

Magical Worlds, Real Encounters: Race and Magical Realism in Young Adult Fiction

One of the defining features of magical realism is the way it resonates with the postmodern concern with peripheries and margins. The oxymoron that yokes together two antithetical realms—that of the magical and the real—explores the liminal zone between the two categories, a zone where boundaries are blurred, where the two distinct currents mix and flow into each other. Since it questions the tenets of realism, magical realism emerges as

a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. (Zamora and Faris, 1995, p. 5-6)

The present study focuses on the way some young adult narratives appropriate the magical realist mode of storytelling to explore cross-racial encounters.

In the context of young adult fiction, a magic realist text can be seen as an epitome of a space that lies outside the institutional frameworks that guide and frame processes like growth, education, and training, a place from where engrained modes of thinking can be explored and challenged. It emerges as a narrative mode suited to the experience of adolescence in the Western culture. Adolescence itself can be seen as the liminal space of magical realism. An adolescent can be seen as an “other,” an outsider to the categories of child and adult, embodying the gap between the two states of being in the chronology of growth. Even as an adolescent inevitably grows up to become a part of his/her cultural milieu, the narratives of adolescent

fiction are preoccupied with questioning and destabilizing the conventions and establishments of the adult world. While the main function of adolescent literature is socialization and acculturation, subversion and transgression are equally integral elements.

According to Latham, magical realism offers a narrative mode through which adolescent literature can achieve the goal of “socialization through subversion” (Latham, 2007, p. 60). This becomes even more prominent in the narratives centering on racial encounters. Focusing on Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (1998) and Isabel Allende’s *City of the Beasts* (2002), I argue that the magical realist zone of adolescence destabilizes the established attitudes and narratives that organize racist discourses, hence opening space for renegotiation, revision, and redressing of official history of racial encounters.

In these two texts, as the magical elements destabilize and often take over the realistic elements, they also deconstruct the official narratives of the adult world, its history, its knowledge systems, all of which are imbricated with racist ideologies. *Holes* and *City of the Beasts* focus on the coming-of-age of young American boys as they encounter the racial “others.” The texts use a variety of folkloric traditions and fantasy motifs like the American tall tale, heroic quest, ceremonial initiation rites, and others, along with the conventions of literary realism. The encounters, set in places that lie outside the borders of the protagonists’ cocooned worlds—a juvenile delinquent camp in Sachar’s text and the Amazonian forest in Allende’s—are as real as they are magical. The adolescents are

located within a network of politics—a web of social, historical, and cultural relationships through which they negotiate their encounters with other races, often deconstructing the official accounts in the process. This leads to the formation of an identity that is mobile, fluid, flexible, and enriched by the dangerous encounters between the self and the other.

Adolescent Zone of Magical Real

Faris lays out the defining features of magical realism thus:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile the two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (Faris, 2004, p. 7)

Magical realism emerges as a dialogue between the centre and the margins, the dominant and the repressed.

The “irreducible element” of magic forays into the realistic descriptions of the text, disturbing the established modes of seeing and hinting at alternative or parallel realities. Through a complex interweaving of the magical elements—mythical, religious, folkloric—along with the mimetic tradition of liter-

ary realism, magical realism emerges as a dialogue between the centre and the margins, the dominant and the repressed.

Similar cultural negotiation underwrites adolescent fiction. Just as the magical is rooted in the real, individual coming-of-age stories are told in conjunction with the discourses that construct, validate, and strengthen cultural institutions and situate an individual within them. An individual’s negotiations with cultural discourses and that person’s dialogue with the social institutions in which she or he tries to find a place (in other words, socialization and acculturation) are the elements that define young adult literature. According to McCallum (1999), in adolescent fiction, “preoccupation with personal maturation . . . is commonly articulated in conjunction with a perceived

need for children to overcome solipsism and develop intersubjective concepts of personal identity within this world and in relation to others” (p. 7). Young adult literature emerges as a volatile field of engagement with institutional politics and social construction. Adolescents are located firmly within in their cultural networks, their identities overdetermined by historical, social, and political discourses.

At the same time, magical realism offers a literary mode suited to the interrogations and subversions of YA literature. Magical realism or the intrusion of the magical in realistic settings “serves to socialize the young adult reader by portraying an alternative—and perhaps subversive—view of society” (Latham, 2007, p. 62). Hence, in its dialogic mode, as well as in its preoccupation with questions of identity, especially with respect to institutional authorities, magical realism mirrors the concerns of adolescent literature, “the very determined way that YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual . . .” (Trites, 2000, p. 20).

Because it is subversive in nature, destabilizing the dominant narratives and exploring alternate realities, magical realism is often appropriated by texts “written from the perspective of the politically or culturally disempowered” (Bowers, 2004, p.68). Hence, magical realism is often associated with the narratives of particular ethnic or national groups that have been dispossessed or disenfranchised.¹ Adolescents constitute a similar disempowered group that exists within the cultural boundaries. The age group is defined as much in terms of growth and development as in terms of immaturity, deviance, and delinquency. Pointing out the extraordinariness and surprise that magic arouses in realistic settings, Faris highlights the existential nature of its presence that insists, “‘I Eksist.’ ‘I stick out’: . . . the magic in these texts refuses to be entirely assimilated into their realism; it does not brutally shock but neither does it melt away, so that it is like a grain of sand in the oyster of that realism” (2004, p. 8–9). Similar to “otherness,” “EKsisting” characterizes the adolescent impulse of exploration, adventure, and testing boundaries—impulses that cultural institutions attempt to reign in by the discourses of acculturation, education, pathology, thereby fixing and holding adolescents in the place that society has ordained for them.

Hence, rebellion and angst are intricately tied up with an adolescent's social and cultural backdrop against which growth happens. Racial encounters are one of the recurring themes, along with encounters of gender and class. Studying the theme of racism in children's literature, Leonard points out that "the ways in which race is represented in the fantastic provide a measure of the concern the culture has for matters relating to race" (1997, p. 3). Racial attitudes are integral to the central preoccupation of the genre—formation of an individual's identity through personal interaction with others. Growth occurs through such intersubjective interactions between an individual and the members of his or her social group, as well as with the members of other groups. In such trajectory of growth, racism emerges as one of the prominent institutions as it influences identity politics by dictating intersubjective interactions—how one interacts with people of other racial groups.

Studying the tradition of adolescent literature in America or "the adolescent reform novel," Trites (2007) insists that in these novels, social critique serves as an extension of the narrative of individual growth (p. ix). By depicting an ethical individual growing up in a less ethical society, these narratives undercut the dominant values and traditions of the adult world. Hence, in adolescent novels, the reformist impulse seeks confrontation rather than conformity. The idea of growth embodies this cultural confrontation; it highlights the hypocrisy of the adult world and the potential of the adolescent protagonist to reform and revise the biased attitudes. Citing novels that center on adolescent protagonists—from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* published in the nineteenth century to recent books like Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974/ 2004) and M. T Anderson's *Feed* (2002)—Trites argues that as the growth of the protagonist unsettles various dominant attitudes, it also implies the need for society to develop a more tolerant and liberal outlook. An adolescent's growth thereby indicates the need for social growth.

This engagement with collective aspects of a culture, therefore, is another common link between adolescence and magical realism. Cultural narratives like myths, legends, and other popular traditions of storytelling interlace with the narrative of individual growth. Narrating adolescent subversions and trans-

gressions, they unsettle the unidirectional pattern of growth as well as the linearity of official accounts. Menton (1982) insists that the element of magic in magical realism can be attributed to the collective relatedness rather than to individual dreams. The collective narratives—magical ones that come from the oral and folk traditions and "real" ones that come from the social, legal, and political systems—both form an integral and crucial part of the magical realism in adolescent fiction.

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Sachar's Holes: Debts of Past

Each novel under discussion juxtaposes these collective, cultural accounts—official histories and unofficial legends and myths—in order to weave complex coming-of-age narratives. Adolescent protagonists are the central players in these racial encounters; events of the past cast a shadow on their present until the two are reconciled, until the adolescent protagonists assume the responsibility of the past wrongs before they take up the responsibility of the future, because the two are intricately linked.

Sachar's *Holes* begins with Stanley Yelnats's conviction for a crime he did not commit. Subsequently, he is sent to Camp Green Lake, a place for juvenile delinquents in Texas. At Camp Green Lake, bad boys are taught to be good citizens under the eye of the State authorities, who seem to believe that "If you take a bad boy and make him dig a hole every day in the hot sun, it will turn him into a good boy" (Sachar, 1998, p. 5). Stanley is assigned to Group D in the Camp, which consists of six other boys, all from different communities mirroring the multicultural American society. At the beginning of his stay, Stanley naively believes that there is no racial tension among them.

Stanley was thankful that there were no racial problems. X-Ray, Armpit, and Zero were black. He, Squid, and Zigzag were white. Magnet was Hispanic. On the lake they were all the same reddish brown color—the color of dirt. (Sachar, 1998, p. 84)

However, as Coats (2004) points out, Stanley is living in denial—the "white denial of the privilege

that comes from being a white male” (p. 133). At the beginning, it is difficult to associate any kind of privileged position with Stanley. Even in the world outside the Camp, Stanley is a misfit—he is overweight, bullied by teachers and children much smaller than he, and he belongs to a family that “always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time” (Sachar, 1998, p. 8).

While the legal system finds Stanley guilty of stealing shoes belonging to a well-known baseball player, for Stanley, it is the bad luck that his family has suffered ever since his “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather” Elya Yelnats stole a pig from a one-legged Gypsy, who put a curse on him

and his descendents. Years ago, in Latvia, Elya Yelnats had sought Madame Zeroni’s help to win over a pretty but empty-headed village girl, Myra, and her miserly father. Madame Zeroni gave him a pig, instructing him to carry it to the mountain top every day and sing a lullaby while the pig drank water from the spring. At the end of the year,

when Elya was strong and the pig was fat enough to please Myra’s father, Madame Zeroni asked Elya to carry her to the spring and sing her a lullaby while she drank from it. Elya does not keep his promise—not because he never meant to, but because he discovers that Myra does not love him, and, brokenhearted, he sails off to America. According to Coats (2004), “in thinking only of himself and in exercising the privilege of the white male to travel and make his way in the world, he has failed in his responsibility to the Other” (p. 133). This failure haunts the generations of Yelnats until the debt from the past is repaid.

Though Stanley does not have any part to play in this ancient family history, he is still a part of the cultural and social setup that privileges a white boy over others. Though he has been a misfit outside, in the Camp, this privileged position as a white boy surfaces. Zero, a fellow prisoner and a black boy, agrees to dig his hole if Stanley agrees to teach him to read and write. In Group D, Zero’s identity is what his name suggests—a cipher. Mr Pendanski, the counselor, says he is Zero “because there’s nothing inside his head”

(Sachar, 1998, p. 19). He is the fastest digger, but last in the queue to get water. Zero assumes the position of a black subject, deprived of racial privilege, hungering for its substitute—literacy. When Stanley agrees to teach Zero in exchange for digging, the other boys immediately resort to the racist subtext of the deal: “They’d say ‘Who died and made you king?’ or ‘It must be nice to have your own personal slave’ (Sachar, 1998, p. 117). Later, the other black boy, X-ray, quips:

“Same old story, ain’t it, Armpit?” X-ray had said. “The White boy sits around while the black boy does all the work. Ain’t that right, Caveman?” (Sachar, 1998, p. 117)

Hence, the inmates of the juvenile delinquent camp reenact the racist history of America at Camp Green Lake. The desert space of Camp Green Lake itself is a magical place that bears the burden of racial violence. It is a place where various narratives of racial conflicts converge. Zero’s and then Stanley’s escapes from the Camp set in motion the events that echo back to the violent history of an American small town—violence that shaped its geography by magically transforming a once-flourishing town into a desert camp. Over a hundred years ago, the townspeople, led by Trout Walker, killed a black man, Sam, the Onion man, for falling in love with the white schoolmistress, Miss Katherine Barlow. While the tragedy turned the schoolmistress into “the most feared [outlaw] in the West” (Sachar, 1998, p. 115), the town turned into a “dry, flat wasteland” (Sachar, 1998, p. 1) where not a single drop of rain fell for 110 years.

The irrational association of a natural calamity with a particularly violent racist incident and the assertion that Camp Green Lake continues to suffer for the murder of a black man constitute threads of the past that are magically tied up with Stanley’s present. If one of the tenets of magical realism is destabilizing the boundaries between life and death (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 6), this story qualifies, as it invokes the history of racial privilege in the Yelnats family as well as in Camp Green Lake and reveals the ghosts of the past that have to be put to rest.

A series of coincidences make it seem that fate has organized history into a narrative of debt and repayment. The outlaw, Kissin’ Kate Barlow, stole Stanley’s grandfather’s fortune and buried it in Camp Green Lake. Hence, Miss Walker, the warden, prob-

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ably a descendent of Trout Walker, makes the boys dig holes. Fugitives from the Camp, Zero and Stanley are saved in the desert by “Sploosh” (pickled peaches) that Katherine Barlow made for Sam more than 100 years ago. Stanley carries Zero up the mountain where he discovers Sam’s onion field and a spring. Back at the Camp, much to the Warden’s dismay, the box containing the fortune that Kate Barlow robbed carries Stanley’s name. Hence, Stanley gets his grandfather’s fortune, which he shares with Zero.

In *Holes*, rather than weakening the realist effect, these coincidences elevate the story to the domain of magical realism. Fate and providence actively guide the efforts of adolescent boys as they unconsciously settle the scores of the past. The linear narrative is destroyed in favor of a multilayered pattern: the smallest events of the present seem to be intricately tied up with those of the past and yield unexpected results. For instance, Zero turns out to be the great-great-grandson of Madame Zeroni. When Stanley carries him up the hill, nurses him back to health, and sings a lullaby while Zero drinks from the spring at the mountaintop, the Yelnats family finally seems to be free of the curse. Mascia (2001) insists that Sachar “has employed literary forms in which magic and the outrageous are expected so that unlikely events might happen and enjoy reader acceptance” (p. 55). These narrative forms not only justify the presence of magic in *Holes*, but also problematize the dominant narratives. Myths, legends, and personal narratives reveal the reality of racial violence, poverty, and systems of justice. Talking about the use of coincidences in children’s fiction, Pinsent (2007) remarks that coincidences “create a sense of a benevolent providence overseeing the exploits of the characters and ensuring that good comes out of evil” (p. 210). More important, in *Holes*, this benevolent providence reveals a system of social injustice even as it resolves the individual narrative of Stanley and Zero into a fairy-tale closure.

Rather than lulling the reader into expecting a happy resolution, the marvelous motifs from folklore and fairy tales complicate the process of coming-of-age in such a way that it is no longer a narrative of socialization, of an adolescent finding a place in society; it is an account of an adolescent finding himself in a society that is, or rather has been, unjust and unethical. Rather than depicting a process of coming-of-age where the adolescent members assume a place

ordained for them by society, the text uses magical realism to question the social and cultural ideologies of the world in which the adolescent protagonists find themselves. It throws its adolescent protagonists into a zone that questions the expected trajectory of growth, identity formation (as a social construct), boundaries between the self and the other, and the place of self vis-à-vis the other. Hence, the process of growth is deeply linked with the history and ideology of the community. The progress of Stanley’s growth is intricately and magically tied up with the history of racial violence in Camp Green Lake and also with the discourses of white privilege. Coming-of-age then means taking active part in the discourses that shape a community—an active engagement with the past is crucial for the future.

Becoming a part of a particular group means endorsing and assuming the responsibility of its role in history as well as in the present. Stanley Yelnats atones for the promise broken by his great-great-grandfather, Elya Yelnats, by saving Zero. The bonds formed by these magical encounters attempt to rewrite the racial tensions that characterize multicultural America. Rather than a narrative of socialization, *Holes* emerges to be a narrative of the revelation of racial tensions, of the violent communal history of contemporary multicultural America; at the same time, the magical motifs linked to the coming-of-age story assert the hope and promise of atonement possible in the present as well as the future.

City of the Beasts: Magic in the Heart of Darkness

Compared to Sachar’s complicated narrative structure, Allende’s story follows a seemingly simpler pattern—a group consisting of an anthropologist, a reporter, a photographer, and many others journey into the heart of the Amazonian forest in search of elusive, terrifying beasts that have been sighted in its dense parts. The expedition is funded by the magazine *International Geographic*. It follows the route taken by the early explorers who came to the continent looking for

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the mythical El Dorado, the city of gold. The expedition into the unmapped territories of the third world echoes the colonial narratives of the last century. The plot structure reflects some great texts dealing with colonial politics and racism (for instance, the expedition itself reminds the reader of a similar journey in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*).

However, *City of the Beasts* also takes up a theme that is central to adolescent literature—an adolescent's journey from a dissatisfied, angst-ridden misfit to a mature member of society. The novel begins with an

upheaval in a suburban American household, the Cold family. The illness of the mother completely ruptures the safe and comfortable routine of the three Cold siblings. Alexander Cold is further upset when he discovers that his mother is suffering from cancer. As the mother goes in for a long and painful treat-

ment, the siblings go to live with various relatives. Alex is sent to live with his idiosyncratic grandmother Kate. Kate, a fearless and celebrated reporter, takes him along with her on the expedition to the dangerous rainforests of Amazon.

From the start, the expedition is surrounded with the discourses of scientific discovery, culture studies, medicine, and economics. Heading the expedition is Dr. Ludovic Leblanc, who is famous for his anthropological study of Indian tribes. Dr. Leblanc believes that the Indians "are brutal warriors, cruel and treacherous . . . they kill to prove their courage, and the more murders they commit, the higher their place in the hierarchy of the tribe" (Allende, 2002, p. 54). Armed with this knowledge about Indian tribes, Leblanc is heading the expedition funded by *International Geographic*. The magazine is interested in the accounts of rare, beastly creatures in the forest that could turn out to be a yet undiscovered species. Accompanying them is Dr. Omyra Torres, an employee of National Health Services, whose mission is to "protect the Indians. No foreigner may come in contact with them unless the necessary preventive measures are taken. They are extremely vulnerable to disease, especially those carried by Whites" (Allende, 2002, p. 76).

Alex and Nadia (the daughter of the guide) are unwanted members of the expedition. Dr. Leblanc insists, "This is not a kindergarten, it is a highly dangerous scientific expedition" (Allende, 2002, p. 114). Ironically, it is the children who are aware of the real motif behind the expedition. Before embarking on the trip, they discover the scheme of a wealthy local entrepreneur, Mauro Carias, to use the expedition as a cover-up for his plan to eliminate the Indians and thus gain complete and safe access to the farthest parts of the forest and its resources. These are the discourses—the missions, the plans, and the schemes of the adult members of the crew.

These discourses are challenged by magic that intrudes right from the beginning of the trip, especially in the lives of the young protagonists. As Alex discovers the unpleasant aspects of his culture—the greed of Mauro Carias, the violent nature of the military captain, Ariosto, and the megalomania of Dr. Leblanc, he and Nadia also discover their affinity to the "other," the ancient tribe of the Amazon forests called People of the Mist. As they distance themselves from the adult crew, Alex and Nadia grow closer to the People of the Mist until they finally become members of the tribe.

The process begins on the night before the expedition embarks; Alex has a mystical encounter with the caged jaguar of Mauro Carias. As the jaguar seems to fix its eyes on him, Alex enters a trance-like state:

. . . in a human voice, but one that seemed to issue from the depths of a cavern, it spoke his name: Alexander. And he answered in his own voice, but it, too, sounded cavernous: Jaguar. The cat and its counterpart repeated those words three times: Alexander, Jaguar; Alexander, Jaguar; Alexander, Jaguar, and then the sand of the plain became phosphorescent, and the sky turned black and the six moons began to whirl in their orbits and scatter like slow-moving comets. (Allende, 2002, p. 105)

Like magic in magical realism, which intrudes into an otherwise realistic environment, Alex's trance intrudes on the realistic setting of the narrative. Nadia explains that Alex could communicate with the jaguar because the jaguar is his totemic animal. Hence, though strange and magical in terms of the Western parameters of "reality," Alex's experience is easily explainable through the tribal world view. According to Nadia, Alex ranks among tribal greats, like warriors and shamans, since he found his totem without look-

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ing (Allende, 2002, p. 108). He has a similar experience at the funeral of the tribal chief and also during his initiation rite. Therefore, like in Conrad's text, the journey through the Amazon forest is the journey to the inner most recesses of the self. However, the elements of magic and folk belief are integral to this journey. Alex discovers that like a jaguar, he is powerful, strong, and courageous. Gradually, as the narrative progresses, Nadia and Alex become members of the tribe.

As one of the most ancient and isolated tribes of the Amazon, the People of the Mist are marginalized and culturally disempowered. However, the members of the tribe possess magical skills—most prominently, that of becoming invisible. Whether it is stunning camouflage or magic is never clear. Because of this trait, the community has not been touched by the world outside the forest. It also turns out to be a powerful weapon, since their undetectable presence terrifies the crew. In their direct encounter with the crew, they become invisible and therefore difficult to target until they surrender themselves. One of the members of the tribe is Walimai, the shaman who is always accompanied by the ghost of his dead wife.

Hence, People of the Mist blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality and also between life and death. Once Alex crosses over his cultural boundaries, he is “born” again as a member of the tribe. Alex himself experiences a death-like state during the initiation ritual when he loses “his sense of time, space, and his own reality” and sinks “into a state of terror and profound fatigue” (Allende, 2002, p. 233). Remarking on the centrality of rituals in magical realist narrative, Faris (2004) notes that

the fact that the cultural pasts and beliefs present in magical realism often include encounters with the dead takes on additional significance. In a process analogous to initiation rites that enact ritual experiences of symbolic death and rebirth, readers and their societies strengthen themselves through narratives that bridge the worlds of living and eclipsed dying cultures. (p. 137)

Afterwards Alex recognizes that “he had left his childhood behind and that from that night on he would be able to look after himself” (Allende, 2002, p. 236). The journey through the heart of the mountain to the city of the beasts itself is like a heroic journey to the world of the dead. Alex and Nadia return from the City of Beasts capable of saving the tribe.

The acceptance of magic and the alternative world view of the Indians compel Alex to question the values of his own culture. His belief in the efficacy of medical science is jolted by Dr. Torres's betrayal, and when he visits his mother in a Texas hospital in a dream, he comes to accept his out-of-body experience. The climax of his quest occurs when he captures a few drops of precious water of health to take to his mother. Though he knows that “his hopes had no logical base,” he has learned to “open his mind to the mysteries” (Allende, 2002, p. 318). Hence, in this liminal space of the forest where magic holds sway, the official explanations prove inadequate. On the other hand, the totemic rituals of the tribe, the initiation rites, the dreams and trances—all antithetical to the forms of knowledge endorsed by Dr. Leblanc and Dr. Torres—seem to hold the answers. Alex

and Nadia go deeper and deeper into this mysterious world. Yet they are pragmatic enough to realize that the City of Beasts is not the mythical El Dorado, a city made of gold. It is mica or fool's gold. On the way to the city, Alex also realizes that what seem to be the precious stones on the walls could be worthless rocks.

Alex and Nadia also work out the symbiotic relationship between the tribe and the beasts—that the beasts record the history of the tribe in return for protection. They realize the extraordinary and unique nature of the relationship; it is something that their own culture is incapable of, as becomes evident in the violent encounters between the crew and the People of the Mist. They also discover that Dr. Torres, sent to protect the tribe, is actually the secret accomplice of Mauro Carias. Her real mission is to vaccinate the tribe with a deadly virus and ultimately wipe it out. While Nadia and Alex are able to stop Dr. Torres and Carias, Leblanc changes his view once he witnesses the bloodthirsty nature of his own crew members. The crew proves to be dishonest, heartless, and cruel, displaying all the faults that Dr. Leblanc had accused the natives of. In contrast, the People of the Mist offer a model of communal living, a civilization at peace with their habitat in the forest. The adolescent protago-

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nists, Alex and Nadia—the jaguar and the eagle to the People of the Mist—save the tribe from extinction.

Hence, in Allende's text, the process of identity formation occurs through active agency, through a careful negotiation between "us" and "them." Rather than a story of passive acculturation, Alex's coming-of-age, like Stanley Yelnats's, involves an active nego-

tiation with power structures and ideological networks. Alex matures as he recognizes the unpleasantness of the culture that he comes from and to which he is meant to return. In the end, Nadia and Alex are as much members of the ancient tribe as of the American expedition.

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As they decide to use diamonds they acquired on the trip to save the rainforests and the People of the Mist, they emerge as adults whose magical encounters have helped them to rise above greed, vanity, and cruelty, unlike the adult crew.

Conclusion

Adolescents, the "others" existing within our own cultural boundaries, discover affinities with racial others and their alternative world views; as the protagonists from these two novels recognize the shortcomings of the culture they come from, they discover another set of cultural and social practices that had hitherto been misunderstood and maligned.

Though it is doubtful whether it was digging the holes in Camp Green Lake that reformed "delinquent" boys, Stanley and Zero do change at a deep level during their stay at the Camp. At the beginning, Stanley is concerned only with his ill luck and the injustice done to him. He chooses to come to Camp Green Lake because he thinks it will be like a holiday Camp. However, after sharing the ordeals at the Camp and later, Stanley refuses to leave the prison camp until his friend and fellow sufferer, Zero, is also acquitted. In the epilogue, as family and friends gather to celebrate him, Zero is an inseparable part of this group. Similarly, at the beginning of *City of Beasts*, Alex thinks of himself as "a pretty normal person" (Allende, 2002,

p. 15). He is a typical teenager at home—a finicky eater, fond of sports and music, and in love with the prettiest girl in school. However, in the forest, as the vestiges of civilization are shed, he emerges as a responsible member of the expedition, a brave warrior, and protector of the People of the Mist.

In these racial encounters, the magical elements serve as a catalyst that undoes the boundaries between various racial groups. Fixed ideologies and official narratives are questioned, challenged, and modified. Faris (2004) insists that "rather than containing and ultimately dissolving impulses toward social disruption, or skirting political issues, magical realism often provides a narrative space that both models and questions them" (p. 160). In young adult fiction, it creates a space for active political engagement and negotiation for the adolescent protagonists and, therefore, the reader.

While the two novels considered above focus on racial encounters, several young adult writers have used magical realism to narrate coming-of-age stories vastly different from linear *bildungsromans* of growth and development. Writers like Francesca Lia Block have used the genre to approach volatile issues like gender and sexuality. Her Weetzie Bat books merge fairy tale elements with the ordinary as her young protagonists navigate through the world. David Almond's *Skellig* (1998) calls into question institutions of education and formal training, critiquing the adult society by presenting adolescent characters who display capacity for greater kindness and discernment. The element of magic in these stories complicates the linear process of growth that a culture envisages for its young.

And so we return to Latham's (2007) observation, "[I]t is this merging of magical and the real that serves to socialize the young adult reader by portraying an alternative—and perhaps subversive—view of society" (p. 62). In the liminal zone of magic, the unofficial myths, legends, and tales are as legitimate as the official discourses, making it possible for the adolescent protagonists to transcend the realities of their culture, to engage with alterities, and to mix with the Other. It offers them great power of renegotiating and settling debts of the past, preventing injustices, and, hence, influencing the course of the present as they move into the future.

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Note

¹ Magical Realism has been mostly associated with the post-colonial writers of Latin America. Carpentier (1995/1949) argues that rather than subverting or transcending reality, "fantastic" exists in the natural or human reality of Latin America due to its varied history, culture, geography, demography, and politics. Scholars like Chanady (1995), Flores (1955/1995), and others have also studied the literary expression in conjunction with the culture, politics, and history of Latin America.

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