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Exploring Disability in Magical Realist Fictions

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Eva Is Inside Her Cat" (1948) and his "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children" (1968) are both short stories that make use of magical realism—a literary technique that includes the fantastic and marvelous as natural, everyday components of the familiar world—to explore Otherness. "Wings," the main focus of this essay, has its magic from the "supernaturalization of the real," and "Eva" has magic through "the realistic narration of the unreal…the naturalization of the unreal" (Scarano 17). They also both make use of Gothic tropes through their use of diction and overall tone. What these stories are about, however, is another question. In this paper, I argue that these narratives are both about disability. Specifically, the social construction of disability and the ways disability touches everyone. Both "Eva" and "Wings" present disability as dystopian. My interpretations are from English translations of these stories originally written in Spanish.

Part I:

When thinking about "Wings," the tendency is to focus on the oddity, on questions of religion and supernatural powers, on the harsh treatment the old man receives, on the unanswered questions, or on the frequency of contradictions/ironic statements (e.g., "stellar parasites," "celestial conspiracy," "they did not have the heart to club him to death") (par. 4, 9). "Wings" comes across as "ordinary" but from the domain of the magical. While not necessarily initially obvious, "Wings" is a story about disability. For a quick definition, someone is disabled

or ill and outside the parameters of compulsory ablebodiedness when their body and its functions do not align with what society says is normal (McRuer).

Disability is everywhere in day-to-day life in "Wings." Every character—except for Pelayo, the neighbor woman, the flying acrobat, and (possibly) a few visionaries—is disabled or ill in some way, at least temporarily. And those who are well and able-bodied are impacted by disability through relationship with or proximity to disabled people. Pelayo and Elisenda's baby is sick and possibly dying as the story opens. Later their child gets chicken pox. Of course, there is the old man with enormous, dirty, and damaged wings who is disabled. He is deemed disabled by the story's character ipso facto his immobility, his abnormal appearance, his age, his low vision, and his unknown language/illiteracy. Everything about him is opposite compared to cultural iconography of what an angel looks like. Because of his disability, he is imprisoned/confined at Elisenda and Pelayo's property. And because the neighbor woman's wisdom, as deemed by the narrator, pronounces him an angel, "unfortunate invalids" line up "beyond the horizon," a distance of several miles, to receive healing (par. 7). Illnesses mentioned involve hearing too well, running out of numbers, sleepwalking, having leprosy, having paralysis, and being blind. Father Gonzaga's insomnia comes up, as does Elisenda's twisted spine from hard work and her "exasperated and unhinged" behavior (par. 12). We also learn about a woman who had been metamorphosized into a spider. Other characters are labeled as simple-minded or as having sterile hearts.

Characters in "Wings" both ridicule and revere the old man with wings. The closest existing literary trope that comes to mind is the "Magical Negro." We could, I suggest, think of the old man with wings as a "Magical Othered." He is a main character in this story yet remains nameless. The narrator either withholds this information, or the angel is not even given the

dignity of a name. The neighbors and travelers who gather to see him and to receive his miracles have fun seeing him and throwing food at him—"having fun" being the narrator's grotesque and uncritical words describing these events. But, they do not just throw any food at him; they throw the "the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers" that no one else wants at the old man with wings while he is pathetically trapped lying in a cage with chickens (par. 5). And as soon as people do not receive the expected cures (the angel's mistakes only cause further disability), they all leave, and the line vanishes.

Herein, is how "Wings" uses disability to create social hierarchies. A horizontal hostility exists between the angel and the disabled people wanting healing. *Horizontal hostility* describes social dynamics that frequently develop with identity politics wherein people who could be aligned are in conflict. In the story, the masses lined up for miles are all disabled—like the angel—but collectively see themselves as cripnormative. *Cripnormativity*, a term I coined, describes the more acceptable ways of being disabled (Pegoda). Thus, the masses and even Pelayo and Elisenda see the angel as *more* disabled and disabled in unacceptable ways. Take the blind man: He does not see any kind of alignment or solidarity with the angel, who is also disabled but is additionally confined and abused. And take Elisenda, who we could call a proto-neoliberal: She becomes very wealthy from showcasing the disabled old man and fostering an environment where he is the subject of an Othering gaze. She has personal experience with disability and illness because of her son and her own mental illness. However, even when the story ends, she sees the angel as an annoyance. In other words, horizontal hostility exists between the blind man and the angel, between Elisenda and the angel, and between Elisenda and the visitors. Further, Elisenda, Elisenda's son, and the blind man, for example, are cripnormative, and the old man with wings is not cripnormative. Horizontal hostility also exists between the line

of people and the angel. Further, the line of people have cripnormativity. They desire to be cured but are not disabled such that confinement is necessary.

We also need to look at horizontal solidarity. *Horizontal solidarity*, as the name might suggest, describes dynamics of allyship and unity within a group of people aligned through an identity. Such horizontal solidarity exists between the masses wanting to be cured and between Pelayo and Elisenda and the masses—"the angel was the only one who took no part in his own act" (par. 8). A dangerous internalized ableism also connects everyone against their chosen scapegoat. It deserves explicitly pointing out that Pelayo and Elisenda only enslave the old man and not other disabled people, which is another indicator that only the old man's physical/mental differences are unacceptable. A useful thought exercise might imagine that the people lined up decide to free the angel and assist in his recovery. They could all help each other.

"Wings" presents disability and disabled people negatively, as needing to be fixed and as being undesirable—"unfortunate invalids" and "a shipwrecked disorder" (par. 7). Cripnormativity is not enough and has its limits. "Wings" does not like differences among people, preferring homogenization. Indeed, it shows all disabilities—except for Elisenda's and wide-spread simplemindedness—as needing cures, being cured, or the disabled person at least attempting to get a cure. Invisible and visible disabilities are, interestingly given how invisible disabilities are often ignored or disbelieved in society beyond fiction, frowned upon equally in this short story. The man with superhuman hearing and the person with skin disfiguration are no different. The story never explains why disabled people cannot just exist as is, as another natural and valid part of the human experience that always happens if a person lives long enough. And there is the constant presence of crabs. "Crabs" are mentioned four times, with the animals being

killed and thrown back to the ocean. Crabs, like disabled people, get in the way of an (imagined, idealized) clean, neat, problem free utopianized world.

The narrator gives mixed messages at times. He/she/they strongly want(s) disabled people to visit the angel, wants the angel to properly heal them, criticizes the angel for his (in)ability to perfectly cure, and says the angel is making fun of disabled people with random "consolation miracles" when they are not healed as required. Is the angel being cruel? Does the angel lack the kind of power needed to cure? Does the angel actually make mistakes? "Wings" explains "the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers" (par. 10).

The story dislikes disabled experiences but effectively shows that disability cannot be escaped. The only time we learn the origin story of someone's disability is with the spider woman.[1] Disobedience had caused her metamorphosis into a spider. This suggests that disability in "Wings" is a punishment for doing something deemed bad by those deemed to have more authority and power, not a natural part of the condition we call life. The spider woman, like Gregor in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1915), can also be compared to contemporary transgender experiences. Like these people-turned-animals, trans people "metamorphosize" into a sex/gender that is more comfortable and are often subjected to Othering gazes, intrusive questions, and are, technically and medically, considered disabled.

Thinking more about the social construction of disability helps to explain other points. Representations are important. For example, we can take a closer look at the disabilities and illnesses in the story. The story features some characters with unusual—magical—disabilities,

[1] "Wings" does attribute Elisenda's mental illness to stress from the angel, but this is a passing mention. With the spider woman, the story specifically sets out and provides an origin story. There are no other details explaining characters and the causes of their disabilities.

such as the ability to hear stars. While the narrator labels this an ailment and the man with this ability wants to be cured so he can sleep easier, these all show that disability and difference are problems. This "ailment," in another story or from another perspective, could be seen as belonging to someone closer to nature, to other worlds, or to other (supernatural) dimensions. "Wings" also presents blindness as something that needs to be cured. In real life, blind people often have no desire to see. And the old man with wings is also only disabled while in the community where the story is set. When he flies away and becomes the "imaginary dot" his status as "disabled," arguably, disappears, too.

Pointing out that we never hear the voice of disabled people in "Wings" is also worthy of comment. Indeed, there is only one line of dialogue in the entire story, and this line comes from the old neighbor woman. That we only hear the story through the narrator's perspective for 99.992 percent of the story, in most ways, we know very little about how the actual people in the story feel about disability.

In addition to the above, "Wings" has a pervasive Gothic layer. This only adds to its message about the undesirability of disability. The story opens with the stench of deliberately killed crabs and with unusual weather. It has been raining for days and is almost dark outside at noon. And the story revolves around (disabled) people taunting a disabled, imprisoned old man/angel. The old man/angel is always kind of an oddity. The spider woman is also a strong component of the story's Gothic-ness. A basic word count is helpful, too, as it shows the presence of words associated with Gothic literature. The story uses "coop" eight times, "courtyard" seven times, "rain" five times, "Father Gonzaga" five times, "crabs" five times, "night" five times, "spider" three times, "wind" two times, "parasites" two times, and "dead" two times. Other Gothic-associated words in this short story of 2,842 words are used once: "wind,"

"devil," "lunar dust," "alien," "tribulations," "ghost," "thunderclap," "nightmare," "lightning," "final judgement," "killed," "killing," and "fugitive."

As a "tale for children," "Wings" does not have any positive messages. This is not an example of literature that should be assigned to children, especially not without the necessary *pre*briefing and *de*briefing. Children might not even be able to understand it. "Wings," if anything, effectively teaches how to be exploitative and says to hate yourself and to seek cures if you are different. "Wings" would show having Neurofibromatosis (what I have) as an undesirable disability, but it does not show selfishness/sociopathy as a disability. Making money from the exploitation of disabled, suffering people is not just acceptable but rewarded in the world of this story. The story ends with Elisenda and her new fancy clothing in a new large home with the angel newly gone. Magical realism is sometimes used to help audiences see things with new eyes and with new or different appreciation. Does "Wings" help readers see disability anew? If it does, the message is indirect. Readers are unlikely to walk away from this short story appreciating how the story is ultimately about disabled people fighting: Elisenda/disabled makes money from the pilgrims/disabled who all perpetuate the confinement and suffering of the old man with wings/disabled. Perhaps some readers will have new appreciation for how contradictory people can or will appreciate that—like the story—life and disability does not make sense and is not fair.

Part II:

In contrast to "Wings," "Eva" is much longer and far more ambiguous. Readers never really know what is happening. What stage of life Eva is in? Did she die long ago, is she dying, is she actually in her cat, is she (or the narrator) in some kind of trance or high, or is she dead? Readers never get clear answers about her fascination toward the boy and toward oranges and

about her frustration toward beauty. In a narrative that echoes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," what is clear is that Eva is suffering, wants some kind of home, is in a fragile mental state, is trying to sleep, and is trying to remember. "Eva" is far more claustrophobic than "Wings," but also has a narrator who is more accepting, even though Eva only gets to speak three words total: "Time…oh, time!" (par. 8, ellipses in original, indicating pause in speech). The narrator presents the world Eva lives in as if her (magical) experiences are completely acceptable and normal. Eva is, ironically, cripnormative in the social constructions of the story. Only readers see how disabled, how mentally ill, Eva really is.

As in "Wings," it seems highly-probable that in the world of "Eva," disability happens only as a punishment. "Eva" is also far more Gothic, and through this Gothic-ness presents disability such that readers can interpret it as a always being a vastly undesirable and scary experience. The story opens with discussions of cancer, impossible burdens, confinement to four walls, and insects consuming Eva. It seems murder, suicide, and/or secrets are part of Eva's flood, her labyrinth of painful memories. The narrator describes Eva's inundation of generational trauma, and in a parallel to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) says, "it was as if the same head, a single head, had been continuously transmitted…to all the women who were to receive it irremediably like a painful inheritance of beauty" (par. 3). Readers might even ask if the narrator exaggerates Eva's pain or if the narrator uses Eva as a scapegoat. The narrator creates a living nightmare for readers:

> "During those nights, with her big round eves open and frightened, she bore the weight of the darkness that fell upon her temples like molten lead….[I]n order to bring on sleep, she tried to go back over her childhood memories. But that remembering always ended with a terror of the unknown…Then the struggle would begin. The real struggle against

> three unmovable enemies. She would never—no, she would never—be able to shake the fear from her head. She would have to bear it as it clutched at her throat. And all just to live in that ancient mansion, to sleep alone in that corner, away from the rest of the world." (par. 4-5)

Not only is disability some kind of punishment, disability is inescapable and extends into perpetuity: Eva will always experience excruciating pain, according to the sadistic but matter-of-fact narrator.

Looking at some example word counts again also helps show how "Eva" can also be thought of as Gothic literature: this story uses "dark"/"darkness" or "night" eighteen times, "fear" sixteen times, "insects" thirteen times, "night" nine times, "afraid" and "death" seven times, "blood" and "spirits" four times, "isolated" and "weeping" three times.

Conclusion

Wendy B. Faris nails it when writing that magical realist fictions often force readers to negotiate, not with an idealized past and forgotten virtues, but with the dystopian horrors of the past and often force readers to blur conventional boundaries and destabilize expectations related to privilege, oppression, realism, magic, and the past. As shown in this essay, Marquez's "Wings" and "Eva" create anything but utopian pasts, especially when narrowed in on representations of disability. These short stories use layers of darkness and present worlds where not having the expected, normative body results in tragic and exploitative experiences. Only the child in "Wings" is innocent. All the other characters and narrators in both stories have their own self-centered priorities when it comes to disabled bodies, priorities that are devoid of agency for others and devoid of a shared sense of humanity.

The implications of Marquez's fictional representations are more concerning than the representations themselves, especially when we recognize his characters as "historical stand-ins," as I have termed it. A *historical stand-in* is a fictional character who effectively represents and speaks for everyone beyond the story with the same or similar characteristics and situations. When it comes to *all* disabled people, Marquez suggests there is no future, at least not a future with acceptance and person/patient-centered healing. Further, the stories preclude the possibility of acceptance and an overthrown binary of able-bodied/disabled.

Analysis on the basis of disability is important. Too often, disability is invisible. Even when it is very explicit, we tend to overlook disability because such is an extraordinarily common part of the human experience—if you live long enough, you will acquire disabilities; if you even wear glasses, you have a disability. My hope with this essay is to help the reader reconsider these stories and other stories from a lens of crip theory. Because even when unconscious, these stories effectively teach people how to treat disabled people, teach that we should fear disability, and teach that disability is shameful.

In closing, I imagine a version of "Eva" where the narrator gives concrete information about Eva's disabled experiences and shares information or uses a framework that gives more legitimacy to such Othered individuals. And I further imagine a "Wings" where magical realism fosters community and healing, where disability is humanized, and where disabled people have a voice, as in Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line* (1995). Magical realism has a variety of uses, and while narratives often explore tragic pasts in search of more useable pasts, magical realism can do such without the groundwork for further harm.

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