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MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: MAGIC REALISM IN AMY TAN'S *THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES*

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In the days when grandma's (or grandpa's) story-telling was our TV, magic was a daily ingredient of our lives. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Gabriel García Márquez or Angela Carter acknowledge this childhood experience as a major influence not only in their work but also in their approach to reality. There exists, therefore, a hybrid literary tradition that builds on that challenging approach: «marvellous realism» or «magic realism.»[1] In magic realism what is usually considered incredible and fantastic becomes acceptable, commonplace and normal. In the meantime, the logic-based system of beliefs that governs our «rational world» is totally disrupted.

Among Asian American narrative books it was Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) the first one to consciously stray from the realistic discursive model and thus open the way for a more protean and dialogic conception both of reality and of art. In «White Tigers» and especially in the section entitled «Shaman» Maxine Hong Kingston consciously indulges in the magic realistic mode. Amy Tan's third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), constitutes another example of magic realism. It is my aim here to trace this literary mode in *The Hundred Secret Senses* and analyse the implications and reasons behind its use.

The Hundred Secret Senses depicts Californian yuppie Olivia's coming to terms with her Chinese heritage, embodied in the narrative by the intruding presence of her half-sister from China, Kwan. The novel conjures up the magic of Kwan's Yin Eyes as well as a whole array of ghosts who frighten Olivia's childhood and permanently haunt both the Chinese and the American sisters. *The Hundred Secret*

1. Some authors even prefer the label «realismo mágico maravilloso».

Senses is far from complying with the traditional conventions of realistic prose, because, even though the main plot follows a discernible chronological order that sets it apart from the parallel plot of the Yin world, both threads get entangled and fused at the end of the novel. It is obvious that many episodes narrated in the book go beyond a narrow, logical and «scientific» understanding of reality and seem incredible to Western «numb souls» such as Olivia's. The narration even reaches territories that lie beyond the necessary suspension of disbelief that readers activate when engaged in the reading of fiction. Most chapters contain at least a few, and, more commonly, a whole plethora of elements and incidents that could be termed non-real, «a-scientific» or, at least, incredible.

Amy Tan had very few precedents in the Asian American literary tradition –with the aforementioned exception of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*– that could give her «ancestral help» in the interweaving of magic and reality. However, this paradoxical coexistence was by no means new in other so-called ethnic literatures and had been the most widespread literary mode in Latin American literature in the 60s and 70s. However scarce the examples of Asian American magic realism may have been at the time, this is the literary mode that the novel is most indebted to and, therefore, I will argue for an understanding of Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* from the standpoint of a magic-realistic tradition, a tradition that has finally re-emerged from oblivion, both in fiction and in literary criticism, after its unfair post-*boom* ostracism.

Until very recently, it was unusual to come across critical assessments of twentieth century American literature which conceded that some novels by US writers actually partake of the magic realist trend pervasive in Latin American literature from the end of the Second World War.[2] It is true that some monographs on the subject, such as the one carried out by the Centre d'Étude des Avant-Gardes Littéraires de l'Université de Bruxelles included only four «national literatures» (those of Germany, Netherlands, Italy and the Hispanic countries), in a purportedly comprehensive study of magic realism. However, they admitted that this literary trend is also present, albeit «à l'état latent, embryonnaire» in other countries «oú l'on a souvent recours à des périphrases pour le circonscrire.» (21)[3]

But not recording an event does not necessarily mean it does not exist. We encounter, for instance, a clear way of bypassing the label of «magic realism» in Alan Wilde's critical term «mid-fiction». Susan Sniader Lanser defines Wilde's concept as a set of narrative strategies or techniques used to avoid «the extremes of «naive» realism and antimimetic experimentalism by attempting to create from a

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2. I have tried in other essays to prove extensively why this is not true of such a relevant contemporary novelist as Toni Morrison, even though she disavows any trace of magic realism in her authorial approach, and to exemplify magic realism in *The Woman Warrior*. There, I attributed this neglect or reluctance to admit such influence to the univocal relationship that readers and critics alike made between magic realism and Latin American or «Third World» literatures.

3. Magic realism also exists «in a latent and embryonic state/stage» in regions «where people resort to periphrases in order to «dodge» and avoid that term» (my own translation, as all subsequent translations from Spanish and French).

«world that is itself as 'text', ontologically contingent and problematic,» with provisional «enclaves of value in the face of –but not in place of– a meaningless universe» (Lanser 127). Wilde's «mid-fiction» opposes both a realism that has fallen prey to a «resentfully cynical acquiescence to things 'as they are' and, so it is implied, must be,» and the postmodern deconstructive works, steeped in experimentalism, which provide «emblems of a world hardly less narrow and restricted» (Lanser 127). Just as magic realism does, «mid-fiction» argues instead for a new literature «of redefinition and creation, ... an imaginative reinterpretation of the place human beings hold, or may hold in the world» (Lanser 127). This type of writing is especially useful and meaningful for disenfranchized and marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic communities, as well as for «bicultural» writers (Lanser 128).

English critic and writer David Lodge also insists on this special pertinence of magic realism for authors who need to convey their liminal and/or traumatic experiences. Lodge is the first British critic to affirm in a widely known book, *The Art of Fiction*, the potentially universal scope of «magic realism», although he concedes that this literary mode has been most commonly encountered in Latin America (114). Lodge lists writers such as Milan Kundera, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter and Jeannette Winterson, who, in his opinion, share experiences that have deeply marked their personal and collective lives and that «they feel cannot be adequately represented in a discourse of undisturbed realism» (114). As for reasons for the apparent scarcity of practitioners of this mode in English, Lodge attributes it to the absence of especially traumatic historical events among Anglo-Saxon writers. Nevertheless, at least two main groups dismantle this hypothesis, as Lodge himself acknowledges: ethnic minorities and women. The latter find in typically magic-realistic strategies the adequate narrative tools to un-fix and problematize the gender construct.

Even though magic realism lies in the perspective and narrative techniques that the writer chooses for her work, more so than in the actual reality described or imagined, we must not forget that some cultural communities seem to be more amenable than others to that literary mode, due to their very disconcerting nature. Canonical writers of this movement, such as Cortázar and García Márquez, maintain this is the case of Latin American reality, which seems «so fantastic [in the sense of fantasy] that their stories [seem] to them literally «realist», especially since they speak from a continent where «reality» was surrealist well before the namesake literary movement appeared in Europe. And that thanks to [the] coexistence of Reason and Myth.» (Ricci 39)[4]

Much in the same way, the multicultural nature of the United States is a privileged source of diversity and hybridity. In the Chinese American, Afro-American, Hispanic American and Native American traditions, the primitive, animistic beliefs

4. «La realidad [es] tan fantástica que sus cuentos les [parecen] literalmente «realistas», hablando de un continente donde la «realidad» fue surrealista mucho antes de que en Europa surgiera el movimiento literario del mismo nombre. Y ello gracias a [la] convivencia de Razón y Mito».

(that originated in ancient China,[5] Africa, and the Amerindian cultures respectively) and the Western scientific positivism have blended into an original new approach to reality. In a 1996 interview Maxine Hong Kingston intimates how writers like herself, Leslie Marmon Silko or Toni Morrison have included in some of their works a reality very much like the one we encounter in Latin American magic realism, since in all these cultures «there are cultural layers-the Mayan, Aztec and Inca deep past, the European and Catholic recent past, and the modern. Americans writing with a mythic Chinese background or mythic African background naturally write a kind of magical realism.» (Simal 1997b, 168)[6]

Moreover, many canonical writers expand American paradigmatic realism with excursions into the realm of the mysterious. Thus, the allegorical and magical elements that are typical of Latin American magic realism are not exclusive of it, but are present «in the American grain»: in «the fantastic» that prominently features in Poe's short stories, and in Hawthorne's and Melville's allegorical and symbolic traditions of the romance and novel.

However, magic realism does more than incorporate fantastic or supernatural elements. In including and embracing the illogical and incredible as ordinary, magic realism problematizes both the fantastic mode and the realistic one. Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* constitutes, I argue, an example of magic realism not so much because it introduces supernatural phenomena, but because, ultimately, magic is experienced as part of the characters' (especially Kwan's) everyday life. Their perceptions of reality, from the reader's perspective, are wrapped up in an intriguing and mesmerising atmosphere, whereas for those characters immersed in such magic life the supernatural is taken for granted. Magic realism, according to its main theorists, does not function in an antinomic framework that opposes realism (the truthful/veridical) to its fantastic foil (the supernatural). Instead, that cultural and literary mode goes beyond this antithesis, blending in its «magic reality» of the strange and untoward both the realistic and the magic conceptions of life and art.[7] In communities such as the Afro-American one, according to Toni Morrison, this cultural *mestizaje* makes possible the coexistence of an analytic, scientific type of human knowledge together with a *sapiential,* holistic or synthetic one, one that includes elements that the more scientific type would discard as mere imaginings and

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5. This is not to say that the cultures of these peoples were in any sense inferior, but, especially in Africa and Native (Indian) America, they managed to keep transcendent beliefs and a sense of the magic and surrealistic that the Western civilisation rejected in the name of Reason/Logos.

6. It could also be argued, however, that this equation Chinese/magic responds to an oversimplification fuelled by centuries of Orientalism. However, simplistic as this identification is, it seems to work in Olivia's mind, and it is her own perspective that structures the novel and unconsciously makes her adopt a narrative mode over another.

7. Here I am echoing Anderson Imbert's thesis that «[b]etween the dissolution of reality (magic) and the imitation of it (realism), magic realism is «astounded» [...]. The new eyes discover that [...] the world is, if not marvellous, at least deeply disturbing» (19). The original text reads: «Entre la disolución de la realidad (magia) y la copia de la realidad (realismo), el Realismo Maravilloso se asombra [...]. Visto con ojos nuevos [...] el mundo es, si no maravilloso, al menos perturbador».

superstitions. Toni Morrison describes this last mode as a cosmology she felt when growing up, «a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting [...]. And also it was part and parcel of this extraordinary language.» (Gates 414)[8] In many Native American literary works, but also in the artistic output of other «ethnic» minorities, we can easily apply Ricci's appreciation that «the sacred aspect of cosmos harmonically coexists with everyday life, and symbols are alive,» (120)[9] that is, ancient traditions and Western positivism merge in an new, hybrid conception of life and reality. For these collectives even the traditional understanding of literature and the orthodox literary genres are not useful any more, since the Eurocentric canon favours «models of continuous chronology and cause-and-effect relations [which] are utterly inadequate to the task of narrating the[ir] history» (Hutcheon 53).

The Hundred Secret Senses is one such example of the magic-realistic dismantling of the «transparent schema of the realistic discourse» (Ricci 183). Several taxonomic frontiers disappear, not only that between «documentable fact» and «mere imagining,» which gradually fades away, but also that between what is abstract, infinite, and spiritual and the concrete, finite, and material, what is animate and what is inanimate, life and death, subject and object, the self and the other. There is a clear breach of «consequentiality» and time constraints, and we can also see other magic-realistic linguistic and thematic characteristics.

In Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* the conventional dichotomy fiction vs reality, which itself works within a fictive text, does not hold any more, thus complying with Lodge's tentative definition of magic realism since in the novel «marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative» (Lodge 114). What we could consider incredible, magic, surreal stories spring up from Kwan's everyday life and they soon envelope Olivia's too. Like Olivia, the reader starts wondering what is true and what a product of our personal and collective imagination. Reality and fantasy, history and fiction swap places, and the dividing line gets more and more blurred until it eventually vanishes, so that many magic elements are accepted as possible. The novel goes beyond the conventional distinction between history and fiction, what Hayden White denominates «discourse of the real» and «discourse of desire» (qtd. in Ordóñez 20).

Olivia's Chinese half-sister Kwan fills little Olivia's head with stories. At that time she not only believes Kwan's words, but is also able to see those yin people that her older sister talks about. Western society, however, does not accept Kwan's rich imagination as willingly as little Olivia, but considers Kwan insane and confines her to a mental asylum. One day, when playing with a doll, a ghost girl appears to Olivia

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8. See Simal 1997a for a more documented explanation of Morrison's understanding of *sapiential* knowledge, followed by an analysis of magic realism in *Song of Solomon*.

9. «El aspecto sagrado del cosmos convive armónicamente con la realidad cotidiana y los símbolos son símbolos vivos».

and starts playing with the toy until Olivia, «worried that she'd take the Barbie home with her,» snatches it from the ghost's hands. However, the doll's feather boa is missing:

> I couldn't believe that a ghost could take something real and make it disappear. I hunted all week for that feather boa, combing through every drawer, pocket, and corner. I never found it. I decided that the girl ghost really had stolen it.
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> Now I think of more logical explanations. Maybe [the dog] took it and buried it in the backyard. Or my mom sucked it up into the vacuum cleaner. It was probably something like that. But when I was a kid, I didn't have strong enough boundaries between imagination and reality. Kwan saw what she believed. I saw what I didn't want to believe. (50-1)

Eventually we realize this magic world is only accessible to a child's eyes, and as soon as Olivia reaches adolescence she loses the ability to accept Kwan's stories «as literal truth: chopped-off hands flying out of a roofless house, my father floating on the China Sea, the little baby sucking on his mother's heart...» (14).

Like Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, who searches plastic food and concrete as a means of exorcising her mother's Chinese ghosts, Olivia finds modern Western appliances soothing, and a simple shower brings her back to normality, to «what is real and routine, confined to the ordinary senses I could trust» (108). Therefore, when adult, Olivia is apparently successful at keeping those mysteries that the hundred secret senses had unearthed at bay or at least subdued. Even the strange noises she hears in her new house eventually have a «rational» explanation: «For all this time, I had been driven nearly crazy with thoughts of ghosts - one in particular, even though I would have been the last to admit so. But I'm relieved to know what caused the sounds. Living alone edges my imagination toward danger» (151).

But to Kwan herself, dreams and visions go on being as real as the food she eats. Dream-life in the Chinese tradition, as Robert Hegel maintains in «An Exploration of the Chinese Literary Self», is much more relevant than in most Western cultures. In the traditional Chinese culture, the individual self is understood as divisible and simultaneous, and people's identity is closely related to the world of dreams, so that these are considered as real as «waking adventures» (Hegel 15; see also VanSpanckeren 45): «For most of my childhood, I thought everyone remembered dreams as other lives, other selves. Kwan did... When I went to college and could finally escape from Kwan's world, it was already too late. She had planted her imagination into mine. Her ghosts refused to be evicted from my dreams» (28; see 49, 50). This confusion between life as dreamed and waking life haunts not only frightened Olivia, but also Kwan herself, who at times admits her bafflement: «Look at these fingers and hands. Sometimes even I believe they have always been mine. The body I thought I once had, maybe that was a dream I confused with waking life» (257). Just as Maxine listened to Brave Orchid, a born storyteller, until voice and dream blended with no perceptible seams, little Olivia listens to her sister's strange

stories until she falls asleep, never knowing «at what point in her story» she does so, thus wondering «which part was her dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect?» (29).

Just as in Márquez's or Cortázar's works, logic and realistic conditions seem to govern Kwan's strange world: for instance, Simon's dead girlfriend's ghost, Elza, being Polish-Jewish is not easy to contact, because, as Kwan explains, there are «so many dead Polish-Jewish. Many dead Chinese people too, but I have many connection for Chinese –this yin person know that yin person, easier for me to find if Chinese» (99). She also distinguishes between superstition and «real» Yin stories, for instance, the legend that accounts for the name of a peak near Changmian called Young Girl's Wish, featuring a slave girl who escapes to meet her lover and they both turn into a phoenix and fly away, is «just superstition», according to Kwan (194). However, she believes an equally incredible story about the name of the peak: its boulders are all stupid girls who wanted to fly, fell instead and turned into stone (194). Even the story about how Changmian was devastated and became cursed follows its own internal logic even though the premises are beyond verisimilitude:

> People say that when the Manchu soldiers came, they heard people crying in the caves. 'Come out!' they ordered. No one did –would you? So the soldiers gathered dried twigs and dead bushes, then placed them near the mouths of those caves. When the fire started, the voices in the caves began to scream. All at once, the caves breathed a huge groan, then vomited a black river of bats. The sky was thick with the flying creatures, so many it was as though the ravine had been darkened by an umbrella. They fanned the fire, and then the whole valley burst into flame. (339)

This free, «a-historical» use of myth and legendary material is, according to Gabriela Bautista Gutiérrez, one of the main features of magic realism (38). These fantastic events belong to a world of their own, with its own logic, a logic so similar to our rational, «scientific» one that it cajoles us into thinking they are perfectly possible.

When Olivia travels to China, she tries to maintain her Western scepticism about magic reality, as when she explains Kwan's «chatting away» with her dead Auntie, Big Ma, as some psychological means of seeking relief: that way Kwan is «distracted from grief by her memories of a make-believe past» (213). However, the risk to let oneself be engulfed in that magic atmosphere is so considerable in the strange Chinese surroundings that Olivia's husband, Simon, has to warn her wife about these perils: «You realize this is Kwan's wish for a photo, not Big Ma's [...]. Just checking, now that we're in China. A lot of weird stuff has already happened, and it's only the second day» (230). However, Olivia accepts unawares some of these magic elements, not only Big Ma's last wish, expressed when already dead (243), but also her reincarnation, especially when Olivia doubts whether Kwan is her real sister or just her own spirit inhabiting a stranger's body: «Did a terrible trauma in childhood cause her to believe she had switched bodies with someone else? Even if we aren't genetically related, isn't she still my sister?» (258).

Olivia's voice dominates the narrative and only through her mediation do we «listen to» Kwan's. Therefore, the fact that Olivia gradually comes to accept Kwan's version of reality is reflected in the narrative shift in the novel. From an uncomplicated realistic mode dotted with «fantastic stories,» little by little we encounter a narrative strategy that very much reminds us of Cortázar's or Rulfo's magic realism. Thus, while at the beginning of the novel the Chinese/magic and the American/realistic episodes belong to different sequences within the same chapter –the Chinese stories appearing as Kwan's flashbacks–, these episodes end up merging in the last chapters:

> I gaze at the mountains and realize why Changmian seems so familiar. It's the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams. There they are: the archways, the cassia trees, the high walls of the Ghost Merchant's House, the hills leading to Thistle Mountain. And being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed. (205)

Likewise, whereas at the beginning of the novel Olivia's life and Kwan's seem to work under the conditions of analytic/scientific and synthetic/*sapiential* knowledge respectively, they coalesce, almost with no transition, once Olivia travels to China. Hence the two physical enclaves of the novel embody both models of knowledge, but once you cross the border and enter «magic China,» physically or spiritually, you cannot go back to your former «scientific» self. The real and the imaginary merge to the point that this convergence survives its transplantation to America, as it had happened in the case of the young Kwan and as it happens in the case of the adult Olivia at the end of the novel.

The turning point, the moment when Olivia begins accepting Kwan's magic world closes the sixteenth chapter. Kwan tells Olivia Du Lili's sad story, and we learn about Du Lili's adopted daughter's death and how her sorrow was so deep she had to believe she had become her own daughter in order to assuage the pain caused by her loss. At this point Olivia's confusion reaches its height:

> I stare at Kwan. I stare at Big Ma. I think about what Du Lili has said. Who and what am I supposed to believe? All the possibilities whirl through my brain, and I feel I am in one of those dreams where the threads of logic between sentences keep disintegrating. Maybe Du Lili is younger than Kwan. Maybe she's seventy-eight. Maybe Big Ma's ghost is here. Maybe she isn't. All these things are true and false, yin and yang. What does it matter? (246)

And even though she resists these doubts, Olivia cannot go back to her former complacent certainty: «it isn't in [Kwan's] nature to lie. [...] Then again, if I believe what she says, does that mean I now believe she has yin eyes? Do I believe that she talks to Big Ma, that there actually is a cave with a Stone Age village inside? That Miss Banner, General Cape, and One-half Johnson were real people?» (320). Finally

dreams become real, what was glimpsed as some imagined life really took place in the past and Olivia recognizes that she remembers her former self: «Yes, Kwan, of course I remember. I was Miss Banner...» (321; see 324-5). Of course some «scientific», «real» evidence of the existence of a Yin world and of reincarnation has also helped Olivia in this epiphany: «And then the oddity of this strikes me, that we're no longer talking about a bedtime story of ghosts. Here is the music box, here are the things that supposedly belonged to them. I can barely speak. "This was Miss Banner's music box?"» (317).[10]

For the narrator, the mature Olivia, magic reality is very much like love: for all her scientific explanations of the process, there remains something mysteriously inaccessible and extremely mesmerising. It is not a coincidence that her opening up her mind to different modes of knowledge occurs at the same time as her realisation of the nature of love, which she eventually sees as «a trick on the brain, the adrenal glands releasing endorphins,» flooding «the cells that transmit worry and better sense», so that they lie in «biochemical bliss» (279). However, there is something more powerful than mere chemistry: «You can know all these things about love, yet it remains irresistible, as beguiling as the floating arms of long sleep» (279).

Another feature of magic realism is the neutralisation of the traditional Western antinomy between what is considered abstract, infinite, and spiritual as opposed to what is concrete, finite and material, as well as the distinction between the categories of «animate» and «inanimate,» life and death. Robert Hegel describes how in traditional Chinese culture a «spiritual» and a «material» self coexist, which allows both people and fictional characters to «function on two planes of existence simultaneously» (Hegel 15). Ghosts pervade Kwan's world, and her experience at the mental hospital makes this presence all the more dangerous and traumatic:

> All that electricity loosened my tongue so I could no longer stay silent as a fish. I became a country duck, crying *gwa-gwa-gwa!* –bragging about the World of Yin. Then four bad ghosts shouted, «How can you tell our secrets? They gave me a *yin-yang tou* –forced me to tear out half my hair. [...] The ghosts branded me for having two faces: one loyal, one traitor. (16)

Moreover Kwan is not the only one to believe in fantastic creatures or spirits. Many other inhabitants of the village of Changmian and other parts of China perceive these ghosts as real: «Local people told Lao Lu, «Don't live there. It's haunted by fox-spirits» (39).

As to the opposition between life and death, the existence of a channel of communication between the «two worlds» is never questioned, especially by Kwan, who mentions her dying experience several times: «The day we died, Miss Banner and I were laughing and crying, saying we should have eaten more eggs. [...] The last

10. See the discovery of the buried jar with blackened duck eggs in p. 355.

time I saw Zeng before he became Georgie, that was ... ah, yes, the day before I died» (185, 213). Dead people talk to privileged living persons such as Nunumu/Kwan: Zeng - when dead - appears and warns her (224-5); Kwan sees Big Ma's yin self and knows her Auntie is dead, which does not prevent Kwan from talking to her all night nor Big Ma from asking for her photograph to be taken, even though she's dead (207, 209, 213-30). Therefore Kwan, and, to a lesser extent the writer herself, acts as a sort of «medium» or «ghost-talker» (254): she mediates between the community of the living and the transempirical reality thanks to the heritage handed down through oral tradition.[11]

The ghost figure not only links life and death, but, in many other cases, it also merges two or more identities, hence betraying another feature of magic realism, the conflation of self and other, subject and object. The individual melts into the others or merges with Nature. The love-making scene is just one example of this fusion (284), but the most transparent way of effecting this blending in the narrative is the conflation of the listener (imaginary viewer) and the object of (visual and aural) attention in reincarnation: Kwan (Pancake) and Buncake exchange bodies and/or become one (252-7). When Pancake-Buncake is finally brought to the old ghost-talker, she diagnoses:

> «There's a ghost inside this girl. [...] The girl who lived in this body before doesn't want to come back. And the girl who lives in it now can't leave until she finds her». That's when I saw her. Buncake, staring at me from a window across the room. I pointed to her and shouted, «Look! There she is!» And when I saw her pointing back at me, her puckered mouth saying my words, I realized I was looking at my own reflection. (255)

Kwan remembers her former avatar, a Hakka maid who herself feels the Ghost Bandit Maiden inside (79). Kwan's system of ghosts and reincarnation not only merges several individuals into just one being but it ultimately hints at an all-encompassing human spirit (see 143-5). Even the two sisters, usually so dissimilar to most people, bear this connecting thread: «In spite of all our obvious differences, Kwan thinks she and I are exactly alike. As she sees it, we're connected by a cosmic Chinese umbilical cord that's given us the same inborn traits, personal motives, fate, and luck» (21). Dead Elza is equally alive for Simon and he can feel that powerful human link: «She's there. Because, you see, we were connected, really connected, in every way. It wasn't just physical, that was the least of it. It was like well...» (92). Another instance of this redeeming union is the identification of Du Lili and her dead adopted daughter (246). We also witness the coupling of the past and present avatars: Olivia and Miss Banner, Kwan and Nunumu, Georgie and Zeng, Simon and Yiban (338).

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11. See Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (p. 296) where the writer resorts to this very metaphor.

This easy conflation of selves into a collective human spirit is reflected in Arnold Krupat's critical theory which argues for a synecdochic conception of self, most commonly found in communities such as the Native American one or, in our case, the traditional Chinese peasant village. Krupat contends that, in opposition to the typical Western understanding of self, whose most adequate trope would be «metonymy» and its one-to-one conception of autobiography, communities such as the Native American peoples have kept a synechdochic sense of self that shows in their autobiographical writings. This conception would favor the communal «we» over the individualistic «I», who would only have relevance insofar as it stands for the community or talks in behalf of its people. Off-the-beaten-track Changmian epitomizes this communal understanding of self: everyone feels connected to and affected by what everybody else in the village does, at least until a beehive of tourists threaten its peace and its traditions at the end of the novel. In Kwan's and Nunumu's Changmian, ghosts are part of the community, the connection between the living and the living, and the living and the dead is felt as real, as the survival of a prestigious ghost-talker, even after the various political upheavals, confirms.[12]

When I listed some of the most typical «magic realistic» elements I mentioned the breach of the usual «consequentiality» of narration: instead of being linear and extensive, time is conceived and perceived as circular and intensive. In the reincarnation pendulum, the novel's temporal framework oscillates between past and future. *The Hundred Secret Senses* includes numerous flashbacks (to 1864, to dreams, to childhood, to college life...). Past and present go hand in hand on many occasions, especially in Kwan's voice, which leaps to the time of the Taiping rebellion in China and then jumps back to the present. The past often appears deeply linked to the present and future, sometimes through a character, such as Olivia/Miss Banner or Kwan/Nunumu. Time also stretches, or else it becomes dense and condensed so that a moment can embrace a whole eternity: «Of course, I can't say exactly how long ago this happened. Time is not the same between one lifetime and the next» (29). Our Western measurements of time are not valid for yin people either, who prefer to be guided by natural elements like the moon: «Kwan said that people in the World of Yin were very bad about making appointments because nobody used a calendar or a clock anymore. The best method was to watch the moon. That was why so many strange things happened when the moon was at its brightest» (103). Even Olivia comes to acknowledge this same atemporality: «Calendars don't measure time for me anymore. Kwan's birthday was six months ago, a lifetime ago» (132).

The main mythemes and the characters also bear witness to the magic dimension of the novel. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan is the bearer of

12. «It was just a name, Third Auntie what you call a woman when you should not say the word «ghost-talker». In her youth, she had become famous all around the countryside as a ghost talker. When she was middle-aged, a Christian missionary redeemed her and she gave up talking to ghosts, all except the Holy Ghost. When she was old, the People's Liberation Army reformed her, and she gave up the Holy Ghost. And when she grew very old, she no longer remembered whether she was redeemed or reformed. She was finally old enough to forget all she had been told to be» (254-5).

sapiential knowledge, she can easily diagnose spiritual and physical ailments (122), guess what someone on the phone is doing (25), and even perform some kind of exorcism (105-7). Olivia tries to escape ghosts and the mystery surrounding *sapiential* knowledge, just as Maxine does in *The Woman Warrior*, but here it is the Chinese sister instead of the Chinese mother who represents that non-Western knowledge:

> No one in our family talks about Kwan's unusual abilities. That would call attention to what we already know, that Kwan is wacky, even by Chinese standards-even by San Francisco standards. [...] Every once in a while, I wonder how things might have been between Kwan and me if she'd been more normal. Then again who's to say what's normal. [...] Maybe there's a place in the world where everyone has a sister with yin eyes. (19)

The mytheme that entitles the novel refers to a secret language that conveys magic: it is Chinese for little Olivia, since Kwan used to «segue from just about any topic to the tragedies of her former life, all of which she conveyed to me in our secret language of Chinese» (12; see 141, 159), while it becomes yin heart-talk soon, when Kwan explains the hundred secret senses to her sister. This language of ghosts which is really, if we believe Kwan, a «language of love» consists in trying to communicate «with mind and heart together, use hundred secret sense.» (102)[13] This quintessential form of human communication has been superseded by more sophisticated but also more treacherous means in waking life: «Secret sense not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. [...] Memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come together, then you know something true in you heart. [...] You use you secret sense, sometimes can get message back and forth fast between two people living, dead, doesn't matter, same sense» (102). The underlying message is that ordinary words can lie, whereas the language of the hundred secret senses is beyond lying. Likewise, while the accuracy of analytic knowledge is too limited to convey complex truths, the synthetic knowledge which the hundred secret senses communicate is richer and thus closer to the truth.

For some critics and writers like Toni Morrison magic realism is an evasive label «a way of not talking about [her books'] politics» (Gates 414). Magic realism, however, is far from being escapist (although it can be read that way), but reflects a

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13. Here it is relevant to read Zhao Tingyang's demand for a «philosophy of reciprocal knowledge» and for an epistemology that instead of trying to reach the Other through logic and a dialogue between different minds, as in classical Western philosophy, strives to approach and embrace the Other through an understanding of the Other heart. This theory has been elaborated by using the Chinese concept of «gi», represented in an ideogram that depicts a field and a heart, meaning «mind upon heart» or «to think is to think in the field of heart».

deeply revolutionary attitude, not only at the more formal, linguistic and structural levels, but also in the sense that it inaugurates a counter-culture mode of resistance. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, does not hesitate to argue that in Salman Rushdie's and García Márquez's works «narrative representation –story-telling– is a historical and a political act» (51).

In «Marvellous Realism: The Way out of Négritude», Michael Dash insists in the need for a spiritual rebirth in the postcolonial peoples and communities. Although Dash is actually addressing his ideas to the Caribbean countries that have been colonized by France, his conclusions also apply to «internal colonies» within the United States. Writers in marginalized communities in both contexts have to go beyond the necessary and «desperate protest against the ironies of history,» their artistic vision needs to get over the tragic past and focus instead on «the complex process of survival which the autochthonous as well as the transplanted cultures in the New World underwent» (199-200). In this process, writers often resort to

> myths, legends and superstitions of the folk in order to isolate traces of a complex culture of survival which was the response of the dominated to the oppressors. That is to say that colonization and slavery did not make things of men, but in their own way the enslaved peoples might have in their own imagination so reordered their reality as to reach beyond the tangible and concrete to acquire a new re-creative sensibility which could aid in the harsh battle for survival. The only thing they could possess (and which could not be tampered with) was their imagination and this became the source of their struggle against the cruelty of their condition. (200)

This is not an invitation to escape reality by recreating a fantastic world nor do we have to accept reality as monolithic, with no gaps or mysteries, but we must explore these cracks in reality instead. There we may glimpse a more comprehensive truth than that we reach through our five senses. The hundred secret senses penetrate Anderson Imbert's «disturbing» world, Kwan's yin world, and discover in that liminal space «[b]etween life and death, ... [the] place where one can balance the impossible» (341), a different kind of Truth.[14] Jim Barnes maintains Art is the privileged means to get at this Truth:

> It is in this combination of fact and lie that Truth stands. If it means something to you, if it affects you, it is a certain truth. If it makes you see, if it makes you realize, if it makes you grow, then it is somehow true. [...] For me, then, only fiction (only lie) is the greatest of all truths. In all honesty, I can say I

14. See Anzaldúa's Introduction to *Making Faces, Making Souls/Haciendo Caras*, where she praises the empowering beauty of liminal works of art and the strategic importance of «dwelling in the cracks». See her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she develops this theory.

> have never learned anything about the world and its importance by reading a newspaper, that bastion of daily fact. But believe me, *I learn*, I learn, today when I read and reread Momaday, Ellison and our other good ethnic or other wise contemporaries. (96-7)

Ricci agrees that imagination can be an empowering element that contributes to the transformation of reality, because magic realism can channel our spiritual growth towards a personal *and* collective conscience which is both more mature and more deeply committed to change the readers' perception of reality, with the ultimate goal of transforming history (192). In subverting the realist, empiricist epistemology, Tan's book engages in critique of and resistance to domination, resignation and despair. Hope, instead, leads to the possibility of and wish for change and revolution: «I now believe truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future. I believe hope can surprise you. It can survive the odds against it, all sorts of contradictions, and certainly any skeptic's rationale of relying on proof through fact» (357). Olivia has learnt the lesson, as we have seen, and has abandoned the monolithic, sceptical «rationale» that inhibited hope and action in her. When first assaulted by threatening doubts, Olivia had remained passive before the quandary of the strange events in Changmian: «I'm not Chinese like Kwan. To me, yin isn't yang, and yang isn't yin. I can't accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth» (247). However, at the close of the book Olivia has changed so much that «there is room for paradoxes» in her mind now, as she «embraces» contradictions and «up-holds» Hope: «I lift my baby into my arms. And we dance, joy spilling from sorrow» (358).

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