



Received: 09 March 2018
Accepted: 11 July 2018
First Published: 17 July 2018

*Corresponding author: Mohsen Hanif, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran
E-mail: mhanif@khu.ac.ir

Reviewing editor:
Carol Colatrella, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

Additional information is available at the end of the article

LITERATURE & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The interconnection between nature and history in US ethnic magical realist novels

Mohsen Hanif^{1*} and Tahereh Rezaei²

Abstract: This article examines the interrelated reflections of (American) nature and history in six American magical realist novels mainly written in the 1980s. For this purpose, the authors explore Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Leon Forrest's *Two Wings to Veil My Face*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Each of the storytellers in these novels has an ulterior purpose that instigates their long sessions of storytelling in the world of the novels. The storytellers in all the novels believe that their narratives are a means of re-defining or consolidating a communal ethnic identity. Although they often depict the domestic lives of their peoples, yet at another level, their narratives undertake to rewrite the geography and history of their ethnicities from their own points of view and in response to mainstream historical narratives. The way they represent their race, nation, and the landscape wherein they have lived, this article will show, plays a crucial role in the process of identification. The narrators' accounts share a number of thematic concerns; yet, they respond differently to their conditions due to their varied perceptions of marginality in the American society and their cultural discrepancies. The narrators in these magical realist novels, this article concludes, do not necessarily always lament the destruction of Nature, nor do they all feel at home in the Americas, and although

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The concern over this research goes back to an earlier interest in magical realism. This interest later branched off into two related research areas; magical realism in US ethnic novelists and the representation of magical realism in Persian literature. The former developed into a PhD dissertation and a number of articles and the latter expanded into a book which Mohsen Hanif coauthored with Mohammad Hanif. Tahereh Rezaei often collaborates with Mohsen. Her main interest is aesthetics in general, and Baroque, in particular. Her views on Postcolonial sublime, neo-baroque and postmodern aesthetics have intellectually enriched this and other collaborative research projects.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Do we all develop a nostalgic view of nature and lament the destruction of the face of the earth? Is our perception of nature affected by the historical experiences we have passed through? How is this perception depicted in novels by US ethnic novelists? To find an answer to these questions, we studied six novels, widely known as magical realist, written in the 1980s about the experiences of Native Americans, Black Americans, and Chinese Americans in the American landscape. We realized that their sensitivity to American nature is modulated by their perception of their own communal history, which in turn contributes to the way they form their communal identity. Based on their communal history, each people may respond to nature with feelings as diverse as nostalgia, terror, and domination. This study is a step forward in investigations into how different ethnicities may have varied and at times opposing attitudes towards nature, and how this attitude is rooted in their diverse histories of marginalization.

almost for all of them the remembrance of the past is vital, hardly is it nostalgic and romanticized.

Subjects: Literature by Geographic Area; Post-Colonial Studies; Literary Genres

Keywords: nature; history; storytelling; communal ethnic identity; Native American; African American; Chinese American; magical realist novel

1. Introduction

Magical realism is widely diverse, deeply metamorphic and thoroughly context-bound. Moreover, it has the power to shape both the themes and style of a literary work. As Anne C. Hegerfeldt (2005) maintains “the term [magical realism] has been applied to so widely divergent works both in painting and in literature that any attempt to distil from these magic realism’s essential features leads to such generalization as to make a clear definition impossible” (p. 12). Even, according to her, some scholars “have rejected the term as useless” because of the confusion that any attempt at defining it may cause (p. 14). And that is why occasionally magical realist works that use the same magical elements seem to speak out opposite viewpoints. Yet this is impossible to proceed with an analysis of a set of works without working out a compromise over the stylistic affinities.

This article examines the interrelated representations of (American) nature and history as incorporated by the intra-diegetic narrators (storytellers) within six novels of the 1980s by six US novelists who have professed close affinities with three different ethnicities. To this end, Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*, Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Leon Forrest’s *Two Wings to Veil My Face*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* have been selected. The aforementioned novelists’ ancestral origins partly go back to Native American, African American, and Chinese American cultures.

What binds these six novels together is more, in Wittgenstein’s terminology, their “family resemblances.” Hence, some of these novels might be hesitantly considered magical realist. In general, magical realism here is considered to be a literary mode because we mainly put emphasis on the manner of narration. In keeping with Gerard Genette’s idea of a narrative, here we take magical realist texts as “modes of verbal enunciation” which cut across various historical eras and cultural spheres (1992, p. 64). According to him, therefore, we have three modes of narration: pure narration, mixed narration, and dramatic imitation (p. 70). In Genette’s view, these modes are natural and independent of history: Although historical approaches facilitate their understanding, Magical realism is an a-temporal mode of narration. Therefore, the use of the supernatural does not make a text magical realist, but the style of its narration differentiates a surrealist or fantastic text from a magical realist one. Hegerfeldt (2005), based on “narrative and linguistic techniques typically found in magic realist fiction”, enumerates a number of characteristics for this specific mode of narration: first, the fusion of realistic and fantastic elements in a way that “[t]he fantastic event does not turn out to be a hallucination, a dream, an elaborate intrigue, a practical joke, or an outright lie on the part of the narrator, but is part of the fictional world” (p. 51); Second, matter-of-factness of narration so that events “[i]nstead of being rejected as something that cannot be, supernatural events are perceived as normal or at least possible by magic realist focalizers (p. 54); Third, literalization of metaphor and related strategies that help lift the traditional western distinction between the literal and the metaphoric: Whereas metaphors are “[f]requently rejected as lies or mere rhetoric by the great thinkers of modernity, in magic realist fiction figurative language acquires the referentiality, and by extension also the status, of literal language” (p. 56); Fourth, “the presentation of the realistic as fantastic”, like how Macondo people in *One Hundred years of solitude* see and react to fantastic magnets and dentures; And finally, a critical scrutiny of the process of knowledge production, “rewriting of official versions of history, playfully offering other accounts” (p. 63), and laying bare the “authorization strategies” that the powerful uses to sell out their own narratives of events (p. 65). Style of narration is a common

feature of all these novels wherein critique of a system is achieved, but most importantly it is story telling that makes possible questioning the process of knowledge production.

To pursue their political causes, the magical realist novels adopt a variety of styles. These novels have chiefly tried to bridge the gap between written and oral styles of narration. Orality, as Daphne Lamothe (2004) remarks, “offers a dynamic medium for the transmission of cultural memory because it presents a model of both continuity and transformation as it passes through the mouths and views of each individual” (p. 168). As such, the appropriation of orality in postcolonial literature in general, and magical realist texts in particular, gives the colonized the opportunity to survive, transform, and adapt themselves to the social conditions of the society in which it is produced. This is in fact a tricksterian style that gives priority to survival over hard-headed adherence to age-old traditions. Politically speaking, this style “challenges the monolithic histories theoretically produced by literate societies” (p. 158): Conjuring multiple versions of historical incidents through storytelling helps question both the nature of truth in general and the nature of ethnic minorities’ history as recounted in authorized textual archives.

Consequently, storytellers, as indispensable parts of oral literature, appear in all the selected novels here. Through these intra-diegetic narrators who usually address a younger figure within the novel, the novelists merge the magical and the real to express a range of communal concerns. Nevertheless, storytelling shuns the rhetoric of objectivity in these novels: the novels convey a sense of subjectivity to their audience by filtering the stories through the mind of a specific character, who narrates a story to fulfil a specific goal. This is, as Hegerfeldt (2005) contends, prototypical of many magical realist texts which are modelled on oral or written storytelling strategies and is realized “both through enactment in the text and through metafictional address of a listener/reader” (p. 107). Nanapush in *Tracks*, Proude Cedarfair in *Bearheart*, Grand-momma Sweetie in *Two Wings*, Miranda in *Mama Day*, young Maxine Hong Kingston in *China Men*, and all the three “aunties” in *The Joy Luck Club* give a personal subjective account of their own lives alongside a history of the race that shines in the background of their narratives.

From among them, *Tracks*, *Two Wings*, *China Men*, and *The Joy Luck Club* entirely follow oral storytelling narrative strategies. In *Tracks*, Erdrich employs double narrators who selectively remember the past and allow less realistic visions impinge upon tangible events and blur them. When Erdrich blends realist narrative techniques with her native communal oral tradition, she implements a structure that ushers the reader into a path that requires their active involvement with and flexibility to the alternative realities that exist in other cultures (Castellucci Cox, 1998, p. 170). Similarly, throughout *Two Wings*, Grand-Momma Sweetie is explaining to her grandson, Nathaniel, why she refused to attend her husband’s funeral many years ago. In *China Men*, young Maxine Hong Kingston, addressing her father, narrates the macrocosmic history of her ancestors in the Americas. As Amy Tan shows us in *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers have problems communicating their wisdom and culture to their American-born daughters. The only way out of this impasse is, presumably, to use “talk-story” as a translating medium. *The Joy Luck Club* comprises 16 shorter chapters that are in the form of monologues. When seen together, the monologues are actually dialogues between mothers and daughters. To a lesser degree, *Bearheart* has also enjoyed storytelling as a narrative technique. Gerald Vizenor pretends that Proude Cedarfair, the protagonist of the novel, has written the novel and, in this way, Vizenor shuns any responsibility for the veracity of the narrative. In Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Miranda, Cocoa, George, and an anonymous voice represent a collective view of the Willow Springs. They all narrate the same events from their own points of view and their narrative mode follows oral traditions of storytelling.

Through their storytellers, magical realist texts disclose the interestedness and the prejudice inherent in the so-called empirical or materialist historical accounts. In magical realism, the “objective” historical narratives apparently founded on facts are comingled with or reinstated through legends, local tales, gossips, and rumours. The storytellers’ unofficial narratives help make evident how personal experience shapes people’s perceptions of the past. Magical realism

shows that to understand the past and the present of a community, local narratives ought to be taken into consideration. Moreover, as Hayden White (1973) contends, “there does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality” (p. 21). And magical realism challenges any presumptuous claim to clarity and objectivity in historiography.

Because storytelling is intimately connected to oral tradition and also because it deals more with memory (that is, a subjective account of the past) rather than history (which is an “objective” account of an earlier time), it provides a platform for alternative perspectives on history. Storytellers often construct narratives of events which are at odds with the formal and documented version of the authorities. Each of the storytellers in these novels has an ulterior purpose that instigates their long sessions of storytelling, so the storytellers are interestedly and subjectively involved in the process of storytelling. Accordingly, almost all the six novels repudiate objectivity and distance themselves from this habit of imperial texts, which vehemently pronounce the impartiality of their “realist” presentations.

Furthermore, storytellers in all these novels display considerable concern over identity: They believe their narratives are means of re-defining a communal identity. The narratees in *Two Wings* and *Tracks*, for instance, have just come of age and are either in search of their identity or cognizant of the paramount importance of their communal identity to their future. In *Two Wings*, Nathaniel is curious about his lineage and Grand-Momma Sweetie’s stories seriously affect his perception of both individual and communal identity. Nathaniel’s re-consideration of his upcoming marriage marks out the power of Sweetie’s communal stories on Nathaniel. Likewise, Lulu in *Tracks* is young and planning to marry a Morrisay whom Nanapush, her grandfather, sees as a wrong and unsuitable choice for marriage. To dissuade her, not only does Nanapush tell Lulu about the Morrisays, but also he recounts the entire communal history to re-shape Lulu’s identity.

Although such novels often depict the domestic lives of their characters, yet at another level, their writers undertake to rewrite the geography and history of their ethnicity from their own points of view and in response to the official historical documents. To revamp the identity of their narratees, as this article will show, the storytellers become involved with spatial and temporal issues. That is, while telling their stories, the storytellers re-define the landscape and history of the country (America). The re-presentation that the storytellers give us about the past of their race, nation, and the environment wherein they have lived plays a crucial role in the process of identification. Yet, in this article we argue that although the selected novels might be considered magical realist in terms of stylistic features, they have discrepancies regarding the outlook they have towards American landscape and history. Hence readers may realize different, and at times opposing, perceptions of identity as mirrored in spatio-temporal construction of the Americas as depicted in these novels.

2. Discussion

For the storytellers in the selected novels by Native American and African American novelists, the American landscape possesses a magical quality. Conversely, for the narrators in selected novels by Chinese American, American landscape is solely associated with rationality and is bereft of any supernatural qualities. As Donelle N. Dreese (2002) also maintains, the concern over place and its interrelationship with identity is “nowhere more evident than in American Indian literatures” (p. 8). Native American storytellers consider magic to be an essential quality of the natural landscape. This is because environmental issues are so strongly and incomparably at stake and resonate with greater intensity in Native American literature.¹ The narrators in *Tracks* and *Bearheart*, the two selected novels that draw much on Native American experience in American landscape, bestow so much sublimated magical powers on nature that is unparalleled in the other novels discussed here. Nanapush, in *Tracks*, tells us that people believe that a monster, Misshepeshu, who is presumably the guardian of the water and the trees surrounding it, haunts the Lake (Erdrich, 1988, p. 31). The trees in *Bearheart* can speak and express their feelings: “[T]he cedar stumps,” the narrator explains, “spumed under the bright sunlight and

moaned and screamed during the night [...] the circus was enclosed with a row of brown cedar ghosts” (Vizenor, 1990, pp. 9–10).

Moreover, animals and animal imagery have a vital presence for the Native American storytellers’ in *Tracks* and *Bearheart*. Nanapush, in *Tracks*, calls Fleur a girl who “was wild as filthy wolf” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 3) and Pauline characterizes Fleur with “the white wolf grin a Pillager turns on its victims” (p. 19). Pauline also refers to Fleur as “the wolf those men met in Argus” (p. 88) and in another scene as a “woman, lean as a half-dead wolf” (p. 162). Moreover, Nanapush tells us people believe that Fleur “laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night” (p. 12). Likewise, in *Bearheart*, Proude Cedarfair, the presumed narrator, explains that he growls and behaves like a bear. From his ancestors, he has inherited the spirit of a bear that symbolizes potent native spiritual powers. “He roared like a bear [...] He understood the language of cedar and learned to trust the voices of the crows. He became the rhythm of cedar trees and birds. Silence and language of animals gave him power (Vizenor, 1990, p. 17). Moreover, the narrator notes that Proude “would be a clown [...] a compassionate trickster for the afternoon, a bear from the cedar” (p. 20). Also, in the Utopian fourth world that the narrator in *Bearheart* envisages, “evil spirits are outwitted in the secret languages of animals and birds. Bears and crows choose the new singers. The crows crow in their blackness” (p. 5). And when Proude Cedarfair and Biwide enter the fourth world in *Bearheart* they have already been transformed to bears: “Dreaming together the two pilgrims [Proude and Biwide] travelled in magical flight over the mountains and across rivers and the divide. At Pueblo Bonito the vision bear told the two pilgrims to enter the fourth world as bears” (p. 242), and they “flew with vision bears ha ha ha haaa from window on the perfect light into the fourth world” (p. 243). As the above examples demonstrate, the storytellers in both *Tracks* and *Bearheart* display strong attachments to nature and try to reflect this attachment through magical elements, especially by recounting the metamorphosis of the protagonists into different natural and animal elements such as trees, owls, and bears. Also, these Native American storytellers lament the removal of the Native Americans and the destruction of the wildlife. In *Tracks*, Nanapush reports that at the end of the story Fleur has to leave her dwelling by the Lake. Likewise, in *Bearheart*, Proude Cedarfair begins his journey down the United States when the government forces him and Rosina to leave the Cedar nation.

The great care that these two novels show about nature is slightly due to the fact that Native Americans have been the oldest inhabitants of the Americas compared to African Americans who mostly were shipped to the Americas by force or the Chinese Americans who generally had to leave China due to socio-economic reasons. Regarding the way African Americans look at their environment and the interrelation between cultural and historical identity, Carolyn Finney (2014) aptly points out that: “For African Americans, to varying degrees, the everyday practices associated with environmental interactions are directly related to issues of African American identity and American history” (p. 4), and “people attribute meaning to the environment based on their ideologies, beliefs, myths, and experiences (p. 5). In view of that, in *Two Wings* and *Mama Day*, nature is either side-lined or terrifying. According to Finney (2014), the relation between the Africans and the American landscape was defined “by the economic incentives of the ‘master’ class and by survival instinct” of the African slaves (p. 57). As a result, if natural elements appear or any references to environmental issues are made in these novels, it is often accompanied by a sense of terror and scarcely filled with nostalgia. Grand-momma Sweetie, the narrator in *Two Wings*, almost never brings in her accounts any specific references to natural elements or the American landscape.

The narrators in *Mama Day*, however, refer to nature more as a terrifying element that needs to be challenged and tempered—perhaps they see the power of the “master” reflected in that. Thunders empower Miranda and, as people believe, by means of it, she can practice voodoo. Miranda is capable of “reading” natural signs, which makes the reader feel she has the magical power of divination. She acutely perceives the behavior of plants and animals. Miranda, for instance, is aware of the coming hurricane not through divination, but because she can

interpret the natural changes. The communal voice shows that Miranda understands the magnitude of the coming hurricane by watching closely the changes in nature. Miranda reads the natural signs; she knows why the water is “a bit too fast”, because “After ninety years the natural motion shoulda been in her blood” and she understands why “high [on the] hills the crawfish built up around the mouths of their burrows [or why] the kingfisher sand bank swallows” nest way up from the water or why bush rabbits are “deep into the ground” and why “bees are clustered close close to the door of their hives”; they were, Miranda knew, portents of “a big big storm” (Naylor, 1988, p. 227).

This mysteriously terrifying character of natural elements, however, is overcome by savants, like Sapphira Wade and Miranda. The island wherein Miranda lives has a magical quality echoing a history of the island’s ancestors. When she steps into her ancestral graveyard or mansion, Miranda is possessed and thus capable of communicating with her dead father. “The other place” is where Biscombe Wade lived with his black wife Sapphira who had some magic powers. Sapphira “could walk through lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot. [...] She turned the moon into salve [...] and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (Naylor, 1988, p. 3). “The other place” is also a sacred space that functions as a reminder of both slavery and freedom. Except for the magical quality that the island, “the other place,” and the thunderbolts have, the narrators in these two African American novels scarcely succumb to the charms of the natural elements and their beauty. Gloria Naylor and Leon Forrest seem to be more concerned with the history and legacy of African American’s enslavement and physical subjugation than the African American’s interaction with American nature.

In sharp contrast to the other novels discussed above, the narrators in *Joy Luck Club* and especially *China Men* display a relatively domineering attitude towards American nature. As Andrea Aebersold (2015) notes:

historically, the American landscape has been closely tied to American identity: the freedom to own land, work the land, and explore the land represent the rights of a free American [...and] the promise of individual freedom and economic opportunity through working the land brought many Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the sugar plantations in Hawaii. (p. 13)

Aebersold (2015) rightly maintains that “Asian American environmental experiences are connected to and complicit with construction of American identity” (p. 17). He highlights the “complicity” Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans, had with the whites in constructing the modernized United States. The American landscape in *China Men*, unlike what we see in *Tracks*, *Bearheart* and slightly in *Mama Day*, is starved of magical qualities and is a site of threat and open to unsympathetic confrontations. The early Chinese settlers, as represented in *China Men*, therefore, see the Americas as the space of cruelty and racism, and do not develop any intimate relations with the American natural environment and, later, like the white settlers, they desire to conquer and manipulate the nature. The first Chinese sojourning in America, Kingston narrates, are mostly allured by the myth of Gold in California and thereby they dubbed the country “Gold Mountain.” Later generations, however, mostly immigrated to the United States to work either on sugar plantations or in railroad construction camps. And later see the land as “a dumping ground” where “the rows and fields [in Hawaii], organized like conveyor belts, hide murdered and raped bodies” (Kingston, 1989, p. 85). One of the jobs that “China Men” had in the New World “was to fell a redwood, which was thick enough to divide into three or four beams” (p. 128), which suggests the necessity of conquering and dominating the landscape to survive.

Also, we see that Kingston, the intra-diegetic narrator in *China Men*, explains how her ancestors feminized the American landscape and she persistently reiterates that the “China men” have bastardized the land in different ways; the “China men” cooperated with the whites in constructing the transcontinental railroad, the emblem of technological developments and the representative

of the transgression of the wildlife. In a sexually graphic scene, Kingston (1989) depicts one of her ancestors literally sexualizing the landscape and making love to it:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched [my grandfather Ah Goong] so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. "I am fucking the world," he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (p. 133)

The discourse is reminiscent of the white expansionists who feminized American landscape and had claims to the land. As Arnold and Swenson (2008) writes about the image of Kansas territory in the colonial era, that "'she' was beautiful, submissive, pure, virginal, and waiting to be possessed by men [...] ideal white men naturally desired and competed for women [...] popular images pictured both the West and the process of westward expansion as white and female" (p. 87). This rhetoric was at work for the entire Americas and was not exclusive to the Kansas territory. Kingston also admits that the first Chinese settlers in the Americas cooperated with the white colonizers to transform American landscape by constructing the intercontinental railroad despite the fact that these newcomers were soon intimidated and marginalized by the powerful white settlers.

When the railroad finished, the whites hailed it: "'The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century,' [the white officials] said. 'The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind,' they said. 'Only Americans could have done it,' they said, which is true." Kingston takes the remark literally and believes that her ancestor, Ah Goong, who participated in the construction of the railroad, is an American because he also cooperated in the construction of the railroad. "Even if Ah Goong had not spent half his gold on Citizenship Papers," the narrator observes, "he was an American for having built the railroad" (Kingston, 1989, p. 145). Like the rest of Americans, the Chinese men participated in constructing the embodiment of the American dream: the transcontinental railroad. As such Kingston shows sympathy towards the Chinese men who strived to become a part of the American society in spite of all racial discriminations and political obstacles.

Along with being concerned with spatio-political issues, storytellers in the magical realist texts are diachronically involved in the process of identification, when they exhibit a relentless sense of unease about history. Their treatment of history, however, differs from other postmodern authors who "often display a radical skepticism about the nature, meaning, and value of history" (Byerman, 2005, p. 10). According to Linda Hutcheon (1988), the postmodern historical fiction ironically both invokes the past and suspects the accessibility of it (p. 16). On the contrary, magical realist novels often revivify the past and equally validate their presentation of it. In fact, they demonstrate that history is approachable while different versions of it might be credible. Hence, we will see that the novels incorporate factual information about historical events and the authorities' explanations of them, not to reject them altogether, but to modify them and lay bare other dimensions of events from the perspectives of the suppressed class or race. Magical realist narratives show that total rejection of history may lead to absolute laxity and political stagnation on the side of colonized. As a result, similar to many postmodern fictions, magical realist texts, through the narrators, credit the fictionality of history, yet they suggest that the already-suppressed elements such as folk cultures, myths, and customs would add new dimensions to the history of their community.²

In *China Men*, young Kingston is looking for a reliable account of the migration of her ancestors to the Americas. Young Kingston tells her father: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (Kingston, 1989, p. 15). In *Tracks*, while relating historical incidents concerning the Chippewa community between 1912 and 1924, Nanapush wraps his narrative in an aura of magic to show that this is an indispensable part of his community's history.³ Grand-

Mamma Sweetie Reed, in *Two Wings*, tells Nathaniel some “real” stories of her family that is mingled with mysterious incidents she could only explain with reference to folk customs. I. V. Reed tells Sweetie:

I remembered one of the stories ‘bout Auntie Foisty, up from the white folks, how she was so powerful cunning and touched. She cut a trapdoor in the hole of the slave ship on the way over with her long nails, sealed it back up with her lips so as no one could tell and then outswam the sharks, the slavers and Satan. (Forrest, 1983, pp. 124–125)

Even though the white folks had accepted the African conjure woman’s magical power, they spun tales about how her pagan magic had succumbed to Christianity and she finally had to return to America. I.V Reed continues:

[B]ut though she was on her way back to Africa—when low and behold if she ain’t delivered up in a storm to the arms of a missionary off the coast of Virginia, who saw her terrible vision in the face of a huge, smooth-faced rock, while out fishing; thought she was a bastard angel, whose wings got shattered by a streak of lightning—its light brought low as one of them lost, shooting stars, from worlds, eyeballs beyond this one. (Forrest, 1983, p. 125)

Amy Tan also recounts the “true” stories of the aunties’ lives when she interweaves them into the Chinese traditions they believed in. The daughters seem unable to come to terms with the difficulties they have in America; the mothers, however, have been determined all along to change their situation for the better and seemingly are able to help their daughters solve their problems. Suyuan Woo, one of the “aunties”, for instance, established “Joy Luck Club” wherein she and her friends resisted the spectre of death. “What was worse,” Suyuan explains to her daughter why they invented the club, “we asked among ourselves, to sit and wait for our own deaths with proper somber faces? Or to choose our own happiness?” (Tan, 1989, p. 25). Thus, the Joy Luck Club helped them to repel the nightmares of war and misfortune in China, and it also prevented them from drowning into the abyss of despair. They “hope[d] to be lucky. That hope was [their] only joy” (p. 25). The mothers gathered a rich heritage and a loaded treasury of wisdom all along their life adventures; yet, the question is how the mothers can convey their legacy to their daughters.

The storytellers in magical realist texts have a deep fascination with the history of the ethnic communities they deal with. However, they usually avoid public exposé of this interest. They usually re-write the official histories that the colonizers have forged, but they withhold from re-inscribing any sense of objectivity to their narratives. In this way, they circumvent the colonizers’ (un)conscious declaration of objectivity in their historical narratives. *Tracks* and *Bearheart*, for instance, beside domestic affairs of the fictional characters, directly discuss larger historical issues at stake in the Americas such as consumption epidemic, Indian Removal, and oil embargo. In *Tracks*, although only the Pillagers are involved in the plot, Erdrich, through Nanapush the narrator, constantly reminds the readers of a wider historical context in which the plot disentangles. The microcosmic history of some Native American families living on a reservation is aligned with the macrocosmic history of the Chippewa. Together with the story of Fleur, Nanapush tells his granddaughter about the factual historical tragedies of consumption epidemic, land seizure, and Indians educational programs.

Magical realist novels, thus, give voice to the silenced parts of a history. But this is not the only reason why these texts are important: these texts implement marginalized focalizers whose perception of what is historical information and why such information ought to be preserved often differ from the mainstream Anglo-Americans. Nanapush, for instance, marginalizes what Western historiographers regard “monumental, large-scale events”. Instead, he draws his addressee’s attention to local and tribal issues. Nanapush begins his narrative with factual and large-scale information. “We started dying before the snow,” Nanapush begins. He continues:

and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadouissioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible. (Erdrich, 1988, p. 1)

In fact, Nanapush relates the history of Native Americans from a marginalized point of view. Likewise, Vizenor, in *Bearheart*, incorporates different magical forms to lament and decry the destruction of the woods when the oil embargo of the early seventies brought about the confiscation of some reservations where Native American tribes inhabited (Rigal-Cellard, 1997, pp. 94–5).

Kingston in *China Men* gives us a more fictionalized but panoramic history of the Chinese Americans in the United States during the nineteenth and the twentieth century. To offer an encompassing presentation of Chinese American history in the Americas, which also takes into account immigrant Chinese perceptions of historical moments, she interweaves magical narratives of the events with exact historical dates and documents. Kingston even inserts a short part reeling off a list of laws passed from 1868 to 1978 in America attesting to the hardship the legal system caused for the Chinese immigrants. Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* also lets four mothers, as representatives of different social classes coming to the United States, speak about their own perception of the history of China and the United States of America. And through them, Tan explains the historical circumstances that in the 1940s led to the emigration of a large number of Chinese to the United States.

Yuan (2009) believes that recollection and narration of passed memories is a mode of coming to terms with the past and it may take different forms depending on the purpose of remembering the past and the person who remembers it (p. 110). According to Yuan, only in dreamlike narratives, fables, and fiction, the repressed narratives find a way to be expressed. Therefore, as Yuan (2009) recapitulates it, “the mothers’ China narratives [in *Joy Luck Club*], that is, their recollections of past experiences in China, are necessarily constituted partly through the collective cultural history (i.e., myth, folklore, and legends) and partly through personal memories of the past” (p. 111). As such, when reproduced some years later, these memories incorporate fantastic elements which help them fulfil other purposes than the honest delivery of a historical truth to the contemporary generation. That is, the verity of the Chinese narratives is not as important as the purpose they intend to serve. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the contemporary American context and its contingencies determine the content of China narratives for the mothers.

Mothers’ talk-stories take various modes and structures, too. Some of the tales are utterly fantastic, and, as one of the daughters, Jing-mei, remarks, end with a “happy note.” Telling her daughter about the first Joy Luck Club she formed in the war-stricken Chinese city of Kweilin, Suyuan says: “So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year. Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren’t allowed to think a bad thought [...] My mother used to end the story on a happy note, bragging about her skill at the game” (Tan, 1989, p. 25). Even in America, when the old women meet in the Joy Luck Club they often avoid retelling tragic stories of their own lives. After eating dinner in the Joy Luck Club, Jing-mei speaks: “[The women] go back to eating their soft boiled peanuts, saying stories among themselves. They are young girls again, dreaming of good times in the past and good times yet to come” (Tan, 1989, p. 41). The mothers tell happy stories to comfort themselves and to re-shape the reality around them. They recount “the best stories,” as Suyuan says, in the hope of being “lucky” because “hope was [their] only joy” (p. 25).

Mama Day and *Two Wings*, on the other hand, seem to be more allusive and less direct about real historical incidents. Yet the narrators in both novels allude to the atrocities of slavery. The communal voice in *Mama Day* often remembers the enslavement and the Middle Passage. She introduces “Sapphira Wade,” a symbol of slavery and suppression, to the reader in the very first

pages of the novel but explains that her name never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs because “she don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (Naylor, 1988, p. 4). In fact, everybody knows the woman but cannot express her name verbally. As Elizabeth T. Hayes (2004) maintains, Gloria Naylor puts emphasis on “the pre-verbal semiotic register, where communication is intuitive, wordless, and negotiated through the mother’s body” (p. 674). Therefore, although Sapphira’s name is not “breathed out,” she and the history pertaining to her lie in the collective consciousness of the entire community.

Sapphira Wade is a legendary figure whose name has not been officially registered in historical documents and thus no one knows what she really was called. The only written text that attests to her existence is a bill of sale so damaged that Miranda is unable to decipher it (Naylor, 1988, pp. 279–80). Sapphira’s oblique presence, in fact, symbolizes the elimination of the African Americans, especially African American women, from the official historical records. To supplement written archives of history, Gloria Naylor turns to oral legends. In this way, in Gloria Naylor’s Willow Springs community the past of the community is present not as official histories but in the form of legends and mythic tales remembered and handed down from one generation to another.

The presence of past in the memory of the characters is a powerful leitmotif in contemporary Southern fiction and the fiction of those—like Naylor—who write about the South. Past plays a critical role in *Mama Day*, too. Gloria Naylor introduces it as a treasury of cultural and racial identity that affects the character. By representing the past filtered through mythic consciousness of the people, Paula Gallant Eckard (1995) also notes, Naylor examines, deconstructs, and finally redefines the past instead of making any effort to rediscover the original past (p. 121). Moreover, Naylor strives to procure functionality of this kind of representation and to turn a mere joke into a liberating force. As Miranda says in the novel, “It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge”(Naylor, 1988, p. 3). The white’s mapping, ethnography, and history prove to be inadequate in defining the present and the past. The society shuns “Reema’s boy,” the ethnographer who intends to map out the island’s history and culture because he relies only on western methods of measurement which reify the ethnographic objects of the study and ignore the long repressed voices (Naylor, 1988, pp. 7–8). In this way, history in *Mama Day* is closely in conjunction with women, motherhood, and conjuration, and gives us a representation of the events which is parallel, equally reliable, and complementary to the official history of the whites.

Grand-Momma Sweetie in *Two Wings* also gives an account of the cruelty of slavery in the Deep South. Unlike Amy Tan’s “auntie’s” narratives, Grand-momma’s story in *Two Wings* is bitter and hard to swallow. Nathaniel understands that Grand-Momma’s story is different from and more nightmarish than what he has already heard: Nathaniel muses that “this is completely different from the story I’ve always heard, Momma Sweetie. Is nothing as it seems but the visions we have in nightmares that demand that we question the easy sleeve of sleep?” (Forrest, 1983, p. 282) By moving back and forth from the orality of Sweetie’s narrative to written historical documents, Nathaniel corrects the vagaries and imperfections inherent in oral (hi)storytelling. Since Sweetie has to remember stories of different people in the past two centuries and because some unreliable narrators such as I.V. Reed have narrated some of the stories to her, they might be inaccurate. Additionally, Sweetie’s hatred of her patrimony makes us doubt her reliability, too. Hence, Forrest incorporates written documents to improve Sweetie’s narrative. This quality, according to Hegerfeldt (2005), differentiates magical realism from the romantic modes of presentation. Whereas the romantic texts often present orality, mythos, and imagination as superior to textuality, logos, and rationality, the magical realist texts often find a middle ground and question the validity of each alternative when applied alone (p. 160). Nonetheless, Forrest’s protagonist, Sweetie, is aware of the interplay between oral history engrained in memory and the written historical records. She knows that for the subalterns’ voices to be heard, they must use both oral memory and written texts. For this

reason, she requires Nathaniel to commit the tales to his memory and to jot the stories down on paper. Grand-Momma Sweetie tells Nathaniel:

Just bring along a pen and pad, not a pencil, either, because too much has been erased in time. Nor an indelible pencil. Write it all down in longhand, with blue-black ink on the pad, in your notebook, and then it all will be recorded on the tablet of your memory and in your heart, as it's transformed from your longhand to your short memory. It's time we moved from listening and half hearing to listening and recording in longhand. (Forrest, 1983, p. 7, italics in original)

The tension between the orality and textuality in *Two Wings* reaches its apex when Nathaniel opens up a box belonging to Sweetie and finds a tintype in it with an inscription on it reading, “to Jerry, Lucasta—with the love from my heart, free flowing.” Sweetie believes that the picture belongs to her late husband’s mistress, Lucasta. But “for Nathaniel the picture looked exactly like the pictures Jericho Witherspoon must have drawn out upon the sleeve of his memory, and fitting those descriptions of Angelina that Great-Momma Sweetie had given” (Forrest, 1983, p. 293). While Sweetie urges that the tintype belongs to Lucasta, Nathaniel supposes that it is most probably an image of Angelina, Sweetie’s mother, whom Jericho loved. Each of them, in fact, presents his or her own interpretation of the tintype, and in this way, Forrest challenges the validity of textuality, symbolized by the tintype, to read the past indisputably.

Therefore, almost all the narrators and storytellers stress the importance of remembering and retelling the past events for a variety of reasons. However, save for *Tracks* and *Bearheart*, which primarily represent Native Americans’ conditions, none of the other novels gives us a nostalgic representation of the past. These two novels lament the loss of a Utopia which has given way to fast technological and capitalistic progressions. Nanapush’s nostalgic remark is revealing: “I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 3). Vizenor portrays the four different worlds in *Bearheart* as such: “the earth turtle emerge from the great flood of the first world. In the second world the earth is alive in the magical voices and ceremonial words of brids and the healing energies of plants [...]” (Vizenor, 1990, p. 5). Memories of the time past, however, for the African Americans as portrayed in *Mama Day* and *Two Wings* are always shadowed by horrible traumatic experiences. Grand-Momma Sweetie, in *Two Wings*, tells Nathaniel of a family history full of violence, rape, and brutality. In *Mama Day*, the history is so traumatic that almost everybody on the island remembers the island’s history with caution (Naylor, 1988, p. 4). Interestingly, Arthur in *Two Wings* and George in *Mama Day*, who resisted the urge to remember the past, suffered from physical ailments that resurfaced whenever they had to remember the past. In *China Men* and *The Joy Luck Club* the memories of China are mostly intermingled with famine, corruption, and suppression. Almost all of the aunties suffered at the hands of cruel husbands who misused them. Some of Kingston’s ancestors also immigrated to the Americas not to find gold but to escape the civil wars (Kingston, 1989, pp. 91–2). Generally, except for *Tracks* and *Bearheart*, the other novels scarcely lament the past and never reflect any wish to revive earlier periods.

More to the point, whereas each novelist holds a different view towards the past, almost all of them deploy magical elements to demonstrate the supremacy of communal and familial bonds over individuality. African American novels provide a more powerful picture of this tendency. Miranda in *Mama Day* and Grand-Momma Sweetie in *Two Wings* do their best to portray the healing power of community and togetherness. *Mama Day*’s plot begins with Miranda’s concern over Ophelia’s marriage and the continuation of the familial line. *Two Wings* unravels when Grand-Momma explains that she has raised Arthur, her husband’s illegitimate son, despite the grudges she bore against Jericho for his infidelity. Chinese American novels also focus on the interrelations between the family members. In *China Men*, remembering the stories and adventures of her ancestors in America empower Kingston, the narrator, to redefine her American identity. In *The Joy Luck Club*, by focusing on mother-daughter relations, the daughters learn to attach importance to family bonds and celebrate tradition and ancestral legacy. When finally Jing-mei Woo visits

China to meet her half-sisters, she notes their facial similarities to metaphorically underline their deep emotional ties: “although we don’t speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother” (Tan, 1989, p. 332).

In *Tracks*, Erdrich lets the elderly communicate the family wisdom to the younger generation and, in this way, she gives priority to communal values and bonds over individuality. *Bearheart*, however, differs from the rest of them in terms of its conception of community. Prude Cedarfair embarks on a pilgrimage to find the fourth world—a kind of an ideal world—which includes non-Indians as well. Gerald Vizenor refuses to specify the racial identity of some pilgrims such as Bishop Omax Parasimo, Justice Pardone Cozener, and Doctor Wilde Coxwain, Little Mae Farrier, Sun Bear Sun Little Big Mouse. Vizenor’s definition of community, in this way, includes all Americans who share similar socio-political concerns. In fact, almost all the novels discussed reveal a common tendency to otherize other inhabitants of the United States. In all these novels, whites and other ethnicities turn to be either none-existent or at most typical and voiceless characters.

3. Conclusion

Whereas all the novels discussed above display an indispensable interrelation between the process of identicization, outlook on nature, and historical consciousness, yet the narrators’ understanding of this correspondence is varied and at times opposing. For instance, in *China Men* and *The Joy Luck Club*, at least for the early Chinese American settlers, American pristine environment barely possesses any magical qualities, and they usually associate themselves with whites whose identity is defined based on how they manage to master and control the nature. Unlike them, in *Tracks* and *Bearheart*, animals and animal imagery are finely interwoven into the fabric of the texts and American nature, which is holy and pregnant with redeeming magical qualities, is both protective and in need of protection. This difference in outlook on nature is related to how ideologies, myths, and beliefs have built up the characters’ views towards nature. Far from being natural and ahistorical, these widely divergent views have their roots in how these non-white groups were situated in the American history. The narrators in these novels reveal a deep concern with history and the way it must be presented. As a result, the novelists shed light on dimension of official narratives of history which are silenced or ostracised. And to that end, they give the previously marginalized focalizers the opportunity to offer their own narratives of historical developments. Thus their views on what ought to be remembered and what must be ignored challenges mainstream Anglo-American historiography. In their narratives, they often prioritize oral and mythic narratives of the past over historical and written documents which are reminiscent of the colonizers’ views on history. This is most importantly manifest in *Mama Day* and *Two Wings* which, to some degrees, portray a part of African American experience and the upshots of slavery. These two novels are rather oblique in their presentation of real historical incidents. The narratives in these two novels are mainly based on characters’ personal memories, hearsays, and rumours that circulate among the people.

In general, all the six US ethnic novels studied here reveal surprising similarities in terms of thematic concerns that their intra-diegetic narrators try to communicate. Yet, their diverse perceptions of marginality in the American society, as well as their mythological, cultural, and folkloric discrepancies, have persuaded the narrators to respond differently to their socio-political conditions. Although magical realism stresses the clash between two world-views, which ends up in the intrusion of “non-rational” elements into the rational world, the socio-political signification that the narratives convey to the readers are unique from one narrative to another. The narrators do not necessarily lament the destruction of Nature, nor do they entirely feel at home in the Americas, and although almost for all of them the remembrance of the past is important, the memory of it is hardly nostalgic and romanticized.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Mohsen Hanif¹

E-mail: mhanif@khu.ac.ir

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4778-0943>

Tahereh Rezaei²

E-mail: trezaei@atu.ac.ir

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-4720>

¹ English Literature, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran.

² English Literature, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

Citation information

Cite this article as: The interconnection between nature and history in US ethnic magical realist novels, Mohsen Hanif & Tahereh Rezaei, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2018), 5: 1500666.

Notes

1. See, e.g. Donelle N. Dreese collection of articles on the interrelation between environment and Native American Literature.
2. Many postmodern critics such Brian McHale in *Postmodern Fiction* and Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* believe that magical realism is a subcategory of postmodern fiction, and thus it must be discussed within postmodern discourse and its frame of reference. But, in the present article, the authors agree with Theo D'haen (1995) in "Magical realism and postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers" wherein he argues that although magical realism appropriates the techniques of the center (which for him is postmodernism), it in effect moves beyond the center and tries "to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this 'reality' depends upon" (p. 195). Hence, D'haen emphasizes the political tendency and urge magical realism bears which he believes is missing in mainstream or earlier modes of postmodern literature.
3. Nanapush is the epitome of such hybridity. As for him, he believes in the existence of the Lake Monster, and the inhabitants of the reservation consider him an elderly with secret magic powers, yet he attends the church and diagnostically points to the superstitious beliefs of his community. Despite that, Nanapush verges on mimicking the colonial power in a positive way in order for his tribe and its values to survive. Nanapush enters the bureaucratic system set by the whites. He says: "To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home" (Erdrich, 1988. p. 225).

References

Aebersold, A. (2015). Landscape and belonging in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China men* and Milton Murayama's *all i asking for is my body*. In L. Fitzsimmons, Y. Chae, & B. Adams (Eds.), *Asian American literature and environment* (pp. 13–29). New York and London: Routledge.

- Arnold, B., & Swenson, A. (2008). *Competition for her Virgin Soil of Kansas: Gendered and Sexualized Discourse about the Kansas Crisis in Northern Popular Print and Political Culture, 1854–1860* (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Minnesota.
- Byerman, K. (2005). *Remembering the past in contemporary African American fiction*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Castellucci Cox, K. (1998). Magic and memory in the cotemporary story cycle: Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrich. *Colleg*, 60(2), 150–172.
- D'haen, T. (1995). Magical realism and postmodernism: Decentering privileged centers. In P. Zamora & W. B. Faris (Eds.), *Theory, history, community* (pp. 191–208). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Dreese, D. N. (2002). *Ecocriticism: Creating self and place in environmental and American Indian literatures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Eckard, P. G. (1995). The prismatic past in oral history and mama day. *MeLUS (History and Memory)*, 20(3), 121–135. doi:10.2307/467746
- Erdrich, L. (1988). *Tracks*. New York: Pennial Library.
- Finney, C. (2014). *Black faces, white spaces: Reimagining the relationship of African Americans to the great outdoors*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Forrest, L. (1983). *Two wings to veil my face*. New York: Random House.
- Genette, G. (1992). *The architext: An introduction (Introduction a Introduction, 1979)*, (J. E. Lewin Trans.). Oxford: Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Hayes, E. T. (2004). The named and the nameless: Morrison's 124 and Naylor's 'the other place' as semiotic chorae. *African American Review*, 38(4), 669–681. doi:10.2307/4134424
- Hegerfeldt, A. C. (2005). *Lies that tell the truth; Magic realism seen through contemporary fiction from Britain*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi B.V.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Kingston, M. H. (1989). *China Men*. New York: Vintage books.
- Lamothe, D. (2004). Gloria Naylor's 'Mama day': Bridging roots and routes. *African American Review*, 39(1/2), 155–169.
- Naylor, G. (1988). *Mama day*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rigal-Cellard, B. (1997). Doubling in Gerald Vizenor's *bearheart*: The pilgrimes strategy or bunyan rivisted. *Studies in American Indian Literature*, 9(1), 93–114.
- Tan, A. (1989). *The joy luck club*. New York: Penuin Books. (reprint 2006).
- Vizenor, G. (1990). *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*. Minneapolis: University of Mennesota Press. (first published in 1978).
- White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The historical imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Yuan, Y. (2009). Mothers' 'China narrative': Recollection and translation in Amy Tan's *The joy luck club* and *The kitchen god's wife*. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Bloom's modern critical interpretations: Amy Tan's The joy luck club* (pp. 109–127). New York: Infobase Publishing.



© 2018 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

