

LATIN AMERICA AND MAGICAL REALISM:
THE INSOMNIA PLAGUE IN *CIEN AÑOS DE SOLEDAD*

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Abstract

Communities of people have different ways of explaining the world around them and events that occur to them, and these codes for interpreting reality can clash when brought into contact with each other. Latin American writers and scholars have often said that such a clash produces the atmosphere we have come to label magical realism in literature; construing the theory in quite territorial terms, they have claimed that the specific circumstances of Latin America have produced magical realism.¹In this essay, I explore the use of magical realism in a famous episode from García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. The instance of the insomnia plague has fascinated readers and has attracted various interpretations from academics; these have usually been centred around cultural readings. I explore the passage from three distinct perspectives, cultural, historical and literary. García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* is a work rich in historical and literary sources, and in order to help determine the impact of political and cultural happenings upon his work, I have also referred extensively also to García Márquez's recently published memoirs, which have enabled me to make reasoned judgments about the different spheres of influence upon García Márquez's work.

1. *Sleepless in Macondo*

In the third chapter of *Cien años de soledad*, an extraordinary thing happens. It first surfaces when an Indian woman and her brother arrive in Macondo. They are described as being *huyendo de una peste de insomnio que flagelaba a su tribu desde hacía varios años* (126). This sounds like a very peculiar form of virus: generally insomnia is regarded as a symptom of something else, and certainly not something which is transmitted in viral or bacterial form. At this stage it could perhaps seem to be simply a metaphor for the tribulations of the tribe.² Nothing else is said of the plague for a few pages, until Rebeca arrives. She is delivered to the Buendías, inscrutable and apparently unable to communicate. It is finally discovered that she speaks fluently (and foully) in the Indian language. Like Visitación and Cataure, the Indian brother and sister, Rebeca is described as bring-

ing an array of strange habits to the household. We are told of Visitación and Cataure: *Ambos eran tan dóciles y serviciales, que Úrsula se hizo cargo de ellos para que la ayudaran en los oficios domésticos. Fue así como Arcadio y Amaranta hablaron la lengua guajira antes que el castellano, y aprendieron a tomar caldo de lagartijas y a comer huevos de arañas sin que Úrsula se diera cuenta* (126). The stealth and silence of the Indians is emphasised in this remark that these goings on were occurring in her house without her realising. The sense of primitiveness, secrecy and witchcraft is likewise apparent in the portrayal of Rebeca's behaviour: *Nadie entendía cómo no se había muerto de hambre, hasta que los indígenas, que se daban cuenta de todo porque recorrían la casa sin cesar con sus pies sigilosos, descubrieron que a Rebeca sólo le gustaba comer la tierra húmeda del patio y las tortas de cal que arrancaba de las paredes con las uñas* (132). Once again, it is clear that the Indians are perceived as secretive and almost sinister in the way they notice everything by going unnoticed themselves. Visitación is therefore the first to spot the signs of the insomnia plague in Rebeca (134). Unlike her brother, Visitación reacts with sad resignation: *Cataure, el indio, no amaneció en la casa. Su hermana se quedó, porque su corazón fatalista le indicaba que la dolencia letal había de perseguirla de todos modos hasta el último rincón de la tierra* (134). The Indian woman connects the plague to herself and her people. This plague is apparently no indiscriminate bug, but a specifically targeted virus attacking her tribe. She warns the town of the symptoms but José Arcadio Buendía reacts with characteristic self-assurance: he concludes that it is just a superstition and not to be taken seriously. However, several weeks later, the family notices that they cannot fall asleep. It starts with José Arcadio Buendía, who gives the reason for his insomnia to his wife as: *'Estoy pensando otra vez en Prudencio Aguilar'* (134), a perfectly reasonable explanation for his sleeplessness, since Prudencio Aguilar is the man he shot over a cock-fight some years ago. However, it is not long before the whole family is affected by this insomnia, which Úrsula tries desperately to cure with various medicinal plant extracts. Then follows a significant passage: *Mientras tanto, por un descuido que José Arcadio Buendía no se perdonó jamás, los animalitos de caramelo fabricados en la casa seguían siendo vendidos en el pueblo. Niños y adultos chupaban encantados los deliciosos gallitos verdes del insomnio, los exquisitos peces rosados del insomnio y los tiernos caballitos amarillos del insomnio, de modo*

que el alba del lunes sorprendió despierto a todo el pueblo (135–6). It is a peculiar twist that the people of the town ascribe natural causes to an apparently magical plague; it is much more common to find people ascribing magical causes to a natural plague. However, García Márquez's plague has parallel explanations, and to return to José Arcadio Buendía's comment, we see that one of these is an issue of community history. Prudencio Aguilar was the reason that they all packed up and set out to found a village in the first place. Murdered by José Arcadio Buendía in a duel of honour, he comes back to haunt the family until they are driven to leave their homes. Prudencio is the part of the shared, pre-Macondo history of their community, just as eating earth and spider's eggs is that of the Indian peoples. It is carefully implied that these secret, guilty histories are inextricably bound to the insomnia plague.

As Visitación had predicted, the plague rapidly infects the minds of its victims, but in most peculiar ways (135). These early stages of the plague appear to be projecting memories of individual history onto reality³. These times do not last for long. People begin to yearn for sleep, not because of tiredness, but rather nostalgia for dreaming. The lack of dreaming seems to be an essential factor of the plague. Dreams can be presented in Amerindian thought as connecting people to their tribal histories.⁴ The insomnia plague disconnects the people from their past and they become in Visitación's words: '*una especie de idiotez sin pasado*' (134).

The town persists in attributing its spread to natural means, and treating it like any other virulent disease (137). We see how the narrator sides with the perspective of his characters, even though it might appear a highly flawed hypothesis to attribute the infection to food and drink. There is also an inversion of old practice of lepers to warn others of their illness:⁵ rather than the sick advertising their infection with a bell, it is the healthy who must advertise themselves as so.

The next stage arrives, the most frightening one of all, when Aureliano one day realises that he cannot remember the word for something in his laboratory. He writes it down on a piece of paper and sticks it to the object in question. When this phenomenon becomes frequent, and José Arcadio Buendía confesses his alarm at forgetting the key events of his childhood, then a serious project is begun. Not just labels, but labels explaining the labels are pasted on all basic items of use, but the narrator notes the pitiful futility of it all: *Así continuaron viviendo en una realidad escurridiza, momentáneamente*

capturada por las palabras, pero que había de fugarse sin remedio cuando olvidaron los valores de la letra escrita (138). This comment suggests a profound existential concern: for all its apparently plague-like characteristics, the virus presents a threat not to the physical health of the community, or the corporeal life of an individual, but to what it is that makes a community and an individual: history and culture. Of course, these things can be recorded in literature, but as the narrator perceptively acknowledges, words cannot truly capture a world, once the real experience of it has slipped away, and in the profound memory loss occurring here, the meanings of words themselves begin to slip from mental grasp.

As the plague continues, the narrator observes some of the most absurd and humorous reactions that occur amongst the inhabitants; for example Pilar Ternera hits upon the ingenious scheme of reading people's future in her cards (138–9). This kind of popular superstition applied to one's past rather than one's future is quite startling to people who have always been secure of individual and community history; it conveys the sense of unknowing and rootlessness that emanates from a culture that has for some reason lost its grounding.

Just as the town has almost entirely lost itself in the delirium of insomnia, a stranger arrives. This stranger observes the chaos of labels pasted to walls with pity and appears to understand what has happened; he then promptly hands over a medicine that instantly cures the victims (140). The administering of a drug to clear up the insomnia continues the motif of the sleeplessness as a disease.

2. *A historical reading*

The insomnia plague of *Cien años de soledad* has an almost entirely psychological manifestation, startlingly magical, explicable in Western rational terms only by reference to some such phenomenon as mass hysteria. However, despite its apparently magical nature, García Márquez's characters in Macondo perceive the plague as a natural virus, transmitted via foodstuffs and to be lived with in view of no imminent cure, rather than prayed over. This matter-of-fact approach has been seen so many times in the novel already: Amaranta's basket circles around the room, resulting in José Arcadio Buendía tying it down; the cloc-cloc of Rebeca's parents' bones irritates the builders and so they seal them into a wall; and Úrsula follows the blood of her son, as it travels between two houses, without any display of disbelief.

Visitación hints at something fateful and magical about the plague when she resigns herself to the belief that the disease will follow

her wherever she goes. The plague of insomnia is first mentioned as a calamity that caused Visitación and her brother to flee their homes, a mention that immediately associates the plague with the Indians. It was not Visitación and Cataure who brought the insomnia plague to Macondo but Rebeca;⁶ either way, it is still inherently connected to the Indians. It manifests itself just after Rebeca is finally assimilated into the family and gives up her earth-eating and other distinguishing characteristics, such as talking in the Indian language. Also significant is that Rebeca's parents are unknown characters; their daughter arrives on the scene with a collection of mysterious habits and a bag of bones. Although they send a letter to the Buendías, claiming to be relatives, none of the family has any recollection of the parents.

Colombian literature, like the literature of any given country, is frequently overtly historical. It is perhaps especially true for countries such as Colombia, however, where the official versions of historical fact are often a hostage to specific political conditions.⁷ Rebeca⁸, Visitación and Cataure can be viewed as representatives of the descendants of the Indians in contemporary Latin America: a people who have lost contact with their heritage, and therefore exist in a certain amount of confusion and sense of loss concerning their identity.⁹ This fact is of great importance for understanding the insomnia plague, for it connects the insomnia that accompanies these characters with the Spanish descent upon the New World. Spanish chroniclers have recorded how they exploited and destroyed the empires that they found there.¹⁰ In a more gradual process, centuries of culture were devastated, as the colonisers started to impose their language, religion and civilisation upon the peoples they found there. It would appear that initially the focus of the conquistadores was simply that of defeating the native peoples and settling; however by late colonial times, the integration of Indians, economically, culturally and genetically became an important goal for the Hispanic elite in Colombia.¹¹ Safford describes it thus in his article on Indian integration: *The goal of whitening and Europeanizing the population tended to be stated a little obliquely, though nonetheless quite obviously, in public documents, but more baldly in private*; *'Quite obviously, the elite had in mind the inculcation of values, behaviour, and life patterns associated with Western Europe, the seat of the world. For many, to approach European models of work and consumption was an important ingredient of civilization and successful nationhood.*¹² The obvious consequence of

these policies, which were not fully ratified until republican times, was the destruction (by slow attrition) of Indian culture. It is clear from the text quoted above that Rebeca was ashamed of her habits for she shrouded them in secrecy: the narrator makes that very observation. This reflects the shame of Indianness that resulted from the colonial and republican attitudes to Indians in Latin America generally.¹³ The cause of this shame is evident when one reads accounts written by Spanish figures of the late colonial period; Father Joaquin de Finestrad, the Spanish Capuchin, wrote: *I believe firmly that... all the assistance and privileges that are conceded and poured over (the Indians) are not sufficient to extract them from the miserable state of their uselessness... I am firmly persuaded that it is necessary to graft them so that imperceptibly their caste may be finished and they may pass to the legal condition of zambos and mulattos.*¹⁴

As well as the cultural attrition that was occurring amongst the Indian population, another equally devastating force was at work on behalf of the European invaders; disease. Disease is regarded as being one of the key factors explaining the quite dramatic decline of the indigenous population after the Conquest. These diseases were introduced by the Europeans, and while they themselves had acquired some level of immunity to the infections, the Indians were entirely at the mercy of illnesses as apparently trivial as the common cold.¹⁵

With this evidence in mind, it is possible to read a very historical symbolism into the event of the insomnia plague. Its voracious destruction of memory and ultimately identity represents the loss of Indian culture in colonial and republican times. The very magical manifestation of the occurrence reflects the surreal terror of the circumstances, and perhaps the perspective of the indigenous community who find their lives turned upside down by these foreigners with their technology and warfare. However, it is important to remember that it is not just the Indians who are affected by this plague, but also the entire town, which consists largely of creole inhabitants. Perhaps García Márquez was enjoying the inversion of history whereby the Indians decimate the creole community (albeit temporarily: Rebeca is never to know who her parents and people are).

This leads therefore to another reading. While the Indians represent an exploited and dominated segment of the Colombian population, there is also a second layer of repression and exploitation that is plausibly being referred to: that of Latin America as a continent at the hands of Europe and North America. Much later in the

novel, a mass loss of memory occurs that is entirely unrelated to a lack of sleep. Here the loss of memory corresponds to just one specific event: the massacre of the Banana Company workers. The North American fruit company achieves an almost total erasing of this event from the minds of the inhabitants of Macondo: the only person who remembers anything is José Arcadio who consequently becomes a total recluse, deeply haunted by the memory of what he has seen. Although a very different set of events from those of the insomnia plague, the parallels between the two situations are pronounced. In both cases, it is never made explicit what causes the forgetfulness, and in both cases it has a profound effect upon the community.

The massacre of the workers in *Cien años de soledad* is clearly based upon a massacre of striking workers that occurred at a town called Ciénaga on the fifth of December 1928, the year that García Márquez was born.¹⁶ He speaks of the great importance and frustration which the massacre brought into his life at an early age, when he discovered the impossibility of recovering the truth: *My mother's version had such meager numbers and a setting so abject for the imposing drama I had imagined that it caused a sense of frustration in me. Later, I spoke with survivors and witnesses and searched through newspaper archives and official documents, and I realized that the truth did not lie anywhere. Conformists said, in effect, that there had been no deaths. Those at the other extreme affirmed without a quaver in their voices that there had been more than one hundred, that they had been seen bleeding to death on the square, and that they were carried away in a freight train to be tossed into the ocean like rejected bananas. And so my version was lost forever at some improbable point between the two extremes. But it was so persistent that in one of my novels I referred to the massacre with all the precision and horror that I had brought for years to its incubation in my imagination.*¹⁷ It has been considered that the massacre is the most important event in the novel, and that the text can be interpreted according to this historical moment;¹⁸ if this is the case then the insomnia plague not only foreshadows but is also a crucial metaphorical model for this secrecy and deceit. Colombia has a culture of disappearances and a control of history textbooks,¹⁹ and this is reflected by the insomnia plague. The reality of confusion and paranoia, one in which one feels that the boundaries of fact and fiction are established arbitrarily, is expressed powerfully in the magical realist event of the virus of sleeplessness.

3. *A cultural reading*

It has been demonstrated that Colombian literature frequently expresses a dichotomy between the written intellectual literature of the highlands and metropolitan areas such as Bogotá, and the oral culture and literature of the lowlands and coastal regions.²⁰ The Costa region, where García Márquez spent most of his early childhood, is often said to be 'tri-ethnic' in culture,²¹ very receptive to external influences due to its coastal position, and containing a strong presence of oral culture. Indeed, García Márquez's novel has been shown to contain a large number of oral culture themes and structural devices. If high culture writing tradition is characterised by self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, such as that epitomised in José Eustasio Rivera's *Voragine*,²² then the characteristics of oral culture are those of repetition of images and themes (such as ice),²³ epithets (such as '*la bella*')²⁴ and exaggerated characters (such as José Arcadio and Colonel Aureliano Buendía).²⁵ García Márquez's work can be seen to hold in tension these two cultures, oral and written; it is certainly evident that, while the earlier parts of the novel display distinctly oral elements,²⁶ the later parts of the novel exhibit many aspects of the Highlands writing culture.²⁷

Aureliano's notion of writing everything down on bits of paper could be read as representing the passing of an oral culture to a written one.²⁸ Once the insomnia plague is out of the way, Macondo begins to enter a different phase as "civilisation" and all its ambiguous gifts sift in mysteriously like those yellow flowers at José Arcadio Buendía's funeral (242) and alter the whole town.²⁹ The time of transition is marked by this mass loss of sleep and consequently memory.³⁰ The notion of a plague of insomnia is itself a part of oral culture thought: Ong describes the thought of oral culture people: *In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings.*³¹ Here the strange and alien experience of a culture being warped is conceptualised as a virus invading the memories of people: an oral culture perspective that causes the passage to be magically real. One observation of particular importance on behalf of the narrator confirms this interpretation of the insomnia plague: *Francisco el Hombre, así llamado porque derrotó al diabló de improvisación de cantos, y cuyo verdadero nombre no conoció nadie, desapareció de Macondo durante la peste del insomnio* (142). Francisco the Man is a key

representative of oral culture in the novel: a wandering minstrel character who spreads news around villages of the swamp by singing songs containing current affairs. He is a figure from Colombian legend,³² supposed originator of the *vallenato*,³³ a type of music that combined a peculiar blend of folklore, miracle, love-song, travelogue and every day happenings. His disappearance at the time of the insomnia plague cannot be anything other than a very symbolic marker of the passing away of oral culture.

García Márquez has said that the first years of his life were the ones that left the most profound impact, when he was living in his grandparents' house in Aracataca. He recalls in the first book of his recent memoirs that this town was a place that his grandparents had hoped would be an escape from their guilty history,³⁴ but had turned out to be a town full of new trials and torments. He tells of his mother's memories of plagues of locusts, droughts and seemingly interminable rainstorms,³⁵ all of which were to appear in variously transmuted forms in his most famous novel. Notably, García Márquez marks out one particular plague as having a tremendous impact: *The most sinister of the plagues, however, was the human one. A train that looked like a toy flung onto the town's burning sands a leaf storm of adventurers from all over the world who took control of the streets by force of arms.*³⁶ He describes the consequences of this influx, the social disorder as well as the benefits of prosperity, but he then relates an eerie effect upon the old inhabitants: *In the midst of that blizzard of unknown faces, of tents on public thoroughfares and men changing their clothes in the street, of women sitting on trunks with their parasols opened and mules and mules and mules dying of hunger in the hotel's stables, those who had arrived first became the last. We were the eternal outsiders, the newcomers.*³⁷ It is possible that this experience of confusion and loss of identity, which the town and its inhabitants experienced at that time, is the instigating factor in the fictional creation many years later of the insomnia plague that overcomes Macondo.

He has spoken of the importance of his grandmother's way of seeing the world and this appears to have been an absolutely vital influence upon his manner of storytelling. He describes her behaviour towards the daily aspects of the world: *my grandmother Tranquilina, the most credulous and impressionable woman I have ever known, because of the terror the mysteries of daily life caused in her... For she saw that rocking chairs rocked alone, that the phantoms of puerperal fever were lurking in the bedrooms of women in labour, that*

*the scent of jasmines from the garden was like an invisible ghost, that a cord dropped by accident on the floor had the shape of the numbers that might be the grand prize in the lottery, that a bird without eyes had wandered into the dining room, and could be chased away by singing La Magnífica.*³⁸ He tellingly observes his conception of life in that house of his childhood in the following phrase: *Money as cash came to an end because it had no meaning in the oral tradition of the house.*³⁹ This idea of the house being governed by an oral tradition seems to me to be very important, for García Márquez frequently talks about his mourning for those childhood days, especially when he was forced to attend a very prescriptive school once he had left Aracataca and the world of his grandparents. At that point, presumably he lost the magic and wonder both of early childhood and also the very bizarre world of his grandmother. It is possible with this in mind to read yet another meaning into the insomnia plague: that of his sense of loss at the passing from his childhood world to a more “civilised” world, and in his conception the passing from oral to literary tradition. Importantly here then lies an explanation for the setting of the insomnia plague in this ‘magical’ atmosphere: he uses magical realism to portray the oral culture mindset of both his grandmother’s world, and to some extent the world of small children. However, as the plague itself represents, there is a clash of perspective and so no single view is entirely assimilated into the passage.

Memory is very important to García Márquez’s fiction; he speaks of his writing as a quest to recapture this childhood: *Y llegamos a Aracataca y me encontré con que todo estaba exactamente igual pero un poco traspuesto, poéticamente. Es decir, que y veía a través de las cosas que todos hemos comprobado; como aquellas calles que nos imaginábamos anchas, se volvían pequeñas, no eran tan altas como nos imaginábamos; las casas eran exactamente iguales, pero estaban carcomidas por el tiempo y la pobreza, y a través de las ventanas veíamos que eran los mismos muebles, pero quince años más viejos en realidad ...En ese momento me surgió la idea de contra por escrito todo el pasado de aquel episodio.* It is clear that *Cien años de soledad* is firmly rooted in his memories of his grandmother’s house⁴⁰ (the working title of the novel was for twenty odd years *La Casa*).⁴¹ Stavans writes of the author: *Memory, in García Márquez’s view, is synonymous with redemption: to remember is to overcome, to defeat the forces of evil.*⁴² The result of this is that the novel is swamped in themes of memory and perils of forgetting: a phrase which appears to hold the seams of the text together is *muchos años después*⁴³ and most of the charac-

ters bear a burden of obsessive memorising or intolerable nostalgia.⁴⁴ The insomnia plague also represents García Márquez's fascination with memory, and his urgent desire to record in writing these memories before they are lost forever. However, he expresses a cynicism towards even this venture, when the narrator observes: *Así continuaron viviendo en una realidad escurridiza, momentáneamente capturada por las palabras, pero que había de fugarse sin remedio cuando olvidaran los valores de la letra escrita* (138). There pervades a sense of deep insecurity at his own chosen vocation of recording history, the fear that even the hope of permanence offered by literature is in fact illusory, for ultimately words written on a page can be as fragile as memories inside one's head. Ariel Dorfman makes an interesting observation about memory and its connection to García Márquez's magical realism when she writes: *Things are marvelous in Macondo because along with their hard, incontestably fact-ridden intractability, the villagers are simultaneously living the instantaneous retelling of those events, their conversion into legends, that which will be ledgered – read, registered. The immediate exaggeration of what is happening to us forces those circumstances into memory, ensures that they will not be forgotten, that a “plague of insomnia” will not attack our descendants.*⁴⁵ The plague of insomnia itself could be part of this ‘instantaneous retelling’, an exaggerated version of a real event designed to make it memorable. There is frenzy, perhaps arising from a sense of belatedness on behalf of the writer and his nation's quest for independence, that makes it necessary to create an epic text from scratch, speeding up the gradual magicalising process of storytelling that would usually occur.⁴⁶ Echevarría puts forward the idea that García Márquez is trying to create a foundational mythology for Colombia and indeed Latin America as a continent, by mingling many mythic themes and stories with references to the histories of Latin America.⁴⁷ In fact, I think that García Márquez's use of “magicalising” events that has been detailed above also reflects this same desire.

Finally, there is an important passage in García Márquez's biography where he describes his perennial fear of the night: *I never could overcome my fear of being alone, above all in the dark, but it seems to me that it had a concrete origin, which is that at night my grandmother's fantasies and premonitions materialized. At the age of 70 I still glimpsed in dreams the ardor of the jasmines in the hallway and the phantom in the gloomy bedrooms, and always that same feeling that ruined my childhood: terror of the night. Often I have had a forboding, in my worldwide attacks of insomnia, that I too carry the curse of that*

*mythical house in a happy world where we died every night.*⁴⁸ It would appear also that the insomnia plague might be a fictional manifestation of that very fear borne of his childhood years in that house which has condemned the author to 70 years of insomnia.

4. *A literary reading*

Cien años de soledad draws heavily on Biblical material, with frequently parodying intent.⁴⁹ Plagues in the Old Testament are of course well-known features: much of *Exodus* is spent listing the plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians by the angry God of the Hebrews.⁵⁰ It therefore seems likely that, to at least some extent, García Márquez is alluding to Biblical material when he incorporates his insomnia plague into the early Macondo days. Unlike the Biblical plagues, there is no obvious punishment being exacted; or if a punishment function is to be construed, it seems to be affecting the oppressed and exploited, which is a reversal of the situation in *Exodus*. Pertinent also are the similarities of context. Both the Bible and García Márquez's version involve a migration of peoples and the consequent founding of a new community. However, García Márquez inverts the Biblical notion of the promised land by calling Macondo *la tierra que nadie les había prometido* (108). The Biblical allusions are significant, and refer to something that was mentioned earlier: the notion that García Márquez is aiming to create a foundational mythology for Latin America. The *inversion* reflects a self-consciousness regarding his project, and a wry awareness that myth and history are distinct and cannot be reconciled. There were no psychological plagues however in the Bible, and therefore the insomnia plague does not arise as a direct descendent of the plagues of locusts, boils and frogs. Different also is the atmosphere created by García Márquez's plague. The Bible is a very ancient work, composed of many ancient other texts.⁵¹ It also intends to persuade its reader that the magical occurrences are indeed miraculous, and their nature is explained by divine intervention. García Márquez does not explain his plague by reference to an angry god. Rebeca is identified as the vector, but otherwise the manifestation of this pestilence is mysterious. The characters respond with customary practicality in the face of the bizarre: there is no supplication or sacrifice. This lack of explanation is a typically magical realist feature.

The Bible is not the only ancient source for plague accounts. Classical literature abounds with instances of plagues, which devastate in variously horrific ways.⁵² In book seven of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* there is a particularly gruesome tale of a people almost

entirely wiped out by a mysterious plague. Virgil's wretched epidemic appears in *Georgics* 3, a grim account that focuses upon the misery of the animals as they suffer terribly and finally die. Another famous disease account is Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* 6, where the plague affects both the animal and human world devastatingly. Lucretius is adapting the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague, and his adaptation portrays the disease as a moral disaster, reflecting man's ignorance. Thucydides' account is detailed and quite scientifically orientated.⁵³ There is no undertone of magic or religion, such as in Ovid's account, nor of gloom concerning the general state of mankind, which is the presentation Lucretius was striving for. Rather, Thucydides sees his version as an account of practical application.

An obvious distinction in García Márquez's novel is the psychological dimension of the insomnia plague. Psychological aspects were not absent from the Classical or Biblical versions, but the devastating blow was their union with physical (and drastic) deterioration. The uniquely psychological manifestation of the insomnia plague sets it apart from its predecessors, leading one to suspect a specific purpose in this very clear adaptation of a common literary theme.⁵⁴ It is without doubt that an author whose works are persistently intertextual has been influenced by these earlier accounts and is using them to construct and comment upon his own.

García Márquez has often remarked that he has been profoundly influenced in his writing style by both Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf. Of *Mrs. Dalloway* he says: *I would be a very different author if, when I was twenty years old, I hadn't read this sentence from Mrs. Dalloway: 'But there was no doubt that within (the coach) something great was seated: greatness that was passing, hidden, within reach of the common hands that for the first and last time found themselves so close to the majesty of England, the enduring symbol of the state that inquisitive archaeologists would identify in their excavations of the ruins of time, when London was no more than a street covered in grass, and when the people who were strolling its streets that Wednesday morning were scarcely a heap of bones with a few wedding rings, turned over in their own dust and the fillings of innumerable decayed teeth.'*⁵⁵ This sentence with its peculiarly unsettling perspective captures a glimpse of a possible future buried within the present time of the narrative; it presents the future and present as co-existent and it is this technique of taking the ordinary, the mundane, and making it seem extraordinary, which magical realists use so much. The

opening paragraph of *Cien años de soledad* produces a similarly unsettling (although far less chilling) atmosphere in its mingling of the ancient and the recent. The decayed remains of the passers by on that London street recall the mysterious Spanish galleon, filled inside with a forest of flowers, which José Arcadio Buendía and his men discover. They also contain the seeds of the instance of Melquíades' room, which for some people appears as a decrepit foul-smelling room, but for others remains exquisitely clean. Both authors use time to complicate and partially uproot our customary perspectives. It is clear that García Márquez has indeed been greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf's bewildering, though highly literary, style.

Franz Kafka was an equally profound influence, and García Márquez has said of this writer: *I thought to myself that I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago.*⁵⁶ He spoke of being inspired after reading a copy of *The Metamorphosis* by the way in which Kafka related fantastic events in an entirely natural voice, and also discovering that literature did not have to follow a conventional story line. The first line of Kafka's novel is a classic example of the tone the writer maintains throughout: *As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.* The matter-of-fact tone in which the narrator of *Cien años de soledad* relates such events as an insomnia plague would appear to reflect the influence of Kafka's straightforward handling of the bizarre.

Surrealism is an especially broad and fertile scope for analysis in terms of its influence and connection to magical realism,⁵⁷ and one that I leave to one side here for precisely those reasons. Surrealism is a European production, and one Latin Americanists have been quick to criticise as counterfeit and devoid of imagination, despite the obvious similarities of style with magical realism.⁵⁸ It suffices to mention this as a possible line of inquiry and hope that those interested will research the matter further,⁵⁹ for it is now time to draw together the evidence that has been examined in this essay.

5. Conclusions

The insomnia plague presents a number of potential explanations for the prevalence of magical realism. The aim of this essay was to respond to the many Latin American voices citing their own nation, its history, landscape and cultural mixing, as the specific cause of magical realism. I will now respond to these claims in the light of the readings explored.

It is clear in the insomnia plague episode that cultural mingling has played an important role in the attitude of the characters and narrator. Although José Arcadio Buendía expresses cynicism towards the Indian's superstitious habits, he reacts not with shock and disbelief but practicality at the onset of the plague; and his wife Úrsula goes one step further by actually secluding the 'infected' Rebeca straight away. This indicates a strange point in cultural assimilation where neither mode of thought has supremacy, and one of the responses, as has been demonstrated, is magical realism. Also relevant is the oral culture of the Costa region, and its way of assimilating and conceptualising events that is markedly different from the intellectual writing cultures of the Highlands. Oral culture, it was noted, relates a given experience to its nearest human experience, so a phenomenon of mass hysteria that might result in insomnia is read as a virus. Both these readings reflect a very cultural root at the heart of the insomnia plague.

It is undeniable that García Márquez is using the plague as an effective metaphor for the destruction of the Indian culture at the hands of the Hispanic and Creole populations. It is also a metaphor for the loss of oral culture that occurred for him quite suddenly as he had to leave the weird and wonderful world of his grandparents in Aracataca and go to school in the Highlands. This coincides also with the loss of oral culture's ways of thinking that are symptomatic of leaving early childhood anyway. This reading demonstrates historical events that have an innate (and horrific) magic about them, for the process of loss of culture is so unnatural. Thus history also provides an explanation for the magically real event.

The insomnia plague acts as a symbol for García Márquez's deep concern over the fragility of memory. It expresses also his cynicism towards writing's ability to be able to record the memory for posterity. Human identity and community are perceived as highly corruptible things. This was shown to connect vitally with the event of the Banana Company massacre that occurs much later in the novel: a similarly rapid process of forgetting takes place, but for one specific event. The insomnia plague and the massacre represent one and the same thing, if a connection is presumed, which is the Colombian environment of fictional 'truth' and truthful fiction, which has been the strange and bewildering world which the inhabitants of the country have experienced for some time: a magical realist reality of the worst kind.

Finally there are the literary plagues that haunt fictional history. The Bible was demonstrated to be an obvious and overwhelmingly important source. García Márquez appears to be making a myth of foundations for Latin America, but in the same breath he undermines such an attempt by his inversions of Biblical material. Classical sources for plague accounts provided examples of the continuation of a literary theme.

Literature proves to be very important to the matter. It is certain that García Márquez was highly influenced by the surreal styles of authors such as Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf. The bewildering pitch of unreal reality that they strike is used time and again in *Cien años de soledad* to great effect. These writers represent elements of the dominant European culture from which Latin America gained independence in the late 19th century. To that extent, these strong influences upon the Colombian writer appear with baggage. While García Márquez undoubtedly admired the writers, he perhaps imitated aspects of their style as an exercise in demonstrating the Latin American emergence of literary fiction into an arena where it could compete against the so-called classics. García Márquez introduces various European sources into his novel. This helps to explain also the fierce literary territorialising that was shown in the introduction of this chapter, as various Latin American writers and scholars fought desperately to cite magical realism as an original and authentically Latin American export, despite the difficulties inherent in this argument.

Notes

1. Asturias (1967); García Márquez (1983) ; Carpentier (1995).
2. 'una peste' is the description used later by José Arcadio Buendía for the effects of love that he perceives in his family(162) and by the narrator for the effects of the arrival of the Banana company (340).
3. Cf. the dream of José Arcadio Buendía that causes him to found and name Macondo (110); the Biblical dream of Abraham at *Gen.15.12*.
4. On the significance of dreams and visions to Guajiro Indians see Goulet (1993); Grey (1970).
5. Wood (1990, p. 39).
6. Janes (1991, p. 122).
7. For those interested in Colombian history, and specifically its connection to García Márquez's work, an invaluable work is Minta (1987); he even defines García Márquez in terms of his Colombian heritage in the title: *Gabriel García Márquez: Writer of Colombia*. For Colombian politics see Dix (1987).
8. The character of Rebeca seems to be modeled upon a young girl called Margot who was taken into the household of García Márquez's grandparents when

he was very young. He describes how she 'would sit in her little rocking chair to suck her finger in the most unexpected corner. Nothing attracted her attention except the chimes of the clock, which she looked at every hour with her large, hallucinatory eyes. For several days she would not eat ...No one understood how she was staying alive without eating until they realized that she only liked the damp earth of the garden and the pieces of lime that she scratched off the wall with her nails' García Márquez (2003), p. 81.

9. Blakemore and Smith (1974, pp. 206–208).

10. Diaz (1963).

11. Safford (1991).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

13. See Gould (1993), who discusses the shame felt by Indians at their Indianness in his article upon cultural assimilation in Nicaragua.

14. Safford (1991, p. 7). See also Applebaum (1999) for a discussion of regional 'whitening' and negative attitudes to Indians in 19th century Colombia.

15. See Newson (1985) for a perspective on disease and its role in Indian population patterns in Latin America during colonial times. Also Blakemore and Smith (1974, p. 206).

16. A documentary anthology *1928: La massacre en las Bananeras* (Bogotá) provides the 1929 parliamentary debates including eye-witness accounts, and notes the suppression perpetrated by Colombian governments. For the United Fruit Company in Colombia, see Brungardt (1987); LeGrand (1984); Bucheli (2003). See also Green (1996) who talks briefly about the massacre in the context of its connection to what he terms *Gaitainismo*.

17. García Márquez (2003, pp. 62–63).

18. Martin (1995, p. 112).

19. Minta (1987), Bushnell (1993).

20. Williams (1991) speaks extensively of this dichotomy, using many detailed examples, in his book upon the Colombian novel and literary tradition.

21. See Williams (1991) and Fiddian (1995).

22. Williams (1991).

23. The ice of course famously appears at the opening of the novel in Colonel Buendía's memory (81); it is also extensively described at the close of the opening chapter (102). It recurs in the novel as a repeated theme tied to individual memory (273).

24. Remedios, a fatally beautiful and eccentric member of the Buendía family, almost always appears with the epithet *la bella* (303, 304, 305, 309, etc.). This recalls the Homeric use of (metrically convenient) epithets to describe his characters: for instance, Odysseus is frequently *πολυμητις* (*Il.*1.311; *Od.*2.173; *Od.*7.302), and Achilles is often *δῖος* (*Il.*1.7; *Il.*1.292; *Il.*9.209).

25. Williams (1991) gives examples of the kind of techniques one finds in oral culture literature. For oral culture from a Classical perspective, see Kirk (1976); Finnegan (1997).

26. The pre-language state of the village is a very obvious example, and the description *prehistoricos* (81) to depict the stones likewise conjures a world set before written history. The lack of external connection leading to the extreme solitude of the community suggests a pre-civilised state.

27. The wise Catalan, his bookshop and his circle of literary friends appear late in the novel, but there is increasing external control, the lawyers dismissing reality with their mystifying papers, and the increasing importance of Melquíades' scripts.

28. Fuentes (1987) examines the labeling method of the Buendía household as a representation of a debate in literary theory regarding the role of names, exemplified in Plato's *Cratylus* where Socrates saw words as part of the unstable and changing world. See also Plato's *Phaedrus* 274b–277a for discussion of writing and memory.

29. First the *corregidor* Don Apolinar Moscote appears, and accompanying him all the deceit and corruption of the elections; then the lawyers, the train connecting Macondo to the outside world, cinemas, light-bulbs and many other things.

30. It has been suggested by Wood (1990) that the link between insomnia and sleep is simply that there is none: that it is gratuitous mischief on the author's part.

31. Ong (1982, pp. 42–43).

32. As recently as 2003, in an interview with Alex Wolfe, the Colombian accordionist Lisandro Meza said: *The first accordion arrived in Colombia ... bought by a man named Pizarro ... Later they sold the accordion to Francisco El Hombre, whose real name was Francisco Moscote. They gave him the name 'Francisco El Hombre' because he lived in Machovallo, and most of the men in that region were away working in the banana plantations when a plague came and killed many of the children. But there were no men to bury the children. Francisco said, 'I am the man who will bury the children', so they called him 'Francisco El Hombre' ... The legend is that he was the first great accordionist.* (<http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/43/Lisandro+Meza-2003>).

33. The name literally means 'valley-born', and could possibly refer to Valledupar, the main musical centre of the Magdalena area. However, another explanation is that the rural areas along the banks of the Cesar River were very poor, and many of the people there suffered from a disease that caused their skin to flake and discolour, reminding people of newborn whales – *pintaos* or *vallenatos*. Hence *vallenatos* became a derogatory name for the river-based poor, amongst whom the musicians were regarded as the most unsavoury. For a background to the *vallenato*, see Wade (2000).

34. García Márquez recounts the fatal duel of honour between his grandfather and Medardo Pachecho in his autobiography (García Márquez 2003, p. 39); it appears in *Cien años de soledad* as the duel between José Arcadio Buendía and Prudencio Aguilar (107).

35. García Márquez (2003, pp. 40–41).

36. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

37. A very similar feeling is experienced by the inhabitants of Macondo when the gypsies sweep into town: *Los habitantes de Macondo se encontraron de pronto perdidos en sus propias calles, aturdidos por la feria multitudinaria* (101).

38. García Márquez (2003, p. 75).

39. García Márquez (2003, p. 77).

40. García Márquez (2003, p. 62ff) provides extensive evidence to support this.

41. Janes (1991, p. 36).

42. Stavans (1993, p. 64).

43. p. 81, 128, 287 ('*Anos despues*'), 171 ('*Después de muchos años*').

44. Amaranta obsesses over Rebeca who had once won the love of the man Amaranta herself was in love with for almost all her life (328); Colonel Aureliano Buendía suffers terribly after his return from the wars with a burden of nostalgia that never leaves him (81, 273).

45. Dorfman (1991, p. 27).

46. Certainly García Márquez (2003) speaks of the urgency he felt to record his memories of the Aracataca from his childhood when he had returned many years later shocked by how much it had altered.

47. Echevvaría (1995).
48. García Márquez (2003, p. 82).
49. García Márquez uses the Biblical earthly paradise theme throughout the opening chapter; another obvious example is the four year rainstorm (*Llovió cuatro años, once meses y dos días* (431); cf. *Gen.7:4: I will send rain for forty days and forty nights*). For a succinct discussion of the use of Biblical themes in this novel, see Janes (1991, pp. 117–121). See García (1977) for an extensive discussion of the subject of intertextuality in this novel.
50. *Exodus* 7:14 – 11:30. Cf. also the pestilence sent by Apollo to torment the Greeks at *Hom.II.1.10ff*.
51. For the problematic history of canonical scripture, see Wescott (1870), Hoffman (1982) and Bruce (1988).
52. For a general study of Classical plagues, see Finnegan (1999).
53. For Thucydides' plague, see Parry (1969) and Craik (2001).
54. Albert Camus' *La Peste* is a famous novel length example of the motif in more recent literature; there the author studies in detail the reactions of a community to such a devastation. Likewise Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* use disease as a central theme. For plagues in general, see Parker (1983) and McNeil (1976).
55. Mendoza and Márquez (1983).
56. Mendoza (1983).
57. For surrealism and magical realism, see Monegal (1977).
58. Carpentier (1995), Flores (1995) and Leal (1995).
59. For studies of surrealism, see Breton (1972), Matthews (1966) and Nadeau (1989).

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