
Animal Spirits: Magical Realism in the Anthropocene

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Abstract: In this essay I will investigate the minor yet significant presence of animals in magical realist texts. That presence follows two main threads: what we might call “memories of the future” and “world spirit.” They are different phenomena, pointing up the breadth of magical realism: the first is historically oriented and often tied to particular entities; the second is more metaphysical, even universal in nature. But they are related in both imagining beyond paradigms of material progress, even, perhaps, of materiality itself. I will begin by conceptualizing what I think may be going on at a macro level, and then proceed to fill that paradigm (finding contradictions along the way, of course) with what I hope will be some interesting details. I think that intriguing details are a particular strength of magical realist writing, a main reason for its excellence and consequent popularity.

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In this essay I will investigate the minor yet significant presence of animals in magical realist texts. That presence follows two main threads: what we might call “memories of the future” and “world spirit.” They are different phenomena, pointing up the breadth of magical realism: the first is historically oriented and often tied to particular entities; the second is more metaphysical, even universal in nature. But they are related in both imagining beyond paradigms of material progress, even, perhaps, of materiality itself. I will begin by conceptualizing what I think may be going on at a macro level, and then proceed to fill that paradigm (finding contradictions along the way, of course) with what I hope will be some interesting details. I think that intriguing details are a particular strength of magical realist writing, a main reason for its excellence and consequent popularity.

Just as much 20th century magical realism represents colonized voices via magical phenomena that recall indigenous culture, so too via magical animals does it occasionally

accommodate non-human voices that question the human colonization of planet earth, a process that continues in the 21st century, given the issues attending the human devastation of the earth that proceeds apace. In this interpretation, then, decolonization proceeds beyond the cosmopolitan and the human as traditionally construed. Magical realism has always involved imagining beyond the ordinary. In its robust contemporary phase of masterful postcolonial texts (when according to Homi Bhabha “‘magical realism’ [...] becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world”; 7), magic served to conjure the colonizer away, to make indigenous voices heard, voices that often questioned the future by validating past systems of belief, implicitly proposing elements of the past as blueprints for the future, or, more comprehensibly, magically importing elements of the past into the present and implying they will continue into the future—hence the intriguingly confusing expression “memories of the future.”¹ So, in a similar way to how early magical realism often validated pre-enlightenment beliefs, cultures, and narrative traditions (recall Fuentes’s use of myths from the indigenous past, García Márquez’s inspiration from Amadis of Gaul in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Rushdie’s attraction to the *1001 Nights*, which pervades *Midnight’s Children*), so in another realm the presence of (sometimes magical) animals similarly provides “memories of the future” in which elements of the evolutionary past are summoned as meaningful presences, sometimes even as paradigms that might provide future alternatives to present problems.

Furthermore (our second thread), human connection to these magical and often powerful animals is numinous because it catapults us into what the Hindus call Brahman—a generalized world spirit; they take us there because they embody it in a different way than we do and hence make us aware of such a pervading spirit through links beyond the human, questioning traditional distinctions between different categories of beings, performing what we could call a cosmic connectedness. Oddly enough, then, in this view, a profound empathy with animals can be seen to take us beyond the physical. Thus, this minor but significant presence in magical realist texts further demonstrates what I have theorized as magical realism’s tendency to incorporate small doses of spirit into the discourses of realism and rationality.

I will confine myself to this animal presence in magical realism, but I would also like to suggest, as a basis for future studies, that this phenomenon dovetails with the opposite end of the spectrum, i.e. what we might term cyber reality, the (often disturbing) ways futuristic technology and science closely approach, even invade, the human, and, more generally, the organic. Such fictions resemble various characteristics of magical realism: the ways in which it contains “irreducible elements”—pieces of magic that cannot be explained in terms of the rational laws of empirical science as we know it; the inclusion of detailed descriptions of the actual world as well as of non-real phenomena; the way a reader often hesitates between whether an event or a character could be actual or imagined; the merging of different realms; and the destabilizing of our habitual ideas of time, space, and identity.

The texts that I will discuss (some at greater length than others) include Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*; Carlos Fuentes, *Aura*; Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Julio Cortázar, “Axolotl” and “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris”; Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, “The Elephant Vanishes,” and “Samsa in Love”; Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*;

Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*; Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales*; and Ken Liu, “Paper Menagerie.”

One thing to declare at the outset is that there is an immense variety of animals in magical realism, and they are certainly not all encompassed by my two strands.

To begin with two texts in which magically real animals are central, Cortázar’s story “Axolotl” (1951) embodies our first strand, the presence of the past, and Darrieussecq’s more recent novella *Pig Tales* (1996) the second, cosmic connectedness. But, as is often the case, these ideas are not watertight; both categories can appear in both texts.

In “Axolotl,” a man compulsively visits these transparent little amphibians in their aquarium in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. The magic of the story is that instead of remaining typical zoo animals in their enclosures for people to gaze at, a transformation occurs. Animal and spectator merge and separate. An intriguing linguistic phenomenon embodies the transformation: if we read carefully, we can perceive that a kind of pronominal shifting, which is actually a disappearance of clearly perceptible pronouns, anchors the heart of the story. During the transformation, we lose track of who is speaking:

My face was pressed against the glass of the aquarium, my eyes were attempting once more to penetrate the mystery of those eyes of gold without iris, without pupil. I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass. No transition and no surprise. I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew back and I understood.

Only one thing was strange, to go on thinking as usual, to know. To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man buried alive awaking to his fate. Outside, my face came close to the glass again. I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible. (8)

As we read, the textual shift of the narrator’s identity confuses our sense of the narrative’s point of view. From telling about the axolotl the narrator becomes an axolotl, so what we thought we had been experiencing as a third person narrative with a narrator who tells a story in which he is not formally involved, becomes a first person one with a narrator formally involved in the story he tells (from heterodiegetic to autodiegetic—in narratological terms). The use of the first-person possessive to describe something outside of the narrator’s self is disturbing. Who or what is the “I” that sees “my” face against the glass, and who or what is the “it” on the outside of the tank and the “it” on the other side of the glass? Those two “it”s somehow help to stage the transition without specifying exactly how it takes place. And following that, which face is drawing back, from which side of the glass? Furthermore, in addition to this spatial dislocation, we experience a temporal disorientation as well, because the exact moment of the transformation eludes us. Does it happen in the sentence about no transition and no surprise? Or during the pronominal reign of the two “it”s? Or between the two paragraphs? Our habitual notions of space and time are deconstructed. In any case, Cortázar’s story magically resurrects the past, the 20th century human becoming an ancient amphibian; from a fascination with an

ancient creature, he embodies it. His reincarnation as an axolotl thus becomes a memory of his future, more of an archetypal than a personal one. But it also represents a cosmic connectedness between two very different types of beings in the world.

Pig Tales recounts the story of a cosmetics saleswoman who slowly (and with many reversals) almost turns into a pig. Her transformation embodies the commodification that the powerful urban machine of the Parisian fashion world (which includes bodies as well as clothing and makeup) imposes on women.

While quite similar in their portrayal of the closeness of animals and humans, we can see that as we noted at the outset, differences exist—in this case between transformation and hybridity. Man and axolotl seem to transform into each other, and even though the narrator wonders whether the axolotl that is now his former human self will return to the aquarium to look at them, we do not experience that scenario. The narrator in *Pig Tales* on the other hand becomes increasingly pig-like but is not entirely transformed. Her last words are: “I write whenever my animal spirits subside a little [...] the Moon rises, and I reread my notebooks in its cold light. I try to do what Yvan [her lover who has transformed from a wolf-man into a wolf] taught me, but for the opposite reason: when I crane my neck toward the Moon, it’s to show, once again, a human face” (Darrieussecq 151). In retaining that hybridity, she retains her autonomy, keeping a distance between both animals and humans. Earlier, we experience many hybrid moments as she recounts how “the sow [that she is most of the time] rises to her feet and weeps [...]. Even when I’m in the forest with the other pigs, they often sniff me suspiciously, sensing that human thoughts are still going on in there. I’m unable to rise to their expectations. I don’t conform enough to porcine discipline” (143). The cosmic connectivity is strong in Darrieussecq’s text: “I flopped back into my hole. With my entire body I felt once again the spinning of the planet. I breathed with the shifting winds, my heart beat with the surging tides and my blood flowed like a torrent of melting snows. I flexed my muscles in communion with trees, odors, mosses, ferns, and rotting leaves. I felt the rallying cry of the animal kingdom course through my body—the ritual combats of the mating season [...].” (142).

Continuing with an early and seminal Latin American text that also portrays transformation, the most important animal presence in Carpentier’s magical realist novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949) is the transformations of the one-armed former slave, Mackandal:

At night in their barracks and huts, the blacks told one another the strangest news with great joy: a green iguana was seen warming itself on the roof of the tobacco barn; someone had seen a nocturnal butterfly flying at midday; a large dog with bristled hair had raced across the house, stealing a deer leg [...].

Everyone knew that the green iguana, the nocturnal butterfly, the stray dog, and the fantastic gannet were nothing but simple disguises. Graced with the power to transform himself into cloved-hoofed animals, birds, fish, or insects, Mackandal often visited the plantations of the Plaine to watch over the faithful and learn if they still believed in his return [...]. Now his powers were limitless [...]. By his own doing, a negress gave birth to a child with the face of a wild boar. At night he appeared on the roads in the shape of a black goat

with embers on its horns. (Carpentier 25–26)

We are told that his power came from “the grace of the greater gods,” a vague source that endows it with a feeling of cosmic rather than earthly power, such as that wielded by the French colonizers. His followers wait for four years, and finally (again under his own volition) he reappears: “Behind the Mother Drum, the human visage of Mackandal rose” (29). In this reappearance, he seems to retain traits of animals he has incarnated, suggesting the power and permanence of the forces that he embodies: “Something remained in him as a result of hiding in mysterious places: scales, pelt, fleece. His beard was sharp and long and feline; his eyes spread out toward the temples, like those of the birds whose appearance he used as disguise” (29–30). He embodies more than just himself; his identity is multiple. As in much magical realist fiction, such images question our normal ideas—this time about the clear distinctions we draw between humans and animals, and between different animals.

If we investigate other minor instances, they confirm that animals tend to symbolize the power of the Haitian land and its indigenous inhabitants over its invaders; so this is definitely a postcolonial text that uses animals to question the status quo. For the rest of the novel, after the disappearance of Mackandal, we follow the adventures of the slave Ti Noel, as King Henri Christophe builds his Palace of Sans Souci and his enormous fortress atop a hill—both aping European models. Now, Ti Noel carries on a few animal associations of his idol Mackandal, “surprised at how easy it was to transform oneself into an animal when one had the necessary powers. As proof he climbed a tree, wanting to be a bird, and immediately became a bird [...]. As a wasp he soon tired of the monotonous geometries of wax architecture [...].” (125–126). These seem whimsical and self-centered metamorphoses, unlike those of Mackandal who uses his transformations in the service of mankind.

At the end, after observing the democratic society of the geese, who “were an ordered folk, [...] whose existence did not tolerate having one individual stand above others of the same species,” a description we might fit into the category of “memories of the future,” using an earlier model to improve the present, “Ti Noel used his extraordinary powers to change himself into a goose,” wanting to join their clan, but they will not have him, and he finally vanishes, carried off on a great wind. We are told that “from then on, no one knew anything about Ti Noel ... except, perhaps, the wet vulture, the seeker of all death” who “flew down into the thick foliage of the Bois Cayman” (131). So, an animal has the last word, suggesting that as we hear just previously:

the greatness of man lies precisely in wanting to improve on what already is by taking on labors. There is no greatness to achieve in the Kingdom of Heaven, since it has an already established order, the unknown made clear, existence without end, without the possibility of sacrifice, rest, and delight. That’s why, burdened by sorrows and labors, beautiful within his misery, capable of loving in the midst of plagues, man can find his greatness, his greatest measure, only in the Kingdom of this World. (130–131)

It is the opposite of the ridiculously ostentatious creations of Henri Christophe and his ilk, ever

aspiring to build what they imagine resembles the kingdom of heaven, high above the ordinary world. Thus, finally, Carpentier enlists his animal helpers, so to speak, in order to affirm life in this world, difficult as it is, in order to improve it, rather than escaping into another.

I would say that García Márquez's story, *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, pictures a different if not entirely opposing scenario of the human-animal connection. After having lived in a filthy chicken coop in Pelayo and Elisenda's yard, where he mysteriously arrives, and earning them enough to build a new house from the money they collect as the price of viewing him, at the end he just as mysteriously disappears. Elisenda "caught the angel in his first attempts at flight" (462). He struggles to take off, but finally

he did manage to gain altitude. Elisenda let out a sign of relief, for herself and for him, when she saw him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea. (462)

Why does she watch him for so long? I think there might be various answers, but one is that she has gotten what she wants from him—the money for her new house—and wants to be sure he will not return to disrupt her daily routine anymore; another related one has to do with his rather saintly behavior, not complaining at his captivity but just putting up with his life: "The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire [...]. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience" (459–460). So Elisenda keeps watching him because he represents an alternative to the onions she has been chopping, to the drab life in the village, a spiritual aspiration that is missing from her life, but which people like to keep at a great distance. And finally, a third one might be that she is fascinated by the fact that because of his wings, two realms, spirit and matter, seem to be joined in his body; his very being constitutes the story's magical element. He is inexplicable, and that is his attraction. That element is underlined by the satirical treatment of the parish priest's interaction with him:

Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an imposter when he saw that he did not understand the language of God [...] seen up close he was much too human: he had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites [...] and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels. (459)

Elisenda's and the village inhabitants' naïve sense of wonder is a more convincing presence of spiritual aspiration than the official attempt to categorize him, to make him confirm to official signs of holiness. That the narrator persists in calling him an angel, even while reporting his non-angelic characteristics, seems to confirm that idea.

Unlike *Pig Tales* and “Axolotl,” which center on magical animals that critique and question our habitual ideas, Fuentes’s novella *Aura* for the most part uses animals as witchy familiars, who appear very briefly to endow one of its central figures, Consuelo, with powers of enticement and transformation. The young historian Felipe Montero answers an ad for an editor of old documents, and goes to a house in the old part of Mexico City. There he finds the old woman, Consuelo, and a rabbit, which soon, at Consuelo’s call, seems to magically transform into a young girl, Aura, whom it turns out embodies Consuelo’s youth. After many mysterious events, including a scene of cats burning in the courtyard, Felipe falls in love with Aura, not yet realizing that through Consuelo’s magic, he now embodies Consuelo’s dead husband General Llorente. Near the end, Aura asks Felipe:

“Will you love me for ever?”

“For ever, Aura. I’ll love you for ever.”

“For ever? Do you swear it?”

“I swear it.”

“Even though I grow old? Even though I lose my beauty? Even though my hair turns white?”

“For ever, my love, for ever.”

“Even if I die, Felipe? Will you love me for ever, even if I die?”

“For ever, for ever. I swear it. Nothing can separate us.” (Fuentes 411)

And soon, that is just what happens, as the novella ends:

You stroke Aura’s long black hair [...]. Kissing her face without thinking, without distinguishing, and you are touching her withered breasts when a ray of moonlight shines in and surprises you [...]. It falls on Aura’s eroded face, as brittle and yellowed as the memoirs [...] the ray of moonlight shows you the naked body of the old lady, of Señora Consuelo, limp, spent, tiny, ancient, trembling because you touch her, you love her, you too have come back ...

You plunge your face, your open eyes, into Consuelo’s silver-white hair, and you’ll embrace her again when the clouds cover the moon, when you’re both hidden again, when the memory of youth, of youth re-embodied, rules the darkness.

“She’ll come back, Felipe. We’ll bring her back together. Let me recover my strength and I’ll bring her back...” (416–417)

Exactly what transpires is unclear, and therefore explaining it is difficult. The simple answer is that Consuelo is a witch who induces a young man into her house to satisfy her sensual cravings. But can we perhaps dig a bit farther and wonder whether the animal presence once again seems to suggest some kind of cosmic relatedness, a power that Consuelo possesses, grown from her love for her husband the general?

Felipe recounts the story in the second person, seeming to address himself, as well as an imagined reader, which lessens the distance between narrator and listener, drawing the reader in, so she is at the heart of the matter when these strange events take place, lessening her doubt of

their veracity. But here again, there are intriguing differences. In contrast to the other animals we have just examined, whose physical form is changed, we do not see the process of the rabbit's transformation; it is just implied, Aura appearing all at once and the rabbit disappearing. Why do we need these animals, then, since their appearance is so brief? As I have just suggested, and like other animals in stories of witches, the cats and the rabbit lend their animal power to the ageing and exhausted Consuelo, to achieve such a transformation, changing the present into the past, and vice versa, creating an eternal circle of love.

Another example of animal power appears in Cortázar's story "Letter to a Young Lady in Paris," in which a young man narrates his strange magical experience of vomiting up miniature rabbits to a friend in whose apartment he is staying. That they emerge from inside him suggests that the rabbits embody something in him—most likely the fear of disorder that he expresses about disrupting his friend's orderly apartment:

it offends me to intrude on a compact order, built even to the finest nets of air [...] an ambience where someone who lives beautifully has arranged everything like a visible affirmation of her soul [...]. How much at fault one feels taking a small metal tray and putting it at the far end of the table [...]. (39–40)

At the end of the story, the narrator says that

I don't think it will be difficult to pick up eleven small rabbits splattered over the pavement, perhaps they won't even be noticed, people will be too occupied with the other body, it would be more proper to remove it quickly before the early students pass through on their way to school. (50)

It is unclear, but his reference to "the other body" suggests that after throwing the rabbits out of the window, he will follow them, jumping to his death. Earlier on, he cannot bring himself to kill them; here at the end, he presumably will die with them, cementing the affinity between them. They are destructive—as he feared he himself would be—of his friend's orderly world. They and he are connected, both representing an awkward and irrepressible life force—in contrast to the delicate aesthetic sensibility associated with her objects and furnishings, which they damage, and also with both of their books; the rabbits nibble hers and distract him from his reading programme. That after the narrator arrives at the apartment, he vomits eleven rabbits almost at once, whereas he had usually only reproduced one every month or so, emphasizes the opposition of these two opposing modes. The connection between rabbits and narrator puts them into our category of cosmic connectedness, but in a fearful way, not helping him to transform, but rather affirming his uncomfortable way of life.

Here we are experiencing the great variety in magically real animals, many of whom do disappear at the end of their stories; but having been so humanized during them, they cause readers to yearn, or at least to be very curious, to follow them, into a mysterious realm akin to but different from their own. Not an escape exactly but an implied alternative.

At this point, I would like to mention another dichotomy within magical realist animals that complexifies the topic, and which I have already broached in connection with *Pig Tales* above. And that is, the difference between transformation and hybridity. They are of course similar in suggesting the interconnectedness of all life, and the blurring of clear distinctions between different types of beings. The first implies a change—think of “Axolotl,” *Aura*, and “Samsa in Love” (which we will examine later). One type of being transforms into another. The second, hybridity, seems more common and to me implies even more erosion of boundaries and hence destabilizing of habitual categories. They ask the ontological question of what kind of creature is this. Recall here *Pig Tales*, the baby with a pig’s tail born at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and “The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”—angel? bird? human? all three? However, it is difficult to categorize clearly because even with transformations, often they are not total; animal and human remain mixed even within the transformation—as in “Axolotl” and—though to a lesser extent—“Samsa in Love.”

The child born with a pig’s tale at the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is certainly one of the most frightening beings we encounter. It is often interpreted as a symbol of isolation and incest, with a bodily monstrous result, because “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth” (383). But then there is the unbridled happiness that Aureliano and Amaranta Úrsula experience in its conception. What are we to make of that? That such happiness is isolating in the extreme, thoughtless of others, and hence means that societies that indulge in it are doomed? This baby is a very rich example of a magical realist being: it exhibits both of our streams: it certainly embodies cosmic connectivity, possessing animal and (mostly) human features, and “being eaten by the ants” (381).² But the language with which García Márquez surrounds his birth continually references the past: of course Aureliano is reading Melquíades’s parchments, “the history of the family, ... down to the most trivial details, one hundred years ahead of time” (an ingenious example of “memories of the future”), but which also “concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant”—an Aleph of time, as it were (381–382). And there are many more: the wind is “full of voices from the past, the murmurs of ancient geraniums” (382); Aureliano wanders the town “searching for an entrance that went back to the past” (379); nevertheless, “he was unable to bear in his soul the crushing weight of so much past” (381). Finally, the mind-boggling circularity of Aureliano’s final thoughts involving both time and timelessness mix the reader up in a kind of temporal mobius strip feeling: Aureliano deciphers himself in the parchments, “as if he were looking into a speaking mirror. Then he skipped again to anticipate the predictions and ascertain the date and circumstances of his death”—in an action that makes what has seemed to be an omniscient and timeless narrative subject to time.

Unlike García Márquez’s story of the old man, which centers on a strange kind of hybrid animal, and which questions the distinctions between categories, even as it also makes allegorical points about greed and saintliness, Ben Okri’s novel *The Famished Road* (1991) contains many animals oriented to a similar end. It portrays the daily life of Azaro (the narrator) and his family in their village at the edge of a forest, rife with violent interventions of political figures in opposing parties. Azaro is an abiku, or spirit child, who keeps in touch with the realm of the spirits that most

people leave at birth. (Azaro calls his parents the very familiar and down to earth British Mum and Dad, which contrasts with the more elevated poetic language often used in connection with magical animal spirits, merging the ordinary domestic and the magical.)

Right from the start, animals are integrated into the human world. At the very beginning, Azaro and other spirit children begin as birds, which continue to appear often, I think because birds and their flight upwards often signal travel between the earth and the realm of the spirits: “in that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries.... There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born” (Okri 3). But very soon, another, more powerful animal is described, again communicating with the human world:

Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds. [...] If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities. (3–4)

Okri’s animals are encountered both in the magical realm of the forest where they seem to concretize its aura of mystery and strangeness, and also in the village, where they serve the same function by disrupting ordinary activities there. That they appear in both places exemplifies the double nature of life in general. Again, like other animals in these texts, they are very malleable, often transforming into other animals or people with whom they interact, or occasionally disappearing. Here is a magical moment with an owl and Azaro in the forest:

[...] the owl, uttering its nocturnal cry, flew from the branch and swooped past, circling us twice. It made another cry and soared upwards. A crack sounded, like a tree splitting, and I saw the owl falling, as though it had been shot in the mid-air of a dream. It landed on the earth and struggled, wings flapping feebly. Then it turned into a little pool of yellow water and evaporated into the air. (39)

From time to time, small animal events like this seem as if they could be symbolic, but, again, of what exactly is not made clear. Another example: “There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun. They radiated a brilliant copper illumination hard to the eyes. I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. I saw cats with the legs of women. [...]” (245). Near the very end, Dad admonishes Azaro for wanting to chase a lizard out of their house:

When I got to our room a lizard with a lavender tail scurried in after me. I was about to chase it out when Dad said:

“All creatures must be treated with respect from now on. If you want the lizard out command it to go and it will go. We must use our powers wisely. We must not become tyrants, you hear?”

I nodded. Then Dad got up from his chair and in a high-pitched, almost comical voice, he said:

“Mr. Lizard, where are you? Out! Leave this room and go somewhere else. Now!”

[...]

We sat in silence. Then, after a while, the lizard came out from under the cupboard, nodded three times, and fled from the room. (Okri 499)

Thus, like Carpentier's, Okri's animals often interact with people, lessening the gulf between them; and he thus seems to enlist animals to improve life on earth, occasionally using them as models. Just previous to the lizard episode, Dad says,

Human beings are dreaming of wiping out their fellow human beings from this earth. Rats and frogs understand their destiny. Why not man, eh? [...] Strange fishes and sea-monsters and mighty plants live in the rock-bed of our spirits. The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls. There are dolphins, plants that dream, magic birds inside us. The sky is inside us. The earth is in us. The trees of the forest, the animals of the bushes, tortoises, birds, and flowers know our future. [...] Inside a cat there are many histories, many books. When you look into the eyes of dogs strange fishes swim in your mind. [...] Before everything was born there was first the spirit. It is the spirit which invites things in, good things, or bad. Invite only good things, my son. (498–499)

In short, Dad seems to be telling them to become visionaries, embracing all of life, as he imagines animals doing, equivalent to the cat that contains many histories, or the dog with the strange fishes to share. While this integration of animal and human is generally experienced as a positive phenomenon, we should not assume that as a whole the text projects an optimistic tone; as Ato Quayson claims, while Okri's novel seems to be centered in the pre-Independence period of the late 1950s he “has transferred the structure of the feeling of hopelessness of the late 1960s and 1970s onto the earlier phase, thus fundamentally altering the affective structure of the period of decolonization” (80).

In contrast to some other texts (think of “Axolotl” and *Pig Tales*, among others), in most cases, Okri's animals appear briefly, mentioned alone or with others, so briefly that even when they are not magical, they help to create a generalized mysterious atmosphere in which all beings are connected, including trees, unusual weather, animals participating in conversations with humans, in struggles between people, and at parties and ceremonies. And to keep that mysterious atmosphere constantly before us.

However, there are longer interludes that are magical. At one point, Azaro hears rats talking in his house:

Dad, in the darkness, said: “Azaro, rats can be our friends. They can sometimes tell what is happening in the world. They are our spies. Listen to them.” [...] I listened to the rats. One of them had teeth of yellow diamonds. [...] I suddenly realized that if I tried hard enough I

could understand the language of rats. They were saying, as they ate through Mum's sack of garri, that the world is rougher than fire or steel. (Okri 70–71)

This last sentiment Azaro and his family find to be true, given all the violence they experience. Such scenes merge the realms of real and magical even farther.

In addition to animals who participate in magic, or embody magical qualities, other scenes include animals that are not magical but who seem to have a mysterious spiritual bond with Azaro and hence serve as guide figures, integrating him even more than the other inhabitants into the nebulous realm of the spirits. For example,

while the road spirits raged in me, I saw a two-legged dog emerge from the forest. [...] The two-legged dog led me through the forest. It was a lean dog, with intense eyes and a sensitive tail and flea-ridden ears. [...] The dog limped on deeper into the forest. I watched it go and it stopped only once to look at me. I waved, but the dog did not understand my gesture. It went on limping, a solitary and heroic dog, surviving with only two legs and a sad face. (115)³

The Japanese writer Haruki Murakami has written several stories involving the magical use of animals. But they occur in a very different atmosphere than Okri's; not in the mysterious world of forest and village with mythical-seeming animals, but usually in a spare and modern urban realm. Murakami's story "Samsa in Love" (2013) is of particular interest to students of magical realism because it constitutes a virtual rewriting of Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915) in reverse—with a happy ending, no less. As everyone knows, *The Metamorphosis* uses Gregor Samsa's transformation into a cockroach-like bug to achieve many things: primarily critiquing the heartlessness of family and commerce, and suggesting the hunger of people for spiritual nourishment and love—to grossly oversimplify! Murakami's Samsa continues on into life; unlike Gregor, who becomes increasingly alienated from reality and humanity, finally being thrown out with the trash, Samsa is attracted by fish and sunflowers, pleasant things in the natural world, "was glad to be human," and takes an interest in a woman he meets. The story ends with the hopeful sentence: "The world was waiting for him to learn," seeming to confirm his transformation back into a human—a memory of the future? (40).

Is the story an answer to Kafka? It is hard to say, but it certainly riffs on it. Or maybe Murakami's text is something like an embroidery on Kafka's—a sort of palimpsest. At the very least, we might say that Murakami fictionalizes metafiction, aligning himself with Kafka as a precursor, so clear are the references to Kafka's text, perhaps affirming the continuity of magical realism itself. I thought of hypothetically renaming the story: "Contemporary Magical Realism: An Origin Story!" That latent intertextuality—in some instances more obvious than others—means that the reader necessarily has the earlier work in mind. Three examples (just for fun! One is probably enough): Kafka's story begins thus: "When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (3). Murakami's starts in this way: "He woke to discover that he had undergone a metamorphosis and become Gregor Samsa" ("Samsa in Love" 2). From *Metamorphosis*: "His room, a regular human room,

[...] lay quiet between the four familiar walls” (3). But soon, “they were clearing out his room; depriving him of everything he loved” (35); from “Samsa in Love”: “The room had perhaps once served as a normal bedroom. Yet now all vestiges of human life had been stripped away” (3); like Kafka’s Gregor, who struggles with his new appendages to get out of bed, Murakami’s Samsa “tried to move his fingers,” seemingly puzzled that “each was equipped with a number of joints, which made synchronizing their movements very complicated” (4). With all these references, maybe the story imagines/enacts what happens after Kafka’s Gregor changes back into a human being (often my students say that they were hoping he would!). Human and animal mirror each other, so we get a kind of doubly hybridized being emerging from the conjunction of the two texts. Near the start, Samsa does not know what he has been before: “But who had he been before he became Gregor Samsa? *What* had he been?” (3). Maybe that is because (appropriately in this intertextual metafiction) what he has been is a text. Finally, this intertextuality is significant as a seminal moment in the international history of magical realism; Murakami literalizes what we critics often say, which is that Kafka’s story is a prefiguration of magical realism.

As we have been seeing, then, like Kafka’s novella, and following it almost as a set of prompts, the story enacts a magical transformation between human and animal form. But to what end? That is one point of the tale, we do not really know, and neither does Samsa. Our lives are mysteries. But it seems to me there might be a couple of clues embedded in the text that allow another meaning. And so another point of the story is that instead of taking things deadly seriously (as Kafka does), lamenting the lack of happiness and love in our lives, we can find contentment in just fixing small things: “Maybe working on the little things as dutifully and honestly as we can is how we stay sane when the world is falling apart” (Murakami, “Samsa in Love” 37). And near the end, Samsa says “he would return to the second floor and figure out the proper way to dress. For now, at least, that would be his mission” (44).

Two more details align “Samsa in Love” with other magical realist fictions that confound our ordinary sense of space, time, and identity. In present space, at one point Samsa thinks the woman to whom he is attracted “toiled up the stairs, much like a crawling insect. [...] Her creeping gait aroused his sympathy—it reminded him of something” (22). By now, we get it right away: it reminds him of his former self (an implicit confusion of identities), but only the reader knows that. Now the reader finds herself in an in between realm—between human and animal, fact and fiction—as in much magical realism that questions our habitual ideas and categories. And in terms of time, as Samsa smells coffee (repeating Gregor’s doing the same, which is what he is recalling), “The pungent fragrance recalled something to him. [...] It was a strange feeling, as if he were recollecting the present from the future. As if time had somehow been split in two, so that memory and experience revolved within a closed cycle, each following the other” (11). The story could be seen as literalizing “memories of the future”: “as if recollecting the past from the future, making the past startlingly present in the now” (37).

I have focused at some length on this story because within our topic of animals it is such an original use of them—as a metafictional animal. The presence of the animal—Kafka’s Gregor as a bug—as I have suggested above, acts as a kind of palimpsest, a delicate presence behind Murakami’s text, rather than as an actual presence in it. To be honest, I am not quite sure exactly

what to make of that, except to note that it is original! But perhaps we might see it as not only a metafictional statement about the importance of Kafka's text and all that it implies about social and psychological critique, as well as an explicit affirmation of it as a precursor of contemporary magical realism, but also—since it includes a transformativity in both directions, Kafka's man into bug, and Murakami's transformation of bug into man—about the closeness of animals and humans, one of our points regarding the dissolution of differences between beings, suggesting a cosmic view of the world in which they are all allied. It seems to me this view is confirmed by a moment in Murakami's novel *1Q84* in which a character talks about relating to a butterfly (although it is not technically magical):

“This little *person* thinks of me as a friend.” / “Is it possible to become friends with a butterfly?” / “It is if you first become a part of nature. You suppress your presence as a human being, stay very still, and convince yourself that you are a tree or grass or a flower. It takes time, but once the butterfly lets its guard down, you can become friends quite naturally. [...] I come here every day, say hello to the butterflies and talk about things with them. When the time comes, though, they just quietly go off and disappear. I'm sure it means they've died, but I can never find their bodies. [...] It's as if they've been absorbed by the air [...] into nothingness again, perhaps to some other world.” (209–210)

Just like García Márquez's “very old man with enormous wings” who flies off we know not where, or Okri's lizard who scurries out of the room. A similar cosmic merging happens when the main character in Murakami's novel *1Q84*, Tengo, hears a voice and says of it: “this was Kumi's voice and at the same time it was the voice of the owl at night. [...] In his memory the voices were mixed, [...] Tengo needed [...] the wisdom of the night that had put down roots into the soil” (1117).

A similar cosmic connectedness between humans and animals appears again in Murakami's story “The Elephant Vanishes” (1994), another tale in which the animal concerned leaves our world and we wish we could follow—suggesting a desire for a different type of reality than our own. The narrator tells of his fascination watching a lone elephant and his caretaker in a cage on the outskirts of his town when they are alone at night. What intrigues him is “the special warmth, the sense of trust, between them. While the keeper swept the floor, the elephant would wave its trunk and pat the keeper's back. I liked to watch the elephant doing that” (324). Then one day they simply vanish and no one can figure out how—or why, for that matter; many details show the cage and its surroundings to be completely impregnable, and the elephant's foot had been chained by an extremely strong iron ring; neither of these items shows the slightest sign of having been broken.

The elephant and his keeper appear to have magically achieved an exit from the ordinary world; the story ends thus: “The elephant and his keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back” (327). It is not overt, but that ending projects a certain sadness and regret. It is as if the vanishing of the elephant and his keeper have removed the narrator's ability to tap into the ineffable and wondrous connection between them. As a result, he loses volition, and “I would begin to think I wanted to do something, but then I would become incapable of distinguishing the difference between the probable results of doing it and of not doing it” (Murakami, *Elephant*

327). Earlier on, the narrator ruminates on the word “pragmatic,” saying that you can make up neat expressions, like “‘essentially pragmatic’ and ‘pragmatic in essence.’ If you look at things that way, you avoid all kinds of complicated problems” (320). Like the mysterious connection between the elephant and his keeper, which suggests ineffable relations between beings, mystical cosmic connections. Just before that, he speaks about the kitchens for which he sells equipment, saying that “A kitchen probably *does* need a few things more than it needs unity. But those other elements are things you can’t sell. And in this pragmatic world of ours, things you can’t sell don’t count for much” (320)—a cynical utterance that the entire story belies, with its emphasis on the non-pragmatic relationship of the elephant and his keeper, and the narrator’s appreciation of it, expressing instead the opposite—a mysterious cosmic connection between them.

I will end with a relatively recent story by the Chinese American author Ken Liu, “The Paper Menagerie” (2011), which resembles Murakami’s “Samsa in Love” in that the animal in it is a constructed one—as we shall see. The story is recounted by Jack, who moves from China to America at age ten. His mother makes him magical origami animals (the first of whom is Laohu, the tiger—since Jack was born in the year of the tiger) and breathes life into them, so he will have playmates in this alien American world. But Jack distances himself from his parents, constructing a normal American life, and storing the animals (which have ceased to move after his mother dies) in a box in the attic. Although it runs throughout much of the story, the connecting power of animals is exemplified especially strongly in the way the first origami animal Jack’s mother makes for him is the one who initiates the recovery of the past and of Jack’s connection to his mother. Many years after the mother has died, Laohu “purred under my hand” as in his childhood; soon, “Laohu stopped playing. He got up, jumped with feline grace into my lap, and proceeded to unfold himself,” revealing a letter in Chinese addressed to Jack, who recognizes his mother’s handwriting, and which recounts the hitherto unknown details of her life (Liu 188).

Thus, like many of Okri’s animals, a certain animal magnetism, as we might call this power, is enlisted to make the alienated world better. I find the end of the story, which exemplifies the results of this power, very moving, an emotionally powerful use of animal magic: after having read his mother’s letter, detailing her past, Jack recreates his playmate, the paper tiger Laohu, who has in a sense magically brought his ancestral past as well as his mother back to him: “Following the creases, I refolded the paper back into Laohu. I cradled him in the crook of my arm, and as he purred, we began the walk home” (192). This story exemplifies both our strands of animal activity in magical realism—“memories of the future,” which brings the past magically forward to continue into the future, and cosmic connection, which, like Okri’s animals, embodies a sense of the similarity and relatedness of all beings in the world, abolishing the usual separation between them. Intriguingly, these animals in Murakami’s and Liu’s stories, are constructed animals, but they perform these functions like many of the live ones we have examined, confirming their animal power, and suggesting that perhaps some humans, like Jack’s mother, can tap into it.

Is it too outrageous to suggest that examining magical realist animals can help us perceive that critiques of the genre as escapist have a certain validity, but in a different way than such a critique has usually been intended (as allowing us to take our minds off of current social problems and

participate in a realm that includes intriguing magic)? Instead, as we are seeing in the destructive results of the human use of natural resources, sentient animals in magical realism provide an escape from the dominant human presence in the Anthropocene world, and serve as bridges to the non-human one. They thus corroborate studies that advocate taking an animal point of view with respect to the environment, studying what animals need from their environments, rather than subordinating their needs to ours.⁴

Notes

1. In the Latin American context, this expression comes from the title of a novel by Elena Garro, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, Joaquín Mortiz, 1963.
2. Tanja Schwalm agrees that the ants eating the last of the Buendías is one of many examples that mixes up our habitual categories, reverses hierarchies, such as that of “human mastery over the natural world ... [and the] popular but mistaken belief that humans are at the top of the food chain” (96); see her brilliant article, “Relax and Enjoy the Show: Circensian Animal Spaces in Australian and Latin American Magical Realist Fiction,” in which she details many instances in which circus animals function in this way in magical realism, as well as locating them in the circus tradition.
3. In discussing how D. O. Fagunwa’s novels embody ecocriticism, often demonstrating and advocating a closeness of all beings, Oluwolé Coker mentions a saying among the Yoruba, that “If one wanders far enough, one would not only find a squirrel with hunchback, one would also encounter a snail with horns” and comments that in so doing Fagunwa provides “us with omniscience [sic] of the animal world,” and that “The organization and discipline in animal kingdom [sic] are akin to those of human kind” (243). He also cites a scene much like Okri’s from Fagunwa’s *In the Forest of Olodumare* in which animals participate in the narrator’s father’s wedding party: “animals and birds got drunk and began to behave in an unruly manner. The elephant knocked down trees, the lion began his onslaught on the animals, the fox killed one of the fowl delegates and the kite began chasing the birds all over the place” (241). Furthermore, “The animals spoke the language of humans, so did the birds...” (241).
4. For a fascinating variety of the ways in which modernists used animals to question the human/animal divide, which in turn allies itself with questioning other divides, such as gendered, racial, and cultural binaries, see Saskia McCracken and Alex Goody’s collection *Beastly Modernisms: The Figure of the Animal in Modernist Literature and Culture*. Not surprisingly, it anticipates the ways we are seeing how animals play a part in blurring traditional categories between those same entities in magical realism, demonstrating how it grows out of modernism. To cite just one relevant point, in their introduction, the editors note that, prefiguring how “contemporary animal theory seeks to decentre the human, develop a rigorous riposte to anthropocentrism, and explore the ways that human and nonhuman life are entangled, [...] modernist writers and artists were already querying the figure of the animal as antithesis or even straightforward counterpart to the human” (11).

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