose important questions concerning the nature of history and historiography. On the other hand, magical realism also often takes part in the postcolonial project of “revising, reappropriating or reinterpreting history” (Vautier 33) by re-introducing into the localizable historical setting of the text a marginalized cultural and narrative heritage. In doing so, these novels re-introduce through their technique of narrative hybridization voices into the ‘historical reality’ of the novel that have been silenced in the official, colonial imaginary.

Consequently, some of the best-known magical realist texts, as for instance the aforementioned *The Satanic Verses*, are aggressively postcolonial. The mode of magical realism, with its subversive potential and the additional postcolonial thrust that Rushdie

laid upon it, has, however, often been interpreted as allegory. The main characters, who fall from an airplane at the beginning of the novel, have thus been regarded as “the equivalents of the angel Gabriel and Satan” (Bowers 28)<sup>7</sup>. The rest of the narrative has been interpreted accordingly, which has led to the accusation of unbelief and blasphemy. This does not only illustrate the main difficulty that is inherent in the critical discourse around magical realism, namely that “in none of its applications to literature has [this concept] ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres” (Slemon, “Magic Realism” 9), but also stresses the potential at undermining essentialist and/or totalitarian ideologies that is implicit in the textual fabric of many magical realist texts.

For the above reasons, authors from various former colonies have adopted magical realism as a literary mode. In Canada, particularly the 1970s and 1980s have yielded texts that are considered postcolonial as well as essentially magical realist. Most notably, Stephen Slemon as well as Maggie Ann Bowers mention *What the Crow Said* by Robert Kroetsch as well as *The Invention of the World* by Jack Hodgins, whereas Marie Vautier discusses *Burning Water* by George Bowering. It is particularly interesting that even though all these novels are decidedly postcolonial, they do not obtain their magical potential from the cultural sphere of the indigenous peoples of Canada. This already hints at the particular status of Canada—and other countries like New Zealand or Australia—among the (post)colonial countries: they are so-called settler-invader cultures and thus have to cope with different power-relations and different (post)colonial processes. As Laura Moss, editor of a the collection of essays entitled *Is Canada Postcolonial*, puts it in her introduction to this book, colonization in countries like Latin America for instance “was more predominantly a process of displacement, impoverishment, sublimation, and even annihilation” (2); while this was common imperial practice towards Natives in Canada as well, the process of colonization was nonetheless predominantly one of “immigration and settlement” (2).

These novels also have in common that they are usually all critically aligned with postmodernism in their questioning of historiography: Hutcheon even labels George Bowering’s *Burning Water* as historiographic metafiction. Thus what seems to connect these novels is a strong historical consciousness and a prevalent need to not only re-

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<sup>7</sup> Bowers relies on an allegoric interpretation of *The Satanic Verses* by Neil Cornwell.

configure official/imperial history, but also to question the whole concept of history as such. In accordance with Stephen Slemon, Maggie Ann Bowers argues that “these novels assume that colonialism has distorted their sense of identity and their relationship to their history” (99). Due to this feeling of “being both tyrannized by history and yet paradoxically cut off from it” (Slemon, “Magic Realism” 14), the postmodern as well as postcolonial historical project in these magical realist texts seems to be particularly strong. In the following chapters I investigate if, or how this is also the case in Canadian historical fiction of the 1990s and 2000s.

## **“The three most short-lived traces”? Magic, History and Postcolonialism in Jane Urquhart’s *Away***

The three most short-lived traces: the trace of a bird on a branch, the trace of a fish on a pool, and the trace of a man on a woman.

– an Irish triad

Urquhart, *Away* (np)

On various levels, this triad serves as an introduction to Jane Urquhart’s 1993 novel *Away*. Apart from literally prefacing the novel, it also indicates what kind of fictive realm Urquhart creates: a realm of emotion, obsession, myth, migration, and magic. At times, the texture of the novel is so dense and complex that every attempt at breaking it down and categorizing it becomes immensely difficult. Another fact that complicates any analysis is that one of the main recurring themes is the blurring of conceived boundaries and the exploration of in-between spaces, which does not only hold for the thematic concerns that are discussed in the novel, but also for its form: whereas several critics<sup>8</sup> analyze *Away* as a continuation of the romance tradition, others<sup>9</sup> have pointed out affiliations with the hybrid mode of magical realism. And while I do not want to deny *Away*’s (obvious) romantic topoi, it is the novel’s affiliations with magical realism that I want to investigate in the following in order to find out how short- or long-lived the trace of magic is and how it influences the representation of history and postcolonialism in Urquhart’s novel.

The plot in *Away* follows an Irish family immigrating to Canada during the great famine. The narrative begins when Mary, a young Irish-born woman, finds a dead sailor on the shore of Rathlin island, located north of Ireland. Due to this contact with the dead, she is said to be “away”—loved and taken by ancient ghosts—and thus becomes stigmatized in her community. She marries a schoolmaster who allegedly does not believe in these myths and, on the initiative of their landlord Osbert Sedgewick, they emigrate to Canada together with their newborn son Liam. The young family tries to

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Compton, Claire Omhové, Cynthia Sugars.

<sup>9</sup> Agnieszka Rzepa, Herb Wyile, Janet McNaughton, Mary Ann Smart.

establish a farm on a small parcel of land in Ontario, where Mary gets pregnant again and gives birth to Eileen. However, her “faery-daemon lover” (13) has never really vanished and calls her even in this new land, which leads her to leave her family behind in order to live in the woods next to the lake where she feels the presence of the spirit.

After the death of both parents, Liam and Eileen leave their farm to settle at the shore of Lake Ontario, where Liam succeeds in establishing a successful farm and Eileen falls in love with Aidan, an Irishman who is said to be a Fenian, i.e. an Irish nationalist in Canada. The narrative finally culminates in the turmoil around the assassination of the Irish-Canadian immigration minister D’Arcy McGee. The Fenians considered him a halo, but when he started giving speeches in which he argued for a peaceful living together and for the establishment of a new, conglomerate—i.e. not solely Irish—nation in Canada, they consider him a traitor. Eileen shares this belief, mainly due to her unquestioning emotional attachment to Aidan, whom she starts seeing as a romantic, nationalist revolutionary. Eventually, she finds out about the Fenians’ conspiracy to assassinate D’Arcy McGee, and she decides to support this plan.

Only when it is too late does she realize that she has been blinded, and that her mind has been taken away: Aidan is not a nationalist revolutionary, but rather shares D’Arcy McGee’s vision of Canada. He tried to prevent the assassination by insinuating himself into the Fenians’ confidence, but, due to Eileen’s intervention, this mission remains unsuccessful and D’Arcy McGee gets killed. They part ways, but soon Eileen realizes that she is pregnant. She delivers a little girl, Deirdre, and gives her to her brother Liam. He and his wife raise Deirdre as their child and Eileen spends the rest of her life as a recluse in a room in her brother’s house. Only shortly before she dies does she reveal her secret to her granddaughter Esther, who then—and this constitutes the frame narrative of the novel—decides to tell the story to herself for one last time, right before she dies.

*Away* thus covers a time-span of more than a century: from the origins in Ireland and the emigration to the North American continent around mid-1800, to the establishment of the Canadian Dominion and then up to the near present. It is undoubtedly a historical narrative, in that it follows the lives of several generations and incorporates, within this fiction, important events that have become part of official Canadian history, like the assassination of D’Arcy McGee. However, Urquhart’s stylistic mode of description can

neither be linked to ‘objective’ historiographic nor to realistic writing: its lyrical and mystical quality transcends, and seems at first sight to oppose both. Additionally, Urquhart often implants within the realm of realist description what Herb Wyile describes as “marvelous or uncanny details or events” (“Opposite of History” 27).

This interplay of opposites is at the core of the present chapter. In the following sections, I attempt to analyze, with the aid of the theoretical tools outlined in the preceding chapter, how the magic elements in the text influence the historical as well as the postcolonial project in the text. First, I investigate whether the textual features of magical realism illustrated in the theory chapter are applied in this novel, if their use differs, and how so. Then I look at what this possible incorporation of magical realist traits suggests with regard to the representation of (Canadian) history. Eventually, I want to analyze how this affects the authors’ engagement with a Canadian (post)colonial identity.

## The Trace of Magic

“First he turned into a bird, then he flew away, high up, very high over the trees.”

Urquhart, *Away* (194)

In *Speculative Fictions*, Herb Wyile claims that the concept of magical realism plays a significant role in *Away*, mainly because—and here he quotes Zamora and Faris—“the supernatural is not simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (201). This is a good starting point for a closer investigation of the text itself: in the following, I explore how far this statement can be supported textually, referring to the five characteristics Faris has described in *Ordinary Enchantments*.

First of all, there is the irreducible element of magic. This element does not seem to be hard to spot in *Away*: the otherworldly daemon lover, the ghostly presence of the dead sailor that haunts, or accompanies, not only Mary, but also—more figuratively—

the other women of her family during the following generations. This specter only materializes in contact with Mary, and follows the succeeding generations more like a defining presence in the back of the women's mind, haunting their lives with its fateful aura. The materializations in the first half of the novel can, however, be described using Faris' suggested terminology and characteristics: the magic occurrences are described realistically, with plenty of sensory details, but are nonetheless not entirely assimilated into the realistic narrative.

In the following, I want to look at the respective passages in more detail. The daemon lover 'materializes' four times in the novel. This first encounter is very different from the others. It takes place on the shore of Rathlin island, when

Mary heard the barrels creak as they touched and separated in the current. [...] But mostly she looked at the young man whose sodden shirt she held firmly in her hands – the dark curls pasted on his left cheek, the eyebrows like ferns, the lashes resting on the bones beneath his eyes. She absorbed, in these few moments, more knowledge of a man's body than she ever would again. [...] She recognized, immediately, that he came from an otherworld island, assumed that he had emerged from the water to look for her, and knew that her name had changed, in an instant, from Mary to Moira. (7-8)

Urquhart describes everything in this scene with meticulous precision. Nonetheless, the sheer presence of this man seems supernatural, and Mary does neither have any doubts about his 'otherworldliness' nor about the fact that, from now on, she will be changed forever. The other characters do not express any doubt about Mary's 'being away' either. Only a few pages later, when the priest, Father Quinn, tries to assess the situation, this is made explicit:

The islanders stood in a group, wide-eyed and silent. Mary's mother began to weep. There was no doubt in any mind now that this girl on the beach, sitting on the strange black stones, was merely a flimsy replica left by "them" or by him in Mary's place. Father Quinn began to shout instructions. "Moira!" he yelled (for there was no doubt in his mind either). (14)

This is particularly interesting, because Father Quinn, who is supposed to represent a Catholic standpoint in this situation, is fully immersed by the extraordinary event, too. However, even though the characters do not express doubt, the recipient starts to experience just what Faris describes as the third characteristic of magical realism: a sense of unsettling doubt develops on the side of the reader. The further the story develops, the stronger the urge becomes for Western readers to explain the occurrences

rationally. Other characters tell stories of a shipwreck, and even though some details still remain mysterious, it seems possible for the reader to explain this occurrence rationally: a dead sailor washed up the shore, found by Mary, who then mistook him for a vivid remnant of her people's old mythologies.

However, for the following three 'meetings' it becomes increasingly difficult to propose a rational explication. The daemon lover continues to visit Mary, and when he turns up, they become one and he shows her things she could not possibly know or conceive herself:

Something already broken in her opened further, and he came in and showed her sights she had never known about and spoke an understood language that she had never heard. (98)

The first time he visits her after their encounter on the beach, he shows her images of battle, of young Irish men dying at the sea, in battle or resistance – "Dancers, poets, swimmers [whose] distant blood ran in Mary's veins until he who lay in her mind slipped back into the water" (84). The second time, he creates a forest in Mary's mind, despite the fact that she has never seen one.

The woods suggested, in their uncertainties of space, transparencies of light – their rumors of entities glimpsed, then lost – that some magnificent event was always on the edge of taking place, and Mary knew her own presence in the forest, or the forest's presence in her, was such an event. (98)

Again, Mary is acutely aware of the preternatural quality of this event, but at the same time, she puts it into perspective by stating that 'magnificent events' are always just about to take place and that these magnificent events are therefore not extraordinary anymore.

The third time, Mary's otherworldly lover visits her just shortly before she leaves for Canada. This time, he shows her what she will take with her to the new land, what she will leave behind and what she will become part of once she takes on this journey.

"Now it's you," he whispered, "this is what you take with you and what you leave behind." She saw obsessed kings and warriors, torn by grief and guilt, monks curved over hinged books in scriptoriums, gypsies with roads flung like banners in front and behind them. [...] "This is what you carry with you," he repeated, "this is your ship's cargo. And when you go, this is what you become part of."

Then she saw the world's great leavetakings, invasions and migrations, landscapes torn from beneath the feet of tribes, the Danae pushed out by the Celts, the Celts eventually smothered by the English, [...] boatloads of groaning



African slaves. Lost forests. The children of the mountain on the plain, the children of the plain adrift on the sea. And all the mourning for abandoned geographies. (127-128)

Even this very brief illustration of Mary's encounters with the supernatural illustrates that, in the case of *Away*, it is exactly as Faris argues: the "Magical images or events [...] highlight central issues in the text" (Faris 9). In this case, the daemon lover does not only represent a link to Mary's past and to her people's old mythologies, but also shows her what she will have to face during and after her journey. Thus especially the above passage brings up one of the central issues of the text, namely the intrinsically complicated question if, and how, Mary will take her cultural heritage and mythological past—symbolized by the daemon lover—with her: at the end of the paragraph she asks: "And you, will I take you with me?" "Yes and no," he said" (128).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there is another, less prevalent irreducible element in the second part of the novel, namely young Eileen's visionary powers. On various occasions, she predicts what is about to happen, as for instance the arrival of Exodus Crow, the Ojibway who helped Mary survive in the woods. When being asked why she knows such things, Eileen states that a crow talks to her each time she climbs a tree close to the house. Due to the fact that the crow is Exodus Crow's "spirit-guide" (174), this opens up the possibility to speculate about the Cree being a trickster figure that is able to change its appearance, which the introductory quotation, in its full context, serves to illustrate:

"[Exodus Crow] is gone? [...] But I wanted... Did he walk back along the river?"

"No," said Eileen, settling herself at the table to wait for her father to return from the barn. "First he turned into a bird, then he flew away, high up, very high over the trees." (194)

Besides the fact that Eileen displays these visionary abilities, this hint at the Natives' mythological traditions is particularly interesting considering the abovementioned issue of migration and cultural displacement: on the one hand, the quality of magic changes, for it is no longer solely based in Irish belief; on the other hand, the further the story progresses, the fewer magical elements appear in the text. In the first part, there is Mary's otherworldly lover; in the second part, Eileen displays these visionary powers; but in the third part, there is no significant irreducible element anymore. Shortly before the end of part two, before Liam and Eileen leave their farm on the Canadian Shield,

Eileen sits in her tree for one last time. In a scene similar to the last visit of Mary's daemon lover, notions of leaving and loss turn up:

Eileen was watching the way the leaf shadows moved across the skin on her arms, that and the way the spots of sun caused the crow's sheen to roll back and forth across his feathered body like lamp oil on water. She would be leaving soon and hoped to take these things with her. [...] She slipped between the green curtains, got into the canoe, and paddled to the opposite shore. As she was pulling the boat up onto the bank she heard the crow from inside the tree. But the foliage was too thick. She could no longer see him.

She took with her only textures, slim leaf shadows on her arm, and a knowledge of how dark can shine. The bird would be, in the future, something she almost remembered when she awakened at the most silent hour of the night with an unidentifiable feeling of great loss upon her and a flutter of dark wings near her heart. (226)

As mentioned before, the particular constitution of this second irreducible element is an interesting contribution to the discussion of the one main issue that the first irreducible element raises: the combination of Eileen's visions with her unquestioning belief in Exodus Crow's shape shifting abilities suggests that cultural heritage cannot remain 'pure' in the process of migration and cultural contact. Also, the slow but gradual decrease of magical elements may be read as an indication of the difficulty of retaining the knowledge and awareness of one's cultural origins.

Furthermore, the irreducible elements in *Away* also illustrate the second characteristic mentioned by Faris, namely the strong presence of the phenomenal world: Faris argues that "[t]he narrative voice reports extraordinary – magical – events, which would not normally be verifiable by sensory perception, in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted" (7). As shown in the previous discussion, this is undoubtedly a salient and outstanding feature of *Away*. However, the way in which this is true for Urquhart's novel significantly differs from Faris' initial conception and it is interesting to note that even though the main conclusion Faris draws in this section can be applied to *Away*, there is one substantial difference: in *Away*, the portrayal of the real external world and the supernatural occurrences is highly lyrical, and not at all matter-of-fact.

Therefore, the ordinary gains a spectral quality and appears sometimes even more magical than the actual irreducible element. In one of these instances, the ordinary is presented in a particularly spectral manner, namely when the fiddler starts his music at the sad wedding in Ireland, shortly before Mary, Brian and Liam for Canada.

The old fiddler was the first to look up and then rise from the table. [...] He announced in Irish and in a voice disproportionately strong in comparison to his wasted frame, "We're not dead yet." Then, with a surprisingly graceful gesture, he picked up his fiddle and bow.

Anyone standing a mile away on the slopes that led up to Knocklayd Mountain would have been astonished by what was about to take place in the still landscape before them. The day was sultry, overcast, and almost entirely silent – not a breeze to turn a leaf on a tree [...] Then, gently, a ribbon of pure sound emerged from the door of one whitewashed barn and wound over the blackened plots, around the ancient raths, under the hawthorn hedgerows. Two hawks, gliding over the valley, seemed to pick up this ribbon in their beaks and carry it on their wings until the whole region was filled with the terrible, beautiful tune borne of an old man's heart and hands.

It took only a few moments for people all over the area within hearing distance to emerge from the doors of their cabins, for they were hungry, not only for food, but for the music they thought had left them forever. (106-107)

If it were not for the irreducible elements that are undoubtedly an important and defining presence in the text, this continuous notion of celebrating the ordinary would align the text with Roh's magic realism, in which "mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (Roh, qtd. in Bowers 92). In such a combination as in *Away*, however, the ordinary and the supernatural share the same—lyrical—narrative space. This results in the creation of a space in-between, similar to the one described by Faris as a fourth characteristic of magical realist texts, and this "unmediated way in which these different realities are presented means that magical realism also blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction [...]" (22).

The final characteristic that Faris mentions is the disruption of received ideas about time, space, and identity. This characteristic may be the most prominent one in the discussion of textual features in *Away*. First of all, there is a set of narrational devices that contribute to a sense of temporal disruption, the most significant of these being the frame narrative. Esther, Mary's great-granddaughter, tells the family story "to herself and the Great Lake, there being no one to listen" (3). The fact that she tells the story to herself has a twofold significance: as Sheila Ross puts it in her review of *Away*, it is "a lamentation for a lost mythology", but at the same time, "an enactment of its revitalization" (175). According to Zamora and Faris, this particular frame narrative illustrates one of the key features of magical realism, namely "the impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism" (*Speculative Fictions* 218). Frederic Jameson presents

an similar argument and claims that a prerequisite for magical realist writing is the “superposition of whole layers of the past within the present” (qtd. in *Speculative Fictions* 217), which is expressed through the temporal leaps that the frame narrative allows, so that, structurally, the chronological and linear progression is disrupted. According to Amaryll Chanady, the frame narrative in magical realist texts fulfills another very particular and important function: magical realist authors use the frame narrative to

present the irrational world view as different from his own by situating the story in present-day reality, using learned expressions and vocabulary, and showing he is familiar with logical reasoning and empirical knowledge. (qtd. in Wyile, “Opposite of History” 3)

In doing so, the author ensures that the rational, realistic side of the magical realist spectrum is credibly taken care of. In *Away*, this dichotomy is underlined by the mining machines and industrial workers—representing technology and progress—that turn up in almost all of the narrative leaps into Esther’s present.

Moreover, the novel displays a particular kind of this narrative setup that disturbs received ideas about time as well as about identity. Even though the narrative frame does somehow put Esther in the position of what Birgit Neumann calls a “dominant focalization authority” (370, my translation), this position is complicated through the insights that are given into the perceptions of the other—female—characters. Thus Esther’s narrative function is more a mediatory than a dominant one. Neumann refers to this way of narrating in *Away* as “alternating focalization” (370, my translation). Additionally, he detailed description of past emotions and perceptions that this alternating focalization entails calls forth the feeling of ‘living the past’. This kind of focalization creates a “polyphony of perspectives and [a] dialogue of voices” (Neumann 377, my translation), which contributes to the questioning of singular and individual perspectives.

The most important aspect that leads readers to question their conception of time and identity, however, is the omnipresence of repetition as a narrative and structural principle. Already at the very beginning of the novel, even before the author introduces Esther, it is announced that “In this family all young girls are the same young girl and all old ladies are the same old lady” (2). As Herb Wyile puts it, “the dominant force in the O’Malley family history is a kind of destined repetition, the inevitable presence of

romantic enchantment which is given supernatural and archetypal overtones” (“Opposite of History”, 5). These cyclic re-occurrences can be found on various levels throughout the novel: the mental and physical situation of ‘being away’ is re-enacted in every generation; the characters themselves bear clear traces of their ancestors, in particular the women of the O’Malley family, but Aidan, for instance, is also clearly linked to Mary’s otherworldly lover; and even the locations, environments and hardships return: “They inhabited northern latitudes near icy waters” (Urquhart 3), be it in Ireland or in Canada. Additionally, there are constantly recurring Irish songs and phrases, as for instance Brian’s last words before he dies: “Rian fir ar mhnaoi” (229), which translates as—in reference to the aforementioned Irish triad—“the trace of a man on a woman”. All in all, it can be concluded, as Claire Omhové suggests, that repetition in *Away* functions as “a rule of composition that undermines the foundation of identity and diffracts its singularity” (4).

To sum up, it can be said that *Away* provides textual evidence that aligns the novel with the mode of magical realism as Faris defines it. However, even though almost all of Faris’ characteristics can be found in Urquhart’s text, *Away* does differ significantly from the texts that Faris categorizes as magical realist. First of all, the irreducible elements of magic in *Away* may not be as ‘convincing’ as in other magical realist texts: only in the first part of the novel, the daemon lover is perceived by Mary, and in the last part, there is no significant irreducible element at all. Secondly, a defining stylistic characteristic of magical realism, namely the matter-of-fact description is, as I argued before, nowhere to be found in *Away*. However, even if these aspects may appear to be major ‘deductions’, the textual features discussed in this section do illustrate that Jane Urquhart’s *Away* reveals striking conceptual and stylistic similarities with magical realism. Also, on a final note, it is noteworthy that most of the magical realist strategies discussed in this section affect, in one way or another, the representation of time and the construction of memory and history. This observation is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

## The Trace of History

Even had there been an audience of listeners, the wrong questions might have been asked. “How could you possibly know that?” Or, “Do you have proof?” Esther is too mature, has always been too mature, for considerations such as these. The story will take her wherever it wants to go in the next twelve hours, and that is all that matters.

Urquhart, *Away* (2)

With this quotation, taken from the very beginning of the novel, Urquhart stresses the importance and power of storytelling, and, simultaneously, hints at questions about objectivity and reliability that often turn up when it comes to remembering and narrating the past. In doing so, Urquhart sets the frame for an investigation of different attitudes towards the past, whereby ‘the traces of magic’ discussed in the previous section are a defining factor. In the following section, I trace the different attitudes towards the past that this novel incorporates, look at their relation and examine how the magical episodes and events influence Urquhart’s representation of the past.

First of all, it is important to note that Urquhart does, for the most part, follow the conventions of the historical novel: the personal stories and the development of a family are portrayed in realist detail against the backdrop of events documented in official historical accounts. The first part of the novel takes place during the Great Famine in Ireland which forced an immense number of Irish people to emigrate to the New World; the second part follows the endeavors that the O’Malley family has to undertake in order to re-create themselves on a foreign piece of land; in the third part of the novel, the historical event of Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s assassination is re-processed. Yet *Away* is definitely not a conventional historical novel: not only do the ‘magical’ textual aspects discussed in the previous section contribute to, enrich and complicate the novel’s historical project, but many of these textual strategies are compatible with the postmodern historical strategies discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

These postmodern historical strategies have been grouped in three broader categories: metafiction, the representation of orality within writing, and the incorporation of mythical structures and motives. For each of the categories, there are ‘compatible’ magical realist textual strategies: first, there is the metafictional effect

created through the frame narrative, and the story within the story; also, *Away* displays Hutcheon's idea of multi-vocality—or, more accurately in this context, the multi-focality—that challenges the idea of one ultimate, essentially true representation of the past. Secondly, there are various factors that aid the representation of orality within writing. On the one hand, there is the explicitly oral framework: just before Esther fully immerses in telling her story, it is pointed out that she “will work all night *whispering* in the dark” (21, emphasis added). With this formulation, it is made clear that Esther does indeed tell the story, which highlights the importance of oral storytelling in giving account of the past and, in doing so, also “foregrounds the relationship between the oral tradition and historical memory” (Wyile, “Opposite of History” 5). On the other hand, Esther refers to the Irish bardic tradition multiple times, eventually even recreating herself as a continuation of the medieval Irish bards. The first reference to the bardic tradition turns up at the end of the first part, when Mary meets her daemon lover for the last time. As mentioned in the previous section, this is when he shows her what she takes with her and what she leaves behind:

The great scholars, distant, preoccupied, came to her carrying pictures of medieval poets; men and women from the bardic schools, lying prone in windowless rooms with large stones resting on their stomachs and ten thousand metered lines preserved in their heads.<sup>10</sup> (127)

Just a few pages later, in a narrative leap to the frame narrative, Esther is explicitly likened to these bards:

Esther lying still in her sleigh-bed feels like an Irish poet from a medieval, bardic school. She is aware that those men and women lay in their windowless cells for days, composing and then memorizing thousands of lines, their heads wrapped in tartan cloths, stones resting on their stomachs. Esther has neither rock nor plaids with her in this bed but shares with the old ones a focused desire. Nothing should escape. (133)

This reference is particularly interesting, because Urquhart does not only designate Esther as an oral figure—and thus recreates orality within writing—but also clearly points at the differences between written and oral memory.

In the end, however, all the abovementioned strategies also inform the third area of discussion, namely the negotiation of two different ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the past: history and myth. This aspect is definitely the strongest in

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<sup>10</sup> This is the part of the quotation left out on page 35.

*Away*; in its very foundation, the novel illustrates and discusses the different concepts of the past, or of time in general. On the one hand, *Away* follows, like traditional historical or historiographic writing, an overall chronological progression of events, and this progression is, in this case, only disrupted by narrative leaps that result from returns to the frame narrative. On the other hand, the main structural principle, on a formal as well as on a thematic level, is cyclic repetition and recurrence. Thus “the historical progression of the narrative [is framed] in a mythic pattern and [given] a lyrical tone and an archetypal resonance” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 202). However, *Away* does not take sides; it does not favor either of the two attitudes and “resists the allure of myth as a retreat from history [...] without returning to history as a retreat from myth” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 210). Furthermore, the incorporation of mythological structures does not result in ahistoricity, or in the celebration of an eternal mythical return; instead, the novel may rather be seen as an illustration of the historicizing effect of Marie Vautier’s *New World Myth*, where “a historical dimension [is deliberately introduced] into traditional notions of mythic universality” (35).

Thus, on a more general level, it can be argued that through the incorporation of myth, received ideas about history are challenged; but this issue can also be looked upon from a more specific perspective, for there are various sets of clearly designated mythologies that inform the historical narrative. By far the most prominent of these is Irish mythology; it is infused in the novel on several levels. First of all, the title—and all the different conceptions it refers to—is a clear reference to West Irish folklore (cf. Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 85), where young women have often been believed to be “away with the fairies” (Birch 115). Additionally, Mary’s initial metamorphosis, i.e. her name change from Mary to Moira, is particularly indicative of a return to Irish mythology, because the name Moira is, as Birch explains, “a pre-Christian form of Mary, derived from the Trinitarian form taken by the goddess Aphrodite as ‘the Great Moira’” (115).

Secondly, there is the abovementioned Irish triad that is used as a structural principle in the novel and also provides the headings for the three parts of the novel. As mentioned above, the final phrase of this triad is even incorporated into the story as a kind of recurring chorus, and, significantly, this chorus-line is spelled out in Gaelic. Third, Irish mythological tales are incorporated as clear comparisons within the text,



particularly in Eileen's romanticized and distorted perception of Aidan and herself: "He was like Oisín in the land of the forever young [...] She wanted to be like Deirdre, running wild in the woods" (298). Even though both, Oisín and Deirdre, are heroic and beautiful characters in the Irish legends, both their relationships end tragically. Thus this comparison has a twofold significance: it expresses the naïve, romanticized idea that Eileen has of Aidan. But it also foreshadows that their love will not end 'happily ever after'. Moreover, the mythical figure of Deirdre is one of the recurring references that link the women of the O'Malley family over the generations: first, Mary is likened to Deirdre by Exodus Crow when he brings home her dead body. He tells the left-behind family that

"When she had been in the woods for more than one winter, she told me of the woman called Deirdre who had lived happily in the forest with three warrior brothers, one of whom she loved, until a bad king had killed them, and how she had died of sorrow." And later she had told Exodus that she knew, now, why Deirdre had loved the forest for living in it... (184)

Later, when Eileen tells her story to Esther, and, in doing so, reveals to her that Esther is her granddaughter, Eileen explains:

"There are so many ways, you understand, of giving yourself away. I had a baby, you know, when I was very young; I gave her to Molly and Liam to raise. Call her Deirdre, I said to them, because of the sorrows." (351)

Due to its generation-spanning presence, the Irish mythological tale of Deirdre and her sorrows can thus also be seen as a symbolic link that connects the women of the O'Malley family.

However, even though Irish folklore represents undoubtedly the most significant mythological source, it is not the only one in *Away*. As mentioned before, Native mythology is thematized as well, especially in the second part of the novel. The Native trickster tradition is indicated through the figure of Exodus Crow and young Eileen's unquestioning connection with him and Exodus explains his Native beliefs to Mary.

So he told her about the Manitou – the spirit that is in everything and that is moved by earth and air and water and light. [...] He said that there were sky worlds and cloud worlds and water worlds, and spirits that live in them and that were friends to men and women [...]. And then, he, Exodus, looked at the woman and asked if she believed him and she said that, yes, she believed him. (180)

Due to the explicit comparison of Native and Irish narrative heritage, this section of the

novel is especially interesting and, particularly seen from a postcolonial perspective, it is also highly difficult. I shall, however, reserve my comments on this excerpt for the last section of this chapter, which deals with the portrait of postcolonialism in *Away*.

Additionally, there are obvious references to Christian mythology. For example, the biblical myths of the Genesis are mentioned several times: when Exodus Crow talks about his peculiar name, he explains that when his mother read the Bible, she was amazed by the stories that constituted the Genesis, because “there is a great deal of Manitou in this book called Genesis” (Urquhart 175). However, she lost interest halfway through the Book of Exodus, but she “liked the sound of the word” (175), which is why she gave this name to her son. And when Exodus Crow leaves the O’Malleys right after he helped delivering a calf, he explains that “the baby cow must be called Genesis” (194). In addition, there are moments in the novel when other biblical tales are incorporated as comparisons within the text, as for instance when Osbert Sedgewick comes to visit Liam and Eileen and crosses the river on stilts: “There was an old man walking on the water, towards the acres of light [...] He looked so much like the engraving of Moses Liam had seen at O’Hara’s Mill” (214). Thus it is clear that, even though the most prominent presence is that of Irish myth, it is by far not the only one: the whole novel gives, as Wyile puts it, a “postcolonial twist to Leonard Cohen’s phrase ‘let us compare mythologies’” (*Speculative Fictions* 86).

However, maybe the most crucial aspect concerning Jane Urquhart’s historical project in *Away* is, as Wyile suggests, her “negotiation of a third way between history and myth” (*Speculative Fictions* 265), which perfectly blends in with Brenda Coopers concept of magical realism as “seeing with a third eye”, especially when it comes to the treatment of time: “Time itself is hybrid. Magical realist time tries to be neither the linear time of history, nor the circular time of myth” (qtd. in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 209), but it is rather situated in-between. Consequently, the readers are led to question the universal truth claim of our Western consciousness by pointing at alternative ways of perception, particularly in the context of time and history. Neumann phrases this idea very precisely in her discussion of narration and memory in *Away*, even though she does not at all consider the concept of magical realism. She states that the evocation of fantastic elements revitalizes a way of perceiving the world that is based in mythic

traditions of non-Western cultures and thus aids the questioning of rational-modernist worldviews (cf. Neumann 373).

Whereas the presence of the irreducible elements contributes to this challenging of Western scientificity and rationality on a more general level, it is, in particular, the set of magical realist strategies mentioned under the umbrella of disrupting received notions of time and identity that influences the representation of the past in *Away*. First of all, the continuous presence of cyclic structures and recurring features stresses the mythical qualities of the story by representing a temporal progression that is intrinsically different from the Western linear model. Secondly, there is the frame narrative, through which a metafictional effect is created that turns into a metahistorical effect, because attention is drawn to the narrative and mythologizing processes involved in any account of the past. Consequently, readers are encouraged to reconsider those instances which they are familiar with from official history and which they used to perceive as 'true'. There is one situation in the novel that perfectly illustrates this issue, namely the point when the potato blight reached the region in Ireland where Mary and Brian live:

These are the beginnings of despair. The clouds part and the last rays of sun blanket a landscape of unspeakable beauty. The blue sea is covered with a carpet of stars, cormorants sail near cliffs where their young flourish, and smoke drifts from cottages where meals have been taken in peace. The sweet, dark smell of the change is confused with that of hidden roses. Not one bird pauses in song, anticipates the hunger. (77)

The arrival of this disease—of which the readers know that it is a fact taken from historical textbooks—is presented in a way that is similar to the portrait of magical occurrences, like Mary's encounter with her daemon lover or Eileen's visionary powers. This results in a blurring and questioning of the boundaries between the real and the magical, between fact and fiction, and between myth and history.

Thus it can be concluded that in *Away*, the concept of magical realism provides Jane Urquhart with the means to stress the importance of a third way between history and myth. On a structural level, Western historiographic chronological progression is weighed against cyclic mythical structures. On the thematic level, an official historical narrative—of the Great Famine, the setting of the North American continent and, eventually, the assassination of D'Arcy McGee—is infused with episodes from and hints at Irish, Native and Catholic mythology. And, as mentioned above, the manifold

nature of mythological influences is particularly interesting when looked at from a postcolonial perspective, which is what I attempt to do in the following section.

### **The Trace of Postcolonialism**

And then he, Exodus, looked at the woman and asked if she believed him  
and she said that, yes, she believed him.

Urquhart, *Away* (180)

This particular situation in the novel—when the characters Mary and Exodus Crow compare, as mentioned above, their mythologies—is one of the most contested moments discussed in secondary literature. In the following, I illustrate how this situation provokes discussions of nationalism and (post)colonialism. At the same time, I investigate how Urquhart portrays these issues, and, subsequently, I trace the relation between Urquhart’s (post)colonial project and her use of the literary mode of magical realism.

Nation-formation, cultural uniformity/ hybridity and (post)colonialism – Urquhart presents all these issues in a highly complicated manner. As Cynthia Sugars puts it in her highly critical, but very thorough discussion of *Away*, it is particularly the dichotomy between “the contradictory appeal to both authenticity and hybridity, and the dialectic of home and abroad” (15) that renders the text so complex. Additionally, colonial power relations and the connective as well as destructive force of nationalism are discussed and questioned, as well as the transplantation of these concepts from the Irish to the ‘new’ Canadian soil. Urquhart thus traces the creation of Canada as a settler-invader nation by picking up issues that are central to the constitution of such a society. In one of its multiple significations, the title *Away* already hints at an issue that is at the core of the text: through their simple presence in a geographical space that is not legitimately theirs, the migrants—those who ‘built’ the nation—internalize a form of

displacement, which, according to Sugars, “might account for the psychic dissonance that postcolonial critics have identified as definitive of the Second World” (14).<sup>11</sup>

In many ways, it is the interaction between the sometimes highly allegorized characters that reveals the most interesting perspectives on (post)colonial power relations, processes of transculturation and nationalist tendencies. The character of Mary, for instance, represents—through her strong and inextricable connection to her daemon lover—the exiled settler who is only physically present in the new geographical location, but is still fully immersed in the left-behind physical and mental landscapes. According to Sugars, Mary “assimilates the evanescence of Irish legend into her own identity, only to become its embodiment” (13), which leads her to being in a state of exile that is “comparable to Freud’s account of profound mourning, a condition marked by the ‘loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love [man or country]’” (Freud, qtd. in Sugars 11).

Mary’s daughter, Eileen, is ‘away’ in a similar way, thus representing the settler who is, even though she was born on Canadian soil, wound up in a melancholic perception of a “fetishized mythology” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 86). During her childhood, Eileen was endowed with a strong belief that made her embrace the stories that she has been told by her parents as well as by Exodus Crow. Later, however, when she gets in contact with Aidan and the Fenians, this intrinsic belief in universal and manifold stories is replaced by the fetishized idea of a specific Irish mythology. In the end, Eileen has to realize that she has been blinded and led astray, and she spends the rest of her life encapsulated and broken in her brother’s house, without any reconciliation. Consequently, as Sugars states, “the pathos of her mistaken idealization of Aidan Lanighan and his supposed band of revolutionaries renders her a failure as an authentic New World heroine” (16).

Mary’s second child, Liam, embodies the “desire for a cultural and historical tabula rasa” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 62). In a scene that perfectly symbolizes this need to eradicate the past in order to begin a new life in the here and now, Liam visits the school where his father taught, and erases Gaelic words from the blackboard:

Next to the map was a list of Gaelic nouns written in his father’s hand, and beside them their English equivalents written in the hand of a child: “famine,”

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<sup>11</sup> Second World: according to Alan Lawson, the term refers to “that neither/ nor territory of white settler-colonial writing” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 104).

“sorrow,” “homeland,” “harp,” “sea,” “warrior,” “poet,” and the word “castle,” interrupted after the first syllable – the chalk that wrote it resting of the edge beneath the board. ... Still holding the book, Liam snatched a cloth from the top of one of the desks and reduced the final remnants of his beloved father to a grey smear. Chalk dust filled the sunlit air like snow as Liam turned and, after kicking closed the door of the cold iron stove, left the place forever. (207-208)

Even though he is the one who was born in Ireland, he has left his cultural heritage behind in order to ensure a good living on the ‘new’ soil. In this progress, however, he clearly becomes an oppressor/ colonizer himself, when he buys a house at Loughbreeze Beach and threatens to expel half-Ojibway Molly and her Irish father, who have been living on the premises before.

All these characters are presented as intrinsically complicated figures. *Away* does not argue for one way being preferable over the other, but gives a portrait of the pitfalls, shortcomings and dangers of each position. Nonetheless, there are two incidents on the plot-level that appear as too readily and easily proposed ‘solutions’, particularly seen from a postcolonial perspective, and in comparison to the otherwise complex fabrication of the novel. The first of these moments is Liam’s marriage with Molly, whose mother was Ojibway and who thus represents, as Sugars argues, “the ideal settler”, an “expression of the settler-invader’s desire” (18). Through this union, Liam is too easily redeemed, which results in “a problematic erasure of his imperialist ideology [...] and undermines [the novel’s] potential critique of settler-invader nationalism” (Sugars 18). The second moment is the above-mentioned comparison of mythologies that occurs when Exodus Crow and Mary share their stories. On the one hand, there are critics such as Neumann, who celebrate this moment as a literary proposition to bring group-specific mythologies in a pro-active dialogue, thus pointing at the possibility of ensuring the plurality of official memory-space and creating a better understanding of cultural difference (cf. Neumann 383, my translation). On the other hand, Sugars as well as Omhové hold the opinion that

Such an equation [...] is highly debatable insofar as it places the Irish community on the strategically safe side of the ethical divide separating victims from their victimizers, thereby legitimizing Irish settlement in a land they never intended to conquer but in which they merely sought shelter. (Omhovère 5)

In this context, Sugars makes use of the image of being haunted. Canada is often considered as not having its own ghosts to be haunted by, or as not being able to

accommodate such ghosts, as this statement from a very early narrative of settlement by Catherine Parr Traill illustrates:

As to ghosts or spirits they appear totally banished from Canada. This is too matter-of-fact country for such supernaturals to visit. Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that came before us. (qtd. in Sugars 4)

Clearly, this is a settler's perspective, and, clearly, there have been Native ghosts before—but they were simply not perceived by the settlers. Now, in *Away*, this is exactly what Urquhart portrays: the different ways and difficulties of dealing with existing ghosts as well as the perceived lack of haunting. And with this portrait, Urquhart criticizes the transplantation of old ghosts in new landscapes, which Sugars calls “a means of (ghost)writing the nation into being” (7). But, as a novel, *Away* itself fulfils a similar function. And when considering the aforementioned critical plot-moments, Sugar's insistence that Urquhart “is at fault for offering an insufficiently critical postcolonialism” (6) is definitely comprehensible.

But even though it is not without limitations, the postcolonial project in *Away* is nonetheless incredibly interesting in its investigation of settler-invader nationalism and the colonizer/ colonized divide, particularly when looked upon from the perspective of magical realism as a subversive mode. *Away* appears to work against official accounts of Canada's national history by presenting the events from a marginalized perspective. As Wyile argues,

[*Away*] counters Anglocentric accounts of Confederation as a moment of nation-building unity by illustrating not only the history of oppression by the English behind the emigration of so many Irish to Canada, but also the background of intense cultural negotiation, oppression, and violence behind that apparent consensus. (Speculative Fictions 84)

Neumann brings up a similar argument and suggests that the de-centered, alternating focalization and the resulting plurality of voices do not only contribute to a visualization of the past, but also lead to a subjectivization of official historical accounts, and, in this particular situation, to a symbolical reworking of formerly marginalized experiences (cf. Neumann 383). Thus *Away* engages, like many openly postcolonial magical realist texts, in the postcolonial project of “revising, reappropriating or reinterpreting history” (Vautier 33).

The starting point for this revision, however, is a rather different one in *Away*. In most decidedly postcolonial magical realist texts, the opposition between magic and the

real is based on the link established between Native, non-Western cultures and the magical, and the imperial culture and realism. What is necessarily deeply connected to this conceptualization is a historical determinant. The Native narrative heritage is pre-European contact, thus necessarily pre-Enlightenment; as such, it often challenges, in its perception and description of time, post-Enlightenment progressive thinking and, particularly, post-Enlightenment historiography. Urquhart achieves a similar effect, but not primarily by relying on narrative structures taken from Canadian Native mythology; instead, she implements immigrants' pre-Enlightenment folklore, i.e. Irish myths, which also stands in stark contrast to Enlightenment historiography and its claim to rationality and scientificity. Thus, in the end, Urquhart does go in accord with the 'traditional' magical realist texts and their postcolonial project by creating this hybrid discourse between the fantastic—anchored in pre-Enlightenment thought—and the real as an imperial mode.

This deviation from the concept applied in 'canonical' magical realist texts is interesting in various respects. First of all, it complicates the already problematic distinction between ontological and epistemological versions of magical realism, as well as the geographical distinction that comes with it. Commonly, the northern hemisphere has been critically aligned with the epistemological, i.e. scholarly, version of magical realism; however, *Away* reveals clear traces of ontological magical realism, because the magic in the novel is mainly based in Irish mythology, i.e. the cultural sphere of the characters as well as of the author. Secondly, it is due to this deviation that Urquhart's variant of magical realism seems to reflect on the particular colonial power-relations in Canada at the moment of nation building. Through the incorporation of the Irish immigrants' cultural heritage, *Away* becomes, according to Sugars, "a postcolonial celebration of Canada's settler heritage" (5). However, due to the fact that Irish mythology is, even though the most prevalent, not the only source for *Away*'s magic, it is also reflected in the structure of the novel that a singular approach would be insufficient in this settler-invader situation. Thus the novel offers "a critique of a cultural identity politics that advocates an allegiance to a single (i.e. non-hybrid) version of the nation's settler history" (Sugars 5).

As mentioned above, however, it is exactly this 'tip of the cap' to other cultural groups and their respective narrative heritage that has been criticized as a too readily



proposed solution. For reasons mentioned before, this holds true when the novel and the character constellations are looked upon from a strictly postcolonial perspective, and, as Sugars argues, this poses a problem. However, as Neumann points out, there is a more universal component to this 'comparison of mythologies' that transcends the postcolonial project, contributing to a more humanist idea. Through the structural importance of different kinds of mythologies and through the insertion of scenes, in which these mythologies are likened to each other, the universal importance of storying is stressed, as well as the conceptual similarities of these narratives that belong to otherwise different cultures.

To sum up, Urquhart uses the subversive potential of the magical realist mode in an outstanding way, because she sets the focus on the settlers' cultural heritage. The overall portrait is not as overtly postcolonial as in other magical realist texts, which is mainly due to the aforementioned universal overtones that, to a certain degree, direct the readers' attention to more humanist issues. However, it can be concluded that the traces of magic, history and postcolonialism work in a way similar to that of bird, fish and man in the novel: even though these traces seem to be, at first sight, only faint touches, they develop into very prevalent marks and pervade the very texture of the novel.

## **“Not magic, Frances. Miracle.” Rethinking the Relevance of Magical Realism for Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on your knees***

Frances told Mercedes to take Veronica as her saint’s name because of Veronica’s magic hanky. “Not magic, Frances. Miracle.”<sup>12</sup>

Ann-Marie Mac Donald, *Fall on your knees* (170)

Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on your knees* is a highly acclaimed novel. Particularly after, but even before, Oprah presented the novel in her book club, critics have spoken highly of *Fall on your knees* and its author, catapulting MacDonald “into the Canadian literary stratosphere alongside Robertson Davies and Margaret Atwood” (*Quill and Quire*, referenced in Baetz 63). But even though critics concur in their celebration of the novel and its complexities, there seems to be considerable divergence as regards the question of which generic label to attach to the novel. Whereas most critics analyze it as a Gothic or neo-Gothic<sup>13</sup> novel, others refer to it as a ghost story<sup>14</sup> or refrain from attaching labels at all<sup>15</sup>.

There is one critic, however, who has raised particular attention in this respect<sup>16</sup>: in her article “Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*”, Jennifer Anderson argues that this novel is magical realist and that it may lead the way to the formulation of a new, updated definition of this literary category for a Canadian context. In the following chapter, I intend to follow the outline Andrews gives in her article; however, I adopt a more critical perspective on this issue and include an investigation as to how the novel’s historical and postcolonial project feature in this discussion.

*Fall on Your Knees* follows a Canadian family from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. James, “the daddy” (7), is born in Egypt on Cape Breton Island in

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<sup>12</sup> Saint Veronica: a pious woman who, moved with pity as Jesus cross, gave him her veil so that he might wipe his forehead.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Coral Ann Howells, Gabriella Parro, Neta Gordon.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Joel Baetz.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Trish Salah.

<sup>16</sup> This article is given as the sole critical reference for the incorporation of *Fall on your knees* into the introductory book on *Magic(al) Realism* by Maggie-Ann Bowers.

1882. He is Canadian-born; his mother is from Ireland and his father is a Scotsman. After his mother dies in childbirth, he leaves Egypt for the biggest town on Cape Breton Island, i.e. Sydney, where he works as a piano tuner. At the age of eighteen, he falls in love with Materia Mahmoud, the thirteen-year old daughter of Lebanese immigrants. Despite her father's strenuous objections, they elope together in order to get married. Consequently, Materia's family disowns and outcasts her.

At first, James is a hard-working and loving family man, but soon, his demeanor changes; his marriage starts to dissolve and Materia's spirits decline. Until 1913, Materia has given birth to three children: Kathleen, born in 1900; Mercedes, born in 1912; and Frances, born in 1913. Kathleen is her father's pride: she is a talented singer, fair-skinned and pretty. Mercedes is the exemplary daughter, while Frances is a rebel in search of a cause. In 1914, James enlists in order to flee his family environment, because he has gradually felt what he calls 'the demon', i.e. an incestuous desire towards his daughter Kathleen. He returns in December 1917, but he has not outsmarted the demon.

In 1918, he sends Kathleen to live with her aunt Giles in New York to study opera. Kathleen fully unfolds: she progresses as a singer and soon falls in love with her black piano accompanist, Rose. But their relationship does not last for long: from a letter signed by "An Anonymous Well-Wisher" (131), James learns about the love affair. He leaves for New York, where he catches his daughter and Rose in the act. In the immediacy of this situation, his demon is released: he rapes his daughter, and she becomes pregnant. He brings her back home and nine months later, Kathleen gives birth. But there are complications: in an emergency C-section, Materia sacrifices Kathleen's life for that of the babies. When Materia wants to call a priest to baptize the twins—a boy and a girl—James batters her. Meanwhile, five-year old Frances creeps up into the attic and takes the twins with the intention to baptize them in the creek in the garden. She is in a hurry, and when she is about to baptize the boy, she drops him. James comes running out of the house and tosses Frances back from the creek. They cannot save the drowning baby boy; James buries him in the garden. A few days later, Materia commits suicide. James drowns himself in alcohol and gives full scope to his demon, molesting Frances.

James' official version of the events is that Kathleen died of flu, and that Materia had been pregnant and died while giving birth to a baby girl, Lily. The family lives on with this lie, burying the traumatic memories deep in their mind. James goes back to work, while Frances and Mercedes raise Lily. While Mercedes increasingly loses herself in her religion, Frances goes astray: she starts working in a speakeasy, first as a gofer, then as an 'entertainer'/stripper. Leo Taylor, a black man who has worked for the Piper family for years, tries to help her and succeeds, but not in the way he has intended to: Frances develops the irrational idea that she has to seduce him in order to get pregnant, and she manages to do so. During her pregnancy, her attitude turns around completely: she fully embraces the idea of motherhood. But one day, when she is on a walk, Teresa, Leo Taylor's sister, shoots her for having forced Leo to commit adultery.

Frances, however, remains pregnant. She gives birth to a baby boy, but Mercedes decides that the boy must be given away. She gives him to an orphanage and tells the rest of the family, even Frances, that the baby died at birth. Shortly afterwards, Lily finds the family's cat dead and buries her in the garden, finding the body of her brother Ambrose. Frances had told her the story before, but she did not fully believe her. Now she wants to confront her father and ask him about it. But James has had several strokes and is, by now, senile. And just when she approaches him with the questions ready to be asked, he dies. But Frances gives Lily Kathleen's diary, which she got from James, who got it from Giles.

Having read the diary, Lily leaves for New York. She finds Rose, who—since the day Kathleen left—has dressed as a man and earned her money as the Jazz pianist Doc Rose. Lily decides to live with Rose, and one day, after many years, a young black man comes to visit them, announcing that he knew Mercedes. He brings the news of Frances' and Mercedes' death, and explains that when Mercedes died, she left him a note with Lily's name and address, so that he could personally bring her a paper scroll. Lily unrolls it; it is their family tree, and it is not the 'official' one that includes Ambrose, Anthony and Rose. The novel ends with Lily telling Anthony to sit down and listen to the story of his mother.

*Fall on Your Knees* thus covers almost a century, starting in the 1860s with the story of how James' parents met in Cape Breton, and ending in 1964 in New York with Lily telling Anthony the story of his mother. Like *Away*, this novel, too, traces the time-span

from the establishment of the Canadian Dominion up to the near present. However, the focus in *Fall on Your Knees* is not so much on the various generations of women, but rather on the lives of the sisters; nonetheless, it is undoubtedly a historical narrative, incorporating—within the fictional universe of the Piper family—important historical events like miners’ strikes, prohibition or, most prominently, the First World War. Additionally, MacDonald goes lengths to incorporate a magnitude of historical pop-culture references, be it in the form of songs sung or films seen by the protagonists, in plot elements or motifs<sup>17</sup>. And, just like in Urquhart’s *Away*, the stylistic mode in *Fall on Your Knees* is far from realism or historical writing. The narrational atmosphere may not be as lyrical as in *Away*, but the implementation of “marvelous or uncanny details or events” (“Opposite of History” 27) in an otherwise realistic and historical literary environment is a clearly recognizable stylistic trait in *Fall on Your Knees*, too.

Thus it can be said that the given parameters are quite similar as in *Away*, which is why I apply, in the following chapter, a systematic structure that is based on similar cornerstones as the previous chapter. However, it is important to note that the interplay of fact and fiction, which the incorporation of marvelous or uncanny details and events calls forth, is incredibly complex and, at times, confusing in *Fall on Your Knees*. Thus most of the chapter is dedicated to an investigation of the textual components that induce this interplay of opposites, and an examination of whether the textual features of magical realism illustrated in the theory chapter are applied in this novel. Subsequently, I look in more detail at the historical as well as the (post)colonial relevance of this blurring of boundaries.

First of all, however, I intend to look at Andrews’ article “Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*”. The first thing that must be noted when discussing magical realism in *Fall on Your Knees* is, as the introductory quotations serves to illustrate, the fact that the concept of magic that MacDonald presents to the reader is an incredibly complicated one. Magical, mystical, supernatural and uncanny occurrences can undoubtedly be found throughout *Fall on Your Knees*; but there is never a simple or singular explanation, for these occurrences are embedded in a net of religious, pop-

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<sup>17</sup> The novel’s chapter and section headings, for instance, provide an inexhaustible source of pop-culture references.

cultural, folkloristic, supernatural and psychological references. However, Jennifer Andrews' article suggests that there is a way to argue for the magical elements in *Fall on Your Knees* to be incorporated within the realm of literary magical realism, which is why I take her article as a starting point for a more profound investigation of the novels' supernatural occurrences.

In her article, Andrews gives a viable portrait of the parameters that define *Fall on Your Knees*, and delineates why and how magical realism as a critical framework may be fruitfully applied in this case. She starts by giving a very brief historical outline of the critical discourse, pointing at interesting similarities between the Latin American and the Canadian historical situation of cultural resistance:

Like Latin America, Canada has, historically, "rebelled against the domination of a metropolitan power" (Durix 145). As Jean-Pierre Durix explains, some Canadian writers who want to "define themselves as different from the 'Great' British tradition" [...] have sought a "model in Latin American writers" (145). But this alliance between Canada and Latin America also serves another purpose: it offers Canadian writers an "American" model that is not borrowed from the United States, a "superpower" with its own legacy of domination over Canada (145). (Andrews 3)

By referring to this exemplary function of Latin American fiction, Andrews hints at the possibility of transplanting the critical idea of a historically 'grown' version of magical realism into a Canadian context. At another point, she mentions the fact that MacDonald portrays marginal places and communities, which is an important argument that has been brought forth in various discussions of *Fall on Your Knees*; Joel Baetz, for instance, also points out that this novel deals with

marginalized peoples (Lebanese immigrants, bootleggers, vaudeville players, scabs, and Jewish neighbours), marginalized places (the coke ovens, speakeasies, and jazz hangouts), and marginalized events (racial intolerance, regional poverty, and homosexual relationships). (74)

Going one step further, Andrews righteously claims that this focus on fringe spaces and characters is a key aspect in many magical realist novels. In connection with this notion of marginalization, she also comments on the relation between magical realism and history, claiming that

magic realists contest the notion of history as a linear and logical phenomenon from a wide variety of perspectives by including superstition, folklore, and the voices of otherwise neglected members of the population. (4)

The contestation of history as a linear and rational construct is also undoubtedly a key aspect in *Fall on Your Knees*, as I intend to illustrate in the following sections of this chapter. Andrews then continues to explore the subversive potential of magical realism, pointing at the challenge to hegemonic power structures in general and to imperial power structures in particular. Citing Chanady, Andrews states that magical realism

enabled fiction writers to overcome colonial domination and to create their own unique, and equally important, mode of literary expression in contrast to Old World, meaning European, traditions. (Chanady, quoted in Andrews 4)

However, Andrews also points at the pitfalls of magical realism as a postcolonial critical mode: it may allow for comparison between different postcolonial literatures, but only insufficiently accounts for the fact that the (post)colonial situation in Canada, just like in Australia or New Zealand, requires an adapted critical perspective. For this reason, Andrews calls for a renewed interest in magical realism in Canada, so that the existing concept can be updated and adapted for this particular context.

With this appeal to future critics, Andrews brings to the point one of the basic intentions behind this thesis. I obviously concur with the abovementioned aspects; the article convincingly outlines how a text with such parameters—miraculous/magical events, marginal characters and communities, challenging notions of a linear history/historiography, questioning of (colonial) power structures—may be interpreted in a magical realist critical framework. There is, however, a major pitfall with this article: Andrews does not provide sufficient textual evidence to back up her basic and pivotal claim that the novel *is*, actually, a magical realist text<sup>18</sup>. She claims that *Fall on Your Knees*, “at first glance, [...] could be *mistaken* for a Gothic novel” (7, my emphasis)—thus wiping away with one statement many other critics’ perspectives—and that it much rather “adheres to the conventions of magic realism, as defined by Canadian and Latin American scholars” (1). But neither does she go into detail with regard to these conventions, nor does she give sufficient textual evidence to back up her claim.

For this reason, her whole line of argument is significantly weakened. Granted, a close textual investigation of the magical elements is, as mentioned above, highly

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<sup>18</sup> There are several other aspects of Andrews’ deliberations that I do not concur with, as for instance her interpretation of Roh’s concept of magic realism and, consequently, her choice of terminology, i.e. magic realism; or her categorization of magic realism as a sub-genre. These discordances are, however, comparably minor and shall thus not be part of this discussion.

complicated in *Fall on Your Knees* through the complexity of references. Nonetheless, such an attempt must be made; only then the use of the critical concepts outlined by Andrews becomes plausible and their adaptation and reformation possible.

### **The Magical Elements**

The following section of this chapter is thus devoted to an attempt at a textual rendering of the magical elements in *Fall on Your Knees*. Again, I take Faris' set of characteristics as a starting point, beginning with the idea of the irreducible element. In the case of MacDonald's novel, this first characteristic is definitely harder to pin down than in *Away*. While Urquhart uses supernatural elements as significant plot devices, as for instance the otherworldly lover, MacDonald does not do so: a plot outline of *Fall on Your Knees* can be given, as illustrated above, without having to refer to supernatural occurrences. Nonetheless, they are there, and can roughly be grouped into three categories: prophecy, supernatural happenings or events, and ghosts. For each of these categories there are several characters 'affected'. Prophecy can, for instance, be attributed to Materia's mother. Right before James meets Materia for the first time, she reads his cup:

when she peered into the tea-leaves at the bottom of James's cup he was neither frightened nor skeptical, but felt himself drawn in with an involuntary faith – which is what faith is – when she said, “I see a big house. A family. There is a lot of love here. I hear music... A beautiful girl. I hear laughter... Water.” (11)

Shortly before, she had announced that she brings “good news only” (11), and the prediction of the positive aspects of James' future life does indeed come true: Mahmoud gives him a big house as a gift—so that he would never have to see James again; James and Materia have a family—but it does not take long before this family dissolves; there is a lot of love, particularly between James and his first-born daughter, Kathleen, who sings like a bird and is amazingly beautiful—but this love turns into incestuous rape; Ambrose, the incestuous child, eventually drowns in the creek. Another case of foresight, or rather impossible hindsight, can be traced back to Lily. One night, she talks to Frances about a dream she had, in which she was a fish:

“If you were a fish, how come you couldn't breathe?” [said Frances. ...]  
“I was drowning.”  
“Fish don't drown.”



“You were in it, Frances.”  
“In the creek?”  
“You were little.”  
“... I know.”  
“What were you holding?”  
“Nothing... I don’t remember. Go to sleep. It was just a dream.” (225)

In this paragraph, Lily confronts Frances with what happened during the night she was born, thus relating a memory she cannot possibly have.

Secondly, there are several hardly explainable incidents that have clear supernatural overtones. One such event that may be situated somewhere close to prophesy is Mahmoud’s curse. When he finds out about the marriage, he announces:

As for the yellow-haired dog who stole my daughter, may he rot. May he awaken to the contents of his mouth strewn across the pillow and may God devastate his dwelling... well, perhaps not the dwelling.

As for my daughter. May God curse her womb. (17)

Mahmoud’s curse manifests itself: James becomes an alcoholic and his mental and physical health decline even more after his stroke. As for Materia, her womb does indeed appear to be cursed. Even though it is her innermost wish to have a son—because she thinks this would be the only way for her to re-connect with her father, who would not be able to ignore his first-born grandson—she only gives birth to girls. And these girls are then subjected to James’ ‘demon’. The only thing that remains intact in this otherwise damaged family is the house Mahmoud gave them; it appeared to be a new and bright halo at the beginning, “but just because it was new, doesn’t mean it wasn’t haunted” (18).

Another magical instance is the appearance and disappearance of the cat, Trixie, and the accompanying circumstances. The cat “found Frances” (205) around the time when Ambrose died and Lily was born. Trixie has a missing front paw, which unmistakably links her to Ambrose, whose ankle was cut during the C-section. Considering this, and the fact that the cat dies when Frances’ child is born, it is standing to reason that the cat be considered some kind of vessel for Ambrose’s soul, for towards the birth of Frances’ baby, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Frances’ conviction that she can bring Ambrose back to life through her own child:

“Ambrose loves you, Frances.” [says Lily]

Frances takes Lily's hand and places it against her belly. "Here. You can feel him. He's awake now." (440)

Additionally, it is worthwhile noting that it is the blood Lily donates—the blood she shared with Ambrose when they were still in the womb—that saves Frances' and the baby's lives after the shooting. There is another magical happening, closely related to the rebirth of Ambrose, namely Frances' pregnancy. She becomes pregnant when she seduces Leo Taylor, but the nurse in the hospital confirms that she miscarried after having been shot (416). Nonetheless, Frances gives birth to Anthony, explaining that she did, indeed, lose the child, but that the bullet impregnated her again. The idea that the bullet, shot by Leo's sister Theresa, impregnated Frances has been interpreted as a symbolic act of conception between Theresa and Frances (cf. Parro 188-189), replicating and continuing the lesbian relationship between Rose and Kathleen. Additionally, Leo Taylor, the 'first father' of the child, has been, as Parro argues, "under a spell since he saw a pianist in Harlem, Doc Rose Lacroix. The music of Kathleen's lover leaves Leo in a 'narcotic haze,' making him easy a prey for Frances" (188). Therefore, Frances biracial child Anthony can not only be seen as representing the return of Ambrose, but also as the symbolic love child of Rose and Kathleen.

Thirdly, there are the ghosts. While the idea of ghosting seems to be omnipresent in the novel—almost all of the main characters are, for instance, at some point mistaken for ghosts (e.g. Materia: 27, by Mrs Luvovitz; Frances: 324, by Leo Taylor)—there are two 'real specters' that haunt members of the Piper family: Pete, who follows Kathleen, and the ghost of Ambrose who accompanies Kathleen's daughter Lily. Both specters appear several times and Kathleen as well as Lily accept their otherworldly attendants as a part of their reality. Lily even communicates with Ambrose:

He opens his mouth and the water pours out [...] It's not so bad. The water is warm, having been inside him. When all the water is out of him, he is still looking, looking, his empty palms facing her.

She asks him for the third time, "Who are you?"

Ambrose speaks his first words. He has a dark voice because he lives in a dark place. "I am No Man."

"Don't be afraid, Ambrose. Don't be afraid. We love you."

Ambrose says, "Hello."

"Hello," says Lily. "Hello, little boy. Hello." (273)

At this point, Faris' second and fourth characteristic become of interest, namely the strong presence of the phenomenal world and the textual merging of two different

realms. First of all, MacDonald presents supernatural occurrences, as this quotation suggests, in a realistic mode, thus textually merging two different perspectives. Additionally, it is interesting to note that real happenings or episodes often seem more magical than the actual irreducible elements. This is most noticeable with regard to the character of Mercedes. Even though she is not accompanied by supernatural specters, Mercedes' daily routine appears most extraordinary due to her fierce exertion of fanatic rituals, like eating coal as a form of self-castigation:

While Frances sang to Lily in the dark, Mercedes was naked under burlap, kneeling the furnace, offering up her sacrifice to God. [...] "Through my most grievous fault." She takes another bite of coal. (276)

Secondly, MacDonald also intensely investigates the gray areas between fact and fiction. There is one particular moment in the novel that illustrates how MacDonald complicates preconceived notions about truth and falsity, namely when Frances starts laughing uncontrollably at her mother's grave, and her sister as well as her father think that she is crying.

Frances learns something in this moment that will allow her to survive and function for the rest of her life. She finds out that one thing can look like another. [...] In this moment, fact and truth become separated and commence to wander like twins in a fairy-tale, waiting to be reunited by that special someone who possesses the secret of telling them apart. Some would simply say that Frances learned how to lie. (142)

From this point onwards, Frances becomes the embodiment of a storyteller in the novel. She feeds her younger sister/niece stories about Ambrose, telling her, at first, that he is her guardian angel (230), but continually changing the story and, in the end, explaining to Lily that Ambrose was her brother (217). By relating the conflicting stories to Lily, Frances is "testing the power of stories both to bring into being and to controvert various possible realities" (Gordon 161). Ambrose thus starts out as a fiction, but, at some point, "Frances doesn't need to tell Lily any more Ambrose stories [...] because he has become Lily's story. Frances has finally succeeded in giving him to her" (178). And, in the end, Frances even brings this fiction to life through the birth of her own child, thus physically giving Ambrose back to Lily.

Even on a textual level, the recipients clearly experience the interplay between fact and fiction, because very often, they simply cannot be sure what just happened. The narrative voice is deceptively misleading and can be described, in Faris' terms, as

coming from “radically different perspectives at once” (Faris 43); and, at times, the origin of these perspectives is hardly determinable. Another feature that Faris mentions in this context is particularly prevalent in *Fall on Your Knees*, namely varying narrative distancing strategies: the perspective immediately alternates between the direct address of a second person point of view and situations in which the narrative voice is much further detached. Additionally, at least in some parts of the novel, focalization continuously changes without any premonition, and the reader is at the mercy of the respective point of view, sometimes without even being sure which point of view it actually is. Particularly at the beginning of the novel, the reader is often led to look through James’ eyes and is continuously snared into his disturbed perception. At one point, for instance, James ponders about his first attraction to Materia, who was 12 years old when they first met:

How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn’t run away with men. [...] She had seduced him. That was why he hadn’t noticed she was a child. Because she wasn’t one. Not a real one. It was queer. Sick, even. Perhaps it was a racial flaw. He would read up on it.

All Materia wanted to do was get pregnant again so God could send her a son. But there wasn’t much chance because her husband wouldn’t come near her. (34)

In this excerpt, James clearly shuffles off the guilt: he holds Materia responsible for seducing him, in order to distract himself—and the readers—from the fact that he has obviously felt an abnormal attraction to children. However, through the immediate shift of focalization from one paragraph to the other, it becomes a delicate endeavor for the reader to discern the subjective points of view in these paragraphs. Therefore, it is difficult to process the information—in particular the information that lies between the lines—and to draw boundaries between the individual perceptions.

However, this deceptive narrative perspective is not the only thing that confuses the recipients. They may also be vexed by “contradictory understandings of events” (Faris 7). In this context, a discussion of Faris’ third characteristic, i.e. unsettling doubts, is highly pertinent. First of all, it is interesting to take a look at how the characters deal with supernatural occurrences. There seems to be a recurring pattern: none of them display any kind of doubt when it comes to the existence of ghosts or other supernatural occurrences; instead, they incorporate them within the framework of Catholicism. This is especially interesting when it comes to the two girls who are accompanied by ghosts,

because Kathleen as well as Lily are extremely skeptical towards their religion. From the very beginning, Kathleen only feels a connection to her father, who was forced to convert to Catholicism, but does not practice it; but she has never had a functioning relationship with her mother. Thus Materia is literally foreign to her, and it is especially her mother's extreme, mystical adherence to the Christian faith that alienates Kathleen. Nonetheless, she also adheres to the Christian system of categorization to make sense of Pete, associating him "with the devil after an experiment with vanity" (Parro 186).

Lily is similarly alienated from, and even afraid of, her sister and 'foster-mother' Mercedes. Mercedes is even fiercer than Materia in her adherence to the Christian laws and in her observance of the Christian rituals. The only thing she wants to see in Lily is a saint, so that she can redeem herself through her little sister. This scares Lily enormously and makes her question the validity of the Christian good/bad dichotomy. Nonetheless, Lily refers to Ambrose as a guardian angel. It becomes clear that, even though Kathleen and Lily make meaning of the specters by placing them within the Christian reference system, they display a skeptical or abnormal relation to their religion. This is another pattern that fits most of the characters in the novel: James is indifferent towards religion in general, Frances only adheres to her own stories, Materia is overly mythical in her interpretation of Christianity and Mercedes is radically fundamentalist. By representing the characters' abnormal relations to their Christian faith, but also their simultaneous, unquestioning adherence to the Catholic belief system when it comes to the interpretation of their perceptions, MacDonald illustrates how intrinsic, almost subconscious, yet misleading the adherence to a particular belief-system can be.

Nonetheless, religion functions as one of the possible solutions that Western readers may spot and accept when they are trying to account for the magical elements. Another one of these possible solutions that may be appealing, particularly when it comes to the ghosts that inhabit MacDonald's novel, is the presence of Freud. The supernatural materializations of Pete and Ambrose may be decoded as manifestations of the Freudian subconscious. Several authors of critical articles have taken this approach, arguing for the pivotal importance of Freud's concept of the uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees*. This may be regarded as a critical point when trying to interpret the novel as magical realist text, because the substantial presence of Freud cannot be ignored. He does not only

represent intrinsically Western beliefs and ideas, but also provides a framework that offers psychological interpretations for the apparently supernatural events.

How critical this aspect is for a magical realist interpretation may be illustrated by taking a look at Andrews' argumentation. She states in her article that one characteristic of magical realism that is illustrated in *Fall on Your Knees* is the fact that

none of these [supernatural] events is placed beyond the realm of daily life. Nor does the text offer a clear psychological explanation for the dysfunctional behaviour of the Piper family [...]. (9)

While I think that the first part of the argument is valid, the second part of the statement is highly questionable. As mentioned above, and as Baetz argues, "Freud is an unavoidable [...] presence in *Fall on Your Knees*. [...] MacDonald makes direct reference to Freud [...] as the foundation of James's library" (67). Thus the presence of Freud simply cannot be ignored and, therefore, at least the possibility of a psychological explanation of the events always lingers over the text – and critics, like Baetz, have proven that this lingering psychological interpretation does indeed make a lot of sense. Seen from another perspective, however, both of these possible solutions call forth exactly what Faris defines as unsettling doubts: Western readers are caught up in the dilemma to either follow the initial impulse and incorporate the irreducible element into their received belief system by force, or to follow the second impulse and at least consider for a moment the chance that the inexplicable happenings could actually be true. Or, to cut it short, the readers are caught up in the attempt to "reconcile two contradictory understandings of events" (Faris 7).

It is also interesting to note that the idea of the uncanny—placed outside of a Freudian reference system and, instead, attached a cultural understanding—may very well be likened and related to, maybe even incorporated into, the magical realist concept. Wyile, consciously or unconsciously, hints at this possibility in his very concise formulation of magical realism as incorporating "marvelous or uncanny details or events" ("Opposite of History" 27) into a realistic realm. As Baetz puts it by referring to the original text by Freud,

the uncanny, in its most basic form, is the unique brand of dread and horror one experiences whenever "infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed. [...] For this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the

mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.” (Freud, qtd. in Baetz 67-68)

Following the line of argumentation that Baetz builds in his article “Tales from the Canadian Crypt: Canadian Ghosts, the Cultural Uncanny, and the Necessity of Haunting in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*”, this concept of the uncanny can be mapped onto time, space and culture. First, he points at the liminal status of the uncanny: it is something frighteningly new and foreign, but, at the same time, something familiar and well-known; something that has been buried or denied existence, and eventually comes back to life. It is this liminal status, the idea of merging realms and in-between existence that links the uncanny to the concept of magical realism and accounts for the conceptual similarities of the two.

Tellingly, Baetz also attributes highly subversive potential to this concept and illustrates how MacDonald makes use of the uncanny in order to question received ideas about time. For one, he argues that

MacDonald reworks the uncanny in *Fall on Your Knees* to contest the limits of official history. Although Freud emphasizes that the uncanny is clearly a psychological process, its central feature—uncontrollable anachronism—makes it a well-suited strategy for cultural resistance, one that disturbs colonial authority and negotiates the possibility of a pluralized history. In MacDonald’s fictional universe, time clearly follows an uncanny, not a linear, path. (73)

In her challenge to official history, MacDonald brings to light buried histories of marginalized people and places, raising “a family past ignored by the region, a regional past ignored by the nation, and a national past that is dismissed on the world stage” (74-75). How the concept of the uncanny can be used to subvert of linear temporal progressions can also be traced on the story level: the frame narrative is set in the 1960s, and the plot covers the time from roughly the 1860s to said 1960s; but it does by no means unfold in a linear way. Particularly “Book 2: No Man’s Land” about the tragic twin-birth may be seen as being structured according to the concept of the uncanny: while the first section, “O Holy Night”, gives an overview of what happens during the night of birth and the days after, the following sections go—in a non-chronological way—into detail on the various traumatic episodes that the individual characters experience, and the chapter ends with “The Official Version”, i.e. a section that relates

what eventually becomes the official account of events – the “[fiction] everyone agrees to” (164).

The same principle appears over and over again on various levels: Kathleen’s experience in New York, for instance, has been left out when it would have been in its chronological place between Book 1 and Book 2, only to return in the form of her diary in Book 8. This is particularly interesting, because until then, her story has been concealed and she herself has literally lost her voice: from the time James raped and impregnated her and until her death, she does not speak a word. In her diary, however, which also stands out as the only part of the novel narrated from a first-person perspective, she eventually reclaims her voice. Also, the most traumatic event, i.e. James raping his daughter, turns up in the last chapter of the novel under the section heading “Armistice Day”, i.e. Remembrance Day. Thus, the pattern of the uncanny projected upon temporal progressions clearly contributes to a questioning of received ideas about time, which is part of the fifth key aspect of magical realism that Faris mentions.

To sum up, in this section of the chapter I have attempted to find textual backup for Jennifer Andrews’ claim that *Fall on Your Knees* “adheres to the conventions of magic realism” (1). Even though textual evidence has been presented, it is still difficult to back up the claim that *Fall on Your Knees* fully adheres to the conventions of magical realism: the similarities are, at times, too far-fetched and the possibilities to interpret these possible points of intersection are too manifold. Therefore, I would not refer to *Fall on Your Knees* as a magical realist text; however, even though at times far-fetched, similarities are undoubtedly there, which is why a magical realist perspective can indeed provide at least an interesting and fruitful *addition* to the critical repertoire. It cannot be denied that the concept of magical realism is, as Andrews argues in her article, very tempting in order to challenge history, the interplay of fact and fiction, singular identity constructions and hegemonic power relations. Thus I feel that the most salient difficulty with Andrews’ claim is the neglect of other genre elements and interpretatory frameworks which have clearly influenced the novel, and which have been identified by other critics. It is rewarding to include other critical frameworks in this discussion; especially the concept of the cultural uncanny, which is so prevalent in the novel’s



representation of time and history – an important aspect of *Fall on Your Knees* that shall be discussed in more detail in the following part of the novel.

### **Representation of History**

Evidently, *Fall on Your Knees* intensively investigates issues relating to storytelling, memory and the past. As a starting point for a closer examination of the novel's historical project, I take, once again, the tripartite field of critical engagement described in my theoretical chapter: MacDonald does not only make use of metafictional strategies, but also puts a clear emphasis on the incorporation of orality within the text, and, to a lesser extent, also incorporates temporal structures that diverge from linear chronology. In the following section, I look in more detail at how these three aspects are dealt with in the novel and how magical elements as well as the idea of the uncanny influence MacDonald's handling of these aspects.

First of all, it must be pointed out that *Fall on Your Knees* follows the tradition of the historical novel in that the development of the Piper family is portrayed in realist detail against the backdrop of events that can be found in official accounts of Canadian history. James' life in particular is interwoven with and significantly influenced by historical events: he fights in World War I, experiences the miners' strikes that took place on Cape Breton Island during the 1910s and 1920s, and works as a bootlegger during prohibition. Also, it is important to note that these official historical events remain 'untouched'; there are no historical episodes rewritten from a new perspective, or historical figures portrayed in a new light. Nonetheless, history, memory and storytelling are major topics in the novel, and these issues are investigated from new and critical perspectives, which can be illustrated by the fact that many of the postmodern textual strategies described in the theory chapter can be found in *Fall on Your Knees*.

To begin with the metafictional—and, by extension, metahistorical—elements of the novel, it can be said that one of the two main paradigms that Hutcheon mentions in this context appears to be highly influential for the novel, namely multivocality. For the longest part, the readers are "left to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view [...] and must make an evaluation and interpretation of all [they] have been told" (65). This is particularly interesting due to the extraordinary narrative perspective and

the immediately shifting focalization mentioned before, because the readers have to navigate through a complicated net of subjective perspectives, some of which are not even clearly attributable. Only one of these subjective voices is clearly marked out, namely Kathleen's, which is revealed towards the end of the novel in her diary. All in all, it can thus be said that through the complex narrative voice—that, in a magical realist fashion, comes from radically different perspectives—the readers are caught in the attempt of making sense not only of the peculiar representation of reality, but also of the representation of history.

Additionally, there are other factors and strategies implemented in the novel that raise similar doubts concerning singular truth claims about the past. One of these factors is MacDonald's strong focus on and implicit questioning of photographic images. The frame narrative that opens the novel, for instance, constitutes a description of several family photographs. However, this description does not reveal a lot; the only thing it reveals is that there is something hidden behind the photos, something that they do not show and the narrating voice does not tell. Additionally, this frame narrative already introduces the reader to the idea of transcending reality; an idea that is, as elaborated in the previous section, expanded in the progress of the novel. While this opening creates a traditional storytelling situation, some of shown pictures 'behave' strangely: besides the fact that in none of these situations a photographer (or movie maker) could have been present, there is also sound in the pictures ("That sighing sound is just the sea" (1)) and the photo of Frances 'moves' ("And this is Frances. But wait, she's not in it yet. This one is a moving picture" (3)). MacDonald's thus clearly points out that photographs cannot talk for themselves and need interpretation, and, in doing so, challenges their status as 'accurate' historical records by illustrating that they cannot be taken as a 'true' representation of reality.

As mentioned above, this frame narrative also sets up a storytelling situation, and thus triggers an issue that is of key importance for the rest of the novel, namely the power of oral storytelling. In this respect, *Fall on Your Knees* shows striking similarities to the novels Hutcheon refers to in *The Canadian Postmodern*. Apart from the fact that the narrative is set in an oral frame, there is another strategy that serves to thematize the discussion of orality vs. writing, namely to set up a polarizing pair of perspectives, where

One [...] takes its form and modality from oral gossip and communal (mythic) memory, and another [...] is modeled on the historical chronicle and the individual need to record writing. (*The Canadian Postmodern* 53)

This exact pattern can be found in *Fall on Your Knees*: while Frances takes on the role of “the Piper family's retainer of secrets and stories ” (Gordon 160), Mercedes is described as the historical chronicler whose main project is the family tree, “a dry diagram covered with mostly the names of dead Scottish people” (MacDonald 199). In this debate, the two sisters can be seen as allegorical figures, respectively representing one of the two positions mentioned by Hutcheon. Mercedes, as the “gardener of the family” (MacDonald 217), trims the family’s history and pulls out the weeds so that, as Neta Gordon puts it, “the ‘story’ that is told by her genealogical representation is wilfully objective and exclusively retrospective” (168). Additionally, Gordon states that the family tree follows a so-called “linear [patrilineal genealogy] of the so-called chosen line, which [tracks] the sequence from father to first-born son” (171). The rest of the narrative, however,

is an exploration and recuperation of the ‘non-chosen’ line or lines that traverse religion and race and that privilege maternity and, especially, siblinghood over the constraints of paternity. (171)

In the end, Mercedes rewrites the family tree to include these “non-chosen” lines of mixed-race, same-gender relationships and children who were ‘illegitimate’, not baptized or born out of incestuous relationships.

Regarding the incorporation of mythical structures within the novel in order to challenge the linear conception of time, *Fall on Your Knees* does not reveal such striking similarities with the postmodern historical fictions of the 1970s and 1980s. Admittedly, MacDonald interrupts linear temporal progressions and chronologies within her novel, and it could be argued that there may be a pattern of structural as well as thematic replication and repetition: there are recurring issues and situations over all generations, like the question of being allowed to speak one’s mother tongue or the attraction to an ethnical Other. However, I think that, for the most part, the challenge to a linear temporal conception is, as argued in the previous section, mainly brought forth through patterns of the uncanny, i.e. through recurring buried, repressed, or deliberately marginalized memories/events.

To sum up, it can be argued that in its representation of the past, *Fall on Your Knees* makes use of postmodern and magical realist strategies, as well as of concept of the uncanny. As Baetz points out, the concept of the uncanny, used in a historical context, can—and does in the case of *Fall on Your Knees*—effect a re-covering of marginalized or buried histories. Seen from this point of view, the novel itself contributes to this process of historical recovery by dealing with a particular, regional history marginalized within the Canadian whole, i.e. the history of Cape Breton Island. However, most of the strategies discussed in this section contribute to a postmodern challenge of linear, scientific historiography in general, be it through the metahistorical effect of metafictional strategies, the interaction of Frances and Mercedes, representing oral/written memory respectively, or the interruption of linearity.

That said, it must be noted that towards the end of the novel—starting with the incorporation of Kathleen’s diary—past matters are resolved and the pieces of the puzzle, for the most part, fall into place. The end of the novel, for instance, even gives a hint at who actually tells the story: the last sentence, i.e. “Here dear,” says Lily [to Anthony], “sit down and have a cuppa tea till I tell you about your mother.” (566), establishes a link to the opening sentence of Book 1, i.e. “A long time ago, before you were born [...]” (7). Nonetheless, the alternating degree of insight into the various characters and the immediately shifting focalization make it difficult to uphold the idea that Lily is the narrator of the whole novel. Also, the ‘revelation’ at the end does not influence the readers’ doubt-ridden experience when reading the novel. Nonetheless, *Fall on Your Knees* does offer a very non-postmodern, even—as Coral Ann Howell puts it—“decidedly Gothic ending, where the dead past refuses to stay buried, but now it ushers in the promise of redemption through revelation” (59).

*Fall on Your Knees* can nonetheless be referred to as one of those recent Canadian novel dealing with and questioning singular truth claims made about the past, particularly in its celebration of the idea of bringing things to light that have deliberately been put away. In her criticism, MacDonald makes use of ‘established’ postmodern strategies, but without being overly experimental and, as she puts it herself, without the “postmodern jokes at the end” (MacDonald, qtd. in Howells 59).

## Postcolonial Negotiations

When considering the postcolonial relevance of this historical project, two things have to be considered: first, as mentioned in the theoretical chapter, historical metanarratives are a point of vantage for both, postmodern as well as postcolonial criticism. For this simple reason alone, a closer look at the postcolonial relevance of *Fall on Your Knees* appears inviting, for it has been pointed out that the novel questions historical metanarratives in manifold ways, making use of certain postmodern strategies. Secondly, however, I have also pointed out that the novel is not aggressive in its challenge to Enlightenment historiography, and it does definitely not display revisionist tendencies, as many other postcolonial texts do. Therefore, the following part of this chapter is intended to trace the question if and how far the novel's historical project allows for a postcolonial reading, and how the novel's affiliation with magical realism features in this discussion.

According to Corey Frost, "there are several obvious ways in which the novel takes irreverent aim at the controlling myths of imperialism" (195). Frost mentions as the most obvious of these ways the aforementioned challenge to the *national* Canadian historical metanarrative that describes Cape Breton, in basically a subordinate clause, as

a new-world substitute for Scotland, with strong cultural attachments to tradition and the British Empire, a primitive regional backwater, [...] representing the nation's roots and a foundation of faithful labour in resource-based industry (196-197).

This idea is questioned in the novel because the development of New Waterford, a 'typical' Cape Breton mining town, is depicted as being carried by immigrants from various backgrounds: of the main characters, the only ones Irish or Scottish are James, his father and his mother; around them are Lebanese merchants, German Jewish immigrants and West Indian laborers working in the mines.

Thus criticism is obviously not entirely directed towards an imperial Other, but rather towards the Canadian national imagination itself. Frost sees this tendency to internalize the conflict as a direct result of the particular colonial situation of Canada as a settler-invader culture. In such a situation, resistance can never be entirely directed towards an Other. Frost argues that

because of the colonial settler's dual identifications, with the colonizing mother country and the colony, such resistance must operate partially as a critique of

self, an ambivalent attack from within that subverts the notion of fixed, unequivocal identity. (199)

Such a critique of self is offered in *Fall on Your Knees* on various levels: as mentioned above, it is directed towards the national historical narrative, because it re-negotiates the historical image projected on Cape Breton. Even though the community described in the novel is indeed depicted as a settler community, where the Natives have vanished from sight, the town is presented as a mixture of different, on various levels integrated immigrant communities.

The novel also illustrates what Frost mentions as a second aspect of anti-colonial resistance in Canadian literature, namely that it “is played out in the diverse, ongoing, and recursive struggles for cultural identity [...], the struggle for control of an identity narrative: the struggle for the story” (196). Even though Canada “historically and politically is a postcolonial society” (Frost 196), the nation struggles with its own postcolonial identity, and (neo-)colonialism is subject to ongoing negotiation. This is also vividly displayed in *Fall on Your Knees*: whenever Canada is talked about as a nation in the novel, it is in the form of clichés and/or in a very ironic way, be it when Lily, as she explains on her trip to New York that she is from Canada, gets the reply “Oh yeah? I have a cousin in Vancouver, maybe you know her” (530) or when Mrs Luvovitz, talking about her daughter-in-law, states that “her five grandchildren [...] are only each perfect. They speak French at home, English at school and Yiddish with every second shopkeeper. Real Canadians” (559). Additionally, the sisters in the novel, for instance, never dream of going to metropolitan centers within their own nation, but rather fantasize about the former imperialist centers, as for instance Kathleen, who, in her endeavor to become an opera singer, longs for Paris, Rome or London. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the novel ends in New York, a fact that hints at the ongoing debate about Canada’s neo-imperialist cultural dependency on the USA.

This struggle for a self-defining narrative is not only played out on the level of the collective: it is internalized by each individual character. Throughout the novel, individual identities are contested, denied, negotiated and re-discovered. It could even be argued that for these negotiations, too, the concept of the uncanny can be applied. As Baetz argues, “the liminal and ambivalent space, which in *Fall on Your Knees* is identified by Freud’s uncanny, provides a unique opportunity to negotiate cultural

identity” (77), because—and here he references Homi Bhabha—“the negotiation that takes place in in-between spaces and liminal places defines and shapes cultural identity” (76-77). Leo Taylor, for instance, describes his experience of being in Harlem as being “home and not home” (323); Materia refers to Lebanon, the land where she lived until she was six years old, as a “place better than any on earth, but a place you are nonetheless lucky to have escaped” (87). James sees himself as ‘racially pure’, dictating that his children should only speak English (35); nonetheless, he talks Gaelic, his comfort language and literal mother tongue, to Kathleen. Kathleen, alienated from her mother, denies her mixed heritage (503), just like Rose, who sees and presents herself as ‘purely’ black (510-512).

Interestingly, Baetz mentions Lily and her ability and willingness to communicate with ghosts as a prime example of cultural understanding:

Lily’s responses to liminal spaces and negotiations of identity articulate a model for cultural understanding, a willingness to listen to the ghosts, a willingness to live, occasionally, in-between. (78)

Thus here we have, apart from the potential for the contestation of official historical accounts, a second intersection between the concepts of magical realism and the uncanny. Both qualify as cross-cultural discourses: magical realism textually creates a third space between magic and realism and thus offers the prospective of hybridity and cultural negotiation; the cultural uncanny is “used to describe a condition of vexed belonging or possession; [it] is mapped onto spaces where [cultural] identity [...] is settled and unsettled, confirmed and called into question” (76). In this respect, the concept of the uncanny, as applied here in individual identity negotiations, can also be mapped on the aforementioned negotiations of a collective, Canadian identity. On this level, *Fall on Your Knees* argues for the Canadian nation to accept and converse with its own ghosts and to deal with its own absences, as Lily does in the novel.

Bearing in mind the conceptual similarities of the uncanny and magical realism, it is useful at this point to take a look back at the subversive potential of magical realism that Andrews mentions particularly in a postcolonial context. To begin with, it must be stated that the magical elements in *Fall on Your Knees* are *not* taken from a particular pre-Western cultural sphere; the novel does therefore definitely *not* affiliate with an ontological version of magical realism. Even though the daughters have a mixed heritage, and their mother stems from a non-Western culture, this heritage never clearly

manifests itself, except in the form of Materia's language, which increasingly diminishes as the novel progresses. Instead, the Lebanese heritage rather looms over the family like one of the novel's ghosts. Thus magical realism in *Fall on Your Knees* is definitely not comparable to the 'hot', ontological, or Southern variation of magical realism that is prevalent, for instance, in Latin America. Evidently, an inference on a similar subversive potential in a Canadian and a Latin American context can be disqualified due to the completely different colonial power-relations. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile repeating the second part of Andrews' quotation, in which she points out the similarities between the Canadian and the Latin American cultural and historical situation. She argues that

this alliance between Canada and Latin America also serves *another* purpose: it offers Canadian writers an 'American' model that is not borrowed from the United States, a 'superpower' with its own legacy of domination over Canada. (3, my emphasis)

In *Fall on Your Knees*, I feel that this *other* purpose is the most salient one: the focus of the mode's subversive potential towards an investigation of the nation's ongoing (neo)colonial struggles and negotiations.

It can thus be argued that the most significant postcolonial claim of the novel appears to be that the nation must continuously negotiate its own identity, and direct criticism towards itself in order to shed light on previously buried episodes of its own, colonial—and neo-colonial—history. In this process, the cultural uncanny as well as magical realism can be fruitfully applied as interpretatory frameworks in order to investigate this ongoing process of negotiation of Canada's settler-invader past and identity.

## Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I would like to repeat that I do not consider *Fall on Your Knees* a magical realist text per se. The manifold possibilities to interpret the magical elements make the novel different from what has commonly been regarded as magical realism; however, it does display undeniable affiliations with this mode, which is why a magical realist perspective can indeed prove rewarding. In this specific case, however, one must not neglect the influence of neighboring genres and related interpretatory frameworks. In particular, it has been pointed out that the incorporation of the concept



of the uncanny proves useful in the context of this novel: given that the irreducible elements often point at key aspects of the novel, and given that these irreducible elements in *Fall on Your Knees* can also be read as uncanny elements (e. g. the ghosts), it is tempting to see the most important aspect of the novel in its warning against the burial of “reminders of a forgotten, often violent, past [...]” (Baetz 66).

As a last point, I want to return to Andrews’ proposition that the definition of the concept of magical realism must be reconsidered and adapted in order to provide a rewarding perspective on contemporary Canada. Set in contrast to Canadian novels previously categorized as magical realist, *Fall on Your Knees* seems to draw attention to one particular tendency: the subversive potential is less used to challenge binary colonial relations and is less directed towards the British ‘homeland’, but rather seems to attack and question internal power-relations, thus exploring, first and foremost, Canada’s settler-invader status and history.

## **“Ghosts are not shoes”: *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* and the Fear of not Being Haunted**

It was exceedingly creepy out there if we were no longer haunted. [...] “Maybe we can get new ghosts,” Helen said. “Ghosts are not shoes,” said I, the unnecessary mother.

Margaret Sweatman, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (273)

Margaret Sweatman’s 2002 novel *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* is the most recent and least critically discussed of the novels investigated in this thesis. Apart from several reviews, there is only one published article; but this article by Herb Wyile, entitled “‘It Takes More Than Mortality to Make Somebody Dead’: Spectres of History in Margaret Sweatman’s *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*”, paves the way for the argument I build in the following chapter. Wyile’s examination of the novel includes aspects from various different critical frameworks, all of which have been discussed before in this thesis: the uncanny, (postcolonial) ghosts appearing in a magical realist framework, and the conflation of these aspects within the frame of historical fiction. In the following sections, I intend to incorporate and debate the considerations laid out in this article into my own discussion of the novel, focusing once again on the textual presence of magical realism, the representation of history and its potential postcolonial relevance.

The narrative begins in the late 1860s in the Orkneys, where Alice falls in love with Peter McCormack. They soon have to separate, and the only thing Alice knows about Peter is that he was about to sail for the New World. She decides to follow him and against all odds finds him. Disguised as a man, Alice joins him in the buffalo hunt in southern Manitoba. Peter immediately recognizes her, and a lifelong bond develops between them. When Alice lies down with Peter, a lightning strikes the lovers. They survive, and both know immediately that Alice has become pregnant. Alice, however, continues her disguise, and joins Peter in his fight alongside Louis Riel and the Métis, i.e. people of mixed European and Native parentage. One day, she witnesses the participation of Orangeman Thomas Scott in the brutal beating of a young Métis and thus demonizes Scott. When she gets the chance, she does not hesitate to join the

execution committee ordered to shoot Scott. After the assassination, they continue their revolutionary endeavors, but as the birth of their child approaches, Alice and Peter realize that they need a place to call home. They buy a piece of land from an Indian, who, in return, gives them a piece of paper Peter takes for a contract, but which is, in fact, only the coal drawing of a buffalo. On this piece of land, their child—and the narrator of the story—Blondie, is born. At her birth, the ghost of Thomas Scott turns up and touches the baby child, which leaves a birthmark. From this point onwards, the ghost of Thomas Scott accompanies the family.

At a very young age, Blondie falls in love with Eli, the white, adopted son of Marie, a Métis who has been living on the outskirts of the property that now ‘belongs’ to Alice and Peter. Years pass, and their love develops. But after they sleep together for the first time, Eli is drawn to the wild and leaves. Blondie reacts against her pain by going into seclusion and devises a plan for her own education, focusing “only on what was truly irrelevant” (109). After fifteen years, Eli returns. But when he comes back home, it is Blondie who feels the need to go away in order to escape her intellectual isolation. She dresses up as a man and leaves for Africa with the intention to fight in the Boer Wars. When she returns, Blondie and Eli truly find each other, and when they “lay down together”, it is once again a lightening that brings about conception: nine months after the couple was hit while making love, Blondie gives birth to their daughter Helen. Shortly afterwards, Marie, Eli’s dead mother, returns as a ghost and stays with the family, just like the ghost of Thomas Scott.

Helen becomes the “most beautiful woman the world had ever known” (168). She is fascinated by the lives of the rich, a world she discovers when Blondie starts working for upper class member John Anderson. Eventually, Helen marries John’s son Richard, but is soon bored of her life in a golden cage and leaves her husband to live as a tramp on the rails, dressed up as a man. Occasionally, she returns to the property of her parents, and on one of these visits, she finds the man of whom she once painted a picture without even knowing who he was: the monk Brian. They fall in love and he leaves the monastery for her. And again, when they sleep together, a lightning strikes and Helen conceives Dianna. But Helen is drawn to the outland, and so she enlists for the Spanish Civil War, where she goes missing.

Thus Helen's daughter Dianna grows up without her mother. Dianna trains as a lawyer, but gives up this profession to draw botanical illustration and engage in political protest. Eventually, the pilot Jack, who landed on their property, brings the news of Helen's execution as well as a photo of her just before she died. Jack stays to live with the family. But Helen has promised to return, and death cannot hinder her. She does not return as a specter, but rather comes back in a different form: "Helen became a black moth" (389). From that day onwards, she regularly visits Bill and Dianna. The years pass, and one day, Dianna, who has always been strangely attracted to Jack, lays down with him, and, hit by a lightning, conceives a daughter who she names Helen. When Dianna gives birth, all ghosts are assembled: Thomas Scott, Marie, Alice and Peter.

Like the other two novels under investigation, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* covers a time span of approximately one century. Starting in the late 1860s with Alice and Peter meeting back in Scotland, and ending in 1979 with Blondie's death, the novel thus traces the time from the birth of the Canadian Dominion up to the near present. In this historical narrative, a great number of historical wars and rebellions are addressed, ingrained in the genealogy of the McCormack family. Nonetheless, even though the historical aspect is highly prevalent in the novel, it is just as notable as in the other novels discussed that Sweatman's style is far from realism or historical writing: throughout the novel, there is a multitude of supernatural events written into a realistic frame. In fact, it can even be said that in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, both the historical as well as the magical aspect are more distinctly carved out than in the novels previously discussed.

Nonetheless, I find it rewarding for the sake of commensurability to apply a structure similar to the one outlined in the previous chapters. Putting to use once again the theoretical tools provided in my theoretical chapter, I first take a look at how the magical elements, which are so highly prevalent in the novel, are actually textually encoded. Furthermore, I want to investigate if the textual incorporation of supernatural elements can be interpreted within a magical realist framework. The second step, once again, constitutes an examination of the strategies used to discuss different relations towards the past and, consequently, also investigates the novel's eventual representation of (Canadian) history. In a third and final step, I intend to analyze the findings from a

postcolonial perspective in order to gain insight into the question of how a magical realist framework influences the discussion of the novel's postcolonial project.

### **“One dead, one too young”: the Magical Elements**

Mum threw up her hands. “Honestly, girl!” She poured herself some coffee, offered some to Marie and then said, “Of course not.” And to Helen, “You’re too young.” Cranky, she blew steam, muttering, “One dead, one too young. And one too stupid.”

Margaret Sweatman, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (193)

In a very humorous manner, this snippet of a conversation between Alice, Blondie, Helen and the ghost of Marie illustrates the substantial importance of magical and supernatural occurrences in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*. It also illustrates what Salman Rushdie mentions as the defining feature of magical realism, namely the “commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (Rushdie, qtd. in Bowers 12). In the following sections, I intend to investigate further instances of such commingling in order to test them for their magical realist relevance according to the system of definition given by Faris.

In his article “‘It Takes More Than Mortality to Make Somebody Dead’: Spectres of History in Margaret Sweatman’s *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*”, Herb Wyile stresses the immense importance of the ghosts that inhabit the novel and simultaneously points out that they represent a clear point of intersection with the mode of magical realism. He argues that, particularly in magical realist texts,

ghosts often play an important part in the genre’s melding of a rational, empirical order and a supernatural and/or mythical order. (735)<sup>19</sup>

While Wyile does not go into detail on this aspect, it is interesting to point out that in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, it is indeed the ghosts who are ‘responsible’ for the creation of an atmosphere in which “the supernatural is not simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Faris and Zamora 201). As the

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<sup>19</sup> In this article, Wyile does not discuss terminology or his view on the literary categorization of magical realism – without further explanation, he uses the term ‘magic realism’ and refers to it as a genre.

most prevalent irreducible element in the novel, ghosts conjure up this melding of the supernatural and the ordinary most vividly. Most encounters with ghosts are presented, as the introductory quotation suggests, in a way that does not reveal any kind of doubt on the side of the characters, because the ghosts are fully incorporated within the characters' frame of reality. This is, for instance, also the case when Marie appears for the first time as a ghost – an event that Western readers would probably approach with a rather different frame of mind:

The door opened and Eli walked in, behind him the shadow of my mother-in-law. Her voice, that atonal bone sound, a falling note not unlovely to the ear but changeful, a tone of constant fall. "The baby should not eat bugs," she chimed, "especially when the bugs are freshly dead." I sighed. (174)

Blondie does not hesitate or startle, she is not shocked or horrified; instead, she only sighs over the redundant advice given by her dead mother-in-law. This unchallenged acceptance is also mentioned in Wyile's article, namely as the main aspect that distinguishes magical realist texts from traditional ghost stories. As he puts it, it is the "lack of a sense of the supernatural as an emotionally disturbing, ontologically disruptive force" (737) that sets the one category apart from the other.

However, there are certainly other magical or supernatural occurrences besides the ghosts that may qualify as irreducible elements. These can roughly be grouped in three categories: first, there are various instances of prescience; Secondly, there are spontaneous magical events; and third, there are supernatural qualities. Prescience is omnipresent in the novel and plenty of characters display this ability at one point or another. One of the most notable instances of foresight is Helen's painting: before she decides to leave the golden cage of her marriage, she paints the picture of a man whom she does not know.

"Who is this?" he asked softly. She shook her head. "I don't know." It was the truth. [...] This was a man from the world beyond. They both looked at him, wondering when he would come true." (315)

It is interesting to note that they both unquestioningly believe in Helen's visionary powers, because they do not wonder 'if', but only 'when' he would come true. Later in the novel, it is revealed that the future father of Helen's child, Brian, is the man in the painting. Another character who displays visionary powers is the Cree who 'sells' to Peter the parcel of land tells him that "Your baby will have a long life" (22), which is

undoubtedly true, as Blondie dies at the age of 109. Also, Blondie predicts the First World War at a party in John Anderson's house where she prepares the food: "There's going to be a war," I said" (214). Her mother Alice predicts Hitler's rise before and during the Second World War in a play that she writes for the School for Historical Drama, which she calls the School of Histrionics<sup>20</sup>:

She went to Peter. He was seated in the oak chair. Alice held her scene out to him and he read it. "What's this character's name?" he asked. Alice listened to the muses a moment and then she said, "Hitler." (278)

Additionally, Bill and Dianna have visions induced by the after-life visitations of their mother and wife Helen. In these moments of "seeing Mama" (390), they become witness to historical war atrocities that are just about to take place.

As for the spontaneous magical events, there are again several characters 'afflicted': first of all, and most significantly, there is the recurring event of being hit by a lightning during sex – an event that brings about the conception of a girl in each generation of the McCormack family (6, 167, 358-359, 450). For the sake of illustration, I reference the first description of sexual contact between Helen and Bill:

They were standing, a lightning rod, and just before it struck, they pulled back from a kiss and looked at each other closely, eye to eye, and then, with that leader stroke, leapt in the air still joined, straight up, united; they flew forty feet high, their nuptials in lily white light. (358-359)

A second outstanding event marks Alice's and Peter's recognition that they need a homestead: being pregnant, Alice throws up "things she'd never eaten, food not available in the Red River valley in 1869. Oranges and mango, artichokes and lichee nuts. The future cuisine of the Dominion" (21).

Besides these spontaneous preternatural events, several people also display preternatural abilities. Blondie, for instance, exerts electricity after she has decided to retreat to her studies. Without any given explanation, Blondie explains that

The problem with static electricity grew so acute that I could touch no one, even in summer, for fear of an electric shock of sufficient magnitude to inadvertently erase their memories. (125)

Another preternatural ability has been given to Alice: she can smell people's attitudes

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<sup>20</sup> According to Merriam Webster definitions: "1) theatrical performances 2) deliberate display of emotion for effect." Also: Histrionic Personality Disorder: "a condition characterized by excessive emotionality and attention-seeking" (Long np).

and agendas. Blondie explains that

Alice had a keen sense of smell. About two years earlier, she had sniffed on Peter's urgent body the briny scent of radicalism. [...] Passing me, feigning to hang up her hat, she whispered in my ear, "Sulphur and ash. And hydrocarbons, whatever the hell they are. That man wants to die. What'd you do to him?" (135-136)

This outstanding ability is indeed acknowledged, but in a very matter-of-fact way, as Alice's ability to identify Eli's yearning for death by his smell is simply described as a "keen sense of smell" (135).

To sum up, it can be argued that the ghosts, the idea of conception through electric storms and the supernatural abilities of smell and electricity are the most prevalent irreducible elements in the text. However, this is only a selection of the most pervasive and most important magical occurrences, abilities and events, which serves to stress the fact that the novel is indeed interspersed with supernatural elements. What makes the quoted events and abilities outstanding is the fact that most of them clearly pose key issues that the novel is set out to investigate. And again, it is the ghosts who most palpably hint at these underlying issues. First of all, the ghost of Thomas Scott brings Alice, who was firmly dedicated to a political cause when she killed Scott, to "question the spirit of certainty that compelled her to kill him" (Wyile, "Spectres of History" 745), thus making her, and the reader, think about absolute political certainty and radicalism in general.

At the same time, the appearance of the ghost of Thomas Scott often coincides with other moments of political certainty and revolutionary spirit, as for instance shortly before Riel is hanged, or in 1916, when women are given the right to vote provincially and one of the suffragists claims that "It's the beginning of a brand new future full of peace!" (270). Thus Scott can also be seen as cautionary figure warning against the consequences of unquestioning political certainty and of definite truth claims. This function as a cautionary figure, however, is maybe even more graphically fulfilled by Helen's returning spirit and the visions she induces: visions of political atrocities—irrespective of which ideological camps—"that would surely have caused an aneurysm in the brain of the toughest general" (390).

All these ghosts also represent important historical episodes and their uncanny return. While Scott can be seen as a representation of "the spirit of eastern Protestant



bigotry and triumphalism that fuelled the settlement of the West” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 744), and Helen’s departure and her return as a contribution to the “fictional recovery of the suppressed history of the left in Canada” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 747), it is Marie’s ghost who brings about one of the most significant issues the text deals with, namely the errant claims at the possessions of land in the settlement of the Canadian West. Thus the irreducible elements clearly underscore central topics of the novel; however, since most of these central topics go hand in hand with issues of history, historiography and (post)colonialism, a detailed discussion shall be deferred to the succeeding sections of this chapter.

Apart from the fact that they obviously illustrate the novel’s irreducible elements that underline key aspects of the novel, the selected quotations cited above also illustrate the second characteristic Faris mentions, namely the strong presence of the phenomenal world. Indeed, the tone of description lies within the norms of realism even when it comes to the supernatural phenomena, and, significantly, “the same phenomena that are portrayed as problematic by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist” (Chanady 24). This matter-of-factness and the unconditional admittance of supernatural occurrences are particularly prevalent in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*; as the introductory quotations illustrates, these characteristics sometimes even appear exaggerated for comedic effect. Consequently, due to this unconditional admittance, the narrative stance does indeed at times appear, as Faris points out, naïve and childlike.

The quoted passages also illustrate that the narrator as well as the characters do not display any kind of doubt. The recipients, however, may very well experience a sense of unsettling doubt when reading the novel, which represents Faris’ third characteristic. There are several reasons why the recipients may fall into a state of constant doubt and negotiation: first of all, even though in most cases, there is no doubt about the unquestioning incorporation of supernatural elements into the characters’ reality, there are also situations in which the narrative offers an interpretative framework more suitable for Western readers. For instance when the ghost of Thomas Scott turns up for the first time: only Alice sees him, and she is in labor, which allows for the sighting to be interpreted as only an imagination born in a moment of unbearable pain (51). And even though the existence of the ghost of Thomas Scott is ‘verified’ later through other

characters' interaction with and acceptance of the specter, this alternative interpretative possibility causes hesitation on the side of the readers and makes them reconsider the parameters according to which they should perceive the events presented in the novel. Secondly, the narrative sometimes explicitly plays with these different levels of belief and with different perceptive frameworks and interpretations. For instance when Helen returns home and meets Bill, he is depicted as the "pied piper to cabbage butterflies" (351), because "something occurred that was either a miracle or simply a delight" (350): thousands of cabbage butterflies, usually flying around in groups not larger than half a dozen, ascended into the sky right behind Bill. In this case, the readers are literally instructed by the formulation "either a miracle or simply a delight" to hold on for a moment and estimate the possibility (or probability?) of such a simultaneous ascension of thousands of cabbage butterflies.

As a fourth characteristic in Faris' system of definition, she lists the creation of a hybrid narrative space through the establishment of a narrative voice that comes from two different perspectives at once, the origin of which is sometimes hardly determinable. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, this narrative perspective does indeed merge two different realms, even though it is clearly attributable to a character in the novel: Blondie is the one who tells her story, but she tells it from the grave. As she explains in the prologue:

I am 109 years of age, since the twelfth of the month. Born on a hot day in 1870.  
I would have to admit, I am ancient. And today, which happens to be a Tuesday,  
I am dead as a stick. (2)

This simple fact introduces to the text a notion of fluid boundaries that is thenceforward expanded on various levels: boundaries between the living and the dead, between the magic and the real, between fact and fiction are repeatedly blurred. This narrative set-up enables the voice, as Faris argues, to move "from death to life to writing, from remembering to imagining, blurring boundaries between them" (108).

Faris' fifth and final characteristic is the disruption of received ideas about time, space and identity. While the spatial component does not seem to feature prominently in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, given concepts of time and identity are indeed put to question. First of all, Sweatman's novel is, like the other two texts under investigation, also grounded in an oral frame narrative. However, in this case it is less used to

“foreground the dissonance between romantic past and realistic present” (Omhovère 6), but rather to “[disrupt] the illusion of a recreated past and [to comment] on historiographical and fictional assumptions” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 217). Most importantly, the frame narrative serves to introduce the recipients, as mentioned before, to a realm of blurred boundaries through the presence of a narrative voice telling the story from the grave, thus also interrupting the very basic idea of a chronology from beginning to end, from birth to death. Formally, however, this text does not reveal as many anachronistic tensions as the other novels under investigation do. On the contrary, sections and chapters are often even subtitled with the respective years – and these continually proceed in an ascending order. This means that, apart from minor irregularities, the narrative proceeds completely chronologically.

Nonetheless, there are several factors that contribute to a disruption of received ideas about time. While the frame narrative is written in the present and most of the rest in the past tense, there are, mainly at the end of the fifth and in the sixth part, moments of spontaneous ‘presencing’, where certain episodes are told in the present tense. These moments make the recipients question the linearity proposed by the chronological structure. The most important and most pervasive factor in this context, however, is the use of cyclic structures, as for instance the uncanny re-appearances of the ghosts and the prescient visions of some characters. These disruptive factors bestow the text with an “anachronistic quality that undermines the causality, linearity, and teleology of traditional Western historiography” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 738), a highly conspicuous quality that needs to be discussed in more detail in the following section. Additionally, the very same principle of cyclic repetition also affects received ideas about individual identities, as the characters in the novel are repeatedly faced with recurring qualities or events, as for instance the recurring act of conception through lightning, or the act of dressing up as a man. Thus the characters seem to be endowed with an infinite quality detached from temporality and individuality. They are—as Blondie describes her great granddaughter—“infinitely familiar. And infinitely new” (455).

To conclude this section, it can be said that *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* does indeed reveal striking similarities with the literary mode of magical realism. Most significantly, the irreducible elements are arguably more pervasive and persuasive than

in *Away* and in *Fall on Your Knees*, and some paragraphs from Sweatman's novel—in particular those depicting interactions with ghosts—could be taken as textbook examples for magical realism's "matter-of-fact depiction of magical happenings" (Bowers 18). Furthermore, it has been pointed out in this section that the affiliations with magical realism provide room for further interpretation, particularly with regard to the representation of the past and negotiations of the Canadian national past and identity. In the following, these aspects are discussed at full length.

### **"History was a whiteout": the Representation of History**

History was a whiteout, a tomb full of wig powder and scurf.

Margaret Sweatman, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (125)

At that point in the novel, Blondie talks about her chosen life in intellectual isolation, vowed to irrelevancy (108-109), and about how she retroactively applied the principles she had since pursued to her past life, too. Even though this is not a particularly significant part of the novel, this statement is outstandingly strong and, in itself, provides a stark contrast to the set-up of novel as a historical narrative. Therefore, this vigorous statement can also be seen as a symbol of the challenge that the novel poses to given notions of a linear history written by objective and scientific historiographers. In the following section, I investigate how Sweatman encodes this challenge textually and what form the contestation eventually takes, reconsidering, in the process, the magical realist elements identified in the previous section.

In the discussions of *Away* and *Fall on Your Knees*, I have opened this section with the reconsideration of the three categories of textual strategies commonly applied by Canadian authors of historical fictions during the 1970s and 1980s. In the present discussion, however, I want to concentrate on only one of these three categories, namely the incorporation of mythical structures in a work of historical fiction. I do not want to suggest that Sweatman does not make use of strategies that pertain to the other two categories: while I think that metafictional aspects do not constitute a substantial part of

the novel, Sweatman definitely comments on the orality/literacy debate, but incorporates this discussion in her reworking of the relation between history and myth. Thus it can be said that the mythological resonance that comes with *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* is definitely the most defining aspect when it comes to the representation of the past. As such, this mythical resonance also specifies the form that the novel's challenge to linear historiography most prominently takes: the novel becomes a "mythological epic of a family caught in the violent repetitions of the course of history, encouraging a suspension of traditional historiographical expectations" (Wyile, "Spectres of History" 740).

As partly illustrated in the previous section, Sweatman uses several textual strategies described in the theory chapter that have been identified as aiding the illumination of the history/myth divide. Additionally, however, she makes use of strategies I have previously categorized as comments on the orality/literacy debate, as for instance the oral framework. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, this narrative set-up also contributes to this discussion of myth and history, because, as Wyile puts it, the oral framework aids the attempt at reinstating "myth—as the residual trace of preindustrial, premodern, oral cultures and their knowledge—as a corrective or alternative to history" (187). This attempt at providing such a corrective to history is not only aided through the oral narrative set-up, but also, and maybe most conspicuously, through the figure of Eli. He is introduced to the reader as an illiterate person, but his illiteracy is never presented in a negative light. Blondie explains that

It was apparent he was illiterate the first time we spoke. His ear was too good for a literate man, his memory too clear, and he knew many names for things—the name that told its purpose, its local use; the new colonial name; and sometimes the old Native names. [...] Big bluestem, turkey foot, muskooseeya. (87-88)

At a later moment, when discussing the number of casualties in the Second World War, Eli replies: "Only 37,964 this time?" he said. [...] "Last time, they killed..." He squinted, his memory trained by illiteracy. "62,817" (391). This second quotation clearly illustrates that Sweatman even reverses preconceived ideas regarding the orality/literacy debate. In a world-view dominated by Western rationality, everything literate and written has been considered positive, objective and true, while everything oral and relating to memory has been deemed error-prone, subjective and un-scientific. By referring to Eli's immense mental capability as being "trained by illiteracy",

Sweatman inverts these categories.

Additionally, through his strong affiliation with orality, the character of Eli is linked with premodern attributes. He is often explicitly attributed a mythical quality, as for instance when Blondie states that “Eli has always been ancient” (87). He is, consequently, likened to the cultural heritage of the Natives, as the first of the above quotations serves to illustrate. This positioning may raise questions about the imaginary creation of a Native Other: concerns may be that “the uncertainty non-Natives feel about the justice of our history and our right to occupy the land” may lead to the construction of an “imaginary Indian” (Francis, qtd. in Wyile, “Spectres of History” 742). However, Sweatman complicates this matter by, again, inverting preconceived notions: Eli is, genetically, not Native. He is the white, adopted son of half-Native Marie. How Sweatman explicitly works against preconceived assumption about the Native ‘Other’, can be seen in the following excerpt, in which Marie medicates Alice and Blondie:

Marie cared for my mother that night, and she collected a few drops of my mother’s pee and let it into my ear and cured the ache, and my mother said it must be an Indian cure, and the woman said, no, not Indian, she’d learned it from Baptists in South Dakota. (62)

Here, Sweatman clearly plays with the recipients’ expectations by deliberately building on the construction of the Native as ‘Medicine Man’ or naturopath, and then subverting it. Thus it can be seen that the strategies aiming at the incorporation of the oral within the text also substantially aid the creation of a mythical resonance.

The most outstanding and memorable features of the novel, however, are modeled in a pattern of cyclic recurrence and repetition. First of all, there are the recurring episodes that link not only the different generations of the McCormack family, but also the different historical eras, thus hinting at parallels between them. The two most significant episodes are the act of dressing up as a man in order to participate in a political event from which women would otherwise have been excluded, and the recurring acts of conception during electric storms. The latter events mainly function as links between the individual characters of the family, and may be interpreted as the causes (or effects?) of the next generation’s supernatural abilities, like Alice’s sense of smell, Blondie’s electricity or Helen’s unearthly beauty. The act of cross-dressing, however, clearly serves to point out similarities between different historical eras and

different political systems. As Wyile argues,

Sweatman [...] inserts the McCormack women into (almost) exclusively masculine historical conflicts: Alice, Blondie, and Helen, likewise disguised, participate in the Red River Rebellion, the Boer War, and the Spanish Civil War respectively. (“Spectres of History” 740)

While I do not think that Sweatman intends to point at detailed similarities between the referenced uprisings, I feel that the main idea is to draw attention to overall, iterative structures and, as mentioned before, to the consistently fatal consequences of unquestioning political certainty and definite truth claims.

Another feature modeled after the pattern of cyclic recurrence is the presence of ghosts. As mentioned before, their deliberately timed reappearances fulfill a warning function similar in effect to what has just been described in reference to the various political uprisings. Additionally, some of the spectral occurrences appear to invite for an interpretation according to the theory of the cultural uncanny, which has been mentioned in the discussion of *Fall on Your Knees*. Notions of the uncanny seem to pervade the whole text, echoing Freud’s depiction of it as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud, qtd. in Baetz 67-68). Ultimately, however, it is the ghosts in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* who literally embody this return of the repressed. As Baetz puts it, in reference to *Fall on Your Knees*, the uncanny occurrences bring forth “a family past ignored by the region, a regional past ignored by the nation, and a national past that is dismissed on the world stage” (74-75).

While this function of bringing forth a repressed history may not entirely fit the ghost of Thomas Scott—“who became one of the most important figures in the history of the West, merely by getting himself shot” (Howard, qtd. in Wyile, “Spectres of History” 744)—it certainly applies to the ghost of Marie and the after-life return of Helen’s spirit. While Helen’s return marks the return of the repressed history of the Canadian left (cf. Wyile, “Spectres of History” 747), the ghost of Marie serves “as a reminder of [the McCormack’s] ambivalent ownership of land previously occupied by the Cree and Metis and [dramatizes] the racial and territorial politics of a settler culture” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 741). It must be pointed out that the character of Marie and her incorporation within the McCormack family may be interpreted as an attempt to soothe

the settler's guilt by indigenizing "his or her ancestors, a symbolic manoeuvre to bestow the settler with a legitimizing genealogy" (Wyile, "Spectres of History" 743). Sweatman, however, resists the "urge to deploy [her ghost] to symbolically indigenize the settler" (Wyile, "Spectres of History" 744) and instead manages to bring to mind a repressed Native history through the uncanny return of Marie. Through the gnawing notion that naturally comes with the uncanny, the McCormack family is constantly reminded of the troubled history and unsure status of "[their] property" – a phrase that is put in quotation marks throughout the text ("our property").

Summing up, it can be said that Sweatman provides an impressive investigation of the relationship between history and myth by creating a stark contrast between the two different attitudes towards the past. The novel follows a conspicuously clear, straightforward progression; historical details and events are even more pervasively part of the novel than in the previously analyzed texts. Thus the historical component seems to be very distinctively carved out and the novel's set-up is very much reminiscent of the traditional historical novel. At the same time, however, the mythological component is also extremely pronounced. Therefore, it seems as if Sweatman deliberately accentuated the two opposite ends of a spectrum, in order to make them interact and thus illuminate the broad range between them. On that note, Wyile also points out the subversive potential of this dialogue between history and myth. He states that

While Blondie's tale progresses forward in time and is divided into chronologically ordered, dated sections, her narrative has a cyclical structure and a mythological resonance that further subvert traditional historiography's empirical and epistemological authority. ("Spectres of History" 739)

In this dialogue between history and myth, it is not possible for one side to overrule the other. Consequently, none of the two attitudes towards the past is presented as preferable – a characteristic that is often mentioned as a defining aspect of magical realist texts, too. As I have argued in the discussion of *Away*, many magical realist texts extend the idea of in-betweenness also towards the perception of time. To say it again in the words of Brenda Cooper, "Time itself is hybrid. Magical realist time tries to be neither the linear time of history, nor the circular time of myth" (qtd. in Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* 209).

Thus it can be concluded that in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Sweatman contests the Western perception of a linear history and historiography in a twofold way.



On the one hand, she creates uncannily returning ghosts in order to work against history being masked or ‘whiteouted’. On the other hand, she presents, in a fashion very similar to magical realist texts, an in-between attitude towards the past that sets mythical structures in a dialogue with the linear time of Western historiography: while continuously moving forward, the narrative repeatedly circles back and returns – or, as Sweatman symbolically puts it in the very first line of the novel, “I’m dipping my pen into the Red River, always at the same spot, and like they say, all the time into a different river (1).”

### **“Is he foreign?”: the Portrait of Postcolonialism**

“Who is that fellow?” Richard asked. “He... dropped in.”  
“Is he foreign?” “Aren’t we all?”

Margaret Sweatman, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (412)

In the previous sections, I have analyzed the text’s subversive potential as it contests Western history and historiography. In the following part of this chapter, I take a look at how Sweatman manages to direct the incendiary capacity of the novel to the discussion of national constructions, colonialism, and post-/neo-colonialism as well. In doing so, Sweatman uses strategies that, again, clearly invite a reading along the lines of magical realism and the cultural uncanny. Consequently, I therefore comment on Sweatman’s use of magical realist characteristics in a cultural context and analyze Sweatman’s focus on the troubled status of the Canadian settler-invader identity by pointing out affiliations with the cultural uncanny.

First of all, it is interesting to note that Sweatman pursues a path that well-known, often aggressively postcolonial authors of magical realist texts have taken. Like Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children*, Sweatman also attaches an allegorical quality to her main character, which indispensably links him/her to their country. However, whereas the narrator Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* has been interpreted as “an allegory of the nation of India” (Lee np), Blondie and her life may much rather be seen as an allegory of the region: “given that Blondie’s birth coincides with the founding of Manitoba, her

family chronicle becomes an allegory for the province” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 738). With the establishment of this link between Blondie’s birth and the birth of the province of Manitoba, Sweatman starts her investigation of the ambiguous status of the land and its inhabitants. Blondie herself describes her birth and the birth of Manitoba as follows:

Lengthening days ripe with time for planting, time to plan for my arrival, time to make a province out of squatters’ territory. And it shall (on orders from Ottawa) be called Manitoba, and hereafter no one will remember whether it was, in the language of the Assiniboine, “the lake of the prairies,” or if it was Cree, “the god who speaks.” (47)

This excerpt seems to indicate a binary opposition: the Aboriginal peoples are established as the marginalized and suppressed, while the centre, i.e. Ottawa, is presented as the dominating oppressor. Thus Blondie establishes an clearly defined colonizer/colonized divide. However, once again, Sweatman does not give in to such an easy distinction. If the establishment of Manitoba on the land of the Cree and Assiniboine is harshly criticized here, this criticism also extends to the establishment of the family’s very own homestead on Native land, because the lives of Blondie and the province are analogically linked.

Analogies like this return repeatedly in the novel. While the nation is criticized for its dealing with the Natives, the fact that the very own family homestead is based on a similarly troubled status is omitted, but nonetheless haunts the family. Thus it becomes abundantly clear that the family’s relation with the country on which they have established their homestead is an intrinsically troubled one. In the following excerpts, this troubled relation is clearly expressed, and the different—but analogically linked—situations are brought into relation through the act of fencing. First, Blondie talks about Big Bear and the uprising, accusing once again the Canadian nation of being acting as colonizing oppressors:

But then, the Canadians made the whole country a jail. Fences everywhere. The Indians couldn’t leave their reserves without somebody counting heads, checking up on them. (75)

In an obviously ironic comment, fifteen-year old, pubescent Blondie adds “Just like me, I thought. Just like poor little white me” (75), comparing herself to the Natives because her parents have also started fencing the property:

The place was riddled with fences and gates. Peter thought fences made the land his. A brand on it, his signature. He never lost his anxiety over the false scrip he'd paid for. He was like a sailor who couldn't quite get over the fact that his ship would sail upon so changeable an element as the sea. (79)

The act of fencing, in this case, is a desperate gesture: deep inside Peter knows that, ultimately, the land cannot be owned. This insight fundamentally troubles him, particularly as he discovers that the Cree from whom Peter bought the land has not given him a written title to the land, but rather the “charcoal drawing of a buffalo” (49), “a neat metonym for the historical transaction (and transition) between Native peoples’ nomadic lifestyle and European settlement” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 741).

In a way, the McCormack family homestead thus becomes uncanny. It “is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ *simultaneously*” (Gelder and Jacobs, qtd. in Wyile, “Spectres of History” 742). Additionally, the property’s troubled status becomes nervously repressed, but continues to loom over the family. At one point, Peter again complains about the unfair ways in which Canada deals with the country’s Aboriginal inhabitants, but concludes:

Is there an original owner of such land? This is what comes from settling down, my dad thought sadly, guiltily, his left eye twitching. You become simultaneously self-righteous and hypocritical. (29-30)

And, eventually, what makes Peter’s left eye twitch does indeed come back to haunt the family, namely in the form of Marie’s ghost. She embodies the troubled nature of the family’s homestead, because she had been living on the outskirts of the property that Peter ‘bought’ even before they came there. However, the most important thing to note in this context is how the family deals with this uncanny return: they are not afraid of the ghost, nor do they ignore her, but instead, they accommodate and live with her. As Wyile states, “[w]hen Marie comes back to haunt them, the McCormacks accommodate, rather than suppress, this legacy of uncertain possession” (“Spectres of History” 743).

Judging from the previous remarks, it can be concluded that the critical energies in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* are not exactly directed towards an imperial Other: on the one hand, they are directed towards the Canadian nation; on the other hand, they are also invested in an examination of the colonizing tendencies within the very own

family. As I noted in the discussion of *Fall on Your Knees*, such an “attack from within” (Frost 199) is typical of the quests for self-definition in settler-invader cultures. I feel that this endeavor of negotiating and discussing the intricate and deranging aspects of a settler-invader identity is an immensely important factor in Sweatman’s novel. However, Wyile also points out,

that Sweatman ties these recurring postcolonial questions to a critique of capitalism and to considerations of class conflict that have been much less visible in Canadian literature. (“Spectres of History” 744)

The family’s genealogy reveals allegorical overtones in this context, too, as Sweatman creates a character who clearly represents the capitalist establishment, namely their “very own Orangeman” (296) Richard. While he gains an increasingly bigger share of the property through the credit he grants to Blondie, and which she cannot pay back, the narrative simultaneously portrays

the systematic mapping, containment, and commodification of territory and its appropriation first by the colonizing forces of the new dominion and subsequently by the forces of capitalism. (“Spectres of History” 737)

Or, as Blondie puts it: “they’ll say it in English, call it real estate and swear it has always been so” (47). Thus it becomes clear that, in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, the investigation of colonizing tendencies and uneven power-relations is not restricted to the time of historical colonialism and nation-building, but extends into the present: Sweatman is also concerned with the forces of capitalism, class issues and neo-colonialist developments within the contemporary Canadian nation.

Returning, for a moment, to the ‘attack from within’, it is interesting to point out that, as Suzanne Baker argues, magical realism and postcolonialism are informed by congruent agendas: magical realism “works both within and against the aesthetics of realism”, while postcolonialism “works both within and against the effects of colonialism” (Suzanne Baker qtd. in Wyile 737). Both these endeavors can clearly be traced in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*. Sweatman undoubtedly writes within the norms of realism, creating “a fictional world that resembles the one we live in” (Faris 14), just as she develops her investigation of the nation and its colonial relations from within. On the other hand, she clearly disturbs not only the aesthetic of realism, but also the effects of colonialism, particularly through the presence of ghosts: their uncanny returns disturb the linear narrative of progress that tends to ‘whiteout’ marginalized

histories.

In this context, it must be mentioned again that the ghosts in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* are accommodated and not seen as or something to be afraid of. The categories are, once again, inverted: not the presence of ghosts is seen as fatal, but their absence. In the paragraph just before the introductory quotation of this chapter, Blondie explains:

We stood rigid, fearing the final absence of Thomas Scott. It takes more than mortality to make somebody dead. [...] We were becoming positive and absolute in our ways at home, and no one had considered our martyr of bigotry, our patron saint of Error. His final departure was a double strike against us, a second and perhaps more terrible murder. It could mean an end of a world. (272-273)

This excerpt clearly illustrates that when one is not reminded or aware of one's transgressions, or of things one has tried to repress, the result is stasis and exactly the kind of absolute thinking that the narrative continuously warns from.

All in all, it can be concluded that magical realism is, indeed, not only textually present in the novel, but also offers an undoubtedly fruitful interpretatory framework when it comes to the subversive energies that the narrative directs towards linear history and the forces of colonialism. Due to this considerable relevance of the concept of magical realism, I do want to speculate about the nature of Sweatman's kind of magical realism. As I have stated before, a fundamental distinction has been drawn within the study of magical realism between an ontological and an epistemological version of this literary technique. *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* definitely does not belong to the ontological variation. The novel does not concentrate on one cultural sphere in particular: Sweatman does not intend to explore and represent one particular settler-community's cultural and narrative heritage, and neither does she intend to represent the "indigenous [...] peoples of the region" (Danow, qtd. in Wyile, "Spectres of History" 736). Much rather, she tries to find her own multivocal and critical voice by illuminating the internal power-relations within the family, the Manitoban region and the Canadian nation.

## Of Randomness and Organization

Stéphanie: “Randomness is very difficult to achieve...  
Organization always merges back if you don't pay attention.”

*The Science of Sleep*, Michel Gondry (2006)

In the following section, I count on this supposedly natural persistence of organization over randomness, because the present chapter shall constitute a concise comparison of the results found in the previous chapters. Thus I let organization merge back in discussions of the textual presence of magical realism, the existence of and, as I suggest, symbiosis with a particular kind of historical fiction and the resulting portrayal of (Canadian) history and postcolonial identity. I point at similarities and differences in the authors' uses of Wendy Faris' five defining characteristics of magical realism and illuminate if and to what degree the novels incorporate postmodern historical strategies. Eventually, I analyze how these two factors affect the novels' overall dealing with the Canadian (post)colonial situation.

To proceed chronologically, I start with Faris' five characteristics. In all of the books under investigation, I have identified several irreducible elements. What has soon proven to be the most prominent of these supernatural occurrences is the presence of ghosts. In all three novels, ghosts have been identified as the most pervasive irreducible element. Additionally, in all three novels there are characters who display the ability of prescience. In *Fall on Your Knees* and in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, there are also several events that cannot be rationally explained according to the laws of Western science. And only in Sweatman's novel, some characters also display clearly supernatural abilities.

It has been pointed out previously that the irreducible elements often underline key discussions that the novels engage in. In *Away*, Mary's daemon lover represents a link to her Irish cultural heritage. The transplantation of this ghost into the 'New World', and Mary's unquestioning adherence to him, symbolizes the full immersion in left-behind physical and mental landscapes, which can be seen as one positioning in the difficult process involved in migration and cultural contact. Eileen's visionary powers

and her connection to the Native trickster figure Exodus Crow illustrate another positioning: at least when she is a young girl, Eileen embodies a succeeding stage of cultural contact, where she embraces the stories and realities of both sides. In the third part of the novel, however, where no irreducible element is noticeable anymore, she unlearns this equal respect for both sides and, blinded by political extremism, becomes fully immersed in her romanticized idea of her lost Irish mythologies.

In *Fall on Your Knees*, ghosts as well as supernatural elements are all modeled after the concept of the uncanny. Ghosts represent repressed memories and occurrences: Pete is the personification of James' (repressed) incestuous desire; the ghost of Ambrose represents the results of this desire, i.e. the incestuous child that drowned while Frances tried to baptize him. On the other hand, the supernatural events contribute to the—often symbolic—reconstruction and unveiling of the repressed occurrences: it has been argued that the preternatural conception and birth of Frances' baby, for instance, represents the return of Ambrose, as well as it symbolizes a reconciling recovery of Kathleen's love to Rose.

In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, ghosts point at two key aspects: on the one hand, the ghost of Marie represents the uncanny return of the repressed history of the McCormack family homestead and, analogically, also raises the troubled question of 'ownership' in the region of Manitoba as a whole. On the other hand, the ghost of Thomas Scott as well as Helen's after-life returns point at historical similarities between the different eras, and in doing so, specifically warn against the consequence of absolute political certainty and radicalism. Alice's 'keen sense of smell' has a similar function, as it is always expressed in connection with (political) extremism, which is explicitly mentioned when her sense of smell is talked about for the first time and Blondie states that Alice "had sniffed [...] the briny scent of radicalism" (135).

The next point of comparison is the strong presence of the phenomenal world. This characteristic has, in fact, proven a bit problematic, as it is difficult to define what a strong presence of the phenomenal world actually constitutes. In this thesis, I have taken this to signify the persistence of realistic and sensory description even when it comes to the depiction of supernatural phenomena. Additionally, it is difficult to draw the line between the second and the fourth characteristic, i.e. the merging of different realms: the textual merging of realism and magic is also, like the second characteristic,

expressed by means of the abovementioned persistence of sensory and realistic details in the description of supernatural phenomena. Therefore, I consider the second and the fourth characteristic simultaneously in the following section.

Faris and Chanady argue that the strong presence of the phenomenal world results in a matter-of-fact description of magical happenings. This is definitely the case in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, which may even be seen as a textbook example of such a matter-of-fact description. Additionally, this novel is the only one of the three where the merging of contradictory realms can be interpreted in a different way: due to the fact that Blondie narrates the story from the grave, a notion of fluid boundaries is inscribed in the very structure of the text. Consequently, the boundaries between the living and the dead, between the magic and the real, between fact and fiction are repeatedly blurred.

*Away*, on the other hand, is far from being matter-of-fact. Instead, the whole narration comes with a highly lyrical quality that does not only resonate with the magical phenomena, but extends to the depiction of the phenomenal world. Therefore, ‘real’ events are often attached a spectral quality that makes them appear at least as magical as the actual ‘magical’ events. This is also true for *Fall on Your Knees*: ‘real’ happenings do appear more extraordinary than the actual preternatural occurrences, but the ultimate reason for this phenomenon is very different. The perceived reversal cannot be traced to textual features, but is rather called forth by the nature of the acts themselves, as well as by the reactions of the other characters. Therefore, it may be concluded that even though the narration does not distinguish between magical and non-magical happenings in *Fall on Your Knees* either, the effects of this characteristic are not as carved out as in the other two novels.

Faris’ third characteristic makes for a particularly interesting point of comparison. According to Faris, the unsettling doubts on the side of the readers have a significant effect, namely to make the recipients hesitate and question their own perception as well as the possibility and eligibility of other ways of perception. All three novels definitely call forth such hesitation and reconsideration – but this result is achieved in very different ways. In *Away*, the prime stumbling block for the readers is the fact that the presence of the ghost as well as the appearance of the trickster figure are only experienced by one character respectively. This allows for the possible interpretation



that the magical happenings have only been imaginations reflective of or symbolic for some inner turmoil or mental confusion. And even though the events are almost seamlessly incorporated into the reality of the novel, the presence of this lingering ‘Western’ interpretation can hardly be overlooked.

In *Fall on Your Knees*, the manifestation of this characteristic is particularly interesting. While the characters in the narrative continuously offer interpretations that make the magical occurrence fit into the frame of Christian belief, the narrative itself instructs the reader to interpret ghosts according to the Freudian theories of the uncanny. As I have argued, the explicit adherence of the characters to the first of these possible interpretations, i.e. the incorporation of the events within the Christian reference system, makes the recipients question any kind of unconditional belief in a learned and internalized belief system. This effect, then, would be in keeping with the effect of Faris’ unsettling doubts. However, the possible interpretation according to Freudian theories is so pertinent that it can neither be ignored nor countered, and thus highly influences the recipients’ perception of the novel.

*When Alice Lay Down with Peter* can, once again, be taken as a textbook example. While the readers are sometimes lured in by possible interpretations of events as feverish dreams or exaggerations of the narrator, these are only very brief moments. In the course of the novel, it becomes clear that such interpretations may not hold. There are, for instance, several situations when various characters interact with ghosts. Thus the reader is, at times, instructed to hesitate – but only to consider, question and negotiate various different interpretations of the events. However, even though in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* the unsettling doubts are closest to Faris’ description, the parameters do not fully coincide: the doubts are not called forth because a particular pre-Western perception collides with post-Enlightenment interpretations; instead, it is two generally different, but not culturally or historically defined ways of perception that clash.

Part of the last characteristic that Faris mentions is the most prominent magical realist element in all three novels: the disruption of given ideas about time. While this challenge to linear time and history occasionally results in the questioning of received notions about identity, too, given concepts of space are never explicitly put to discussion. The strategies applied to disrupt the readers’ conception of time, however,

are very prevalent in the novels. They can roughly be grouped into two categories: strategies that are influenced by the concept of the uncanny and those that aid in reinstating a mythical resonance within the text. In *Fall on Your Knees*, for instance, this characteristic is fully realized through the incorporation of uncanny elements mapped onto the representation of time in the novel. In *Away*, the disruption of linear historical progression is mainly achieved through the incorporation of mythical structures that provide a counterpoint to Western linear history. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, both concepts can be found: there is a strong mythical resonance, while the notion of the uncanny that comes with the recurring presence of the ghosts also represents, as Baetz puts it, “a well-suited strategy for cultural resistance, one that disturbs colonial authority and negotiates the possibility of a pluralized history” (73).

In addition to these five characteristics defined by Faris, there is another textual aspect that I have perceived as highly prevalent in all three novels: there are innumerable scenes that come with such an imaginative quality that you can virtually see them realized in a mental cinema. To point out only one of these instances, I quote a passage from the first part of *Away*:

Almost as if she [Mary] were hoping to be fetched, standing as she did on the sand, her skirts hitched up to reveal long white legs, her red hair blowing towards the sky. (18)

In highly visual scenes like this, the particular atmosphere may, on the one hand, be called forth by the very detailed and sensory description that all of the three authors share. But, on the other hand, the inflationary use of particular figures of speech may also contribute to the creation of this atmosphere. Notably, the number of personifications and similes is striking.

Especially the similes also contribute to what Faris describes as the presence of the phenomenal world and the merging of different realms: they are, at times, extremely far-fetched and implausible, but, nonetheless, highly imaginative and visual. Particularly in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, there are many such far-fetched similes and comparisons, as for instance “Winter, blue as an egg” (286), or “they clung together through a snowstorm of seeds, an explosion of gunpowder, a cluster of hot stars kindled between them” (451). The second quotation describes the moment when Dianna conceives her daughter Helen. Lightning has just hit the couple, so the possibility cannot be ruled out that the ‘hot stars’ actually refer to electrical sparks and

that there actually was gunpowder that exploded. Therefore, it is often hard for the recipients to recognize if they are actually reading about magical occurrences or of it is just another very visual and far-fetched figure of speech. In all three novels, this is not an occasional matter, but rather an atmosphere that is created throughout the whole texts.

Next I would like to discuss the question if these novels are representative of a particular kind of historical fiction and how the elements of magical realism influence the representation of history. The characters in all of the texts are involved with particular instances of Canadian history. In *Away*, there is the Irish potato disease which triggered waves of immigration, the settlement of the Canadian East, and the event of the murder of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. *Fall on you knees* portrays the Piper family's history as connected with the First World War, several Cape Breton miners' strikes, and the alcohol business during prohibition. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, the most prevalent historical process is the settlement of the Canadian West and the establishment of the province of Manitoba, but the narrative particularly concentrates on a variety of revolutionary uprisings that were part of this process. Other important international historical events, to which the McCormack family is connected, are the Boer Wars in Africa, the sinking of the Titanic, and the Second World War.

The historical processes and events are incorporated in very different ways and to varying degrees. In *Away*, the various historical processes push the narrative and the characters forward, and there is only one member of the family who actually takes part in a historical event, i.e. Eileen, who, in the novel, virtually enables the assassination of D'Arcy McGee. In *Fall on Your Knees*, it can be argued that it is one particular character that establishes the direct connections to actual historical events: James, as a miner, is affected by the miners' strikes; to outsmart his 'demon', he enlists in the First World War; and during prohibition, he earns his money as a bootlegger. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, the historical component appears to be even stronger than in the other novels: each character, and thus each generation, is directly involved in a significant historical event. Alice participates in the Red River Rebellion, Blondie in the Boer Wars, and Helen in the Spanish Civil War. Dianna is the only one who never

becomes involved in an actual uprising or war, but she participates in the political protests of the 1960s.

In spite of these differences, all of these novels are clearly historical fictions. Nonetheless, all of them also contribute to a questioning of given ideas about time and linear history, as the discussion of Faris' fifth characteristic has shown. All three novels do, in one way or another work with an oral frame narrative that is temporally set apart from the rest of the story. Furthermore, all of them also feature characters endowed with the gift of prescience, which disturbs the perception of history as a fixed, linear progression. In *Away*, multivocality—or rather multifocality—and the establishment of Eileen as a oral figure have been identified as additional strategies that aid in disturbing the idea of Western historiography as an objective science. In *Fall on Your Knees*, MacDonald also, to a lesser degree than Urquhart, writes notions of multivocality into the novel through her particular way of narrating, which makes it hard to ultimately attribute the individual perspectives to the characters within the text. She also establishes an oral/written dichotomy, represented by the characters of Frances and Mercedes respectively, so that the debate is performed within the fictional universe. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Sweatman also counts on the capacity of oral memory to provide an alternative to official, written historical accounts by sketching Eli as an oral figure.

However, the most important and most prevalent strategies used in this context have already been mentioned in the discussion of Faris' fifth characteristic. In *Fall on Your Knees*, it is the concept of the uncanny that provides elements of anachronism that disrupt linear chronologies; in *Away*, patterns of mythical reoccurrence and cyclic structures are set in discourse with post-Enlightenment linear progression, thus playing with the magical realist idea of hybrid time; and *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* combines both the concept uncanny and the incorporation of mythical structures.

With regard to the question of how discussions of Canadian (post)colonialism are influenced by the historical and magical realist strategies, I want to take a closer look at the different kinds of 'ghosting' in the novels. This is particularly rewarding in this context because, as Cynthia Sugars argues, a key function of the figure of a ghost can be the expression of "the sense in which one can be both rooted here and yet exist as a kind

of foreigner (the very core of the settler-invader dilemma)” (4). This notion is particularly relevant in discussions of haunting in *Away* and *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, even though the ultimate focus is not the same.

In *Away*, Urquhart discusses the difficulty of retaining one’s cultural heritage in the process of migration without getting completely immersed in the left-behind mythologies. In doing so, she also thematizes the difficulty of transplanting one’s own ghosts in a ‘New World’ that already has its own, ancient ghosts, which the settler may simply not be able to perceive. Thus the ghost in *Away* represents the ‘original’ Irish cultural heritage, and, consequently, the difficult processes of (misled) transition and transculturation. Urquhart clearly sets her focus on the cultural heritage of one group of settlers, and consequently traces the process and difficulties of transplanting this cultural heritage into a new context/country. However, the portrait is not as aggressively and overtly postcolonial as in other magical realist texts, which is mainly due to the novel’s universal overtones: while the main focus may be on the Irish cultural narrative heritage, it has been pointed out that Urquhart also includes investigations of and negotiations with other kinds of cultural narrative heritage, as for instance Native and Christian mythology. Therefore, this ‘comparison of mythologies’ in a way goes beyond the postcolonial project and hints at a more universal idea: likening the various cultural narrative backgrounds, the universal importance of storying is stressed.

In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, the discussion is less concerned with cultural transition. Rather, Sweatman investigates the identity crises called forth by the family’s awareness of the alleged ‘illegitimateness’ of the very basis of their existence. And through the analogical set-up of the novel, this investigation of identity crises extends to the level of the Manitoban region and the Canadian nation. Thus the ghosts in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, and in particular the ghost of Marie, allude to another kind of troubled in-between existence that is irrespective of cultural heritage. It is not even a question of rootedness: the McCormacks undoubtedly feel rooted on their homestead, which has always been the central piece for the family. They feel at home, but at the same time, they are always reminded of the troubled status of the land and its ambiguous state of ‘ownership’.

In *Fall of your knees*, the ghosts do not thematize the conflicts intrinsic of settler-invader cultures in such an obvious way. They are all modeled after the principle of the

uncanny, just like the ghost of Marie in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*. But they are not attached an analogical quality; instead, they induce an investigation of personal and individual identity crises. Nonetheless, I argue that these individual negotiations of identity, most of which are, as stated in the respective chapter, concerned with vexed belonging, do reflect upon the state of the collective: due to the fact that the whole novel can be seen as structured according to the pattern of the uncanny, because it uncovers a regional history neglected in the Canadian national imagination, an investigation of the self-defining narrative is also induced on the level of the collective. *Fall on Your Knees* thus presents an ‘attack from within’ and ultimately argues for the Canadian nation to accept its own absences and repressed memories. In doing so, MacDonald does not focus on one particular cultural or ethnical group either: even though the Piper family is of mixed, British-Canadian-Lebanese descent, *Fall on Your Knees* rather thematizes issues of vexed belonging on a more general level.

Another aspect that is interesting to discuss in this context is the distinction between epistemological or ontological magical realism. Commonly, the northern hemisphere has been critically aligned with the epistemological, i.e. scholarly, version of magical realism, and the southern hemisphere with the ‘hot’, ontological variation. Particularly in a Canadian context, however, such a distinction is necessarily difficult to draw. Arguably, an ontological version of magical realism in Canada would have to be based in Native belief and folklore. How, then, can a non-Native author express his/her ‘ontological’ perspective on magical realism without being vulnerable to criticism for appropriating the Native voice? In order to create an ontologically magical realist text that would express the nation’s/region’s culture, what cultural practices, myths and beliefs can the author base his novel on? Or, more generally, how can ontological magical realism exist in a settler-invader culture? These are questions that obviously have to be raised in this context due to the “increasing use of magic realism by non-Aboriginal writers” (Wyile, “Spectres of History” 736) in settler-invader cultures like Canada.

*Away* is the only one of the three novels that reveals clear traces of ontological magical realism: the magic is mainly based in Irish mythology, i.e. the cultural sphere of the characters as well as of the author. But, as mentioned before, this cultural sphere is not the only source for magic in the novel, which is why Urquhart’s variant of magical

realism seems to significantly differ from other ontologically magical realist texts. Instead, it reflects on the particular colonial power-relations in Canada. It is, on the one hand, a celebration of one of Canada's migrant communities; on the other hand, the 'comparison of mythologies' in the novel also illustrates that a singular approach would be insufficient in this settler-invader situation.

The magical elements in *Fall on Your Knees* are not taken from a particular pre-Western cultural sphere, which means that the novel does not affiliate with an ontological version of magical realism. Even though the daughters do have a mixed heritage, and their mother stems from a non-Western culture, this heritage never clearly manifests. Instead, the Lebanese heritage rather looms over the family like one of the novel's ghosts. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Sweatman does not intend to explore and represent one particular settler community's cultural and narrative heritage either. There is a fairly strong presence of Native characters in the novel, but it has been illustrated before that it is not her intention to give a voice to the indigenous peoples.

In this chapter, I have offered a comparison of the novels with regard to the aspects that are most relevant to an investigation of the hypotheses that I have formulated in the introductory chapter. In the last chapter, I want to analyze, comment on and interpret the provided results in order to arrive at a final conclusion.

## Attempt at a Conclusion

Charlie: "Truth is for suckers, Johnny Boy."

*Being John Malkovich*, Spike Jonze (1999)

Even though Charlie (Charlie Sheen) has put it quite bluntly in *Being John Malkovich*, the basic notion that comes with this statement can indeed set the mind for this last part of this thesis. For one, the concept of magical realism has always been highly contested. Perspectives and standpoints within the field have always been manifold, varied and sometimes even contradictory. It has been pointed out several times that the seminal scholars of the field cannot even agree on a unified terminology. Clearly, there is not even a faintly unified or ultimately true conception of magical realism – and, according to some critics, this would not even be a desirable goal<sup>21</sup>.

Also, it has become clear by now that Canadian historical fiction of the 1990s and 2000s hails to multivocality and condemns the notion of a singular perspectives on the past, thus contesting in every way possible the idea of an ultimate truth. To conclude, the very concept of such an essential truth is a highly inapt and implausible one in a discussion of magical realism and historical fiction, and in that sense, this chapter is intended to only add one to the many existing perspectives.

First of all, I want to discuss the question if, and if yes how and to what ends the mode of magical realism is applied in these texts. *Away* clearly provides textual evidence that aligns the novel with the mode of magical realism as Faris defines it, even though there may be some 'points deducted' due to the fact that the irreducible elements may not be as 'convincing' as in other magical realist texts and because *Away* is not in any way matter-of-fact. In the case of *Fall of your knees*, it is immensely difficult to argue that the novel adheres to the conventions of magical realism. All the characteristics that Faris describes are not very distinctly carved out in MacDonald's novel, and especially the presence of Freud and the lingering psychological interpretation make it difficult to argue for the novel to be considered magical realist.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Stephen Slemon, the use of the unstable and hardly definable concept of magical realism can "signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems" (18).



However, I am of the opinion that a magical realist perspective provides a rewarding addition to the critical repertoire, because even though the characteristics may not be as distinct, the basic parameters are nonetheless there. *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, on the other hand, reveals the most striking similarities with the literary mode of magical realism. Magical elements are significantly more prevalent on a textual level than in the other two novels under investigation; *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* even provides, as I argued above, textbook examples of some of the defining features of magical realism, as for instance the matter-of-fact description of magical events or the doubts on the side of the readers.

The next question is if these novels are representative of a particular kind of historical fiction and how the elements of magical realism influence the representation of history. Generally, the novels roughly adhere to the tradition of the historical novel, which means that they are formally far from being experimental; there are, as MacDonald puts it, no “postmodern jokes” (MacDonald, qtd. in Howells 59). Nonetheless, the challenge to history and historiography is definitely a quintessential theme in all three novels, but it is not radically pushed to the fore. The texts are by no means radically revisionist, or, to go one step further, it can even be said that they are not radical in any way or form. Therefore, it is safe to say that even though Urquhart, MacDonald and Sweatman do write in the tradition of the their colleagues of the 1970s and 1980s, the focus has somewhat shifted, and even though they do resort to some of their predecessors’ strategies and key areas of discussion, their flirt with postmodern sensibilities is much subtler, if at all detectable. Therefore, I would argue that these novels are certainly part of a trend in contemporary Canadian historical fiction.

With regard to the effect of the magical realist elements on the representation of history, it must be pointed out again that there seems to be a clear point of intersection between the two concepts. The strategies mentioned in the discussion of Faris’ fifth characteristic of magical realism also provide the subversive energies that aid the novels’ critical historical project. The overall historical project in *Away* is to play with the conception of a hybrid magical realist time as situated somewhere between pre-Western, mythical and post-Enlightenment linear history. In *Fall on Your Knees*, the historical project is fundamentally based on the concept of the uncanny and thus breaks up given conceptions of time and history by means of the uncontrollable anachronism

that the uncanny calls forth. And, to cut it short, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* can be described as incorporating both these strategies, calling forth both of the described effects. Additionally, it has been argued that the sheer presence of the irreducible elements and magical realism's characteristic merging of contradictory realms contribute to a challenge of Western scientificity and rationality on a more general level. Therefore, the alliance between historical fiction and magical realism does indeed appear to have the potential for a functional literary symbiosis.

The final question that has to be addressed in this context is whether this symbiosis really provides a rewarding discourse for the investigation of Canada's (post)colonial status. The three novels are definitely not as subversive as other aggressively postcolonial texts, like Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, but I still think that manage to provide an apt framework for the investigation of Canada's (post)colonial situation. They connect the critical energies of contemporary historical fiction and magical realism in order to challenge historiography in general, and the Canadian historical narrative in particular. And this investigation of Canadian history goes hand in hand with an intense investigation of Canada's particular situation as a settler-invader culture.

In this context, I want to follow up on the discussion started in the context of the comparison of irreducible elements: it has been illustrated that the presence of ghosts hints at central issues in the text, and these central issues all deal with Canada's status as a settler-invader culture. *Away* discusses processes of migration and cultural contact by the concrete example of Irish culture transplanted to Canada. In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Sweatman explicitly addresses, by means of her ghosts, the intricate question of 'original ownership' in settler-invader cultures and how this question fundamentally troubles the settlers. In *Fall on Your Knees*, on the other hand, the uncanny returns of the ghosts raise questions about individual identity crises anchored in conflicts of vexed belonging that can be mapped onto the collective of the Canadian nation.

All in all, it can be concluded that the three novels under investigation do, to varying degrees, incorporate magical realist elements. However, I would refrain from referring to any of them as a magical realist texts per se; instead, I would identify them as belonging to that strand of contemporary historical fictions defined above, constituting, again to varying degrees, symbiotic relations with the literary mode of magical realism.

And it is especially due of the seamless incorporation of ghosts into the reality of the novel that Urquhart, McDonald and Sweatman are able to work on, and set in relation, three different fronts: ghosts allow for an incorporation of the concept of magical realism; they aid, in various ways, in the challenge to given ideas about history and historiography; and, eventually, they encode various defining debates about the intricate (post)colonial situation of Canada as a settler-invader culture.

At the very end, I would like to pick up again Jennifer Andrews appeal to critics to look in more detail at the development of magical realism in a Canadian context. I feel that the analyses of *Away*, *Fall on Your Knees* and *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* do suggest a tendency: first of all, there is a mutual interrelation, or symbiosis, between the concepts behind this recent strand of English Canadian historical fiction and magical realism. Secondly, it has been pointed out that this symbiosis results in an intense questioning of Canada as a settler-invader culture. This is a key factor that differentiates these texts from the ‘traditional’, ontological, Latin American magical realists texts: there is no colonial dichotomy, where the magic solely grows out of an indigenous, pre-Western cultural sphere and is ‘written back’ into one narrative space of Western realism. Instead, the concept is altered, coupled with other modes and thus adapted in such a way that it provides the means to investigate intensively the nature of the Canadian situation as a settler-invader culture.

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## Index

- Bakhtin, Mikhail, 25  
*Being John Malkovich*, 3, 96  
 Bhabha, Homi, 26, 71  
*Big Fish*, 3  
 Bontempelli, Massimo 17  
 Bowering, George, 9, 27, 28  
*Brother of Sleep*, 3
- Cape Breton, 51, 53, 66, 69, 70  
 capitalism, 93  
 Carpentier, Alejo, 17, 18, 24  
 Christianity, 61, 62
- D'Arcy McGee, Thomas, 30, 39, 45
- Eliade, Mircea, 14
- Faris, Wendy B., 20  
   disruption of received ideas about time and identity, 22, 36, 83, 84  
   irreducible element, 20, 21, 31, 34, 35, 36, 38, 44, 57, 59, 63, 73, 79, 81, 82, 85  
   merging of contradictory realms, 21, 24, 59  
   strong presence of the phenomenal world, 20, 35, 59, 82  
   unsettling doubt, 21, 32, 82  
 Findley, Timothy, 9, 10  
 Flores, Angel, 17, 18  
 Freud, Sigmund, 46, 62, 63, 64, 71, 88
- Garcia Marquez, Gabriel, 18, 19, 22, 24  
   *100 Years of Solitude*, 3, 19, 22  
 genealogy, 3, 68, 77, 89, 93
- Hutcheon, Linda, 9-13, 16, 28, 40-68  
   historiographic metafiction, 4, 6, 10, 15, 16, 28  
 hybrid, 21, 22, 24, 29, 43, 49, 50, 83, 89  
 hybridity, 26, 45, 72
- in-between, 21, 25, 29, 36, 43, 64, 71, 72, 90  
 Irish mythology, 41, 46, 49
- Kogawa, Joy, 9, 10
- magic realism, 6, 16-18, 26-28, 51, 54, 56, 65, 94  
 magical realism  
   as a genre, 19, 27, 78  
   as a literary mode, 6, 16, 19, 24, 27  
   as a literary technique, 4  
   as a postcolonial discourse, 4, 26  
   epistemological, 24, 49, 89, 94  
   mythic, 24  
   ontological, 24, 49, 72, 73, 94  
   scholarly, 24, 49  
 Manitoba, 75, 91  
 marvelous real, the, 6, 16, 17, 18, 24  
 metafictional, 10, 11, 14, 39, 40, 44, 66, 69, 86  
 metahistorical, 11, 14, 44, 66, 69
- Native mythology, 42, 49  
 neo-colonial, 73, 90
- Ontario, 30, 98, 99  
 orality, 10, 12-14, 39-40, 66-67, 69, 84, 86, 87
- postcolonial, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 23, 26, 27, 28, 31, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 56, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 77, 93  
 postcolonialism, 5, 9, 29, 43, 45, 48, 50, 90, 93
- Riel, Louis, 75, 81  
 Roh, Franz, 16, 17, 18, 36  
 Rushdie, Salman, 19, 23, 27, 78, 90
- Science of Sleep*, 3  
 Scott, Thomas, 75, 76, 77, 81, 82, 83, 88, 94  
 settler-invader culture, 28, 45, 47, 48, 49, 70, 73, 74, 90, 93, 94, 95  
 Slemon, Stephen, 4, 26, 27, 28
- The Perfume*, 3
- Uncanny*, the, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 71, 72, 73, 75, 84, 88, 90, 92, 94  
 Uslar-Pietri, Arturo, 17, 18
- Vautier, Marie, 9, 10, 14, 27, 49  
   *New World Myth*, 9, 14, 41
- White, Hayden, 10, 11, 12  
 Wiebe, Rudy, 9, 10, 13  
 World War I, 54, 66, 80  
 World War II, 17, 80, 86

## Summary in German

Die literarische Technik des magischen Realismus gewinnt von Seiten der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften immer mehr an Aufmerksamkeit. Lange wurde diese Technik aufgrund bekannter Romane wie *100 Jahre Einsamkeit* von Gabriel Garcia Marquez als lateinamerikanisches Phänomen beschrieben; seit einiger Zeit gilt magischer Realismus allerdings als internationaler Trend. Vor allem im Bereich der Postkolonialismus-Studien wird dem magischen Realismus ein immer größerer Stellenwert zugeschrieben, da sich das Konzept als postkolonialer Diskurs anbietet.

Diese Diplomarbeit analysiert drei kanadische Romane, die sich kritisch mit nationaler Geschichte beschäftigen, aber dennoch magische Elemente beinhalten: *Away* von Jane Urquhart (1993), *Fall on Your Knees* von Ann-Marie MacDonald (1996) und *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* von Margaret Sweatman (2001). Die inhaltliche und formale Analyse der Romane konzentriert sich auf drei wesentliche Aspekte: es wird untersucht, ob und zu welchem Grad die literarische Technik des magischen Realismus verwendet wird; wie die Verwendung dieser Technik die Repräsentation kanadischer Geschichte beeinflusst; und, schlussendlich, ob und wie sich in diesem Kontext das Konzept des magischen Realismus als postkolonialer Diskurs an die kanadische Situation anpassen lässt.

Natürlich stellt die Analyse dreier Romane nur eine Auswahl dar, von der man schwer auf einen Trend schließen kann. Dennoch lässt sich sagen, dass sich zumindest in diesen drei Romanen eine Symbiose zwischen kritischer Geschichtshinterfragung und magischem Realismus abzeichnet. Das Resultat dieser Symbiose ist in allen drei Fällen die intensive Untersuchung der speziellen Form kolonialer Entwicklungen („settler-invader“ Kultur), auf der die kanadische Nation aufbaut.

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