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How Disassociating the Past Reassociates the Present: Distilling the Magic out of Magic Realism in Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*

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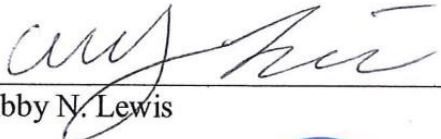
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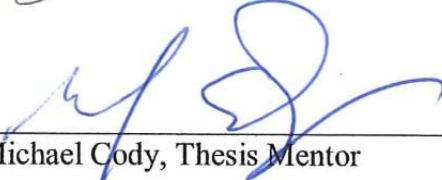
How Disassociating the Past Reassociates the Present:
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By

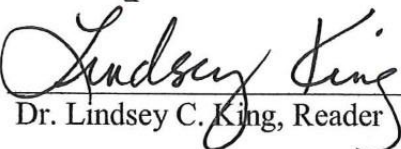
Abby N. Lewis

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April 13, 2017

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
A Realistic Reaction to Magic	4
Exploring the Tightrope Between Fiction and Nonfiction	12
The Delicate Rendering of a Culture in Literature	22
Works Cited	32
Appendix	35

The novels of many non-Western writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie have been marginalized and misinterpreted by literary critics. One example of which is that their work is often labeled as magical realism. Susan Power's novel *The Grass Dancer*, although not thought of as a major work in the genre, is placed in the category of magical realism, despite the fact that Power, like both García Márquez and Rushdie, has stated she is not a magical realist author. In order to dispute the claims that associate these authors with the term magical realism, I examine and challenge the work of Wendy Faris—the most prominent voice on the topic of magical realism. In *Ordinary Enchantments*, Faris analyzes the unrealistic and therefore magical qualities of certain texts, yet she seldom takes into consideration the geographical and biographical background of the author of each text, a background which can sometimes provide key information to unlocking deeper meaning in the work itself, as is the case with Susan Power.

Susan Power grew up in Chicago, Illinois, where she was surrounded by her Dakota family, her WASP father, and the local African American community members. Power has even bragged that, as a child, she was able to meet Martin Luther King Jr. Her father died when she was still young, but she has identified her mother as her biggest influence because, according to Power, her mother has a “wild imagination and she would take me all over the city of Chicago and just tell me stories” (Oslos 5). Power's unique childhood spent immersed in diverse cultures and traditions, coupled with her intimate relationship with her mother, has played a large part in her writing. By examining *The Grass Dancer* through the lens of biographical criticism and placing the work in the proper cultural context, I will aid and solidify Power's claim that “given the culture I was raised in, this [*The Grass Dancer*] is not magical realism, this is actual reality to me. It might not be another culture's reality, but it is not a literary strategy for me” (Oslos 1).

With the help of Lee Schweninger's analysis of the proper cultural context of *The Grass Dancer* in relation to magical realism, as well as my own critical interpretation, I plan to not only release Power's novel from the label of magical realism, but demonstrate what insight is gained in placing the work back in its proper cultural and biographical context.

A Realistic Reaction to Magic

Wendy Faris identifies "five primary characteristics" of magical realism, the first of which is the "irreducible element," which she defines as "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse" (*Ordinary* 7). Her other four parameters include the presence of "the phenomenal world" in the text, a reader's hesitancy or struggle to accept the events that occur, the merging of different worlds through the narrative, and the disruption of "received ideas about time, space, and identity" (7). Only the first and third characteristics, the "irreducible element" and the reader's hesitancy, will be discussed in this thesis. Through the first element, the "narrative voice reports extraordinary—magical—events, which would not normally be verifiable by sensory perception, in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted" (7). Faris cites a number of occurrences of this calm mode of narration in magical realist texts, such as when Gabriel García Márquez's Úrsula, without questioning the mechanics of the situation, follows "the trail of blood that miraculously travels across town" in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (9). Although miraculous and strange things occur in Power's *The Grass Dancer* as well, many of her characters demonstrate an adverse reaction to magical events rather than greeting them as a natural occurrence. Charlene is uncomfortably aware of her grandmother's unnerving ability to manipulate the will of those around her, an ability referred to as bad medicine, which Charlene

perceives as magic. Crystal Thunder ultimately leaves her mother's house because she cannot stand to witness Anna's use of bad medicine, so Charlene has no one to explain Anna's ways to her. The assertion that magical realist texts must have an "irreducible element" was made prior to Faris's by editors David Young and Keith Hollaman: "In a magical realist story there must be an irreducible element, something that cannot be explained by logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief" (4). Faris adds to this definition by describing it as something that cannot be explained by "the laws of the universe" according to "Western empirically based discourse." Young and Hollaman's definition is truly universal, whereas Faris applies hers only to "Western" culture, which eliminates the very explanation that releases Power's novel from the category of magical realism, the explanation's being the "received belief" of Power, her culture, and the characters in her novel as a viable reason for the presence of what others so often classify as magical.

When Úrsula encounters the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, her reaction is one that many would consider strange. Prudencio is wounded, standing "by the water jug" and "trying to cover the hole in his throat with a plug made of esparto grass," a sight that would make anyone balk (García Márquez 24). Yet García Márquez writes, "It did not bring on fear in [Úrsula], but pity." Úrsula does not scream, she does not faint, she does not try to convince herself she is hallucinating. Instead, calm as can be, "[s]he went back to the room and told her husband what she had seen" (24). Her behavior goes almost unnoticed, which supports Faris's statement that magical realist narratives tell of extraordinary events in an ordinary tone of voice. It is important to note, however, that while claiming *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a work of magical realism, Faris and coeditor Lois Zamora also confess, "Gabriel García Márquez insists that he is a social realist, not a magical realist" (4). Power has also stated that she is not a magical realist

writer. In *The Grass Dancer*, when Herod Small War sees the ghost of his old lover Clara, he reacts as follows: “My tongue was locked to the roof of my mouth. As a Yuwipi man, I had heard spirit voices and encountered dead ancestors, but a white ghost was something different all together” (95). Herod’s initial shock, followed by his quick recovery and acceptance of the ghost is explained by his Yuwipi background. It is his job as “a Yuwipi man” to communicate directly with the spirits during traditional ceremonies. For Herod, the event is real, and it is logical in the context of the novel because ghosts are normal according to his “received belief.” Herod also knows it’s only logical that white ghosts would exist too when he has “familiar knowledge” of the existence of American Indian ghosts. His logic exhibits all three of Young and Hollaman’s points that would negate it as a magical realist text.

Power even goes beyond a mere recognition and identification of these extraordinary events; she demonstrates the impact they have on the younger generation in her novel—in other words, the impact they have on Power’s generation. When Harley encounters the ghost of Clara, he is even less shocked by her appearance than Herod. This is partly because of Harley’s familiarity with the rumors about Clara’s ghost—rumors that contain evidence of her ghost’s being “photographed a number of times by tourists” (*GD* 43)—but it is also because he has spent so much time around Frank and his grandfather Herod, the respected town elder and Yuwipi man known as “the one who finds things” (77). So Harley watches calmly as Clara kneels on the floor to cry by the sleeping Pumpkin, and when Clara disappears, “Harley moved to kneel in her place. He brushed his hand across the stained floor, hoping to understand the inky tears” (44). Because of his heritage, Harley not only recognizes and accepts ghosts but also knows from Herod that they often come to impart wisdom, and so he immediately seeks to understand the purpose of Clara’s visit, and the purpose of her tears.

Faris and Zamora state, “Texts labeled as magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less ‘real’ than those upon which the traditional literary realism draws—often non-Western cultural systems” (3). Faris returns to this concept in *Ordinary Enchantments*, claiming that the works are still magical realism despite being “no less ‘real’” than realism because, “even when a magical realist text includes the perspective of a non-Western system of belief, and questions such categories, their form and the assumptions behind them are still present in the realism that the text employs, so it does not belong entirely to that non-Western system either” (48-9). Perhaps these texts are not meant to serve “the purpose of political and cultural disruption,” but merely to accurately depict a different reality. Faris’s statement, while seeming to contradict my assertion, actually aides it. By asserting that non-Western writers are still confined to the rules of Western systems even when claiming not to be shows that perhaps these Western systems are so pervasive that no matter how hard other cultures try to distance themselves from it, we still insist on forcing them back into these “categories.” Perhaps they are labeled as magic realism because many Western ethnocentric readers are too inconvenienced not only to acknowledge but to attempt to understand the existence of other, thriving cultures, and so they react by trying to negate the alternate renderings of reality by referring to them as magical, unrealistic, and therefore false.

Lee Schweninger states, “The application of magic realism to Power’s fiction, perhaps helpful in one sense, is problematic in others. From a strictly Western perspective the label magical realism tends to devalue what it calls magic” (50). He goes on to say,

As popularly defined, magic realism does offer a means of approaching Power’s novel, but the concept depends on a dichotomy between the “magical” and the “real,” the very dichotomy that I believe Power’s novel challenges. Applying the

combination of the words *magic* and *realism* to the novel is thus problematic, because, despite the dissolving of different categories, the underlying semantic principle remains: real versus magical, real versus unreal. (50)

According to Schweninger, to categorize any text as a work of magical realism not only claims (intentionally or not) that the text depicts a different reality, but that the different reality is a false one, a “magical” and “unreal” reality, which, as Schweninger writes, devalues the text. In the literary context of magical realism, the word “magical” here implies an intentional, creative toying with reality, as if the author were purposefully exaggerating or mystifying the narrative as a storytelling technique, when this may not be the case.

Faris seems uncertain herself whether this is a danger or not. She references Amaryll Chanady and Brenda Cooper’s belief that “in the terms of the text, magical things ‘really’ do happen,” which Faris does not appear to support, yet she also states that the reaction of people in the texts to the magic is entirely real (*Ordinary* 8). Faris seems to believe the author intentionally juxtaposes completely unreal and magical events with “recognizable,” “disturbing,” and thus plausible, “if exaggerated” reactions in order to make a comment or critique on the “extraordinary aspects of the real” (15). I support Schweninger’s statement that the label opens the door for criticism like Faris’s, which focuses on debating the authenticity of the magic in a text rather than accepting that magic, and thus exploring more important factors, such as culture, that ultimately answer some of the questions about the reality and believability of the magic in the work.

For example, Power says in an interview that she was most influenced by the writing of Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich:

When I was growing up there were not only few, if any, Native American authors being published, there were few Native characters to be found in literature at all, and what few existed were often wince-worthy creations who didn't bear any resemblance to people in my family or community. I couldn't find myself or my family in literature. And Louise comes along, with her unforgettable characters who could be relatives of mine, her stories of good and bad medicine, which others would label "Magical Realism" but in my world were familiar, ordinary experiences, and suddenly the world broke open for me. ("Learning")

Michael Dorris, late husband to Louise Erdrich, helped a lot of today's prominent American Indian authors get their start, including his own wife. Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* "was a book that had failed to find a publisher until Mr. Dorris, who was then her husband, became her editor and agent" (Smith). *Love Medicine* "broke ground" because it was one of the first fictionally accurate representations of American Indian modern life. Dinitia Smith writes, "The new Indian writing is a reflection of these authors' complex lives, growing up walking a cultural tightrope, on the one hand hearing echoes of old tribal stories and on the other immersed in MTV." This "cultural tightrope" between Western and non-Western cultures has been fraying for decades. Many American Indian authors are of mixed ancestry, such as Susan Power, Sherman Alexie, the late Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, and others. Some of these authors also grew up outside of a reservation, and so, as a result, their books feature characters concerned with their heritage and identity, and some of the novels are not set on a reservation, but in places like Seattle and Chicago. The appearance of a certain amount of autobiographical information in any novel is almost unavoidable, yet that tightrope between fiction and nonfiction in the work of

American Indian authors is imperative to understanding the seemingly magical reality in their work.

Faris writes that magical realism is “frequently a cultural hybrid,” and that it “exemplifies many of the problematic relations that exist between selves and others in postcolonial literature” (*Ordinary* 4). She continues, “And because its narrative mode destabilizes the dominant mode of realism, it implicitly attempts to abolish the ethnographic literary authority of Western representation. . . . it cannot help being caught in the very appropriation it seeks to destroy (4). Even though many non-Western authors attempt to stand outside the “ethnographic literary authority of Western representation,” Westerners still classify their work as magical realism. By doing this, we are only perpetuating and strengthening the trap these enlightening texts are frequently “being caught in.” Faris admits, “As [Amaryll] Chanady has noted, a major force contributing to the development of magical realism in Latin America was the perception of that continent as exotic and the consequent desire to describe this unfamiliar reality to Europe,” yet by classifying these texts as magic realism, we are still labeling and thus marginalizing them “as exotic” (28). As mentioned earlier, García Márquez has identified as a social realist rather than a magic realist writer. García Márquez has also stated, ““The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with a complete naturalness”” (456). In addition, García Márquez’s “grandfather also took him to circuses and other entertainments and introduced him to the miracle of ice (an episode that introduces *One Hundred Years of Solitude*),” which aids my claim that some texts classified as magic realism are actually based on accurately describing the author’s reality (450).

Salman Rushdie, another large figure of magical realism due to his novel *Midnight's Children*, is quoted in an interview with Günter Grass as having said,¹ “the context in which I began to think was governed by the principle that stories didn't have to be true. . . . it was believed that by telling stories of this kind, marvelous stories, it was possible to tell a kind of truth that it was not possible to tell otherwise. So I grew up assuming that this was the normal way of telling stories” (Bassi 48). Faris paraphrases Bassi's thesis that Rushdie's narration is Indian realism in a footnote in *Ordinary Enchantments*. She tries to discredit Bassi's thesis by claiming, as Bassi “points out, however, Indian novelists have been ‘traditional realists in the European sense.’ Thus I would argue that the label [magic realism] is appropriate” (229 no. 67). Faris fails to realize that Bassi offers the statement she quotes in order to emphasize that the closest European label equivalent to Rushdie's writing is realism; therefore, the issue is one of cultural misrepresentation and mistranslation by Westerners. Bassi calls out Faris and Zamora for perpetuating this misrepresentation later in his essay when he quotes their classification of magical realism as “an assault on [the] basic structures of rationalism and realism” (*Magical* 6). He then writes, “Zamora and Faris's comment . . . implicitly iterates the stereotype of a ‘rational,’ and thus unimaginative, West versus and irrational, imaginative East” (59). Faris's reaction to this in *Ordinary Enchantments* is to misconstrue Bassi's thesis for her own gain and to literally marginalize his voice, and through him, the voice of Rushdie himself, by placing her response in the Notes section of her book, thus implying a reply to Bassi's essay is hardly worth the effort on her part.

To further enunciate the misinterpretation of the realist works of other cultures, the very definition of magical realism has diverged over the years. It originated as a term to describe an

¹ The interview is translated from Italian by Shaul Bassi and included, along with the original Italian text, in his essay “Salman Rushdie's Special Effects.”

art movement in the 1920s before later being applied to literature, so it “therefore carries burdens from visual history that its verbal embodiments cannot well bear. Following that, it has migrated from continent to continent and has suffered from inexact definitions” (*Ordinary* 39). It seems as if the term is in dire need of a refurbishment, one that will lend itself to a more concrete study and allow for opportunities to delve into niches in the genre that are now merely placed in magic realism, which has become a sort of literary melting pot for bold, evocative, and deviant non-Western texts. Faris admits, “The term thus underlines the danger that to treat magical realism in this way, from a broad, comparative perspective, is to colonize the diverse cultural traditions of these texts” and that “the attempt to define the general characteristics and significance of magical realism as a worldwide trend will necessarily involve the neglect of many local particularities” (40). Instead of expending so much energy attempting to find worldwide similarities between these texts and therefore develop a rubric for how a magic realist work operates, perhaps we should be celebrating the cultural ways in which these texts not only deviate from each other, but also from standard Western modes of writing and storytelling.

Exploring the Tightrope Between Fiction and Nonfiction

Tobias Wolff, guest editor of the *Ploughshares* issue in which Power’s “Moonwalk” chapter of *The Grass Dancer* appears, writes in the introduction that his initial plan for the issue “was to put together a collection of autobiographical and fictional writing that tested the border between those preposterously rough groupings,” but he quickly abandoned that strategy when he came to the realization that “[g]ood writing resists classification” (5). He continues, “Over the next nine months almost every piece that came to me was either straightforward reportage or imaginative writing that chose not to concern itself with self-conscious questions about its own

nature and relationship to other kinds of writing.” The pieces that appear in the issue, Wolff confesses, do so simply “because they interested me as stories,” because “I wanted to know more about the dying woman in Susan Power’s masterful ‘Moonwalk’” (6). Classifications, literary categories such as “Modernism, Minimalism, Post-Modernism,” magical realism, are, according to Wolff, nothing more than “terms of convenience for academics and pedants-at-large, to give them a sense of mastery over what is too varied and complex for their patience or understanding” (5-6).

Susan Power is acutely aware of the constraints of literary categories and the fact that her work actively resists such classifications. She learned this at a young age:

Teachers noted that I had talent when I was in elementary school, but few of them approved of my subject matter in those early years. . . . I learned to keep my creative work from the eyes of teachers . . . I protected my voice and vision from the influence of those I felt would edit me culturally and politically. Even in college I didn’t take a single Creative Writing course. . . . I didn’t study writing until I attended the Univ. of Iowa Writers’ Workshop when I was nearing thirty years old. By then I had a strong filter in place – I could take in criticism and appreciate what would strengthen my technique while ignoring what I felt were unhelpful reactions to my different cultural worldview. (“Interview”)

Power’s ability to recognize when her writing is marginalized by others, along with her hyperawareness of her heritage and strong resolve to continue her writing outside the eyes of academia, may have been fostered by her mother.

Power relies very heavily on her mother when it comes to depicting that “different cultural worldview” in her writing. Harley Wind Soldier’s relationship with his mother in *The*

Grass Dancer is possibly Power's attempt to imagine what her childhood would have been like without her own mother, who is such a driving force in her life. When Power reads aloud from a memoir-in-progress called *The Last White Man on Earth*² during a Prairie Lights broadcast, she says before she begins, "My mother was a real activist and part of the Civil Rights Movement back in the '60s and the American Indian Movement" ("Susan Power reading" 5:55-6:05), and in the memoir, Power reads, "I wear my mother's anger like a black shawl. I want to be like her" (9:55-10:00). Power ends the excerpt with, "That's all I wanted to read tonight because I haven't checked more of it with my mother yet," which gives a clear indication of how close the two are (10:31-37).

In the introduction to her short story, "Beaded Soles," Power writes the following:

I've written poetry since I was about five years old, and I think it's the cathartic writing process that has kept me sane. In my poetry I could sort through the conflicting values and belief systems I was taught by being raised with one foot in the Indian world and the other in mainstream society. My writing always reflected my experience, which frequently rendered it controversial in the classroom. Many of my teachers regarded my poems and essays as rebellious. I didn't feel rebellious. I felt honest. (*Reinventing* 374-75)

It is this "cathartic writing process" that allows Power to come to grips with her past. She says in the public reading at Prairie Lights, "I was raised in a household where there were all kinds of races in our family and religions" ("Susan Power reading" 4:54-5:01). She goes on to say her "house was always full of Indians and black people" (5:46-50). Since Power grew up in a literal melting pot, she is tolerant and open to different cultures, yet this exposure, while beneficial, is a

² *The Last White Man on Earth*, discussed by Power at the 2002 broadcast, has yet to be published.

hindrance at times. Power's knowledge of history is an amalgamation of narratives told by Americans, American Indians, and African Americans. Because of this unique upbringing, she has most likely heard both sides of historical events, such as the Battle of Little Bighorn, and she is left to interpret which account is accurate, which side is the enemy, and which is not.

According to Power, her "[h]ome was decorated with photos from both sides of the family, 'with the Indians on one side and the WASPs on the other. My great-great-grandfather [sic], who was the governor of New Hampshire during the Civil War, faced my great-great grandfather Chief Mato Nupa (Two Bears)'" ("*Grass Dancer* evokes").

Power struggled with coping in the perceived "real world" as a child because it is simply a different culture, the dominant culture, whereas Power grew up immersed in the ways of lesser-known societies. If Power were from a different country, her situation—her struggle to fit nicely into a specific category—would be labeled as a form of culture shock, yet in this case it is a native form of that phrase, which few understand or recognize. It is the type of shock that results from the dwindling of a culture, from the attempted extermination of a people—a type of shock that was absorbed long ago and passed down through the generations, dismissed as an almost untraceable sense of loss, of missing something that can no longer be recalled in any tangible sense of the word. In her writing, Power attempts to reconnect with this concept of who her people used to be, and who she is supposed to be as a result: "I was never a believer in things. When I wrote *The Grass Dancer*, my mother—I was raised to believe in spirits and magic and all sorts of things, and I had an open mind about it, and I was respectful of my mother's beliefs, my auntie's beliefs, but I was kind of, like, prove it to me" ("Susan Power reading" 57:16-35). In *The Grass Dancer*, Evie represents the voice of doubt in the author's mind when it comes to the

stories told by Power's mother and her aunt, and Margaret Many Wounds stands in as the voice of reason, the voice that Power perceives to be slightly unreasonable.

"I have been defeated by guilt," Margaret Many Wounds declares to herself while on her deathbed (*GD* 101). She realizes her mistake in lying to her daughters Evie and Lydia about their past, and so she resolves to fix the problem by giving her grandson Harley the gift of the moon and the magic that comes with it. When Harley "saw that there were two moons in the world: one on television and one in the sky outside his grandmother's window," Margaret tells him there are "[m]ore than that" (115). She says, "For every person who can see it, there's another one." Margaret is trying to tell Harley that perspective is a key element when it comes to perceiving reality, just as Power's mother has taught Power. Right before Margaret dies, she asks herself, *"Do you have faith?"*: that is the only question worth asking (117). Father Zimmer also realizes the importance of faith:

"I should have been there to ease the passage," Father Zimmer said, stirring his coffee with a spoon, even though he'd added nothing to it. The rising steam was like the vapor of souls. He cried to think that Margaret's soul would hang over the buttes like fog because she had died without his blessing. He didn't want her to be caught between Here and There. (120)

While Father Zimmer's heart is in the right place, he does not understand that faith is a personal connection, one that exists between the believer, the moon, and the spirits. Margaret knows she does not need Father Zimmer's blessing; many of her people died before he came, and they made it to the elusive "There" Father Zimmer thinks of without his help. Power intentionally parallels the Christian faith with that of Margaret Many Wounds. According to Schweninger, "Like history, realistic fiction presumably must deliver a faithful representation of life; it must adhere

to what its readers deem the actual and verifiable,” and Power carefully strings this line between the two realities in her novel (48).

Schweninger’s “Myth Launchings and Moon Landings” focuses largely on *The Grass Dancer*’s “Moonwalk” chapter. His thesis is that Power’s “challenge is to demonstrate to an uninitiated or mainstream reader the power and presence of an alternative reality” (47-8), and that she does this “[t]hrough her juxtapositions of different realities” (51). Margaret greets death with confidence, and because of this, she not only finds her way without a problem, but she also manages to take a detour to the moon in order to send one final message to Harley, letting him know that “[t]here is still magic in the world” (GD 121). However, it is not as easy for Margaret, before she walks on, to convince her doubting daughter of such things; Evie “didn’t like what she considered the powerlessness of faith, preferring the safety of a world where she could see with her own eyes” (101). Evie represents the skeptic in Susan Power, the person who demands tangible proof before even considering the possibility that something exists, which is why she latches on to the lunar mission. It is the impossible made possible. When she and Philbert overhear Margaret tell her story to the ghosts, Evie breaks down, bitter over the fact that Margaret never shared the story before: “Evie was crying. Philbert had never known Evie to cry” (109). The only way she manages to come to grips with Margaret’s confession is by focusing on the individuals who are on their way to a place she cannot reach, saying, “I wonder what those astronauts are doing” (109).

On the day of the moon landing, Evie is excited to show her mother something both magical and tangible:

Philbert had brought the television from Lydia’s place to Margaret’s cabin. He set it on her low bureau so she could watch it from the bed.

“What’s he doing?” Margaret asked Evie.

“The astronauts are walking on the moon tonight. We thought you’d like to see it, Mama.”

“I’ve been there,” she told Evie. She watched Philbert struggle to reach the outlet behind her dresser.

“What do you mean?” Evie asked, irritated by her mother’s remark.

“When I was little, my *tunkašida*, my grandfather, woke me up in the middle of the night. I was about your age,” she told Harley, who stood directly behind Philbert.

“He carried me on his shoulders to a field of prairie grass as high as his waist. He showed me the moon, told me I could go there if I wanted to bad enough. And for just one second I really was there, looking back at the spinning earth, bright as a blue eye.”

“Oh,” Evie said. Years before, she would have treasured this anecdote, but it had come too late for her to enjoy or believe. (113)

Margaret and Lydia are unfazed by the moon landing because it is a symbol of something they are used to; it represents a real-world example of the seemingly magical things around them. The moon is Margaret’s way of passing on her history and her recently rediscovered connection with the spirits to Harley. Margaret ignores Evie because her daughter knows the magic “had come too late for her to enjoy or believe.” Still, Evie is angered by her mother’s immediate dismissal of what she considers a once-in-a-lifetime event. Margaret’s simple, ““I’ve been there”” sends Evie back to her own isolated moon filled with giant craters, missing gaps that she cannot see over, let alone attempt to smooth out.

When Margaret travels to the moon after her death, her act of passing through Neil Armstrong almost entirely unnoticed is symbolic of her relationship with Evie. All that is perceived is a slight quiver of Armstrong's "oxygen system" (121). For Schweninger, "Power prepares the reader to see or appreciate a parallel reality (like Margaret's walking on the moon) by continually and repeatedly juxtaposing the science of the mainstream-West with different epistemologies throughout the novel" (52). Power is saying that even though people may search for miracles, they may never see them until they choose to believe. Evie "wanted to see it happen and know it was real: a scientific miracle worked out with equations" (115), but she cannot solve for x if she does not know the formula; she must first learn the language of her people in order to understand the miracles that come with it. I believe Power wrote *The Grass Dancer* in order to discover that formula, to find a way to reach the spirits she believes her mother and her auntie have access to.

Power projects her own life onto that of her character Evie yet again when she incorporates an absent father figure. At Prairie Lights, Power reads an excerpt from her memoir-in-progress, then says, "My father I discovered dead . . . on the garage floor when I was eleven, and we didn't know if it was homicide or suicide, and so, in this memoir, I'm writing all the different versions of what could have happened" ("Susan Power reading" 10:43-58). Power's act of writing is a healing process, as it is for most writers. She is knowingly seeking answers in her memoir, but she discovers during the Prairie Lights reading that she subconsciously does this in nearly all of her writing:

There was an instant that happened earlier where I had told you a little about my personal background with my—what had happened with my father, and then as I

was mentioning Jude, [a character from *War Bundles*³] there's confusion about what happened with her mother. Was it an accident? . . . Or did she—did she kill herself? And, I hadn't realized until I described both of those pieces by way of introduction, I thought, "Ah, there I am, writing my own issue again." I think that happens a lot with writers. *We think* we are writing fiction. (36:35-37:11)

Evie is upset when she eventually learns the true identity of her father from Margaret because she had already established her own version of him in her imagination based on Margaret's lie that "their father was a Blood Indian from Calgary. A champion rodeo rider who had won the All-Around title in North Dakota. . . . That was the legend. That was Evie's understanding of her own history" (*GD* 111-12). Evie makes pivotal decisions in her life based on this false image of her father, decisions such as choosing Philbert as a spouse because he fit the model: "She'd married Philbert because he rode the Brahma bull so much the way her father had" (112).

Because Evie learns so late in life that her "understanding of her own history" is inaccurate, she immediately feels as if the life she chose to lead is inaccurate as well. She has spent her days desperately chasing the shadow of a moon in the shape of her father. Whenever she pictures him, his face is "empty of features except for a great crescent smile traced above his chin." Evie's story is the reason why Margaret tells Harley, "For every person who can see it, there's another" moon (115). It is the responsibility of each individual to decide whether her moon is the one in the sky or the one in her head, and to be able to distinguish between the two. Power confesses in an interview that the "Moonwalk" chapter originated with "an image." She says, "I blame anesthesia a bit. I was recovering from an appendectomy and had an image of a Dakota

³ *War Bundles*, later renamed *Strong Heart Society*, was in the works to be published by Putnam's in 1998 (*Story* 123). According to Power, she "didn't feel it was ready for publication, so I didn't hand it over to the publisher. They'd changed the name and begun promoting it which is why there's mistaken information about it floating around" ("Into the Forest").

woman in a beautiful traditional buckskin dress dancing on the moon” (“*Grass Dancer* evokes”). In the novel’s chapter, Lydia mentions how Evie “hadn’t even cried when two days after an appendectomy her stitches ripped open” (192). Power has molded her own moon out of the fictional worlds in her writing, a moon in which she is the puppet master guiding her characters on a journey to explore the empty craters left behind by the death of her own father.

In an interview conducted by Shari Oslos, Oslos asks the question, “Did you consciously model some of your characters on real people?” (2). Power replies, “Not consciously, purposely, but I think like most writers we certainly draw on bits and pieces of people we’re familiar with. There are some incidents in the book that are definitely inspired by things that have happened to me” (2). And, when asked by an interviewer from *Ploughshares* why she chose to incorporate both fiction and nonfiction pieces in her *Roofwalker* collection, Power gives the following response:

I noticed that even when I thought I was writing a story that had nothing to do with me or my life, there was a thread of connection to memory, to lived experience, once I paid careful attention. I’d written a handful of essays about my family history, and thought it might be interesting to have a collection where a person could read a short story, then read an essay that featured the seed of actual experience which was later spun into fiction. I meant for the book to have these pairings move back and forth between fiction and non-fiction [sic], but my editor thought it would be confusing for readers—a good point, so we created two sections instead. I think we are always writing our story to some degree.

(“Learning”)

Each time Power is interviewed, she is careful to draw attention to the fact that her writing, as well as the writing of other American Indian authors such as Louise Erdrich, is often labeled as magical realism. She then politely rejects the label, every time.

Power is hyperaware that her upbringing was non-traditional, and she often mentions that she was not raised on a reservation like many of her fellow American Indian writers. It is likely she may view her life as an act to some degree, which would explain why she relies so heavily on her mother when it comes to what she can and cannot write about. Power even mentions that her mother was “born and raised in Fort Yates, ND [sic] on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation” (“An Interview”). In early chapter publications of *The Grass Dancer*, the reservation Harley lives on is called Fort Yates by name, so Power likely modeled the reservation after her mother’s memory of the place. Because Power has a small claim to many different cultures and experiences, she feels she cannot take complete ownership of any of her material. She only views herself as the medium through which the material flows, the conductor of the séance.

The Delicate Rendering of a Culture in Literature

When Power is asked by interviewer Kadish to name authors who have influenced her, she mentions Marcie Hershman, who first “cited the age-old dictum handed down to writers, ‘Write what you know.’” Then she offered another version that has guided me ever since: ‘Write what you need to know’” (“Learning”). Power’s writing is a form of communion between herself and her ancestors, a way of lending a microphone to the spirits of the past who never got the chance to tell their own stories, and through this process, Power works to find answers to her own questions. *The Grass Dancer* was published in 1994, when Power was unaware of her

tendency to write her own story even when she thought she wasn't. Her *Roofwalker* (2002) was created to explore those connections between fiction and nonfiction, to locate and identify the "seed of actual experience" in each of her stories, but Power realized during the Prairie Lights broadcast in October of 2002, while promoting *Roofwalker*, that she does this unintentionally in every story she writes, which is why *The Grass Dancer* is not a work of magical realism. Power wrote the novel as a means of finding the answers to the things she did not know in her life, even when she was unaware she was doing so, which is why Hershman's words resounded so strongly with Power.

Many chapters of *The Grass Dancer* were published in literary journals and magazines prior to the release of the novel. One of those journals was *Story*, which first published Power's "Red Moccasins" chapter in 1992. Power remained in contact with the editor of *Story*, Lois Rosenthal, until at least 1997. Rosenthal provided feedback on early submissions of Power's work before it was published, which led to an alteration of the ending of "The Medicine Hole" chapter and a large cut in the narrative of a separate short story titled "Icarus," which was in the works to be published in the Autumn 1997 issue of *Story*. During June 7-11 of 1993, "an international gathering of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota nations," with "representatives from 40 Lakota bands and tribes," passed a "Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality" (Feeney). However, it was not until 1998 that the declaration made its first appearance online. The document calls all American Indians to action in order to prevent the corruption or misuse of their sacred ceremonies in any way, including imitation ceremonies done by non-Native Americans for profit: "We call upon all our Lakota, Dakota and Nakota brothers and sisters from reservations, reserves, and traditional communities in the United States and Canada to actively and vocally oppose this alarming take-over and systematic destruction of our

sacred traditions” (War Against). Power, who was raised Dakota as a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, may have taken it upon herself to follow this resolve by choosing to educate readers through the voice of Thomas Iron Star, the main character of “Icarus.” Power writes of the story in the contributor’s notes, ““When I was fourteen years old my mother took me to see the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, or what was left of it, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. My grandmother was a graduate of that institution in 1908, and I was hearing stories about her experiences there”” (*Story* 123). The visit ““emerged from my memory twenty years later in the voice of Thomas Iron Star, my fictional tribesman.”” Power describes Thomas as fictional, yet she also writes the following: ““His words came to me so easily, I nearly feel I cannot claim them. Some part of me believes in him, his existence; he was so insistent, so fully-formed when I first turned my thoughts in his direction.”” Power must work within the restraints of staying conscious and respectful of the reticence of her Dakota tribesmen while also accurately depicting her culture in literature. The publication story of “Icarus” is an embodiment of that struggle.

The original story of Thomas Iron Star alternates between an epistolary narrative from Thomas’s perspective and a narrative in the voice of the young Abigail Marsh, a girl whose family Thomas comes to work for in Vermont. In the published version of the story, Abigail’s narrative sections (which comprise three-fourths of the story) are cut entirely. What remains are the simple and heartbreaking letters of a young man desperate to return home with his faith intact as well as a literary depiction of the harsh reality of colonialism. Yet the story was originally an open dialogue between two cultures in which a bridge of understanding had begun to form. In a part of Abigail’s narrative, she cajoles Thomas into describing a sacred and ceremonial Sun Dance he participated in. During the ceremony, Thomas had to dance free of his flesh that was ““pegged and fastened to a rope which was tied to the sacred tree”” (43). Abigail is horrified by

the description of the ceremony, and she voices her displeasure. Immediately, Thomas withdraws into himself and refuses to share more with her. This episode may be Power's attempt to apply pressure to a delicate nerve in American Indian writing and culture. Many outsiders fail to enter the conversation with an open mind, and American Indians who share intimate information about their culture and ceremonies are often greeted with the same reaction as Abigail's—horror and disgust. Because of this, some American Indian tribes have begun to withhold information they know will receive a negative reaction from Western culture.

The Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality states,

We especially urge all our Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people to take action to prevent our own people from contributing to and enabling the abuse of our sacred ceremonies and spiritual practices by outsiders; for, as we all know, there are certain ones among our own people who are prostituting our spiritual ways for their own selfish gain, with no regard for the spiritual well-being of the people as a whole. (War Against)

Is it possible that a short story written by a Dakota describing a sacred ceremony could be interpreted as a contribution to “the abuse” of the ceremonies? Perhaps, if it were detailed enough to enable “outsiders” to reenact and/or imitate the ceremony described. This is likely not Power's intention in writing the story, yet it may still border on the territory of being too open about sacred ceremonies. It is possible Abigail's thoughts on Thomas's culture were cut for that reason, but it is also possible Louis Rosenthal, the editor of *Story*, was only interested in

Thomas's story and not Abigail's.⁴ The possibilities behind the choice to condense "Icarus" are endless, yet a primary reason the publication process is of interest is because, despite the fact that "Icarus" was published by *Story* in 1997, it was not included in the 2002 collection of short stories in *Roofwalker*. "Angry Fish," a story that is included in *Roofwalker*, was published by *Story* in 1995. So why is it Power chose to include "Angry Fish" in *Roofwalker* and not "Icarus"? The answer to that question is likely outside the realm of theorizing as well. Yet it may have something to do with the Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality, and it may also be a reason why Power insists on checking her work with her mother before sharing it with others.

As mentioned previously, Power fell in love with the work of Erdrich (also commonly categorized as magical realism) because it accurately depicted Power's family and reality in literature. It may have also proved to her that if Erdrich could represent her reality without revealing any "sacred ceremonies and spiritual practices," then so could Power. I believe that Erdrich taught Power (and perhaps others) how to do the impossible. How can an author who is asked not to reveal sacred religious practices convey a religion, and through that, a reality, to another culture? Answer: by paralleling it to the religion and reality of the dominant culture. Erdrich does this exceptionally well in her writing. Characters like Marie Lazarre from "Saint Marie" and Pauline from *Tracks* are only two examples of Erdrich's responses to the impact Christian religious persecution had (and continues to have) on American Indians. Erdrich,

⁴ At this point in her career, Power had already published three short stories in *Story*, the first in 1992. See the appendix. She and Rosenthal maintained a steady communication over the years. Postcards sent from Power to Rosenthal can be accessed through the *Story* Archives of the Princeton U Library. The only mention of "Icarus" is in the following excerpt from a card written by Power dated 11 March 1997: "I'm sorry my earlier manuscript . . . went astray. Enclosed is another copy of 'Icarus' with the letters (there are four of them) flagged."

however, is an Ojibwe writer, and she may face fewer restraints than Power when it comes to revealing “sacred ceremonies.”

In Erdrich’s “Crown of Thorns,” Gordie hits a deer that he comes to believe is a reincarnation of his deceased wife June. When the deer seems to wake from death, essentially reincarnating June’s spirit a third time, the deer gazes at him through the rearview mirror with a look that “was black and endless and melting pure. She looked through him. . . . She saw how he’d woven his own crown of thorns. She saw how although he was not worthy he’d jammed this relief on his brow” (180). The short story was published as a part of *Love Medicine* in 1984. It is perhaps the first book of Erdrich’s Power would have read. At the time of its publication, Power was studying to get her J.D. at Harvard Law School. She says, “When Louise Erdrich began publishing her remarkable novels in the 1980’s (right about the time I graduated from Law School), I fell upon them like a starving person who hasn’t realized she’s hungry” (“Learning”). The impact of Erdrich’s writing on Power’s is clear from the very first line of the prologue, entitled “Crowns of Glass,” in *The Grass Dancer*: “When Harley saw his father, Calvin Wind Soldier, and his brother Duane, in dreams, they were wearing crowns of glass” (3). This image comes in part from the fact that Harley’s father and brother were thrown through the windshield of the wrecked car, as explained later in the prologue. Yet the image is also an important symbol. Gordie’s crown of thorns evokes the common Christian connotations of the crown as a source of pain and mockery, which is why Gordie “was not worthy” to wear the crown; he is not responsible for June’s death. By jamming “this relief on his brow,” Gordie is avoiding the reality of the situation. Power takes it a step further. Since she makes Calvin and Duane’s crowns glass, they represent a mirror, which turns the symbol in upon itself, as Harley does with his own personality: “Harley was so uncertain of the positive space he took up in the world that he was

invested in the negative” (*GD* 69). Harley goes as far as trying to mimic the behavior of his late uncle, Ghost Horse, in order to inhabit some kind of concrete and positive space, rather than the empty negative space he feels he is made up of. I believe the crowns of glass also symbolize Power’s hope that readers will use the book to do as Harley’s father and brother do for him, to turn the mirror back at themselves instead of others, removing the Christian imposed false crown from Gordie’s head and finding a unique crown of their own within themselves. “Harley imagined he was pure surface, taut skin covering emptiness,” but as Power points out, Harley’s strongest gift is his imagination (319). Harley’s dreams of his dead father and brother’s crowns of glass and his imagining that he is made up of nothingness, of negative space, are, as Power states, a mirror of what he sees in the real world: “Harley Wind Soldier was nearly trampled by ghosts but wholly unaware of how remarkable his vision was” (320). Just as Margaret Many Wounds reminds Harley at the end of the novel of their conversation about how for each person who can see the moon, there is a different one, Power is reminding the reader that each individual has his or her own remarkable vision, and for each person who can see clearly, there is a different moon, a different reality, and each is just as valid as the next.

As mentioned previously, a reader’s hesitancy is the third defining quality of magic realist texts according to Faris, yet Power and Erdrich are generally careful to remove this hesitancy. By the end of Erdrich’s *Tracks*, Fleur Pillager, who is feared by most of the residents on the reservation because of her reputation as a witch and her perceived ability to manipulate good and bad medicine, is demystified. Old man Nanapush, the narrator of the final chapter of the novel, points out the now obvious signs of Fleur’s plan to fell all of the trees around her house in his retelling of the story to Lulu: “There were signs I never thought of as signs—the axe she’d obviously stolen, the edge of sawtooth metal jutting from beneath the house. . . . Small

mounds of sawdust drifted on the path I took. Woodchips littered the ground. Often, I smelled the spilled sap of pine. Fleur shrugged when I noticed these things aloud, . . . mumbled and hid a smile” (218). These hints of Fleur’s manipulation of the trees come before the event, so the reader knows to anticipate an episode that will seem unbelievable, and, as Nanapush says, “It was then I understood,” so does the reader: “Each tree was sawed through at the base” (223). Because the mystery is solved prior to the seemingly magical event, when “[o]ne man laughed and leaned against a box elder. Down it fell. . . .,” the reader is not shocked by the impossibility (223). Nanapush provides the insight the reader needs in order to understand and believe in the episode, not to be left “quiet with shock. Fearing a second blow,” like all of the government workers (223-24). If Erdrich had chosen to tell the event from the perspective of one of the white workers (a different reality, yet parallel to Nanapush’s), the episode would surely be depicted as magical realism, yet the reader is given a clear and entirely plausible explanation of what happened that day through Nanapush’s narration.

As Schweninger points out, Power uses the same technique in *The Grass Dancer*:

Through her juxtaposition of different realities, Power dissolves the very divisions implied by the term *magical realism*. . . . I argue that rather than fused or assimilated worlds of the ‘real’ and the ‘magical,’ the author describes parallel realities, coexisting and equally valid. The distinction, I believe, is significant. In writing a Native American text Power is both using the colonizer’s language and genre and, at the same time, writing in the realist tradition. (51-2)

The different realities Schweninger refers to are “the colonizer’s” reality and a Native American’s reality. As Schweninger writes, Power “moves easily between the two [cultures], and accepts the validity of both” due to her own diverse upbringing (53). Power uses Jeannette

McVay, according to Schweninger, “to serve as a sort of liaison between two worlds” (54).

Jeanette is the outsider who makes her way to the reservation, curious about the culture of this other world. In the chapter fittingly titled “Christianity Comes to the Sioux,” Jeanette decides every student is going to share a story ““and confirm our way of looking at the world”” (*GD* 61). Yet “Power does not share the stories the students tell, rather she relates what they *think* during the telling” (Schweninger 55). The students do exactly what Jeanette asks. They “confirm” *her* way “of looking at the world” by describing a “baby story” about “Iktomi, the tricky spider” and a tale about a Dakota woman who turned to stone (*GD* 61), but each student confirms his or her own way “of looking at the world” by thinking of another story that aligns more closely to the student’s reality, and not Jeanette’s. Frank tells the Iktomi story because he “knew his friends would understand how inappropriate it would be for him to speak publicly of his grandfather’s ceremonies” (61). Power does the same thing as Frank, telling the reader her own Iktomi parable with the fictitious story of Frank and Harley while also inviting “the reader into an inner circle, a circle from which even Jeannette is excluded” (Schweninger 55), because Power also knows it would be “inappropriate” for her to speak of real ceremonies she has witnessed. Power even has Frank wonder “what Jeanette would make of the story,” the real one in his head, and if she would “accuse him of dreaming” (*GD* 63). Power knows, even before publishing the novel, that the concepts in the story—her reality—will be classified as magical, illogical, or false. Faris mentions in her paragraph on hesitancy that “because belief systems differ, clearly, some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others, depending on their beliefs and narrative traditions” (17). And, to go back to Young and Hollaman’s definition, in order for a text to be magical realism, there must be some element “that cannot be explained by logic, familiar knowledge, or *received belief*” (4, italics added). American Indians reading a novel written by an American

Indian about American Indian culture are far less likely to hesitate than Western readers when it comes to believing the seemingly irreducible elements in these texts, yet cultural differences, or even simple difference of opinion, should not negate, marginalize, or diminish the impact of these enlightened texts in any way.

I am not claiming that texts classified as magical realism should necessarily be demystified or thought of as pure realism. Rather, I have argued that Western readers should be conscious of their ethnocentric views and thus hopefully enter the worlds of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, and Susan Power with an inquisitive and receptive attitude in relation to the cultural and biographical background of both the author of the text and the characters within it in order to absorb all that these brilliant works can offer.

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Appendix:
Susan Power Timeline

1961 – Born in Chicago, Illinois

1974 – Visited the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania

1983 – Graduated from Harvard with a B.A.

1984 – Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* published

1986 – Graduated from Harvard Law School with a J.D.

1988 – Erdrich’s *Tracks* published

1990-93 – Lived in Iowa City, Iowa

1992 – Joined the MFA Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Iowa Arts Fellowship recipient

Before April – In touch with Wolff about “Moonwalk” in *Ploughshares*, Fall vol. 18, nos. 2 & 3. Issue titled “Stories”

April – In touch with Rosenthal about “Red Moccasins” in *Story*

Autumn – “Red Moccasins” published in *High Plains Literary Review*

November – In touch with Rosenthal about “The Medicine Hole” in *Story*

1993 – “Red Moccasins” reprinted in *The Best American Short Stories of 1993*, ed. Louise Erdrich

7-11 June – “Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality”

1994 – *The Grass Dancer* published by Putnam’s

10 May – “A Hole in the Sheets” published in *The Voice Literary Supplement (The Village Voice)*, vol. 39.19

June – Part of “Morse Code” published in *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 273, no. 6, pp. 88-100. Available at the ETSU library

Spring – “Snakes” published in *The Paris Review*, vol. 36, no. 130, pp. 20-57. Available at the ETSU library

1995 – *GD* wins the PEN/Hemingway award

March – Power visits the Rosenthal family

Autumn – “Angry Fish” (later published in the *Roofwalker* collection) published in *Story*

1995-97 (?) – Bunting Institute Fellow at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts

1997 – Hodder Fellow at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey

10 Mar. – Interview with Moseley of *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*

Mar.-May – In touch with Rosenthal about “Icarus” in *Story*, vol. 45, issue 4, Autumn

- “Beaded Soles” published in *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, eds. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird

2000 – 30 May – Interview with Oslos from *Voices from the Gap* at U of Minnesota

2002 – *Roofwalker* published by Milkweed

7 Oct. – Prairie Lights reading for *Roofwalker* via Iowa Public Radio station

- Power teacher at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota

2005 – Frank Conroy (director of the Iowa WW) dies

2012 – 9 Mar. – Interview with Kadish of *Ploughshares*

2013 – *Sacred Wilderness* published

2015 – Fall – Interview with Kevin Norris of *Barley South Review*, issue 7.3, online only