

# Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*

Jennifer Andrews

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## Article abstract

Canadian magic realist texts are often identified with postcolonialism and postmodernism. Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees* provocatively reworks the formal and thematic dimensions of magic realism by presenting a story of a mixed-race Cape Breton family from a lesbian feminist perspective, demonstrating that the Maritimes can be a viable setting for magic realist works. Through her magic realist treatment of characters, MacDonald begins to explore the race, gender and sexual politics that exist both within the Piper family and the community at large. *Fall On Your Knees* displays a heightened awareness of other literary texts and cultivates a consciously metafictional approach to the writing of fiction. The novel combines an exploration of the nature and limits of the knowable and a playful recreation of history with a realistic presentation of specific political concerns.

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# Rethinking the Relevance of Magic Realism for English-Canadian Literature: Reading Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*

JENNIFER ANDREWS

MAGIC REALISM REMAINS a vexed concept for Canadian literature, despite having been adopted to describe a specific group of English-Canadian texts, including Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* and Jack Hodgins's *The Invention of the World*. Traditionally, magic realism has referred to Latin America fiction. Thus, this transplanting of magic realism to a Canadian context created a series of debates during the 1970s and 1980s regarding definitions of the phrase, its applicability to English-language works produced in regions outside of "the third world," and the relationship of magic realism to other critical frameworks, including postmodernism and postcolonialism (Slemon 9). Over the last decade, however, examinations of Canadian magic realism have dwindled. Such neglect raises the question of whether magic realism is still relevant or potentially useful to the field of Canadian literature. The publication of a voluminous critical anthology by Duke University Press in 1995, called *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, which reprints the seminal essays in the field, including several on Canadian fiction from the late 1980s, suggests that it continues to hold a "strange seductiveness," at least for North American critics (Jameson 302). What is this allure? Why does magic realism remain so compelling? This paper attempts to address such questions by exploring the contemporary relevance of this sub-genre for Canadian criticism through a close reading of a recently published novel that challenges the established definitions of this concept. Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees* provocatively reworks the formal and thematic dimensions of magic realism by presenting the story of a mixed-race Cape Breton family from a lesbian feminist perspective. MacDonald's novel adheres to many of the

conventions of magic realism, as defined by Canadian and Latin American scholars. But her depictions of sexual, racial, and national difference foreground the need to expand and redefine magic realism within Canadian literature, a process that is closely tied to the German and Latin-American origins of the term.

The concept of “magic realism” was first coined in 1925 by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who wanted to champion a new direction in European painting, a return to Realism after Expressionism’s abstract style.<sup>1</sup> According to Roh, the phrase expressed the aim of this innovation in painting styles: to juxtapose marvellous objects and events with the quotidian aspects of daily life. Roh specifically used the word “magic” in his essay to suggest “that...mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (16), a notion that has remained central to definitions of magic realism over time.

The literary significance of Roh’s phrase came into clearer focus in the 1950s and 1960s when various Latin American writers and critics, including Alejo Carpentier, Angel Flores,<sup>2</sup> and Luis Leal,<sup>3</sup> began to use it to describe a new kind of fiction. In the prologue to his novel, *El Reino de Este Mundo* (1949), Alejo Carpentier outlines what he calls “*lo real maravilloso americano*” (75). According to Carpentier, the marvellous or magical aspects of life are an integral part of the lived reality of Latin Americans; discovering the unusual or strange does not mean “subverting or transcending reality with abstract forms and manufactured combinations of images” (75). Carpentier deliberately differentiates Latin American magic realism from European surrealism’s “conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality” (75) to give the former term a geographic and cultural specificity. In doing so, he undermines Western European claims to cultural superiority. Carpentier argues that a commitment to faith is an essential part of magic realism and calls on Latin American writers to look for inspiration at home, rather than relying on foreign conventions and ideas to fuel their imaginations. Although he criticizes those who support a return to realism for following “a slavishly political agenda,” Carpentier’s concept of magic realism also is inherently political in its celebration of America’s uniqueness and vitality (86), a quality that is not part of Roh’s definition.<sup>4</sup>

The move to form a distinctive Latin American identity through fiction that fuses a political and social reality with magic continued over the next several decades and brought writers like Gabriel García Márquez international acclaim.<sup>5</sup> This so-called “Boom” period, which peaked during the 1960s, was shaped by a group of writers — including García

Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar — who supported revolutionary ideals in their own lives, and articulated these same beliefs in their texts.<sup>6</sup> In fact, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), a text that explores some of the key social, political, and economic struggles in South America's history through the story of the Buendia family, is considered the prototypical magic-realist novel.

Carpentier's prologue marked the beginning of a lengthy debate over how to define magic realism, which has been variously described as a "term," a "mode," and a "genre."<sup>7</sup> Because magic realism is so often a tool of resistance, employed by the margins against "centralized totalizing systems," many scholars are hesitant to identify it as a "genre" (Slemon 10; Durix 187-89). As Stephen Slemon contends, "magic realism...can itself signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems" (10). He argues that "there is something in the nature of the literature it identifies that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems" (10). The fact that magic realism is often characterized by "generic hybridity" complicates attempts to define it (Durix 187). The desire to avoid pinpointing or limiting the scope of magic realism, however, raises its own set of problems. Bringing such a wide array of works together under a single label may thwart the possibility of making distinctions among them. This article is specifically interested in delineating what magic realism means and how it works in a Canadian context. Hence, it is best understood here as a sub-genre<sup>8</sup> — much like the Gothic or sentimental novel — that combines elements of realism and magic in order to explore "multiple and contradictory" versions of reality (Durix 187).

Rather than outlining a range of critical positions in detail, as others have already done with great skill,<sup>9</sup> what follows is a list of some of the characteristics that are consistently used to describe Latin American examples of this sub-genre. These definitions provide a particularly relevant framework for discussing Canadian magic realism. Like Latin America, Canada has, historically, "rebelled against the domination of a metropolitan power" (Durix 145). As Jean-Pierre Durix explains, some Canadian writers who want to "define themselves as different from the 'Great' British tradition," which is "identified with conventionality," have sought a "model in Latin American writers" (145). But this alliance between Canada and Latin America also serves another purpose: it offers Canadian writers an "American" model that is not borrowed from the United States, a "superpower" with its own legacy of domination over Canada (145).

In a Latin American context, magic realism demonstrates that the strange is, in fact, commonplace and that the unreal constitutes a signifi-

cant part of reality. Instead of creating imagined worlds or distorting reality, as writers of fantastic literature and science fiction often do,<sup>10</sup> these texts attempt to articulate the mystery behind reality and to prevent myths, folklore, and alternative versions of history from being relegated to the supernatural realm or ignored altogether. Ghosts and spirits appear, making absence present and foregrounding “magic realism’s most basic concern — the nature and limits of the knowable” (Zamora 498).

Magic realist writers typically presume that readers have faith and believe in the existence of some kind of spiritual plane. Superstition is treated as part of daily life, and brings another dimension to the narratives being relayed. At the same time, a special value is placed on the retention of oral traditions within these texts. Contradictory versions of the same event are made available and written records are revised to include folk wisdom, prayers, and the firsthand experiences of those who have been oppressed or silenced. Thus, magic realists contest the notion of history as a linear and logical phenomenon from a wide variety of perspectives by including superstition, folklore, and the voices of otherwise neglected members of the population. These authors also play with the concept of time in their narratives in order to convey the unpredictability of life, whether at the level of individuals, whole communities, or even nations.

Magic realism pays particular attention to places and communities that have been marginalized. Magic, in this context, becomes a tool for challenging power structures and may facilitate the metamorphoses of characters and communities. For instance, the breaking of sexual taboos is a part of many magic-realist texts. Such acts of deviance can represent a rebellious attack on authority and challenge dominant paradigms of what is “appropriate” behaviour by inverting established rules. However, psychological explanations and justifications for characters’ actions and choices are usually peripheral or non-existent in these works.

Latin American magic realism is also frequently described as a “New World” phenomenon that has enabled fiction writers to overcome colonial domination and to create their own unique, and equally important, mode of literary expression in contrast to Old World, meaning European, traditions (Chanady, “Territorialization” 126; Durix 105-06, 110). But these Latin American writers and critics, who want to give their works value on the international stage, may run the risk of reinscribing the same colonialist attitudes that they are striving to contest by territorializing the power of the imagination.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the political dimensions of magic realism have made it an attractive and potentially useful sub-genre for scholars when describing the work of writers from Latin America, the

Caribbean,<sup>12</sup> India, and Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> Talking about magic realism in a Canadian context, however, raises a different set of questions, because of the country's history of colonial domination over Native peoples, ongoing internal battles regarding the status of distinct societies residing within Canada (particularly Francophones living in Québec), and the lengthy period of British imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

Magic realism was first used to describe English-Canadian novels and short stories during the late 1970s. As Geoff Hancock put it in 1977, "something is happening to documentary realism in Canadian fiction.... Everyday Canadian life is seen as absurd.... writers are suddenly free to make things up, to instill humour and hyperbole into the landscape, to juxtapose unlikely objects and characters, to apply dream imagery to objective reality" (*CFM* 4-5). Magic realism provided a label for this new wave of writing, which acknowledged both the realist conventions that had shaped the development of Canadian literature and some of the innovative strategies being used to challenge the solidity of this foundation.

Subsequent discussions of magic realism in Canadian literature have been governed by a few specific precepts. Hancock notes that magic realist works by Canadian authors are usually characterized by "hyperbole treated as fact;... a labyrinthine awareness of other books;... an absurd recreation of 'history'; a meta-fictional awareness of the process of fiction making;... [and] a collective sense of a folkloric past" (*MRCL* 36). These writers "cast doubt on the nature of reality" by playing with "the mysteriousness of the literary imagination at work" (36). Oral history and myth take on the value of the real, enabling Canadian writers to explore how fiction can and does preserve or distort the past. The collision between Old and New Worlds, which is an integral part of Latin American magic realism, also characterizes much of the magic realist writing produced in Canada. This tension between established traditions and New World attempts at self-definition is an important part of Canadian literary history, especially given the legacy of British rule over Canada and the nation's desire to separate itself from the culture of Empire by creating an independent political, social, cultural and economic profile. Formally, these texts typically include doubles and transformations, stories within stories, elements of parody, mock-epic conventions, and the structure of a myth or tall tale.

Not surprisingly, Canadian magic realist texts are often identified as postmodern.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, the writer takes up a marginal or ex-centric position in relation to the dominant culture, parody is a means of con-

testing established versions of history, and the narrative's intertextual references and playfully subversive stance facilitate an examination of the relationship between art and the world(s) in which we live. The problem with such an assertion, as Linda Hutcheon has shown, is that postmodernism is "politically ambivalent: its critique coexists with an equally real and equally powerful complicity with the cultural dominants within which it inescapably exists" ("Circling" 150). The perspectives presented in postmodern works differ substantially from magic realist texts, in which concrete and immediate political concerns are a central focus.

This distinction is reinforced by the ways in which magic-realist writing is discussed within a Canadian context. Stanley McMullin, for example, describes it as "hinterland" writing (16). Authors located in regions outside the economic centres of power challenge and subvert central Canada's imperial control over the history and identity of the margins through magic realism. McMullin suggests that, for Canadian magic realists, Northrop Frye's famous query about our national identity, epitomized by the question "where is here?" precipitates the examination of the roots of a region that may be otherwise ignored (20).<sup>16</sup> Writers like Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins write back to "heartland" constructions of the "hinterland" with their own distinctly magical accounts of a specific place and its residents.

In fact, Hodgins's *The Invention of the World* and Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* are repeatedly singled out as quintessential examples of Canadian magic realism.<sup>17</sup> Hodgins's novel addresses questions of colonization, the repetition of history, and the potential for eventual liberation from the legacy of Donal Keneally, an Irish immigrant to the New World and a tyrant of mythic proportions. It does this by tracing the story of the Revelations Colony of Truth, a Vancouver Island community, led by Keneally, that is shaped by England's oppression of Ireland as well as British colonialism in Canada. Kroetsch's novel explores the magical dimensions of small town in Alberta, called Big Indian, that is turned upside-down when a young woman, Vera Lang, is raped by bees. *What the Crow Said* uses magic realism to expose and contest selected binary structures — including gender — that threaten to divide and even destroy the population. These magic realist depictions of colonial domination, both within Canada (on the level of region) and on the international stage (through Canada's complex relations with Britain first, and more recently with the United States), have led critics such as Stephen Slemon to couple magic realism with postcoloniality. This alliance is intended to facilitate comparative discussions of magic realist texts across different cultures



but creates its own set of problems by not acknowledging the complex, multiple meanings of postcolonialism for Canada as an “invader-settler” colony (Griffiths 169),<sup>18</sup> which differ radically from the term’s use in the context of subjugated nations.<sup>19</sup>

The marginality of these so-called “hinterland” writers is further complicated by the fact that the texts most often used to illustrate Canadian versions of magic realism are the works of well-known, white, male, Western or West-Coast-based authors. Women writers remain virtually absent from discussions of Canadian magic realism; Sheila Watson, Susan Kerslake,<sup>20</sup> Gwendolyn McEwan, Jane Urquhart,<sup>21</sup> Sandra Birdsell, and Susan Swan earn only a passing mention.<sup>22</sup> Nor do East-Coast or ethnic minority authors garner a significant place in studies of magic realism. How then does reading *Fall On Your Knees* as an example of Canadian magic realism complicate current critical uses of the term?

MacDonald’s novel raises an important challenge to fixed notions of when, where, and who can produce magic-realist texts in Canada. *Fall On Your Knees* takes place mainly on Cape Breton Island, where the shoreline meets the Atlantic Ocean, and thus from the outset radically dislocates traditional associations between Western or West-Coast-based Canadian settings and magic-realist works. When MacDonald’s characters do travel, they go across the border to New York City, rather than to Ontario, a journey that strategically sidesteps interactions between the Canadian hinterland and heartland in order to explore Canada’s vexed relationship with the United States. At the same time, however, MacDonald herself is a Toronto-based playwright, actor, and author who deliberately returns to her East Coast roots to explore issues of racial, cultural, and sexual “otherness.” The novel, for instance, begins with the inter-racial marriage of James Piper, a man of Scottish and Irish roots, and Materia Mahmoud, a Lebanese-born, first-generation immigrant. They have both grown up on Cape Breton but were raised within dramatically different cultural frameworks.

In a 1996 interview, MacDonald explains that she wanted to write about Cape Breton because “it’s so rich and haunted for me” (Cole 35). At first glance, *Fall On Your Knees* could be mistaken for a Gothic novel, with its violent villain (James Piper) who precipitates incestuous relationships with two of his daughters, lives in an old house isolated from the community, and exemplifies the fallen nature of man.<sup>23</sup> Like magic-realist works, Gothic texts usually juxtapose differing realities, explore the relationship of time and space, present irrational or mysterious levels of experience through the appearance of ghosts, depict acts of sexual deviance



(including incest), and expose the primitive or “savage” side of otherwise cultured individuals (Northey 18).

In fact, the Gothic tradition has been adapted by a variety of Canadian writers, including John Richardson, Anne Hébert, Martha Ostenso, and Margaret Atwood, over the past two centuries to articulate the complexities of life in the New World, a place where the truth is often stranger than fiction, ghosts wander the wilderness, and evil abounds. MacDonald’s novel certainly includes traces of these Gothic conventions and tropes, adapted to a Canadian context. But she places them within a magic-realist framework, a strategy that foregrounds the tensions between the Old and New Worlds and celebrates the mysterious aspects of this Cape Breton community. Rather than examining the psychological dimensions of human evil and using a Gothic narrative method to show how strange the world depicted in the novel is, MacDonald creates a text in which the appearances of dead children and the performing of miracles co-exist with daily life.

The central characters of the novel are the four daughters of James and Materia Piper. Each daughter produced by this mixed-race union is uniquely distinguished by elements of magic and mystery. Through her magic-realist treatment of these characters, MacDonald begins to explore the race and gender politics that exist both within the Piper family and the community at large. More specifically, the daughters’ magical and supernatural qualities allow them to challenge social norms and expand the boundaries of what constitutes “reality.” The youngest daughter, Lily, an incestuous product of James and his first child, Kathleen, communicates with the ghost of her dead twin brother, Ambrose. The second daughter, Mercedes, is a penitent whose rituals of faith come from Catholic legends and myths. She eats coal, dons burlap, and attempts to have Lily, despite her illicit origins, declared a saint. Kathleen, Lily’s mother, possesses an extraordinary voice and “mermaid eyes” that lead one of her teachers to speculate that “Perhaps she wasn’t a child at all” (41). The third daughter, Frances, is a breech birth, considered a lucky omen for an island child because, as the narrator explains, it is a “charm against drowning” (64). This trait comes in handy years later when Frances manages to baptize Lily and Ambrose, in the waist-deep water of a creek, against her father’s wishes. Frances’ luck continues into adulthood when she is shot in the abdomen by her lover’s sister, Teresa, on the beach, survives, and goes on to deliver a healthy baby boy. When the police arrive to take Teresa away, they find her comforting Frances with a West Indian lullaby that dispels the

hatred between the two women; here, folk customs create bonds that cut across racial and cultural differences.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, none of these events is placed beyond the realm of daily life. Nor does the text offer a clear psychological explanation for the dysfunctional behaviour of the Piper family, including James's incestuous relationships with Kathleen and Frances. Instead, magical elements and the breaking of sexual taboos are an integral part of this community's realities. Moreover, by juxtaposing the perspectives of various characters in the novel, ranging from James and Materia's father, Mr. Mahmoud, to Kathleen and Mr. Mahmoud's African-Canadian housekeeper, Teresa, MacDonald suggests that there are multiple versions of the "truth" available and waiting to be told.

*Fall On Your Knees* displays a heightened awareness of other literary texts and cultivates a consciously metafictional approach to the writing of fiction. MacDonald's novel skillfully alludes to a wide variety of magic realist texts, both canonical (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) and non-canonical (Toni Morrison's *Jazz*), that play with the relations between time and space and recreate history in a pluralistic and provisional fashion. For example, the logic and naturalness of linear time is repeatedly undermined in *Fall On Your Knees*, as the narrative freely moves backward and forward, beginning with a preface called "Silent Pictures" in which a third-person detached narrator retrospectively reflects on the Piper family, who are, apparently, "all dead now" (1). Similarly, the first book of MacDonald's novel begins with the line: "A long time ago, before you were born" (7), which echoes and inverts the famous "Many years later" opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like García Márquez, MacDonald reminds readers of the fictional nature of her tale, asserts the power of memory, introduces a fragmented version of history, and overtly reaches back into a past that has been previously hidden.

MacDonald also rewrites Toni Morrison's Harlem from a distinctly lesbian and Canadian perspective with the story of Kathleen and Rose in New York City. Morrison's novel, *Jazz*, published in 1992, is a retrospective account of the events leading up to the murder of Dorcas, a young black woman who is killed by her married lover Joe Trace in 1920s Harlem. The third-person narrator of *Jazz* is seduced by the sights and sounds of the "City," including the jazz music that pours out onto the streets and expresses the anger, fears, and passions of the community (7). This intimate relationship between the narrator and the city frames Morrison's text. In *Fall On Your Knees*, Kathleen is similarly affected by the music she hears

in the Harlem jazz clubs and falls in love with the magic of New York City shortly after she arrives: "I feel like all New York is a warm embrace just waiting to enfold me. I am in love. But not with a person" (456). Part of Morrison's novel explores how Joe's wife Violet struggles with the memory of Dorcas. The young dead woman haunts Violet, who has craved a child of her own and sees Dorcas as a potential surrogate daughter. MacDonald can be read as refashioning this heterosexual love triangle in *Fall On Your Knees*; she adds incest and a lesbian relationship between mixed-race women, one Canadian and the other American, to her text. MacDonald's narrative also extends and reconfigures Morrison's representation of Harlem through an exploration of sexual and national difference. In particular, she shows how Americans stereotype Canadians, and vice versa. With *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald avoids replicating the straightforward binary pairing of the central Canadian heartland and the marginalized hinterland, which is part of most Canadian magic realist texts, by introducing another, quite different set of power relations.

*Fall On Your Knees* combines an exploration of the nature and limits of the knowable and a playful recreation of history with a realistic presentation of specific political concerns. This interplay between the magical and the real sustains tensions throughout the novel without providing a clear resolution to them; readers are encouraged to question the claims of totality made by each mode of narrative presentation and to take pleasure in this oscillating relationship. Realism focusses on the verisimilitude of detail, concentrates on the norms of human experience (events and emotions that are familiar to the population as a whole), and tries to convey a broad picture of human nature through a snapshot view of a single community. Although many of the characters in MacDonald's text may seem other-worldly, the backdrop of the novel chronicles some of the most pressing social, political, economic, and racial issues faced by this Cape Breton community over the course of the twentieth century. James's life, for example, is interwoven with these events. His employment history includes crossing the picket line of a strike at a local coal mine to make money for Kathleen's schooling, an act that leads his neighbours to ostracize him and dramatizes the increasing unemployment and poverty in Cape Breton. James then spends three years in the trenches during the First World War, an event that permanently traumatizes him but revitalizes, if only temporarily, a lagging local economy. He subsequently profits from bootlegging liquor during the 1920s and 1930s, a period of prohibition in Nova Scotia and the United States during which the Piper family manages to survive and thrive despite the lack of a postwar boom in

the province. MacDonald's novel also offers detailed historical descriptions of the racism that divides whites from blacks in New Waterford and beyond, the rise of cinema (which provides an outlet for the Piper girls to dream about recreating themselves as Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford), and the implications of the Second World War for local residents, who have lost a generation of men forever.

With this realistic framework in place, MacDonald challenges the presumption that the East Coast (and Cape Breton Island in particular) are regions relatively unaffected by colonization and immigration. The novel traces the initially illicit love affair between James and Materia, the children of recent immigrants to the New World. Both have been raised with strong ties to their respective homelands and mother tongues. James learns Gaelic from his mother and Materia speaks Arabic with her family, but the couple communicate with each other in English. By juxtaposing these diverse points of origin, MacDonald's narrative strategically displaces simplistic constructions of Canada as a country colonized by two nations. The novel contains Gaelic, Arabic, Yiddish, and Italian phrases which appear, typically untranslated, throughout the text.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, a combination of Old World and New World traditions shapes the lives of various families in the community, including the Mahmouds, the Pipers, the Luvovitzs, and the Taylors, each of whom carries a different set of cultural values from their homelands.

In particular, MacDonald uses the juxtaposition of magic and reality in *Fall On Your Knees* to suggest the complex meeting of these multiple worlds and perspectives. Her novel undercuts nostalgic or fantastic recollections of the Old World while simultaneously countering mythic constructions of the New World as a place of equal opportunity for all. MacDonald's depiction of Cape Breton is one way to critique idealistic treatments of the Old and New World. Yet by fusing this ironic vision of the two worlds with the fantastic and imaginative viewpoints of various characters, her novel also retains an appreciation for the wondrous aspects of both. For example, at one point, Materia relays her memories of life in Lebanon to her children: "There are gentle breezes, it's always warm there. The buildings are white, they sparkle in the sun like diamonds and the sea is crystal-blue. Lebanon is the Pearl of the Orient" (87). But when asked why the Piper children cannot visit "the Old Country," Materia explains that although Lebanon is a "place better than any on earth" it is also "a place you are nonetheless lucky to have escaped" because of the Turkish invasion (87). Here, reality undercuts the beauty of Materia's memories of Lebanon with the horror of war and the knowledge that her

homeland no longer exists in an untainted form. This interplay cultivates a fragmented pattern of meaning that deliberately counters the power of Materia's imagination with a legacy of civil and religious conflicts.

Conversely, when Materia first arrives at Sydney Harbor at six years of age, she hears her father tell the family: "Look. This is the New World. Anything is possible here" (14). This phrase that allows her to dream of freedom from the confines of an arranged marriage to a stranger and the watchful eyes of her protective parents. However, once married to James Piper, a match that her family deems unsuitable, she realizes that Mr. Mahmoud's advice is intended exclusively for his male children. Materia finds herself longing for the Old World, and, later in the novel, she repeatedly retreats to the attic and an empty cedar chest with a scent that takes her back, if only in her imagination, to the comfort of Lebanon's exotic spices and her mother's arms. The notion that anything is possible in the New World is exposed as a cliché in MacDonald's text, which focuses specifically on the political, social, and cultural limitations of life on Cape Breton for women and certain ethnic minorities.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald looks realistically at the power dynamics of a New World society that is struggling to establish its own sense of order. Rather than seeing Cape Breton as an example of post-colonial magic realism, MacDonald's text suggests that colonial domination is alive and well in the region in a wide variety of forms. For example, racial hierarchies determine who is employed in the coal mines and in what positions; James is promoted to an above-ground job for showing his loyalty to the mine during a strike while many of his coworkers, including Albert, a black man from Barbados "who never got them killed," are simply let go (49). Similar power structures are used by men, like James, to regulate the conduct of women within the community, whether ethnic minority women or lesbian females. James forbids Materia to work as a vaudeville pianist when he discovers her popularity with the local community, arranges for Kathleen to be accompanied to and from school every day to protect her from leering men, and repeatedly beats Frances for mentioning Kathleen after her death and displaying her sister's photograph in his presence.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, the strength of one's imagination becomes an especially important survival strategy for the females living in this community. At this point, the novel expands the range of questions typically posed by magic-realist texts to examine the complex matrix of gender, race, sexuality, and power from a lesbian feminist perspective. MacDonald explores the cross-cultural dynamics of race relations among several immi-

grant groups living on Cape Breton Island, especially Mr. Mahmoud's dismissive treatment of his African-Canadian housekeeper, Teresa, whom he wrongly labels a thief, and James Piper's selective racial hatred, which is directed at African-Canadians as well as, over time, his own Lebanese wife. But *Fall On Your Knees* also portrays the personal and political struggles of the central female characters at various stages of their lives as they wrestle with the power men claim over their bodies and actions. In particular, the main subplot of the novel involves a lesbian relationship between Kathleen, who is training to become an opera singer in New York, and a mixed-race pianist, Rose. Here, the tensions between magic and reality, as well as a desire to explore the nature and limits of the knowable, facilitate a form of self-expression and sexual intimacy that contests both masculine authority and racial prejudice.

In this context, MacDonald aligns herself specifically with Latin American women writers, such as Isabel Allende, who see magic realism as a strategy of empowerment for their female characters but are also hesitant to create easy alliances between magic realism, postcolonialism, and tangible political change, especially regarding the status of women. Magic cannot simply erase the difficulties that her female characters face. Allende's texts have been described as "magically feminist" (Hart 32), a term that acknowledges the author's sustained focus on the status and condition of Latin American women. Allende's pairing of magic realism and feminism offers one way to differentiate her work from the novels of García Márquez, to whom she is often compared.<sup>25</sup> As Patricia Hart notes, "the mere existence of a woman who dares to be a feminist in Latin America is a marvelous or magical event" (156), a situation that Allende depicts through the words and actions of various female characters who challenge the limits of an inherently patriarchal society but do not always manage to overturn these structures of oppression.

MacDonald reworks this Latin American perspective in *Fall On Your Knees* to explore an interracial, lesbian relationship from a Canadian viewpoint. The entries from Kathleen's diaries occupy approximately the last one hundred pages of *Fall On Your Knees* and it is her sexual and emotional exploration of her identity in New York City that problematizes patriarchal and heterosexual constructions of what femaleness is all about. Kathleen initially displays the same kind of dismissive and prejudicial reaction to Rose that James has shown Materia. However, when Kathleen starts to listen to Rose's compositions, Kathleen realizes that the young pianist possesses enormous talent. Shortly after, Rose discovers that Kathleen's mother is Lebanese and not, as she puts it, "pure white" (504),

while Kathleen learns that Rose's mother, aptly named Jeanne Burgess, is from an upper-crust white Long Island family, though now reduced to a life of heroin addiction and prostitution to support her habit. It is through these unexpected reversals, as well as through a mutual desire to move beyond the confines of their lives, that Kathleen and Rose begin to explore their own sexuality and to rethink the narrowness of their individual prejudices. The two women use their imaginations to create a space for their love affair in a world where such emotional and sexual bonds are typically either relegated to the margins or banned altogether.

Magic-realist techniques can be read as playing an important part in this process of revelation between Kathleen and Rose. For example, by communing with ghosts, both women experience a dimension of themselves that momentarily transcends the realities of time and space: Rose dresses up in the suit of her dead black father and resurrects a part of her past that she has never known; the outfit is her only tangible reminder of him. As she explains to Kathleen, donning her father's hat "keeps the world out so I can be in my own thoughts" (496). With her father's clothes, Rose can temporarily free herself from the burden of her mother's addiction and the limitations that Jeanne imposes on her daughter's conduct. She is able to explore an alternative sexual identity, one that breaks heteronormative codes, by turning to remnants of a ghost from the past. Yet the relationship that develops between Rose and Kathleen, partly facilitated by these otherworldly bonds, has serious and tangible consequences for both women. When James discovers the women together, making love, he rapes Kathleen and brutally beats Rose. Kathleen subsequently becomes pregnant by her father and dies during childbirth, confined to the attic in the Cape Breton family home. Rose discovers that Jeanne instigated James's visit to keep control of her daughter. Angered by this betrayal and unable to get the truth from Jeanne regarding her father, Rose cuts her hair and transforms herself into "Doc Rose," a male jazz pianist who spends the next several decades on the road (554).

MacDonald sustains this interplay between magic and reality to the end of the novel by resurrecting ghosts from the past who offer the Piper family a new way to understand the relationships between those who are dead and their survivors. Kathleen's daughter, for instance, eventually travels to New York City to locate her mother's lover. Lily, whose "shrivelled leg" has motivated her older sister Mercedes to start a fund so that the young cripple can travel to Lourdes and be cured, decides to embark on a different kind of pilgrimage (277). Much like Rose, when attired in her father's suit, Lily puts on the "green silk dress" of her dead mother,



which is missing a sash, and carries Kathleen's diary in hand as she walks from Cape Breton to New York, a voyage that takes its own physical toll on her leg but allows the young woman to learn about the mother she has never known (451). The magical aspects of this journey come to the fore when Lily reaches the city and goes to Rose's apartment building. A group of older neighbours who spot the young woman swear that she is a ghostly version of Kathleen: "That red-haired devil who ruined our Miss Rose has come back to life" (540). When Rose sees Lily, she is confronted with the reality that her lover is dead and yet standing before her, a resurrection from the past that allows the older woman finally to express her grief. Through Lily's efforts, Kathleen's dress is returned to its rightful place, beside Rose's grey fedora which is adorned with the missing emerald sash. But Lily, with her name — which is associated with both purity and death — and her ghostly outfit, is also an ironic reminder for Rose of the racism and homophobia that precipitated the separation of the two young lovers.

Lily's arrival is followed by a visit from Anthony several decades later, the child of Frances Piper and Ginger Taylor, a black Cape Breton resident whom Frances seduces in order to get pregnant. Anthony carries a family tree, created by Mercedes just before her death, to deliver to Lily. This gift from the grave provides a record of Anthony's parentage, acknowledges the incestuous origins of Lily, and joins Rose with Kathleen. The family tree follows the conventions of magic realism by treating what has been relegated to the margins as folklore and myth as a valid part of the historical record. But MacDonald adds her own lesbian feminist viewpoint to this document, incorporating another set of issues into the field of magic realism by acknowledging the legitimacy of Kathleen and Rose's relationship. More broadly, by naming and locating these various familial lines, regardless of sexual orientation, race, or paternity, Mercedes's document offers a model of empowerment and potential resistance to those narratives which conceal the strange and sometimes unpleasant aspects of life.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, the nature and limits of the knowable take on a tangible relevance in the real world. The relationship of Kathleen and Rose, for instance, tests sexual and racial boundaries and also cuts across national borders. Here, MacDonald adapts and alters Allende's magic feminist perspective to explore lesbian concerns and especially interracial relationships. At the same time, she focuses the novel on a population and region of the country that is typically marginalized or ignored altogether: the East Coast of Canada. Her text raises significant questions about how the sub-genre of magic realism has been defined over the last two decades

in Canada. *Fall On Your Knees* can be read as calling for a new definition of the term within a Canadian context. MacDonald's novel demonstrates that the Maritimes can be a viable setting for magic realist works and encourages critics to look more closely at how women, in particular, are represented within these texts. Without romanticizing the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality, MacDonald pays special attention to the struggles of her female characters as they work to define themselves within and beyond a community and family structure that are both patriarchal and racist. However, MacDonald refuses to provide definitive answers to the questions that her text raises about national, sexual, and racial identities. Like Allende, MacDonald uses the political dimensions of this sub-genre to provide tangible examples of the challenges her female characters continue to face from generation to generation.

It is left up to readers of *Fall On Your Knees* to continue the narrative and to extend the story of the Piper descendents in new directions. Part of MacDonald's project is to examine self-consciously how traditionally marginalized regions within Canada and the country as a whole may perpetuate and profit from romantic constructions of "otherness." *Fall On Your Knees* exposes some of the most stereotypical aspects of these creations, but also remains specifically focussed on the material conditions of Cape Breton residents. Rather than relaying the story of a region that metonymically represents the postcolonial culture of Canada in its entirety,<sup>26</sup> MacDonald is committed to depicting the heightened reality of Cape Breton and the power relations that exist therein as well as the challenges posed to these structures by the lure of New York City and American imperialism. By bringing magic-realist and lesbian-feminist concerns together, *Fall On Your Knees* situates otherwise neglected voices and perspectives within the novel's framework of reality and puts the concerns of her female characters at the forefront of the text. MacDonald's novel calls on readers to expand their imaginations and to explore new ways of thinking about the intersections of magic realism, cultural diversity, gender politics, and sexual difference in the context of Canadian literature.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Roh's 1925 essay and his book-length study of magic realist art were both translated

into Spanish in 1927. As Guenther has noted, the German title of Roh's book, *Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus*, was "curiously reversed" in the Spanish translation (*Realismo mágico, post expresionismo*) and thus magic realism became the privileged first term in Latin America (55, 71).

<sup>2</sup> Flores delivered a paper, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," at the 1954 Modern Languages Association Meeting, which was subsequently published in *Hispania*.

<sup>3</sup> Leal's "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature," an article that contests Flores's insistence that magical realism began in 1935 with the publication of Jorge Luis Borges's *A Universal History of Infamy*, was first published in *Cuadernos americanos* in 1967.

<sup>4</sup> See Durix 104-05, for a detailed assessment of Carpentier's criticisms of Roh.

<sup>5</sup> García Márquez won several international awards during the late 1960s (including France's Prix de Meilleur Novel Etranger in 1969), and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982.

<sup>6</sup> See Williams 55-62, for a recent assessment of the Latin American "Boom" period.

<sup>7</sup> See Durix 116, 125, 146 for examples of how magic realism has been described in these terms.

<sup>8</sup> See Baldick 90-91, for a description of what constitutes both a "genre" and "subgenres."

<sup>9</sup> See Flores, Leal, Jameson, Simpkins, Chanady, and Angulo for critical assessments of how the term magic realism has been theorized.

<sup>10</sup> See Leal 121 for a similar assertion.

<sup>11</sup> See Chanady for a detailed examination of Latin American claims to a "New World imaginary" that is equal or superior to European cultural traditions (126). Angulo exemplifies the sustained critical desire to claim magic realism as "a type of narrative discourse which is specific to Latin America" (xi).

<sup>12</sup> See Dash for an early and insightful discussion of magic realism's relevance to Caribbean literature.

<sup>13</sup> See Durix for an examination of magic realism in Salman Rushdie's work, Jameson 302 for a brief reference to Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's use of magic realism, and Durix's *Mimesis* for detailed readings of magic realism in texts by Rushdie, Hodgins, and Kroetsch.

<sup>14</sup> In "Circling," Hutcheon argues that "to treat Canada as a post-colonial country seems to me to require some specification and even explanation" (154). She outlines various dimensions of Canada's history as a settler colony that attempted to wipe out "the indigenous culture (and people)" (156) and notes that although the more recent experience of French-Canadians in Québec is that of "colonization," we need to remember that "the pre-colonial history of the French in Québec was an imperialist one" (153). Hutcheon also examines the American colonization of Canada, both economically and culturally (160). Bennett extends this assessment of the nation's complex relationship to postcolonialism; she provides a useful analysis of Canadian literary history with respect to definitions of the postcolonial (172-75), looks closely at regional differences throughout the country (175-78), and explores Canada's vexed relationship with the United States (179-83).

<sup>15</sup> See D'haen, and Hutcheon's *Canadian Postmodern* 3, 208, and "'Circling'" 151-52, for analyses of how and when magic realism and postmodernism intersect.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett argues that "Frye's famous question — 'Where is here?' — is no longer a geographical question (it never really was) but one of group identity: 'Who is here?' In the history of Canadian writing, that question has no single answer" (192).

<sup>17</sup> See Hancock, McMullin, Fink, Rawdon, and Slemon for discussions of magic realism in the novels of Kroetsch and Hodgins.

<sup>18</sup> See Hutcheon, "Circling" 155 and Brydon 3. Brydon notes that in the case of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the English language and customs were brought over to the new colony and "the indigenous inhabitants were either annihilated or marginalized" (3).

<sup>19</sup> See Hutcheon, "Circling" 151-52, 155.

<sup>20</sup> See Maillard for a detailed assessment of Kerslake's use of magic realism.

<sup>21</sup> An excerpt from Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* is the only female-authored work of fiction included in the published proceedings of a 1985 conference held at the University of Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier University on magic realism in a Canadian context.

<sup>22</sup> See Hancock's "Magic or Realism" 30-31, 34, 41-43, and Hutcheon's *Canadian Postmodern* 208 for references to these English-Canadian female authors in discussions of magic realism.

<sup>23</sup> See MacAndrew ix, 44, 48, 81-84, 110-11, 156, 244, for a detailed description of Gothic conventions.

<sup>24</sup> For example, one of the chapters is titled "Via Dolorosa" (353), an Italian phrase which translates to "the painful road," and Book Eight of *Fall On Your Knees* is called "Hejira" (453), an Arabic word which refers to Mohammed's flight from Mecca but may also describe a journey, escape, or emigration.

<sup>25</sup> See Antoni for an example of this kind of comparative analysis of García Márquez's and Allende's work.

<sup>26</sup> Slemon argues that, in the case of Canadian magic realist works, "The site of each text is a localized region that is metonymic of the post-colonial culture as a whole" (20).

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