



2021

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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Nathaly M. (2021) "Story and Subalternity: The Solitude of Colombia," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 119.

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Story and Subalternity: The Solitude of Colombia

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Abstract

Stories and oral tradition have long been important to Colombian culture. It is through storytelling that the subaltern is allowed to speak and allowed to process the collective trauma of colonialism. In the establishing of an assumed reality as part of social capital, the invisibility of Colombia is further exacerbated through not being able to see oneself in the world brought about by the colonizer when the realism of magical realism is delegitimized. This is further complicated with the subaltern speaking through a voice that is not their own, but rather one imposed upon them through centuries of colonization. I listened to the stories told by an indigenous Colombian woman after the decision to not use Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "100 Years of Solitude" to have a primary recounting of the oral traditions modern magical realism is based on. This served to further the understanding of how colonialism has shaped the self-identity and overall culture of Colombia. Further research is necessary on uncovering these stories and the decolonization of reality, however these findings are good to continue the search into the depths of colonialism's impact in Colombia.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Colonialism, Colombia, Magical Realism, Oral Tradition

The Subaltern as the Subhuman

Deprived of a palatable identity, the subaltern as a conscious subject is forever unknown to us.

-Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

So what is this subaltern you speak of? The subaltern is that which remains. It is a category of 'invisible' dealing with former colonies, places where a power, typically European, once held dominion. It was a term popularized by Gayatri Spivak to talk about the subjugation experienced by the people in her native India with regards to the practice of sati and the perception of such practices by a Eurocentric lens.

In talking about subalternity, there appears to be a sort of connection between the state of being subhuman and belonging to a colonized people. In his research on Algerian men, the acclaimed French psychiatrist, Antoine Porot, wrote in his "Manuel alphabétique" that the Algerian Muslim man was "inferior mentally and physically" with a "deformed cerebral cortex" similar to "that of a monkey".

These ideas persist in much subtler ways to this day in the form of not giving the subaltern recognition when he speaks, of ignoring his accomplishments, of only recognizing something as having value when the dominant power decides it has value.

How Can the Subaltern Speak?

When confronted with the question of subalternity and invisibility, the voice of the subaltern, condemned to mutism according to Spivak, becomes diluted and entangled through the stories the colonizer tells. In the genre of magical realism, it is easy to dismiss the ideas of

flying men and lingering butterflies as mere fantasy, the imaginings of poor, underdeveloped “indians” uneducated in the finer arts of telling a realistic story. I believe that when we limit this scope, it is easy to miss out on the realism part. Stories and oral tradition have long been important to Colombia and Colombian culture, and perhaps it is through this storytelling that the subaltern is allowed to speak and thus allowed to process the collective trauma of colonialism.

So, what do you want to know? He had on a very large hat and one day found he could no longer speak. A woman had stolen his shadow.

-Mariela Grajales, “Conversations”

The Magical in the Ordinary

For about as long as I can remember, the magical was the mundane. It was normal to listen to my grandmother speak about ghosts that came back to the world of the living because they'd been lonely in the afterlife, about women on horseback riding through enchanted lagoons where even the slightest sound would make the water disappear before your very eyes. These images built the foundation of how I experienced my reality.

Colombia is the country most associated with magical realism, the odd child thought to be straddling the lines of realism and the fantastical. If magical realism had a spokesman, it would be Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the man responsible for writing "100 Years of Solitude" and Colombia's first Nobel prize winner. In his Nobel Prize speech, Gabriel Garcia Marquez mentions the solitude of Latin America, the land that is both old and new, the land regarded as a dangerous vacation by some, the land where insects had gold carapaces and birds had five wings(Pigafetta, p. 81). It's curious how in all the fantastic things he sees it's never once

considered that Pigafetta's work falls under the category of magical realism. For the most part, it's understood that what Pigafetta was seeing were things he'd never experienced before so the journal is a way for him to understand the world around him. Sound familiar? We never gave Pigafetta the doubt, for a time his journal could have been considered pure fact, there were indeed birds with five wings and whatnot because he had control over what reality was at the time as part of the dominant culture and he relates his findings back to others of that same dominant culture yet when those in the outgroup do it, we call it fictional and reduce it to being a mere approximation about what could only be true in fairy tales.

Perhaps this solitude, this ignoring of Colombia, this relegation of being just another cocaine-infected country is a form of establishing Colombia to a state of subalternity, of sub-humanity. In Colombia, reality and myth are conflated because there is no myth, only metaphor.

The Dangers of Metaphor

According to Hofstede, in Colombia "The preferred communication style is context-rich, so public speeches and written documents are usually extensive and elaborate." In honing in on these speech patterns, it would be interesting to see just how true this observation holds across the introduction of the Spanish language and to compare it to the indigenous languages spoken throughout Colombia. This could serve a host of interpretations such as in the struggle ensuing after your language is taken from you what's the first thing you do? Do you try to find words in the new, unnatural, alien language to try to describe what happened to you? Do you try to keep words and phrases from the old language? What new things and methods of expression change with the new language? Are some concepts easier to express in one

language than the other? For the purposes of this project, I will use the words 'magic' and 'magical' to refer to this kind of communication style unless otherwise stated. This magic, this way of interpreting the world became equated with the fantastical and thus carried over to how Colombians speak. It can be said that this furthers the idea of the subaltern speaking through story, through context. To some extent, this obsession with context may be a hold-over from the trauma of colonization, of being unable to fully understand what is going on because there was no context to go along with it. On the other hand, this could be a result of colonialism in the sense that it was through the magic weaved by Spanish explorers and Irish missionaries that story began to be a justification for the horrors taking place. These oral traditions weren't something Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his ilk summoned out of thin air, they are part of our shared cultural heritage and make up the very fabric of our being.

In the modern American imagination, El Dorado is depicted as a legendary city of gold. El Dorado, as I knew him, was the chief of the Muisca tribe. His body was adorned with gold dust that reflected the sun. His priests rode with him on a raft and during his ascension ceremony to chiefdom, would offer sacrifices of gold to the god living in the lagoon of Guatavita. He would bathe in the lake and emerge as the lord and king. (Grajales, Conversations).

Eventually, down the road, the chief of the Muisca became a city of gold, ripe for exploitation. This is the magic I'm talking about: the metaphor that became Latin America. This gold became the legend, the words themselves. It has been through the colonization of words, of expression that Colombians have become condemned to mutism, gold stolen, and the new El Dorado becomes magical realism: reality made metaphor made myth by those unable to comprehend it.

Solitude

...our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "The Solitude of Latin America"

When a language dies, it is the death of a people. It is the magic that binds, and thus in its absence, condemns us not only to mutism, but to solitude. The language that made the story of El Dorado, in the magical sense, the sense that invoked the sky and water, that recited blessings has been erased from this Earth. Instead, the primary language became Spanish, a language under the governance of the Royal Academy meaning it is subject to rules and regulations that police how the language is meant to be spoken.

Where there is no language to express loss, you have to make do. So you return to what made the blessings so powerful in the first place: magic. This becomes complicated because the subaltern is speaking, however, it is now forever in the language of the colonizer. In becoming further entrenched in subalternity, there are no origins because they were destroyed. One becomes subaltern to oneself; this is the solitude of Colombia.

In trying to take ownership of the Spanish language, in trying to have a voice, the words become so complicated as to be incomprehensible to ordinary people. Beyond that, the realities that were so painstakingly jotted down were given the title of 'fantastical', carrying with it the implication that reality is formed only when colonial powers deem it as such, so the solitude is further exacerbated through invisibility. It can be said that it is through the removal of the human that inhumanities are deemed acceptable. The establishing of an assumed reality, one bereft of magic and metaphor, becomes the qualifier for whether a not a work has merit.

It is through invisibility that something becomes unknown, and since we fear the unknown, it can be said that invisibility is that which becomes the birthplace of the monstrous. So what do we do? We protect ourselves. We call people monsters because they cannot speak like us; because they do not look like us. Our realities don't line up. How can you kill that which you cannot see? Maybe this can be achieved by believing that it does not exist. In other words, in denying the humanity in someone, you are killing them through depriving them of a name. In calling a place something like 'New Spain' or 'French Algeria', you deprive a place of its people and thus the isle of solitude and isolation is allowed to step further into the darkness of imposed invisibility. Such is the legacy of the brutality that is colonialism.

Colonizing Reality

Pierre Bourdieu in "The Forms of Capital" mentions the concept of social capital as something which guides the educational system in the sense that those in the upper class had a form of non-economic currency in the form of being exposed to the dominant culture since birth, something which guides the educational system and thus places working-class and poor students at a disadvantage and continuing social stratification in society. One of the main things Bordieu addresses in this text is the concept of social capital. He talks about how social capital is something the upper classes take for granted and sometimes can be exchanged for economic capital. He applies this to the educational system in how those of the lower and working classes are at a disadvantage because the system favors this social capital, something denied to them since birth. I chose to extend this idea and apply it to the concept of reality, in a way, equating the two concepts such that reality in the colloquial sense is that which is defined through a Eurocentric, largely agnostic view placing the lower, subaltern class at a disadvantage due to

the system being set up in such a way that puts them at a disadvantage through discrediting their experiences in how they see, understand, and interpret the world around them. This form of colonialism, I believe, is very subtle because the Eurocentric perception of reality is something that is so embedded in almost everything we do that it lends itself towards there being a value judgement in calling people witch doctors, women hysterical, saying some gods are more valid than other gods. In an increasingly globalized world, this becomes more and more visible as this form of colonialism becomes normalized. Yet it is nuanced because these perceptions aren't exactly static.

This idea could be applied when talking about reality and realism. Realism, as in verisimilitude, morphs when applied to class. With a colonial power being the dominant culture, the concept of reality as defined by them invalidates the trauma of colonization. In a way, this can be said to be a form of institutional gaslighting wherein the right to exist is granted by the dominant culture to where recognizing this reality, in turn, becomes a form of social capital.

A consequence of this brings forth a concept explored by Loïc Wacquant in "L'Amerique comme utopie a l'envers" which is seeing yourself through the eyes of the colonizer. Perhaps this could play into the rigid social structures found in present-day Colombia where those viewed as more palatable by the colonizer are at the top of society, thus the hierarchization of subalternity is survived through having a class system built into invisibility. In this source, as part of a larger collection of sociological texts, Wacquant interviews an African-American youth from the inner city and asks him to describe his experiences as being part of American society. The concept I chose to extract was seeing yourself through the eyes of the colonizer.

Throughout the text, the youth relays a lifetime of disenfranchisement and systemic bias as a result of forces beyond his control. The lasting impact of slavery on colonization is not lost upon him. Although the conscious thought of seeing people as less than human has taken more subtle forms in modern times, their impact is still very much relevant today. When you see yourself through the eyes of the colonizer, you start to question your own humanity and feed into the self-fulfilling prophecy of worthlessness propagated by the dominant society. This applies to subalternity and invisibility in the sense that perhaps it is a contributor to the silence of the subaltern the perceived silencing by the dominant class such that the subaltern is condemned to mutism solely because it sees itself as mute.

From my grandmother's stories, perhaps the most striking line had to do with a group of people who lived on mountains so high, they did not believe in spring. (Grajales, Conversations) The subaltern speaks. The subaltern speaks because the dominant society does not know how to listen. Through the hegemonization of reality, the subaltern is at a disadvantage because this understanding is assumed, increasing the invisibility of those on the outskirts of society.

The Alternate Utopia

A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "The Solitude of Latin America"

In spite of it all, it seems that the subaltern continues to babble. Within silence, the isle of solitude makes its home. The subaltern is said to not be able to speak. The subaltern is said to have no agency.

Enter the alternate utopia, one where "no one can decide for others how they die"(Garcia Marquez, *The Solitude of Latin America*). I believe that the alternate utopia is where the subaltern speaks: story, the best way I know. In a space where no one can tell you how to express, subaltern voices are given the opportunity to speak.

In taking ownership of the narrative, the unpalatable is able to become palatable because it is allowed to exist. Since the original language was condemned to solitude, it becomes necessary to use the language of the colonizer such that the colonizer has no way of avoiding the confrontation. It is a way of saying we will survive you. Yet, this is a nuanced concept because why should the subaltern need permission to speak? From who? From the colonizer? From the dominant society?

This is further complicated with the subaltern speaking through a voice that is not their own, but rather one imposed upon them through centuries of colonization. In the alternate utopia, the ideas of parallel solitude, of a second chance serve as almost a libation of sorts. The magic returns through representing the world as one sees it, floating women and all. The stakes have never been higher.

Reflection

The purpose of this project was to respond to the question of Can the Subaltern Speak? Through the application of the lens presented by Gayatri Spivak to magical realism and Colombia. I don't think I'll ever be truly done with this project because there are still a lot more

things to talk about. One implication that makes me uncomfortable is that in my research, it was very difficult to find anything specific to Colombia when it came to exploring subalternity through literature and more specifically, magical realism. So, what is the implication?

After spending hours at the library, a decent amount of time in the rare books collection, and talking to the research librarian, it became quite clear that in the English-speaking world there is very little interest in the subject matter. In other words, I tried multiple databases and not a lot came up. Throughout this project, I played the roles of researcher, anthropologist, sociologist, translator, and intellectual. I took the resources I was able to find and tried to apply it to a subject matter I'm very passionate about. What was actually quite harrowing was that through writing the content, I got the sense that I was addressing something important and bigger than myself because to be quite honest, I felt very alone in writing this because not only was there next to no information about subalternity and Colombian stories, but what I did find was extremely complicated and nuanced to the point where I felt like I couldn't talk about the theories but rather I had to talk directly to them and engage with what they had to say. The subject isn't exactly easy, and it remains dubious as to whether or not it would've been a better idea to include "100 Years of Solitude". And above all, que viva Colombia.

Discussion

Porot's "Manuel alphabétique" illustrates that perceptions of reality vary across cultures and times in the sense that we consider and have come to expect science to be objective and without bias. This idea is complicated by the mere existence of his article. How have his belief on Algerians been expanded upon? How many other groups have been given this treatment? Is

this happening right now? Science can be a tool for good and the betterment of mankind, however, it can also be a tool to justify unspeakable horrors and provide a springboard for the systematic oppression of others. Sentiments like those in the peer-reviewed article did not occur in a vacuum but rather they were part of a machine geared towards justifying colonization through giving the mysterious 'other' a name and a face. To expand this, it goes to show that colonial thought ran a lot deeper than just literature and within governments. This thought process was built into the school system, into medicine, into law, and into the public imagination.

If I am going to be talking about magical realism and Colombia, it would be downright impossible to not mention Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His Nobel prize speech is almost a call to action and an act of admonishment towards those who will appreciate Latin America only in the context of enjoying its music and literature, yet continue to treat its people as the mentally challenged child of the 'civilized' world, unable to think for himself or produce anything of any true merit. What's particularly striking is when Garcia Marquez talks about the alternate utopia. I believe that this alternate utopia occurs when the subaltern speaks. In other words, the alternate utopia is breathed into existence every time an individual fights against their invisibility through being a conscious subject and taking ownership of their own narrative. I chose to equate solitude with silence such that through the act of speaking we can fight the invisibility cast upon us by powers who act as if they know best when it comes to meddling with the affairs of Latin America. Furthermore, the focus on language shifts from a means of existing to a means of protecting magic in writing it down to preserve and prove that it existed. In this

way, magic can be allowed to be summoned and once again, be given another chance to walk the Earth.

Spivak complicates, defines, and redefines subalternity in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. I took the idea behind subalternity, applied it to the subhuman, and ran with it. Spivak primarily focuses on the practice of Sati in India and how, when viewed through a Eurocentric viewpoint, it reduces and annihilates the experiences of the culture that practices it. This is further expanded to serve as an example of how the subaltern speaks, which is to say through the words of someone else. There’s also the concept of having a palatable identity as a way of being seen as civilized enough to speak for yourself. I went ahead and tried to expand the definition and weave my own interpretation to suit the culture I was most familiar with: Colombia. In including Colombia under the umbrella of subaltern, my definition would have to separate itself from Spivak’s to enhance what I was trying to convey, which is that in the case of Colombia, the subaltern speaks through story. These stories later go on to inform the realities of everyday Colombians. The condemnation to mutism is reminiscent to the condemnation to solitude. When multiple subjects are allowed to speak, the shroud of invisibility is lifted, so the subaltern is no longer dehumanized, it is allowed to have a soul and join the world. It is through this humanization that the subaltern is able to become human, someone, not something, but a person capable of speaking.

Author's Note

Dedicated to Mariela Grajales and Jose Anibal Grajales

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