

Collective (Un)Consciousness: A Magic Realist Reading of Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) and Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

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Abstract

The uniqueness of Latin American and African experiences has rendered them subject to detailed research and thorough discussion. Throughout the course of history, most Third World nations have witnessed various switches in ruling regimes which have in turn resulted in traumatic shifts of consciousness. Among these nations are the Latin American and African countries that have long been subject to colonialism which have exercised political and social domination over them, inducing a traumatic consciousness that can only behold itself as isolated and discontinuous. This paper selects the Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) and the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) as representatives of these two unique historical and cultural cases. Dealing with such special political and cultural nature requires an equally unique means of expression, hence the use of magic realism.

This study traces the use of magic realism as a mode of writing adopted by Alejo

Carpentier and Ngugi wa Thiongo in their novels *The Kingdom of this World* and *A Grain of Wheat* respectively, to represent the common individual and collective traumas induced by two seemingly distinctive colonial experiences that have led to the presence of hybrid communal identities. Besides investigating the role of magic realism as a means of political and cultural resistance in both Cuban and Kenyan literature as exemplary of subjugated nations, the current study also traces the concept of collective consciousness that is either formulated by the colonizer or experienced by the colonized during the colonial process. The article further exposes the fundamental role of the collective unconsciousness of the colonized peoples belonging to these hybrid communities as a primary tool for uniting the scattered souls and emancipating minds from the imposed colonial cultural clutch.

Keywords: magic realism, Cuban literature, Kenyan literature, Alejo Carpentier, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, collective consciousness, collective unconsciousness

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Introduction

In Latin America, Africa and most Third World countries that have long been subject to numerous colonial interventions, the problem lies in the existence of two opposite aesthetics, two irreconcilable perspectives of the world: an intellectual practical western mode of living that seeks to impose itself on an environment totally unknown to it, and an aboriginal one with a whole set of distinct belief systems and sovereign identities; an entity incorporating a vibrant culture and traditional knowledge that insists on being existent. Such colonial experiences have culminated in a hybrid mixture of individuals that have absorbed the dominant imperial collective consciousness while holding tight to their underlying collective unconsciousness that always glues the chasm together. This article focuses on the Cuban and Kenyan experiences as exemplary of subjugated nations that have witnessed various switches in ruling regimes which have in turn resulted in traumatic shifts of consciousness; a traumatic consciousness that can only behold itself as isolated and discontinuous.

In the pre-independence period, literature has been used to evoke shared unifying cultural heritage as a vital means of resisting colonialism. However, after gaining emancipation, these postcolonial nations have witnessed an era of disillusionment and guilt. The imperial structures have not been eradicated; they have rather been delivered from one foreign hand to another native one, consequently arousing the need to remind people of the whole picture and expose its various angles. From this juncture, magic realist authors strive to break with the

conventional modes of expression to express totally unconventional experiences which prove "to be more real than reality itself" (Barlett 27). They tend to reconcile and reconceptualize their communities by raising the national awareness of peoples who have long been subjected to political and cultural diversities by drawing upon the mythical and cultural roots of their communities; roots from which the whole collective experience has sprung; roots that always bring them back to their lost selves. Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) are selected as narrative productions that represent the part played by literature in colonized countries as a means of resistance and cultural assertion, though the experiences tackled and the adopted modes of representation are characteristically distinctive.

Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-) come from different struggling nations and reflect two dissimilar cultural heritages that belong uniquely to the roots from where they have stemmed. Nevertheless, in their novels under study, both represent and criticize the effect of the imperial prevalence even after the so-called emancipation. Both authors deal with the effect of imperialism on the personal and communal psyche of the colonized people who turn into separate individuals fighting for survival. *The Kingdom of this World* and *A Grain of Wheat* document the sufferings of both Cuban and Kenyan peoples, as representatives of Latin American and African colonized nations, in fighting for political and cultural freedom against the French and British colonialism, underscoring the importance of the collective

unconsciousness that forms the communal memory of these nations and its role in emancipating their colonized minds and uniting their scattered souls.

Carpentier's writing has deeply been grounded in "the non-Western, African-driven mythologies and rituals" as opposed to the "separation from the life of the spirit that had been the outcome of the West's privileging of reason" (Paravisni-Gibert 115). *The Kingdom of this World* has often been studied as a representative of Haiti's post-revolutionary disillusioning era. According to Leger, what mainly characterizes the novel is that in spite of portraying the marvellousness of Haitian spirituality, Carpentier "cannot envision a theory of transformative potential through a nation that seemingly offers little possibility for change" (87). The narrative can also be read as a manifestation of the effect of colonialism on masculinity. In "Catastrophic Colonialism: An Examination of Masculinity in Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*", Fiona Evans argues how "colonialism influences the development of a complex rooted in reactive behaviors against the oppressor's masculinity" (1). On the other hand, wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* has mostly been studied in relation to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* constitutes one the major intertexts in wa Thiong'o's fiction. The narrative is marked as a literary text "given a more universal dimension and even cosmic implications with a strong metaphorical network, partly African in origin, but mostly given coherence by Christian symbolic" (Bardolphe 32). It is said to be the work that marked wa Thiong'o as "one of the major voices of the new wave of post-independence writers" (Harrow 243). Various studies have further been held comparing the novel to other African texts examining the theme of guilt and redemption as characteristic of the post-imperial era.

Hence, this present article aims at bringing together these two literary experiences, that have mostly been studied separately, to highlight the traumatic effect of colonialism on nations and their individuals in spite of the different details included in each separate experience; effects that bring together diverse experiences into one frame. The study further hopes to uncover the role of magic realism as a narrative mode used by both authors as an identifying tool of expression for these two specifically unique cultural and political experiences in a way that uncovers the hidden layers of their lost histories.

Collective (Un) Consciousness and the Aesthetics of Magic Realism

In such a world full of fear and disillusionment, man endeavors in a quest for "a less hostile elsewhere", finding it impossible except by "unleashing fantasies that metamorphosize his lived experience" (Fignole 41). In 1967, Guy Debord, author of *The Society of Spectacle*, remarked that representations of reality the way it has been done had eventually led to its distortion and has warned against the prevalence of a new mode of social life based only on a deceptive spectacle that has led to the distortion of reality: "[The spectacle] is not something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations—news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment—the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life" (13). In other words, the events used to narrate a historical experience have mostly been chosen or organized for a specific purpose, a purpose that is "moral, social and linked into a relationship with a legal order of authority, which either reinforces or opposes the morality the story espouses" (Cooper 35). That is, in colonial contexts, narrativity has

primarily been used to create a collective consciousness that would accept and internalize the intended imperial legacy and thus enforcing both political and cultural colonial clutch.

Collective consciousness or in French 'conscience collective' is "the set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society" (Jary 93). The term was introduced in 1893 by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his *The Division of Labour in Society*. It initially referred to the use of religion in primitive societies as a means of uniting their members through creating a common consciousness that would smooth the way for the imperial process. In the case of the Cuban and Kenyan experiences, as subjects of this study, the colonial national consciousness has been formed by grouping the colonized subjects into one single entity upon which intended qualities have been imposed to facilitate the colonial scheme. However, embedded into the lost history, is another collective experience that has been buried into the indigenous land: the seed of unity and resistance. This collective experience forms the indigenous communal consciousness which comprises of the shared struggles that unify them despite their sense of nonbelonging, together with a deeper collective unconsciousness incorporating native beliefs and traditions that preserve the identity of the nation.

With the growing awareness of the need to revive these buried communal roots, there started to emerge a call for the need to represent a different image defeating this authoritarian one that has long distinguished colonial territories, and hence came the importance of magic realism as a narrative strategy characterized by "the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction" ("Magic Realism"). As far as this study is concerned, magic realism is tightly interwoven with the

collective unconsciousness of both Cuban and Kenyan peoples, as representatives of Latin American and African experiences at large, whose original cultural roots find manifestation in all aspects of thoughts and actions, and together with their communal memory act as the resisting catalyst of unity, rebellion, and strength.

As an artistic concept, magic realism emerged after WWI as a rejection of Expressionism, to return to the real and its representation but under a new light. It was an attempt to uncover the hidden mystery behind everyday reality. The term 'Magic Realism', which is now reread as a global postcolonial literary project, has first been coined by Franz Roh in 1925 describing the neo-realistic style in German painting which "is not an escapist venture but rather an opportunity to see the fantastic in the everyday" (Geetha 345). For Roh, the term "describes a broad artistic movement, a general shift in emphasis, against what he considers the formal excesses of Expressionism and towards a more faithful rendering of the object of representation" (17). In 1955, Angel Flores published his paper "Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction", and with this publication, the term 'Magic Realism' has formally been linked to literature. The expression 'magic realism' has gained international currency with the aptly named Latin-American 'boom' whose most famous representatives are Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges. Later, the term 'lo real maravilloso' has been introduced by Alejo Carpentier referring to the narrative writing in which the marvelous elements are expected and accepted as part of the everyday norm.

Although originally built upon the western notion and using the western term, still magic realism in colonized countries has meant to create an autonomous style of literature opposing the western one. Its "in-betweenness, [its] all-at-onceness encourages

resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures” (Zamora 6). Magic realism merges two conflicting prospects: a rational view of reality and the acceptance of the supernatural or the magical as a trusted constituent of this reality. In a magic realist text, “the supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason” offering no explanation to the appearance of these elements in the text (Spindler 82). By doing so, the reader of a magic realist text is plucked off the pre-existing historical and formal ties and is bound to a clearer awareness of the hidden meanings and interconnectedness of life through encountering a bi-dimensional world where the mystical or fantastic elements are used to produce a more inclusive image of life and its diverse realities, providing an alternative perspective in which the reality of the ‘established’ is shaken.

Clearly, when reading magic realist texts, one cannot mistake the presence of mythological aspects as well as the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious of the people depicted in the narrative production, as it reflects the common people’s dreams, fantasies, and fears, and consisting mainly of archetypes “which give definite form to certain psychic contents” (Jung 60). This use of folklore and community beliefs is meant to trigger this collective unconsciousness which might have been tarnished and forgotten all through the imperial process of assimilation. With the use of magic realism, all the official or accepted norms and histories are violated; the known facts are approached from another angle, historical figures and events are presented with fragmentation; “boundary violations are often made to call attention to themselves in order to interrogate the historical facts and show how things may have been different” (Sabanpan-Yu 297). The magic realist images thus tend to

“recreate traumatic events by simulating the overwhelming effects that prevented their narrativization in the first place” by resorting to magic and illusion as a mode of survival (Arva 61). In other words, they aim at re-creating and re-presenting reality to expose the falsehood of the reality initially presented. Hence, its use implies fictionalizing history bringing into focus the fact that history itself is a kind of fiction, stressing the point that distorting reality leads to a greater clarity.

From this departing point, notably in Third World countries, magic realism has been used as a postcolonial mode that seeks to throw the whole set of western realist narratives into doubt. Nevertheless, although magic realist writers “have an urge to demonstrate, capture and celebrate ways of being and of seeing that are uncontaminated by European domination, ...such authors are inevitably a hybrid mixture, of which European culture is a fundamental part” (Cooper 17). Therefore, magic realism itself is a form of hybridity between the real and the magical as well as the imposed and the original. Furthermore, the term “subverts assumptions about what is possible, turning the expectation of magic as something impossible upside down by situating it next to the real” (Sabanpan-Yu 297). To put it more clearly, the mythical or fantastic elements in a magic realist text are not imposed on the events as supernatural occurrences in a realistic context; on the contrary, they share the narrative space with historical and actual events. Still this effect implies that the text should conform to the rules of western realist narrative craft.

As far as the Latin American magic realism is concerned, Fredric Jameson famously argued in his 1986 “On Magic Realism in Film” how this mode of writing has become “a more authentic Latin American realization of what in the reified European context took the form of

surrealism” (301). He posited that this narrative design emerged in South America from a situation characterized by the co-existence of two epistemological and political systems. It became a prominent mode of writing in Latin America in the time when the continent started to flourish both culturally and economically. As unique as the Hispanic soil from which it springs, Latin American magic realism employs characteristic techniques as the use of Hispanic mythological elements, real people in ghostly apparitions, smooth transference among the now and the hereafter and the acceptance of transformation as a normal way of living. Moreover, the cyclic world they represent is ruled by faith and imagination rather than logic and rational construction; and hence what is seemingly impossible is easily accepted.

On the other hand, African magic realism is primarily constructed within the framework of African oral traditions asserting the African unique cultural identity. Basically, the African magic realist movement is defined as “A grouping of African novels [that] has emerged out of the historical and cultural conditions of Africa, both oral and written, and to the traditions of the Latin American brand of magical realism” (Cooper 15). In the case of African communities that have experienced colonialism and have suffered from both political and ontological subjugation and oppression, ‘Black’ has been viewed as a ‘condition’ with a whole set of complicated experiences summarized into one homogeneous entity, depriving these ‘black’ individuals from their individuality, and creating a collective consciousness facilitating the colonizer’s schemes. Nevertheless, this collective consciousness has eventually generated a sort of sympathetic knot among the individuals comprising this whole.

Hence, the ‘magically’-constructed selected narratives in this study elucidate the multiple contradictions resulting from colonialism, thus providing a liminal space where the postcolonial identity can exist. Both *The Kingdom of this World* and *A Grain of Wheat* underscore the strength of magic realism in Latin America and Africa which lies in the fact that the collective myths ingrained into these indigenous cultures play a vital role in the lives of their inhabitants. Accordingly, the use of this narrative mode provides those aboriginally-rooted peoples with an equal ground from which they can tell their story.

***The Kingdom of this World* and the Collective Communal Power**

Cuba as a region is characterized by its geocultural instability; it is a region of pivotal importance distinguished by an interaction of a long history of colonial existence and a deep-rooted body of folk culture. In his writings in general and *The Kingdom of this World* in particular, Alejo Carpentier has strived to impede the reproduction of cultural imperialism that occurred after the Cuban liberation from the French rule when “the United States seized the economic and political infrastructure of Cuba”, restoring imperialism in a subtler form (Dimitriou 98). The novel traces the colonial clutch in Cuba before and after the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) led by Toussaint Louverture. For Dimitriou, although the revolution has partially secured the national and cultural liberation of his country, it “could not avoid the transmission and reproduction of colonial oppression similar to that against which it was fought” (98). *The Kingdom of this World* traces and retells different phases of the Haitian Wars of Independence. It is set in Hispaniola and is divided into four parts, each chronicling a significant stage in the movement towards independence. Carpentier moulds the

character of Ti Noel to trace the various stages the country has passed through from both subjective and objective perspectives in a way that provides a more inclusive and comprising version of the long-told story.

Written in 1949 and published in English in 1957, the narrative is considered as being “a work of central importance for the development of the magical realist narrative mode in Latin American literature” (Cunningham 1). *The Kingdom of This World* underscores the role of the Afro-Caribbean beliefs in motivating the Haitian Revolution and sheds light on the Caribbean cultural practices and Voodoo spiritualism. The events are set in the revolutionary Saint Domingue, a former French colony on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, and explore the historical thread of the nation through tracing the timeline of the slave Ti Noel. In choosing to re-narrativize this revolution through a minor figure, the author “challenges the reader to recognize not only the limits of epistemological perspectives to organize reality, but the capacity to escape these limits” (Hoehling 255). The narrative adopts a chronological thread providing “a presentation of the forward movement of history but within this chronological progression there are patterns that repeat themselves in an endless process of renewal”, which may stand as an implication of the inevitability of the repetition of history regardless of changing characters (Harrow).

As a nation politically and culturally exploited by various imperial powers, a long line of historical experiences has been erased from the collective memory or rather the collective consciousness of the oppressed people. In this sense, magic realism is adopted by Carpentier as a means of revealing some of these erased traces to reconceive history and offer a potential future one. The novel’s underlying motif is transformation, the power of metamorphoses in inducing change and the transformative

role of the hero. The novel’s narrative structure, divided into four parts each representing a different cycle of historical time, “demonstrates this difference between discourse-time and story-time” (Dimitriou 105). According to him, “Ti Noel’s perception is always mediated by an invisible, primary narrator who distances” him from the reader to diminish his perspective (452–453). Through following Ti Noel’s development, the reader touches on the incongruity of life which is hardly noticed by the powerful colonizer.

With the opening of the novel, the reader is introduced to the slave Ti Noel and his master Lenormand de Mézy, together with Macandal, a Saint-Domingue martyr, whose legacy has been part of the Cuban mythology and Cuban collective unconscious that has constituted, in turn, a key spark in the Haitian revolution. Magic realism is employed since the commencing lines of the novel with Ti Noel recollecting the “things that had happened in the great kingdoms of Popo, of Arada, of the Nagos” (*The Kingdom of This World* 9), smoothly interweaving the mythical elements within the threads of a real colonial setting. The human-beast nexus which lies in the center of the Latin American belief system also runs throughout the novel. Since the early lines, Ti Noel speaks of the “epic ballads in which the animals had been allies of men” (*The Kingdom of this World* 9). Although this opening part narrates only realistic images and circumstances, still “Ti Noel’s explication of the virtues of African belief in magic and the irrational brings forth the fantastic elements of the novel” (Cunningham 6). Similarly, in the print of an African king receiving a Frenchman that Ti Noel encounters, the king is portrayed as being “framed by feather fans and seated upon a throne adorned with figures of monkeys and lizards” (*The Kingdom of this World* 10). This print reverses the legacy of white supremacy and establishes the

Africans' ownership of the land and its secrets questioning the European exploitation and enslavement of African people who used to be kings of their own land.

This human-animal link further reflects the obvious chasm between the two existing cultures. While the Frenchmen treat animals as beasts of burden useful only to be exploited in labor, the African heritage has long established a tight link and communion between man and animal who are often presented in African historical memory as communicating, exchanging roles, suffering together, and standing for each other. This bond is even extenuated by presenting as natural the possibility of transformation. Macandal, originally a leader who loses his arm in one of the battles, resorts to herding cattle in the fields and getting involved with the natural environment as a sort of a compensational relief. This is when he gets curious about "the existence of certain plants to which nobody else paid attention", and starts to see in this landscape the secrets of life; plants that disguise itself to escape from ants, others that move or change with the human voice, ...etc. (*The Kingdom of this World* 14). This triggers him to enter the realm of sorcery emblemized by the witch Maman Loi, the sorceress "under [whose] tutelage, he masters the role of the magic properties of leaves, plants, fungi, and herbs" (Niemi 106). Macandal learns of "extraordinary animals that [have] human offspring and of men whom certain spells [turn] into animals" (*The Kingdom of this World* 15). Through this sorceress's magic and spell, Macandal causes plagues and transforms into various animal guises. The colonists have been exasperated with fear after being afflicted, together with their animals and herds, with unexplained mass poisoning, and it starts to spread that Macandal has been chosen and nominated to use his magical spells and powers to exterminate the white people and create a

great empire of free negroes in Santo Domingue.

The people's collective faith and belief in Macandal and his spells, an important aspect in Latin American magic realism, gives him real powers and leads to the first spark of the revolt. The slaves are quite sure that Macandal uses various guises to reach his goal; they believe that by his disappearance, he has become the ruler of the whole island with boundless powers after getting rid of his limiting human body and "having recovered his corporal integrity in animal guise" (*The Kingdom of this World* 23). However, when he returns to his human form as "The Restored. The Transformed" thinking he would be able to cause similar changes, he fails (*The Kingdom of this World* 26). Upon his reappearance, Macandal is executed; an act that is considered by the other slaves as a process of sacrifice which shows the power of collective memory only understood by its beholders. Macandal's execution makes of him a martyr and unites his people against the designed imperial plans. Killing the leader does not bring fear in the hearts of the slaves; on the contrary, with Macandal's body flying in the air, the slaves think he has gone to unite with nature as a sacrificial act leading to their salvation, crying together: "Macandal saved" (*The Kingdom of this World* 29). Unable to decode the slaves' collective consciousness and beliefs, the French executors wrongly perceive this incident as a winning step for them by getting rid of this threatening leader, unaware of his everlasting grasp on the lives of his fellows. This time again the whites are outwitted by the powers of the realm unknown to them; the slaves' collective belief in Macandal's powers has added to their hope and strength. These fantastic details are cleverly knotted into a real chronological and historical timeframe made authentic through the omniscient narration. Hence, people's collective faith in

Macandal's magic has inspired one of the most influential uprisings in history; a 'real' event that has never been expected by the West and that's what made it 'marvelous.

The second part of the novel compresses time and emphasizes the power of the collective communal consciousness in inducing change. It narrates the onset of the Revolution in 1791 led by the Jamaican Bouckman calling for arousing the voice of freedom within their souls. The French colonizers have been traced by the negroes who are in turn executed by their white masters. At this point, the French come to realize that "the slaves evidently had a secret religion that upheld and united them in their revolts" (*The Kingdom of this World* 43). In plotting the revolt, the Haitian slaves "beseech Ogoun's assistance", which is offered by his Dionysian (Niemi 106). That is, through uniting with their supernatural roots, the slaves return to a realm of spontaneous deeds and impulsive emotions. Nevertheless, as aforementioned, the colonial grasp cannot be easily loosened. With the passage of time, some cultural changes have started to afflict the Cuban young generations, the outcome of a hybrid culture, who now come to imitate the French immigrants and even take lessons in French ethics. Here, Carpentier introduces what he sees as the real danger of colonialism; a danger that disturbs the integral solid cultural memory and shakes the collective cohering ties of the indigenous people.

This after effect of cultural and political hybridity and assimilation is manifested in the imperial schemes that pursue after the so-called emancipation. Twenty years later, Ti Noel returns to Haiti as a free man in a free land belonging to its people. However, he is surprisingly forced into slave labor by black masters. The continuity of imperial rule under the reign of King Henri Christophe portrays him as emblematic of the hero who has become a

tyrant. Ti Noel is even surprised to find a huge palace, even greater than the so-called colonial ones, belonging to the Negroes who have by now adopted the same French way of wearing the religious mask. In other words, slavery continues to exist but in a more severe and subtle form, for "there was a limitless affront in being beaten by a Negro as black as oneself" (*The Kingdom of this World* 63). Even more, the white masters have been keen not to kill the slaves for they have been considered a fortune for their masters unlike the new Negro rulers. With the new era, the two existing religious and cultural beliefs work hand in hand; King Henri Christophe adopts the slogan 'God, my cause and my sword', the notion that has so long formed the collective consciousness of the imperial dominance, and at the same time carries the aboriginal rituals of slaughtering bulls to help make the fortress impregnable.

Because of his deeply rooted belief in the effect of the supernatural spells, the sounds of his people's drums frighten Christophe, as he knows that "the bulls' blood that those thick walls had drunk was an infallible charm against the arms of the white men. But this blood had never been directed against the Negroes"; a realization that leads him to put an end to his own life leaving the country to face a new phase (*The Kingdom of This World* 78). The closing part of the novel culminates the tackled themes by exposing the time after Christophe's suicide, and portraying the country under the rule of Mulatto Boyer, during which a lot of prevailing abuses need to be defeated. The new invaders coming from Port-au-Prince have commenced to enslave the Negroes once more. Now, Ti Noel, a witness of all these historical shifts, and an old man that has acquired supernatural skills, is pictured squatting among the ruins of de Mézy's former plantation. His failed attempts to assimilate into his new society reflects the "problematization of coexistence of two

orders” (Bell 42). Unable to save his subjects or his own self, Ti Noel discovers his transformative ability, and turns himself into a bird, a stallion, a wasp, and an ant. Nevertheless, he finds in this animal world the same enslaving system where he is forced to carry “heavy loads over interminable paths under the vigilance of big-headed ants who reminded him unpleasantly of Lenormand de Mezy’s overseers, Henri Christophe’s guards, and the mulattoes of today” (*The Kingdom of this World* 93). Now he faces the conflict between using the magical transformative powers he has acquired to save himself or utilizing them for the salvation of his people.

In this stage, this power of metamorphoses has itself undergone a process of metamorphoses and transformation. Ti Noel uncovers his fault in using his disguise to escape from this world rather than serving his people, and realizes that the real greatness of man is in “wanting to be better than he is...in laying duties upon himself”, in being “beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials”, and that he only finds his real greatness “in *The Kingdom of this World*” (*The Kingdom of this World* 96). With this revelation, Ti Noel stands up high declaring war against the new masters, urging his people to fight against them. He “disappears like so many heroic figures before him” and is believed to be transformed once more to a benevolent power helping Negroes all through (Harrow 299). Hence, the structural and narrative organization of the novel serves Carpentier’s aim at exposing how these imperial systems have been transferred from one ruler to another as the nature of surviving in the kingdom of this world. That is, an imperial design has been replaced by another imperial one; and likewise, a revolution leads to another revolution just to secure liberation for a selected few: “white metropolitan nobles are

replaced with black creole nobles, while the majority of freed slaves are coscripted anew to the demands of imperial enterprise” (Dimitriou 106).

Carpentier’s use of magic realism helps him provide a more inclusive picture of a nation that has undergone various processes of metamorphoses and cultural changes; a nation whose people must get back to their collective roots if they need to free themselves of the everlasting imperial grasp. It is only through the nation’s communal memory that change can be induced. The collective memory which has first been used as a weapon of resistance against the foreign colonial power, continues to work as a catalyst for standing against the native imperial regimes. Moreover, the novel emphasizes the importance of answering the call of the community and of the individual’s role towards his nation that emancipation and transform can be realized.

A Grain of Wheat: The Revival of Buried Identities

As mentioned earlier, after its Latin American boom, magic realism as a mode of writing has crossed the borders and become one of the major literary languages of the postcolonial world. The application of the term has been manifested in other postcolonial nations in which the mythical or supernatural elements have been naturalized and assimilated within a western language and mode of writing. It has been used by Third World writers who have “attempted to describe the realities of their countries through the use of the fantastic” (Bouhadiba 195). In spite of the unique nature of each experience it presents, the use of magic realism, although distinctively, brings to the reader’s mind a more wholistic frame of colonization. Both nations have been part of two separate colonial projects, yet colonization seems to be moving in one direction; tarnishing the authentic aboriginal

reality through assimilation and hybridity. Furthermore, even though the nature of the experiences may differ, the results share some core aspects. Among other African writers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has concerned himself with "building ... national cultures, within [his] concerted critiques of the corruption and betrayals of the class of African leaders that emerged after independence" (Cooper 52). He has been working on "the decolonization of African memory" and his work has long underlined "the disillusionments of post-independence African politics" (Cooper 52). He uses his novels as a platform advocating his beliefs urging Kenyan peasants and workers to produce change. Wa Thiong'o has found in magic realism a vehicle "to serve his cultural revival mission" (Bouhadiba 194). According to him, no region has not suffered from colonialism and its after effects. He has preferred to include his books under the umbrella of African orature and has used Gikuyu oral culture to dig out Kenyan indigenous roots.

The oral narrative style, typical of Kenyan storytelling, is thus employed by wa Thiong'o as the source of power in African culture and literature that "reveal[s] the great variety and depth of imaginative expression with which African languages sustain the creative activities of African societies" (Hirpara 236). His body of work draws inspiration from the historically real Mau Mau struggle for independence (1952-1962) together with the native Kikuyu culture. Kenya has been a British colony from 1895 till 1963. The following years have been characterized by conflicts and divisions among Kenyans. *A Grain of Wheat* traces Kenya's struggle towards independence and reveals the harsh realities of post-independent Kenya and its endeavor towards decolonizing the minds and souls, exposing "the socio-economic forces at work in producing the colonial consciousness" that

breeds a kind of psychological feeling of imprisonment inside static and unchanging circumstances inhibiting the people's power of resistance (Lutz 171).

The novel criticizes the everlasting impact of colonialism on indigenous nations by drawing upon a community on the verge of political, psychic, and cultural disintegration. The characters presented in the novel are the outcome of a colonial system that spreads the social epidemic of the competition for survival. What the characters endure under the British rule generates a state of passivity and disconnectedness formulating an individual consciousness that pushes the characters to seek their own welfare. Throughout the novel, "individualism is presented as a product of the exploitation and competition for survival endemic to the process of colonial domination" (Lutz 172). Meanwhile, this individual consciousness is challenged by a collective consciousness comprised of shared experiences and suffering; a collective drive that refuses but to resist and sustain this communal feeling and need for combating oppression. The conflict between these two antagonistic levels of consciousness works under another layer of collective unconscious that often balances the two poles.

Although the novel is written to a great extent in the tradition of the 19th century English novel, the author finds in the realist tradition a limitation to the expression of a 'reality' stranger than fiction itself. Therefore, Wa Thiong'o chooses the African oral traditions for its capacity of dispensing with spatial, temporal, and even formal restrictions. The narrative is set in the fictional town of Thabai which is inhabited by a blend of real and fictional characters fighting for the freedom of Kenya. Wa Thiong'o creates a whole magical world including supernatural characters, places and folkloric aspects and blends them swiftly within an actual historical background. The

reader, for instance, witnesses the narrative's characters participate in the marches refusing Jomo Kenyatta who has a valuable significance in Kenyan history. *A Grain of Wheat* centers around the Christian concept of resurrection: "Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (St John.12.24). It depicts the moments when the characters undergo moral uncertainty and devastating guilt and focuses on the effects of the colonial struggles on the individual psychic formation. Unlike the collective spirit portrayed in *The Kingdom of this World*, the author chooses to focus on the specific conditions these colonial nations have passed through that have induced characters that are torn between their moral integrity and fear.

In such a colonized society, the guilty characters are victims in the sense that they live in "a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (Frye 41). Hence, the characters pursue their lives carrying the burdens of their guilty past. The novel focuses on "the consciousness of the collaborator, Karanja; the political prisoner, Gikonyo; and Kihika's betrayer, Mugo, in order to present a dialectical vision of human emancipation" (Lutz 172). In their quest to attain their national self-image, the novel unleashes the "shared cultural heritage, collective memory, founding myths and symbolism sought to contribute to the cultural revival of the colonized communities" (Hevisiova 2). This hybrid culture characteristic of the African experience, caused mainly by the process of rehabilitation and assimilation the Mau Mau fighters have undergone in the detention camps, foreshadows the future of Africa. In other words, such an imperial strategy of assimilation under the motto: all men are equal, used to abuse the peoples of the countries subjected to colonial schemes, has

obviously affected the colonized consciousness and identity formation.

While the theme of transformation lies in the heart of *The Kingdom of this World*, central to *A Grain of Wheat* is the oxymoron of life in death and death in life; the concept of the circulatory nature that is central to both African culture and Christianity. In African culture, death follows life and is crucial for the occurrence of a new life as a "seed which must crack and die before a new life can be created" (Harrow 250). That is, the land never dies after uprooting the crops; it rather remains pregnant with seeds that carry possibilities for a new life. This image of the 'pregnant' earth is highly glorified in African literature. Similarly, the Christian concept of the inevitability of death, either spiritually or physically, to achieve resurrection is central to the understanding of the novel. A grain must be buried into the ground to produce a new life. This grain of wheat may refer to all the buried notions and feelings that must grow one day; let these seeds be the sacrifices of the heroes who have so long fought for their people, or the seeds of oppression that have grown into guilt, betrayal, and self-agony. These two parallel spiritual beliefs run through the whole narrative as the basic constituents of the contemporary hybrid African culture of Kenya.

The novel's protagonist, Mugo, is an introvert villager of Thabai who has played a role in the Mau Mau Revolution. Mugo's secret is reflected and unfolds through this dual spiritual reference. The Uhuru celebration is the event chosen by the author to get together all the scattered narrative threads which tell the protagonist's story. Like Macandal's resort to farming after losing his arm in *The Kingdom of this World*, the events commence with Mugo farming in an alienated place after getting back from the detention camp during Kenya's state of Emergency, tracing his quest from guilt to

salvation; a quest that intersects with other similar stories buried deep inside their beholders. Since the early lines, elements of magic realism can be traced as an inevitable constituent of a reality that is naturally accepted. For example, the reader is introduced to the myth of women governing the land of the Agukuyu, an underlying belief that has made it easier for the Africans to accept the British colonizer who is also governed by a queen. The omniscient narrator also pictures the confrontation between the Africans and the white man in which “the snake held on to the ground, laughing their efforts to scorn. The white man with bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke, hit back” (*A Grain of Wheat* 15). This image goes together with that of the colonizer setting his feet on the chosen land: “Its origins can, so the people say, be traced to the day the white man came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the white man was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was sugar; his humility was touching” (*A Grain of Wheat* 13). These mythical beliefs have extended to affect even the actions of the colonizer himself who has been influenced by the collective power of the indigenous culture he now becomes part of.

This idea is referred to in various instances as in the story of Mr. Roger, the rebel who has been crushed by a train established for colonial plans, the ghost of whom is said to be haunting the railroad crossing which requires an annual human sacrifice to pacify it. Another basic concept primordial to the themes of the novel is that of guilt and salvation which is a primary Christian motif and provides the most obvious emotional catalyst for the characters’ behavior and thoughts. As discussed earlier, the characters’ actions are driven by an “ethic of individual achievement”; they are torn between the need to confess to reach peace and the fear of confession (Lutz 183). The

sense of guilt that these characters hold pushes the events forward and leads them to choose different paths that give way to their final reconciliation and unity, as in the case of Mugo whose guilty feelings for betraying Kihika prompt him to devote his life to his people’s cause. It is through the posited contradiction between how people see Mugo and how he envisions himself that wa Thiong’o exposes both the internal and external layers of the story, pointing to the complexities of the position of the individual within such a complicated context.

To cover his sense of guilt, Mugo decides to “bury his past in [his people’s] gratitude”; convincing himself that for men of God, the past is always forgiven (*A Grain of Wheat* 146). Nevertheless, with people’s overwhelming praise and belief in him, he feels more and more guilty. As he tries to overcome his guilty feelings, Mugo is met by the dry land in which “he felt hollow. There were no crops on the land and what with the dried-up weeds, Gakrakw, micege, mikengeria, bangi-and the sun, the country appeared sick and dull” (*A Grain of Wheat* 8-9). As a means of escaping this devastating conflict, Mugo practices a state of connection and communication with the other dimensional spheres of denial and illusion:

He has trained himself to enter a twilight calm whenever he lay on his back, in bed, or in the shamba. At such moments, his heart dialogued with strange voices. And the voices faded into one voice from God calling out, Moses, Moses! And Mugo was ready with his answer: Here I am, Lord. (*A Grain of Wheat* 143)

Mugo always thinks that he is “born to save”, and that his life is spared for the sake of saving his people from misery and poverty (*A Grain of Wheat* 153). Also, when Kihika asks to meet him to find a hiding place; fearing to be caught for helping a Mau Mau fighter,

Mugo imagines a dialogue with God where he is advised to inform about Kihika and even concludes this decision by assuring himself through a dream about Abraham and Isaac. That is, he overcomes his sense of guilt by convincing himself of an illusionary heroic role; the role of Moses that is destined to save his people and lead them to the new Jerusalem.

Mugo is not the only victim; such a community only produces individuals torn between their conditions and what they need to do. Karanja, for example, is a character chosen by wa Thiong'o to represent the colonized individuals who have been closely inculcated with the colonizer's ideology. Karanja chooses his own good over the welfare of his people, an inclination made stronger by Mumbi's choosing Gykonyo as a husband. This experience of loss and feeling of rootlessness marks the catalyst of his coming actions; why would he endure anymore when he no longer has a target to achieve? He stands for those who assimilate into the colonizing system as a means of survival. From his perspective, "every individual participates in a desperate war for survival where all ethical values are suspended" (Lutz 176). In an attempt to clear his heart, he tells Mumbi, "As for carrying a gun for the white man, well, a time will come when you too will know that everyman in the world is alone, and fights alone to live" (*A Grain of Wheat* 166). Another victim is Gikonyo whose experience in the concentration camps together with Mumbi and Karanja's act of infidelity create a psychic trauma within him. His betrayal for his oath has been because of his need to see Mumbi as the only source of life for him. The discovery he encounters on meeting her leaves him aimless and thus adopts a state of isolation. Similarly, Mumbi, this sincere wife who has tried to preserve the honor of her disappearing husband, finds it impossible to preserve her life without giving herself in to

Karanja filled with "submissive gratitude" (*A Grain of Wheat* 171). Such an experience only leaves her guilty with a child who carries this guilt over his shoulder; a young generation born into shame finding little hope for escaping the guilt thrust upon them, most often unintentionally, by their ancestors.

These various conflicts, either external or internal, are projected through the landscape which is considered a very important constituent of African culture that appears continually within the narrative line "functioning as a backdrop to the main action" (Harrow 246). The conditions and suffering of the people are symbolized by the conditions of the land and the suffering crops; the sooty drops of sweat that reflect the Christian concept of hell; the recurring image of rain as the divine blessing; the empty, dry land that always reflects people's sense of loss; and most importantly, the motif of the dying crops and their role in bearing fertile seeds for a new hopeful life. This symbolic natural backdrop represents the African communal memory and culminates into the ending of the story manifesting the stages through which the characters develop. In other words, the characters who have been driven into their own individual realms, are only brought together through their collective need for salvation and their shared experience of guilt. Their suffering under the white colonial rule has created their communal memory which always runs deep under their actions and always, together with their inherited collective unconscious, springs out to unite them together.

The guilty Mumbi who has spent long years waiting for her imprisoned husband; the husband who betrays the secrets of his comrades to get back to his wife only to find her impregnated by Karanja, who is in turn guilty of uniting with the colonizer, as well as the guilty Mugo, get together into one united knot seeking salvation for themselves and their people. The internal feelings of all these

characters are exposed, and the reasons behind their actions are uncovered, leaving the reader with a complex portrayal of both individual and communal suffering. Furthermore, Mugo's confession, described by everyone as the "great confession" on the day of the Uhuru celebration; the day which is supposed to bear the announcement of his leadership; provides an act of salvation that saves him individually and the community from this torturing guilt (*A Grain of Wheat* 264). His short but direct speech sums it all: "You asked for Judas.... You asked for the man who led Kihika to this tree, here.... Kihika came to me by night. He put his life into my hands, and I sold it to the white man. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years" (*A Grain of Wheat* 252). Although this deed results in his execution, according to both African and Christian beliefs, it has saved him. This act, together with Kihika's former death, is the 'grain of wheat' which will free the land and its inhabitants from their sufferings and knot together the scattered individuals.

After the Uhuru day and Mugo's declaration, things take a different turn. Karanja leaves the town to seek a new start where no one knows him; Gikonyo accepts the child and pursues his life with Mumbi; and people head for a fresh start based on the sacrifice of their courageous heroes. The novel closes with Gikonyo thinking of carving a wooden stool as a wedding gift to Mumbi. This stool stands for the history of Kenya with its disparate stages; pre-independence and post-independence. It is carved of Miuri wood, a Kenyan wood which is not imported by the British, as a symbol of the indigenous identity which is tightly related to its land. Moreover, leaving the Jembe in the plants symbolizes the agricultural future of Kenya depending on the old ways of living based on nurturing the land. He is even resolved to change the woman's figure and carves "a woman big-big

with child" (*A Grain of Wheat* 280). This idea correlates with women's role in bearing the future of the country and alludes to the creation myth where Gikonyo and Mumbi are portrayed as the "primordial parents of the Mugihuyu people" (Jabbi 210). Mumbi's child in this sense is a symbol of the future generation; a hybrid of various seeds, and a hybrid of guilt and salvation.

Thus, wa Thiong'o's narrative can be said to be a clear manifestation of the impact of the collective consciousness that affects the characters' choices wrapped in a communal sense of guilt. It also digs into the unifying indigenous roots that tie together the dispersing threads of a long experience of struggle and survival. In *A Grain of Wheat*, thus, wa Thiong'o blurs "boundaries between national and individual events, between factual history and fiction, thus throwing into question the process by which subjects position themselves in history and the ways they might conceive and tell the story" (Kessler 76). It is thus a narrative that exposes the African colonial experience in general, and the Kenyan struggle in particular, with all the buried aspects responsible for, and influenced by, the unique African cultural and individual texture.

Conclusion

Despite stemming from two distinct experiences, and being deeply rooted in their unique political encounters and cultural heritage, Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* provide the contemporary reader with their own new versions of imperial history and its effects on both the individual and the community. Both Cuban and Kenyan literary outputs have been rich in authentic images of a lost past, a past that have long been intentionally misrepresented. Still, each has had its own flavor and set of beliefs. This paper has strived to bring together these exemplary texts that reflect Cuban and

Kenyan struggles for identity and existence through and after colonialism to examine the common sufferings of Third World countries under colonialism and to trace the role of magic realism in retelling these distinctive political histories. Both novels echo a final cry that the individuals find their full accomplishment and fullest actualization of their personality only when they work for the community at large. The texts under study reflect their authors' and nations' cultural heritage that emphasizes the inevitable rootedness of the individuals within their communities and the need to preserve these roots to induce the targeted rebirth.

Magic realism offers a suitable tool for the authors to question "the official and historical motivations for political tyranny" (Sabanpan-Yu 297). Carpentier and wa Thiong'o adopt magic realism in their texts as a strong mode of resistance for both western cultural and political domination. This narrative mode is operated by each author in ways that are as unique and distinctive as the experiences they represent, bringing forth the rich heritage that constitute the Cuban and Kenyan collective unconsciousness. It is important to further note the significance of the people's collective consciousness that, although used to defeat the colonized nations, works as a strong power that brings together these scattered shots in an integrated whole and replaces the individual assertion with a communal consciousness that breaks all limiting ties.

Despite the distinctiveness of the two examined experiences, studying them through the lens of magic realism clarifies the similar outcome for the colonial experience they were subject to. In *The Kingdom of this World*, Carpentier focuses on the role of collective unconsciousness and the Cuban belief in spirituality in instigating a transformative change in both the individuals

and the community. The novel also frames the idea of the endless effect of imperialism even after the so-called freedom. This cyclical imperial structure is defeated only by the power of transformation used by Carpentier as a metaphorical weapon against static processes of resistance. Ti Noel's final revelation is meant to highlight the need to 'transform' the individual's struggle into a communal one that only succeeds if directed towards the welfare of the whole nation. Similarly, in *A Grain of Wheat*, wa Thiong'o utilizes the heritage of Cuban beliefs and traditions in reviving the sense of community within the individuals who are overwhelmed with a hindering sense of guilt resulting from a social structure that only produces individuals struggling for self-survival. The African's tight link with his land is closely touched upon as a major constituent of the African cultural heritage, together with the coexistence of two religious mythological bodies: the Christian and the native African that only produce hybrid consciousnesses in constant conflicts for existence.

Hence, in assembling two historical experiences that have often been tackled separately, the current study hopes to examine their connectedness as representatives of the literary outcome of the sufferings and struggles of Third World countries that have been exposed to colonial oppression and imperial assimilation. The use of magic realism by both authors has helped restore the indigenous sense of identity and belonging, as well as revive their communal roots as a uniting and unifying force. The paper has also striven to investigate the power of the colonial consciousness, either that imposed by the western regimes or that resulting from people's shared sufferings, as opposed to the buried collective indigenous seeds that remain a crucial constituent of the new version of the story.

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