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STUDENT **PAPER** 5

Mind, Body, and (De)Mystic: Indigenous Epistemologies in K-Ming Chang's Magical Realist Short Fiction

Elisa Ady

Introduction

Magical realism, widely regarded as the "literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha, 6), renders visible what Western ideological projects have for so long fought to enshroud—alternate ways of knowing. Like Indigenous cultures caught under colonial rule, magical realism remains largely inscrutable to Western tradition, particularly epistemic tradition as we understand it today in ideological and institutional capacities. By and large, the literary movement continues to evade classification for precisely the reasons that it is still so well known; magical realism mimics (whether intentionally or not) the material conditions of Indigenous cultures struggling between ideological imperatives—that is, precolonial and postcolonial ways of being and knowing. The enduring presence of precolonial ways of knowing (or 'epistemologies' as a shorthand) within the genre of magical realism, then, is primarily responsible for this inscrutability. Readers deeply ensconced in a Western or Eurocentric episteme may fight to understand, for example, magical realist knowledge gleaned through the imagination, or through an intergenerational trauma rooted in colonial legacies of race and ethnicity. One way to interrogate the epistemologies embedded in the genre—and their material applications—might be to first investigate how Western ways of knowing rely upon particular cultural histories of the senses. Knowledge supported by the five senses is funneled through Western institutions and ideologies of "logic, and rational empiricism" (Cajete, 2), to be validated or contested by turns, an ongoing epistemological project which seeks to accomplish a uni-national authority in countries like America. The intention here is a systemic erosion of the existence of Indigenous peoples, whose national and cultural identity, and thus belief systems, continue to come under colonial threat in our current historical moment.

One of the long-standing fascinations—and problems—with magical realism is this: characters navigating texts within the genre operate according to systems of knowing that borrow from both Western modes of representation, like realism, and Indigenous modes, like ancestral philosophies (memory, communication, and knowledge). Magical realism alternately destabilizes and legitimizes dominant modes of representation through the inclusion of alternate epistemologies, in a process that produces a kind of narrative hybridity not unlike contemporary transculturation. This in-text knowledge production takes from and blends systems of knowing in what many scholars believe to be an exploitation of the Indigenous, as when Faris calls realism, with roots in Eurocentrism, simultaneously responsible for the cannibalization and the replenishment of an "Indigenous fantastic" (149). In order to assimilate

the uncanny into dominant modes of representation like realism, characters must attempt to—at least in part, if not always successfully or wholly consciously—confront and perhaps also work to undermine "empirically constructed perceptions of reality" (23). For Indigenous peoples like the Kānaka Maoli, for example, this confrontation or forced assimilation between the precolonial and postcolonial is constant (Meyer). Indigenous scholars and magical realist characters alike continue to grapple with what 'reality' and 'knowledge' mean under violent (post)colonial rule. Here, I stage a conversation between Indigenous and magical realist ways of knowing with the purpose of demonstrating how non-dominant epistemologies can begin to look towards healing, decoloniality, and new paradigms of research. Reading Taiwanese-American writer K-Ming Chang and her short fiction as a magical realist field of reference from which to measure the nuances of Manulani Meyer's theory of "cultural empiricism" ("Holographic Epistemology" 96), as well as Kichwa lawyer Nina Pacari's concept of an epistemic decolonization, I point to what I call epistemic alterities as a demonstrated example of Indigeneity radically challenging our understanding of 'realities' and relational practices.

Alternative, Otherwise, On the Other Hand

Million calls Western knowledge production a practice in civilization. To civilize: that is, to lift or wrench one out of the so-called primitive state. The West understands and maintains distance between the categories 'primitive' and 'civilized' in order to enforce a rigorous sociocultural standard through which to alter, assimilate, and expunge those living under this predominance. In other words, to be considered 'primitive' in the Western significance of this word is to acknowledge an inherent developmental deficiency in the (post)colonial subject. The proposed solution for this deficiency is then a forced evolution towards 'civilized.' By virtue of this 'civilizing' project, Indigenous peoples are seen as either 'primitive' or on their way to being 'civilized'—that is, they are caught in a never-ending liminal space from which their ways of being and knowing are at constant risk of violent extinction. One of the jobs of what I call Western truth projects, or epistemic ideologies, is this process of civilizing, a kind of sociocultural genocide.

In relation to a hegemonic order of 'truth' under (post)colonial rule, Indigenous ways of knowing are systematically recalibrated as 'alternative'—to which I put forward Catherine E. Walsh's idea of interculturality as the "project of an otherwise" (59), a concept she borrows from Black and Indigenous epistemologies in Otherwise Worlds. 'Alternative' may then instead become 'otherwise,' perhaps even 'on the other hand.' Though, historically, Indigenous ways of being and knowing far precede Western truth projects in countries like America, hegemony aims to destroy their social, cultural, political, economic, and epistemic significance. Thus, Western knowledge production is colonial by nature and perpetually ever-expanding. It does not ask. It tells, with and by force. As Million suggests, "Epistemology is an '-ology' of disciplinary origin defining and guarding the existential and ontological boundaries of acceptable Western truth claims" (339). Native science, as Cajete refers to it, is consequently mystified and undermined. While the truth project in question might assert that it acts in accordance with an empirical reality, its true purpose is to maintain one (hegemonic) system of knowing to the exclusion of all others. It is important to note here that the 'West' and 'Western truth projects' do not necessarily refer to geographic sites so much as ideologies with legacies rooted in the forced assimilation and attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples.

Unfamiliar Oppositions: Precolonial/Postcolonial

Young and Holloman describe the magical realism movement as one made up of "familiar oppositions—life and death, waking and sleeping, child and adult, civilized and 'savage'"

(2). We might add to this list the oppositional tension between Western empirical constructions of the 'real' and those modes of representation that far exceed empiricism. This opposition is best expressed in Latin America's twentieth century coinage (or hijacking) of the phrase 'magical realism' from German art critic Franz Roh, whose proposed usage concerned a visual arts-specific celebration of the mundane. The lasting oppositional tension built into the genre continues to marry contending forces—ancient/modern (Faris), spiritual/irreverent, magic/mundane, precolonial/postcolonial, mystical/material, extraordinary/ordinary, imperial/Indigenous, and so on and so forth—though to suggest that this contention is in any way balanced grossly misunderstands Western truth projects within larger global power structures. Put another way, as readers journey through magical realist texts in search of new or alternate systems of knowing implied by the narrative, they are forced to reckon with worlds that test the limits of Western thought as pertains to events or knowledge verifiable through the five senses.

Faris names the hybrid narrative mode inherent to magical realism one of "defocalization" (46), which I understand instead as epistemic alterities—that is, the liminal spaces produced by non-dominant ways of knowing forced to intermingle or interact with dominant epistemic ideals. As epistemic alterities unfurl, characters are met with and embrace ways of innate knowing that prize memory, imagination, desire, intergenerational trauma, and even "reflexive relationship[s]" (Armstrong) that decenter the human without leaning into profit driven exploitation. These literary epistemic alterities likewise describe the experiences of Indigenous peoples forced to integrate dominant modes of thinking or living (like Western truth projects) into cultures rooted in precolonial thought, creation, and being. The ensuing cultural enmeshment of precolonial/postcolonial, nonhuman/human, nature/capitalism creates an entirely new experience of reality for the Indigenous thinker; thus, an epistemic alterity is achieved where before designations like 'other' and 'primitive' were simply embodied realities untapped by violent colonization. The effect of this kind of transculturation or epistemic alterity mirrors magical realism, where modes of empirical realism blend together with the magical, the mystical, the spiritual, or the otherwise ineffable (Faris).

Meyer captures this cultural enmeshment when she writes, "Here is where Indigenous realities, contexts and understandings can benefit from cross fertilization with Western classical sciences" ("Holographic Epistemology" 94). For scholars like Meyer, most significant to a cross fertilization of epistemologies is acknowledgment that there is no universal system of knowledge. In place of the hegemony of Western empiricism, Meyer proposes a concept of "cultural empiricism" (96) that acknowledges the significance of nuanced differences in peoples, traditions, and locations. This acknowledgment—and subsequent cross fertilization—is, however, only a sociopolitical prelude for groups like the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca, Colombia and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Walsh, 57), whose conception of interculturality seeks to achieve an epistemic coexistence similar to Meyer's cultural empiricism. Here, however, cross fertilization with becomes a struggle against, not only Western hierarchy, but also Western hegemony in pursuit of material change, a feat that many believe can only be tackled through social, political, cultural, economic, and epistemic shifts in power. Unlike cultural empiricism, one of interculturality's desired end goals is, in the words of Pacari, an "epistemic decolonization" project intended to construct "a new social condition of knowledge" (47). So while Meyer proposes a framework for recontextualizing our world, Indigenous peoples in Ecuador, for example, are putting forth organizing demands from which to reorient the organization of state and government.

Magical Realist Modes of Representation

To venture into magical realist worlds, readers, in the words of Zamora, must collapse "the literal and figurative meanings of 'vision'" ("Swords and Silver Rings" 31), or abolish the boundaries between sight (sensory perception) and insight (mental processes). The seamlessness or simultaneity of this collapse is echoed by Debicki's understanding of Meyer's cultural empiricism as an expansion or blurring "between the literal and figurative" (252). In its literary significance, the eyes alone are not the sole or most significant source of awareness, as readers of realist fiction or even vocal proponents of empiricism might be accustomed to. Events in these texts often cannot be explained "according to [Western] 'logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief'" (Faris, 7), but are generally no less true for it. Magical realism's hybridity comes from
this process of belief blending. Narrative events are not always "empirically verif[ied]" (3) and do not necessarily need to be for readers to integrate into this new system of epistemic alterities. Indigenous worldviews then intersect with magical realist worldviews in as much as both imply that "symbolic and literal meaning exist so close together that, in some sense, there is no difference at all" (Debicki, 252). Thus, Reality is not solely material—not strictly observable by the five senses privileged by Western thinking—but an amalgamation of epistemologies caught in the crossfire of precolonial and postcolonial tensions.

The systems of knowledge at play within magical realism are often beholden to similar cultural cross fertilizations—and even struggle. Sense-defined experiences of reality do occur in magical realist texts, as in Western knowledge traditions of empiricism. However, these experiences are often enhanced and invigorated by traditions thought to subvert empiricism. This is true of Chang's magical realist short fiction, where authority is achieved through myth, queerness, ancestral memory, and intergenerational trauma, the latter of which frequently serves as a conduit for communication and knowledge acquisition. These avenues taken towards new understandings of reality are at times themselves senses wielded by the queer women of color walking Chang's worlds, as unraveling epistemic alterities begin to disrupt ideas of a universal reality or system of knowing.

And yet, hierarchical or hegemonic order in Western thought presumes that certain systems of knowing have greater claim to truth than others. This notion is similarly espoused by genre conventions in realism, where authority is gathered through a preoccupation with the mundane, authentic, or 'true,' a narrative fixture that still carries over to much of magical realism. Often, an understanding of 'authenticity' is achieved within magical realism through a systemic record of detail observed by the naked eye, a stylistic choice popularized by formative writers working within the Latin American magical realist tradition like Gabriel García Márquez, known by many for his sweeping paragraphs and his affinity for the exhaustive and the precise. This literary inclination, ultimately subsumed by magical realism, Echevarría likens to European archival traditions concerned with the preservation of facts, truth, or culture through the written word. In other words, an archival tradition where authority is gathered through that which can be recorded and preserved for English-speaking populations directly opposes—and even invalidates—foundational Indigenous epistemologies like oral storytelling. Thus, methods of Western knowledge acquisition and validation thought to be most authentic or valuable work to weaken Indigenous epistemologies. Chang gets at the heart of this when she emphasizes the importance of oral storytelling within her own oeuvre: "Because of barriers to literacy, oral stories were often used as the primary way of recording history and myth."

To begin to confront the sociocultural contention between the written and the spoken, Chang weaves ancestral knowledge, memory, and myth into her fiction, often without ever truly distinguishing 'truth' from 'imagination,' as epistemological distinctions like these are

irrelevant to the experiences of her characters. This endows Indigenous and/or diasporic figures in her works authority over the many stories running parallel, whether they're overarching narratives or anecdotal detours within a larger work: "My mother has never gotten her period. She claims she got pregnant by pushing chicken eggs inside herself, and that's why we've grown up so fast: we have the lifespans of chickens. She laughed when she said it, but I cried every night for months" ("Sitting the Month"). An epistemic alterity is achieved through the process of accommodating non-dominant modes of representation, like oral storytelling, and we see this mode of representation absorb power and thus authority through its reception by other characters, as when the narrator begins to weep nightly over the new knowledge that she cannot live past her family's oldest hen, who's fourteen years old. And though this piece of in-text knowledge eventually appears to be inaccurate, it must also interact with events like the narrator's mother later leaving her "facedown in the water until [she] grew gills," so that most knowledge—regardless of perceived value or accuracy—is believed, experienced, and embodied until absolutely proven false (often through nonexistence).

To successfully achieve its hybridity, the magical realist narrative must make attempts at modifying Western genre conventions "based in empirical evidence, incorporating other kinds of perception" (Faris, 43) into the knowledge acquisition and experiences of the characters. This could mean a seamless synthesis of ancestral philosophies—recurring within Chang's repertoire and integral to the Okanagan way of life (Armstrong), for example—or queerness as an embodied epistemological practice, as when Chang refers to queer desire as its "own bodily language and vocabulary that is separate from the languages [my characters have] learned," like Mandarin or English. In other words, to be queer in the magical realist worlds of Chang's fiction is to embody a theory of knowledge all its own. Language is signaled in and around the body, a clandestine conception of communication that is by nature non-dominant; it can only be experienced, tapped into, and repeated by those few feeling and embodying the queer desire, so that the knowledge production occurring between two girls is at once reciprocal, symbiotic, and constantly in collaboration, as in Chang's short story "Five Wounds": "I'd come here willing something, willing to be seen, and Lily was turning toward me again, her hands on my shoulders, swiveling me toward a window, stained-glass, of a woman getting stabbed." Here, the image of a woman being violently penetrated—presumably by a weapon of some kind, like a knife— enforces a power dynamic of assailant/victim that is directly contrasted with the reciprocity of the narrator willing herself and Lily into a feedback loop of perception. To be looked upon by another lesbian is enough to inspire new knowledge, even if that knowledge begins and ends with the existence of a second girl in an epistemic alterity initially thought to be absent of others. Unlike the assailant/victim relationship as a tableau which hinges upon gendered power, violence, and non-consent, the knowledge that more than one person might inhabit a queer epistemic alterity is communicated with as little as Lily's thumb touched "once to the back of a girl's neck" before she willingly drifts away. The epistemological practice of queerness and queer desire is then communal rather than individual, a physical language that requires an interchange of some kind, as when Lily sees the girl she's touched "look back at [her]," even when Lily herself isn't there, something she calls "scarier than those boys with their revving chainsaws and their glow-in-the-dark skullcaps, I'm what disappears." Lily's language doesn't need to leave a mark behind to be experienced or understood, as the language of the woman being stabbed does. Neither is Lily empowered by the fear that her presence inspires the way that the boys wielding chainsaws at the Halloween Haunt are. More than that, Lily doesn't require confirmation of the knowledge that she's spooked the girls; because she's lesbian, she preemptively assumes that her physical presence and bodily language is itself

terrifying to both herself and the objects of her desire. Thus, her epistemological practice is one of mutual fear rather than an imbalance in power. This is unlike the boys carrying chainsaws, who are enacting and embodying a performance of violence specifically designed to elicit physical reactions from the girls. Put another way, Lily is forced to anticipate and consider the fear her desire might arouse in other girls, even as she leaves the scene of terror without first confirming reactions— "And she was spooked, I knew it, I saw her look back at me, but I wasn't there"—while the boys specifically seek out evidence that their violence has been understood as such to successfully fulfill their roles. This queer epistemology of consideration for others above the self is a critical distinction in Chang's thematic body of work and in the Indigenous epistemologies touched on herein, both of which work to subvert Western ways of knowing that center the individual and their power.

Meyer suggests that all systems of knowing are subject to complex "qualities of how cultural people, distinct to a place, see and participate in the world" ("Indigenous and Authentic" 391). These complexities are particularly significant in cultures where relational existence or reflexive thinking is focal; among Native Hawaiians, or Kānaka Maoli thinkers like Meyer, knowledge is often defined by and absorbed through interactions with the natural world:

> *This different understanding of epistemology began with my own Hawaiian people. [...] It was delivered through song by those who understood the emotion of rains, and why stones were gendered. It arrived from those who sailed vast open oceans with veracious acumen and mythic curiosity. [...] Clarity grew from under blue sky and within clear water as beaches and streams nourished my understanding and dreams, and detailed noa huna (the secret insights from seen/unseen sources). ("Indigenous Spirituality" 152–53)*

This is a principle that I argue also applies to magical realism, particularly Chang's, where nature re-exerts control over the widespread, capital-driven industrialization occurring through unusual or uncanny events. Chang's characters are frequently demarcated by the subservient or witness bearing roles that they play to the larger systems unspooling around them, including the natural world. In this way, they themselves embody a decentered epistemological practice, one where humans are second to nature, and passivity—often avoided in characters by Western literary traditions—allows them to establish a line of communication (or reflexive thought project) with, for example, bodies of water, as when Chang says in an interview about her novel Bestiary, "I also think a lot about water existing both inside and outside of the body. A huge part of the indigeneity of Daughter's family is their rootedness to the land and their understanding of land and water as having its own autonomy and agency."

In Chang's magical realist episteme, we see echoed an integral Indigenous principle put forth by not only Meyer, but also Million, who writes of the Okanagan or Syilx people: "[...] it is the 'land,' not the speakers who are central. It is 'all their relations' in that place with the myriad entities that 'make' it. It is the 'life force' as it is known in that 'place'" (342). The speakers are not central, though this doesn't mean that they're absent or discarded by nature itself. It seems instead that acknowledgment of a non-central role in an Okanagan way of being and knowing begins with the non-central subject's understanding of nature as a force that possesses the power to move and speak through them (Armstrong). Their relations to each other, particularly their ancestors, to the surrounding flora and fauna, and to the natural environment that they inhabit, remain most integral to the formation of 'place' not only as a component of their so-called empirical reality, but also as a site for sociocultural connection. In other words, the subject relinquishes themself to the natural world, achieving a shared autonomy that is regenerative and perpetually self-sustaining, not unlike this moment in Chang's "Five Wounds":

> *Lily [...] started to tell me a story, about how her mother had a limb made of wind. [...] She carried her limb of wind everywhere. There's no way to sever something made of air. What happened to her, I asked, and Lily said that she*

> *was gone. Eventually her entire body assimilated into wind, and now she rattled bodies of water and induced storms in other countries and occasionally visited her daughters by wind-burning their chins and suspending their skirt-hems, lifting them to the ribs.*

Lily's mother serves as a conduit through which nature—specifically, the wind—can communicate its existence. The wind reclaims autonomy over encroaching capitalistic and colonial forces by bruising "everything [Lily's mother] touched," by quite literally moving through her, and eventually absorbing her physical form. Death, in this instance, is framed as a regenerative process, where forsaking one's flesh means returning to nature. This epistemological impulse then works to disrupt the "human-defined subject of law and with it the Western, colonial, and Cartesian logic that separates humans and nature" (Walsh, 65), an epistemic function that allows Western truth projects gleeful sanction to impose on a disembodied notion of nature through exploitation. In Chang's work and in a nonhuman-centered Indigenous framework, nature takes precedence over impulses toward greed and colonization. More to the point, the idea of passivity, subservience, or observance as a strength rather than a poor mode of narration is of note, as it defies our understanding of Western literary traditions, specifically literary traditions concerned with the hero's journey. In Chang's magical realism, the existence of a human hero would only threaten the autonomy of the natural world. Instead, humans stand witness to the thrashing forces of a vengeful Earth reclaiming its body from the exploitative powers of empire, and this display of natural strength is itself heroic. Nature, then, is the ultimate authority on knowledge—not humankind.

Epistemic Liminalities: Being, Seeing, Knowing

In the context of Meyer's theoretical framework, the magical realist knowledge system expands to include not just events considered overtly out of the ordinary, but also modes of representation that the West has historically worked to banish from the realm of truth production: imagination, nostalgia, reflection, meta-consciousness, intuition, ancestral knowledge or ancestral memory, cultural tradition, and so on and so forth. Specifically, Meyer proposes a holistic framework for understanding Indigenous knowledge with help from post-quantum sciences. She calls this framework "holographic epistemology" ("Holographic Epistemology" 94), and within this framework, she identifies three principal categories. First, the body. This, Meyer likens to empiricism, though she again makes the distinction that sensory knowledge is culturally defined. The body captures sense-memories considered objective and physical, experiences like "scraped and bloody knees from a hill we knew would thrill us" or, "the weight of a premature baby in one hand" (96). Second is the mind. The mind is responsible for much of the color that magical realist worlds carry (Zamora and Faris) and is frequently the source of creation or reality construction in Chang's work. This means it is also the site of awareness, idea, and assigned meaning, and often blankets the physical world. The spirit is the third and final category of this holographic triangulation. This, according to Meyer, completes the trilogy, and includes the transpatial, non-physical, cultural, mystical, and contemplative (97).

When applied to Chang's short fiction, crucial parallels between this holographic epistemology and magical realist epistemologies emerge. The following one-sentence excerpt from Chang's short story, "Skins," best captures, in miniature, the parallel that I posit: "The front door was framed in white columns that reminded me of whale bones, the ribs of a myth." When broken up into pieces, Meyer's framework becomes immediately discernible. "The front door was framed in white columns" is a piece of information gleaned by the main character Sacred through sense-experience. Thus, it's considered physical and objective. But it quickly segues into, "...that reminded me of whale bones." This comes from the mind, or memory. It's a mental leap that might seem random to anyone but Sacred, who carries cultural experiences distinct from the rest of the world, and whose inner reflection has the power to devour and transform inanimate

objects. And finally, the sentence concludes with, "the ribs of a myth." Myth is a theme that's present in all of Chang's fiction and is always closely interwoven with ancestral memory and ancestral knowledge—and thus transcends notions of a physical place or a sense of belonging. In this sentence alone, we move from body to mind to spirit in a single sentence, although Meyer urges readers to think of this trilogy not as a linear narrative, but as a simultaneous, three-dimensional, holographic event.

In "Sitting the Month," Chang begins: "The white girls lightened their hair in the summer with lemon and olive oil. My hair stayed dark. In some photos, I looked like another girl's shadow: weightless, shapeless, my body missing a body." Photography here is an apt example of the liminal space suggested by Meyer's epistemological triad, as we experience the mind, the body, and the transpatial in a seemingly synchronous, superimposed knowledge system. Moreover, it's a system that is no longer devalued as in the Western 'civilizing' project, but understood as a significant or notable epistemic alterity through which "all things from trees to photographs have a potential spiritual vitality" (Quayson). Put another way, photography as a practice might seem like a scientific pursuit with the goal of representing 'objective reality,' but it entails both the photographer's taking and processing of light-sensitive material and the artistic intentions of each individual photographer and viewer, respectively. At its most rudimentary, photography should be an empirical quest to capture that which already universally exists—or at least that which remains available to all able-bodied viewers (when pointing to the limits of sense-derived knowledge, it is important to include differently-abled perceivers). And yet, as Chang demonstrates here, photography becomes its own unique liminality, a notable way "in which to view and experience knowledge" (Meyer, "Holographic Epistemology" 94) that is neither purely scientific nor wholly creative. Instead, it's a metaphysical parallel to an idea Meyer has already conceptualized: that no knowledge system or experience can ever claim to be truly empirical or objective.

It is the job of Western truth projects to systematize knowledge and its acquisition, such that epistemic alterities are othered if not outright erased, and, as Million puts it, this subjugation and erasure of "epistemologies that are nonhierarchical and nonhuman centered is not accomplished without violence" (340). In other words, Western truth projects have failed to disclose their own liminality. On this front, Chang does not fail. 'Liminality' here comes from the Latin word 'limen,' meaning threshold. Thus, we might interpret liminality as the entry point that separates—or joins—two or more spaces, systems of knowledge, or even realities (especially those considered disparate). Liminality might denote disorientation or dissociation arising from perceived ambiguity, as is described in anthropological definitions of the concept. When someone is caught in a transitory stage, for example, it's because they've entered into a space of pre-flight, as a convergence between contrasting worlds closes in (Turner). To an architect, liminality might signify an airport or a hallway. To an anthropologist, it could be "the intervening phase of transition" (Turner, 57) in a rite of passage. In Chang's work, this liminality is best demonstrated by the photograph. That a girl captured on film might also be perceived as a shadow, as the dark matter or detritus of a hegemonic class of white girls, as unintentionally 'crossing over' or 'caught between' a space ruled by race, seems peculiarly liminal. On film, the unnamed main character is thrust towards an involuntary point of entry and/or departure. It's difficult to say which, as the ambiguity between empirical sense data and imagined reality in a photograph is—as with Meyer's trilogy—simultaneous, specific to each culturally defined participant, and so inextricable that the sense data and the imaginary are impossible to sift through separately, at least for Chang's protagonist. There is no telling where real begins and magic bleeds out.

When Chang writes that, "[t]he white girls lightened their hair in summer with lemon and

olive oil. My hair stayed dark," the question of desire versus determination arises. In this short story, the white girls possess the ability to alter the sense data that they produce at will, while the protagonist is confined to her own liminality. Who is she? Can her identity or image be traced back to the objective reality of her body? Here, the white girls embody the very essence of empiricism as defined by Western truth projects. Their aesthetic alterations and thus existences are recognized as a universal sense experience. By contrast, the protagonist is imprisoned by her mind, metacognition, and internalized racial trauma. This is what Meyer calls "wisdom: naauao, which means 'enlightened intestines'" ("Holographic Epistemology" 96). Chang's protagonist is not permitted universality, or objectivity. She is consigned to her body and all the wicked, magical, and often violent ideas it produces in herself and those who observe her. In "Sitting the Month," the protagonist of color can never live in the perceptual stage "prior to cognitive acts such as inferring, judging, or affirming that such-and-such objects or properties are present" (Hatfield). She can never be sense data alone. She is not just darker in pigment relative to the white girls captured on film. She is also their shadow—simultaneous and perfectly symmetrical, at once physical and totally ephemeral, the "body missing a body" or girl made ghost. She is the triangulation of all knowledge.

Azim describes the perpetual negotiation that occurs when those perceived as normatively noncompliant enter into spaces that call into question their identity. She calls this experience a "shifting of [...] positionalities in a space of foreign authority," (453), as with the photograph in Chang's short story. In the photograph, authority is individual and thrown into sharp relief by reference points (the white girls) recognized as sociopolitically normative—that is, white and empirical. That the main character's otherness—this quality of nonbeing or ghost-like liminality—might be inherent to the body, an ingrained knowledge she carries with her as a result of her sustained suffering, seems the most terrifying and magical. But if the photograph represents a space of individual authority, one where the sense experience captured on film is doomed to be endlessly reinterpreted, re-remembered, and reenacted by each participant that picks it up, it's clear that the shadow self the protagonist sees—and fears—is self-imposed. That, then, is more terrifying and more magical than filling a prescribed role. Not that she has been cast as the shadow without her consent by the wildly overrepresented white girls, but that she has begun assigning it to herself unconsciously due to the racial hegemony that she lives under, even when she is the sole authority of her own story, as with the photograph.

(Post)colonial Positionality

Through Indigenous ways of being and knowing, we see that a person's capacity to conjure meaning at will through alternate epistemic avenues aids in their construction of reality, so that the interiority of the mind has the power to become the external world. This is directly paralleled by magical realism, where, as posited by Zamora, sight and insight can be and are the same impulse. This might mean gazing upon a photograph and understanding that the personal meaning assigned to that object—magical or otherwise—is immediately true of one's material reality. Put another way, the eyes characters inhabit as they journey through magical realist texts become their pen and their paint brush, giving precedence not to objects as objects or their inherent value, but to a holographic knowledge system: to creativity and flesh and personal history, to lineage and desires and dreams—unreliable though they may be—to assumed meaning, to sentimental value, to figurative weight, to alternate proposed realities where hybridity is an unfortunate condition of empire.

In the words of Debicki, "Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge leads to a different experience of what is real" (250), in the same way that the experiences of the characters inked

into magical realist landscapes are shaped by the hybrid knowledge systems that they've assembled for themselves. In response to the (post)colonial structures rearing their wicked heads, these systems of knowing and understanding roar back at the empires fighting to subjugate, swallow, or supersede them. This resistance comes with a contract of its own. Magical realist landscapes, in addition to reasserting imagination after or in anticipation of imperial violence, come with a certain instability. We, readers, agree to this with the understanding that our participation in reality is shaped by the meaning we endow to the world around us, which is true not just of the books we read but also of the lives that we inhabit. This Indigenous impulse and its literary parallel is significant, as it allows a conquered people to reassert their power through realities that they've constructed for themselves. Not a 'reality' that's been forced on them by the empire that they're living under, but one where the capacity to imagine, touch, and connect is the ultimate response to violence, and, also, one of the last lines of defense that they have. Magic can be and is alive not just within the worlds of the magical realist novel, but also in the realities of Indigenous peoples and those around them: "The fluidity of these boundaries, which are more inclusive than exclusive, means that our relationships with so-called non-living things remains within the realm of the real. As such, when I refer to earth as my mother I am not using metaphor, I am being literal. This active relationality is built into our languages, too" (Debicki, 250).

\The key idea here, and one which constitutes a thematic through-line in Indigenous scholarship, is that the universe is alive. Moreover, we're constantly forging connections with it, connections that are distinct and culturally defined, connections that are experienced, and remembered, and synthesized, so that a simple white door to one person might evoke whale bones and also the scaffolding of ancestral storytelling. Of particular note is Meyer's third category: the spiritual quality that infuses not only the magical realist world, but also the world of Indigenous knowledge production. Key also are expressions of intention, humility, and gratitude in the face of new and ancient knowledge systems, systems that have suffered at the hands of Western epistemology, and, most significantly, systems that have just as much of a claim to truth—if not more—as the projects that have historically sought to exterminate them.

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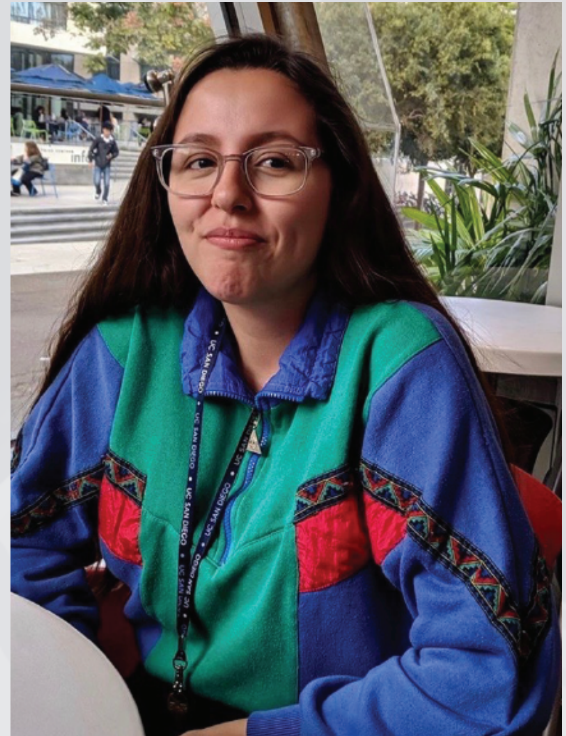

Biography:

I'm a first-generation graduate of UCSD, where I earned my BA in Literatures in English and recently participated in the McNair Scholars Program. During my time at UCSD, I've served as a student intern and community college mentor for the Preparing Accomplished Transfers to the Humanities Program, written an Honors Literature Thesis that won the Sherley Williams Memorial Award in Literary Arts, and undertaken research projects through programs like TRELS and McNair. I'm passionate about bridging the gap between the critical and the creative in academia and am currently applying to PhD and MFA programs to see where graduate study might take me.

"My hope of attempting to publish my research would be to change ...[how] The arts and humanities are frequently neglected in institutional capacities in favor of what's seen as far more vital, particularly at STEM-oriented schools like UCSD... (often because they're not seen as empirical pursuits)... I've always been personally invested in advancing access to the arts and humanities at the level of underrepresented students—specifically, low income, first generation students of color."

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