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Winter Quarter 2019

One Hundred Years of Solitude: An exploration of Historical Consciousness

Born in 1927 in the rural Colombian town of Aracataca, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was brought up in a time of great civil unrest and neocolonialism[1] in Latin America. Raised by his maternal grandparents, his grandfather, Ricardo Márquez Mejía, a retired Liberal war general, and his grandmother, Doña Tranquilina Iguarán, the young author was heavily exposed to the intricacies of political discourse from an extremely young age. Throughout his adolescence, Marquez's grandmother often recounted stories of war and unrest within the country, alternating between logic and myth in her tales, reinforcing liberal and socialist ideology in the mind of her impressionable grandson. Her fantastical tales would eventually become a significant source of inspiration for much of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's literary works in his trademark genre of Magical Realism *(Estorino)*. His grandmother's narratives paired with the author's subjection to the infamous period of rural violence in Colombia known as *La Violencia* would eventually become the foundation for the creation of what is considered to be Marquez's most influential and famed novel, *Cien Años de Soledad*[2] published in 1967. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

[1] Neocolonialism *(n)*- the economic and political policies by which a great power indirectly maintains or extends its influence over other areas or people *(Merriam Webster)*.
[2] *Cien Años de Soledad* is the original title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel.
English Translation: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

would later garner the author a Nobel Peace Prize in 1982, along with number of additional merits. Fifty-two years following its initial publication, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* remains one of the most critically acclaimed magical realism novels in the field of writing. Marquez's eloquent and unique representation of Latin American historical consciousness through the story of a mythical South American town, Macondo, continues to captivate readers and critics, invoking a new point of view of both the effects of colonialism and the documentation of History in Latin America.

One Hundred Years of Solitude follows six generations of the Buendía family, the founders of the rural South American town of Macondo. Macondo, an autonomous settlement, experiences very little contact with the developed world, causing the town and those who reside within it to be extraordinarily disconnected from the realities of the larger global community. For generations, Macondo's solitary source of contact with the outside world were the occasional visits the town received from traveling gypsies who introduced the mesmerized townspeople to modern wonders such as ice and fake teeth. These visits were also accompanied by the intermittent presence of a magical Indian, Malquiades, who leaves behind a plethora of indecipherable prophecies for the Buendía family. During this period of intense isolation, Macondo and its inhabitants are subjected to a plague of insomnia in which their memory of the past is eradicated, forcing members of the community to begin documenting all that they observe around them by means of the written word in order to preserve the only surviving aspect of their past culture- language. As time moves forward, Macondo gradually recovers from the plague and begins to establish contact with surrounding villages. Despite catalyzing Macondo's technological advancement, this new found outside contact brings an eventual long-lasting period of civil unrest to the town. Conflict develops between the government supported

Conservative party and the opposing Liberal party which represents those in Macondo being exploited by means of the colonialism accompanying industrialization. As the complexities of this ideological opposition reveal themselves, the increasing political unrest amongst Macondo's Conservative and Liberal parties becomes the focus of the novel's plot with consecutive generations of Buendías fighting on behalf of the Liberal regime. In time, however, a new matter of contention arises as imperialist capitalism begins to infiltrate the borders of Macondo embodied by the establishment of an American-owned fruit company. Following their establishment, the company begins to exploit the land in order to harvest and export bananas. As a result of the company's instillation, members of the town become economically dependent on the export of American-owned crops. They are forced to work in subhuman conditions in order to make a minimal profit, promoting a vicious and unrelenting cycle of exploitation in Macondo. Enraged by their lack of worker's rights, the banana plantation employees collectively decide to strike, gathering in the town square as a form of peaceful protest. In response, the colonial government opens fire on the defenseless workers, killing 3,000 in a massacre so catastrophic, it is seemingly unbelievable. However, despite the monumental nature of the shooting, only two people bore witness to the event: Jose Arcadio Segundo, who escaped with his life by hiding amongst the dead, and a young boy who is able to observe the tragedy from a "child's privileged position" *(Marquez, 306)*[3]. In the years following the massacre, Jose Arcadio Segundo, as well as the child, now in his old age, attempt to recount the events that occurred to the oblivious population in Macondo. However, due to the lack of first-hand witnesses partnered with numerous propaganda campaigns administered by the colonial government, the two men are rendered insane and disregarded, causing the reality of the past to be "thrown into the sea like

[3] From this point forward, all citations from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* will be cited using page number only.

rejected bananas" along with the dead *(307),* forgotten in time. Following the Massacre, Macondo enters a five-year ceaseless deluge which floods the town into its final decline. The novel concludes with only two members of the Buendía family remaining in Macondo, Aureliano and Amaranta Úrsula, the town now overridden by plants and insects. Aureliano and Amaranta partake in an incestual relationship, producing the last child of the Buendía lineage who possesses the tail of a pig. Both the Amaranta and the child succumb to individual ends, leaving Aureliano in solitude. In his final years of seclusion, Aureliano succeeds in deciphering the mysterious transcripts left behind by the magical Indian Melquiades over one hundred years prior. Upon his completion of this, the town becomes overrun by plants and insects, meeting its end just as it began: in solitude.

In further analyzing the complex timeline detailing nearly a century of events from Macondo's birth to it's inevitable death, it is evident that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not only a tale chronicling the regional history of the fictional South American settlement, but a commentary on the history of Latin America as a whole, "passing from the mythical pre-conquest time to that of history marked by 'interminable civil wars, dictators, coups d'état, brief resurgences of democratic rule, social revolution...aborted by the prompt arrival of the U.S. Marines to finance the counterrevolution" *(Estorino).* Throughout this paper, I will be analyzing the parallels Gabriel Garcia Marquez creates between the fictional world of Macondo, and the history of socioeconomic instability and colonialism in Latin America, primarily focusing on that which the author experienced in his country of origin, Colombia. Through the use of these parallels, Gabriel Garcia Marquez presents a vivid political commentary on the importance of historical consciousness within society, questioning the merit of truth in recorded history. In his work, Marquez presents two clear categories of history: that which is viewed from an individual

lens, and that which is issued by systems of institutionalized power and thus is widely accepted as fact deeming it "official". Through his use of magical realism to combine both logic and myth, Marquez illuminates the overwhelming deficiencies in each presentation of history, both individual and "official", thus emphasizing the need for a speculative approach to the documentation of the past, and the grave ramifications that accompany a loss of general historical consciousness among a population, the eventual cause of Macondo's ruin.

Historical Parallelism

In order to understand the dichotomy of Marquez's two representations of history, the individual and the official, one must first be able to understand and identify the historical parallels present in the novel that render it a fictionalized history of the Latin American Struggle to emerge from colonialism *(Green)*. Marquez's use of magical realism, while essential to the political commentary of the novel, eradicates conventional chronology from the book, mixing past, present and future, causing numerous historical parallels weaved throughout the novel to not be readily apparent to readers. The town of Macondo, which serves as the primary setting of the novel, directly represents the small settlement in rural Colombia where Marquez grew up, Aracataca. Macondo's autonomy is an integral aspect of this parallel, as "historically, towns in this region were slow growing and late to arrive at the party of Colombian national politics *(Norcross, 6)*. This parallel is further extended by "Jose Buendía's frustrated attempts to connect Macondo" echoing "the frustration of Colombia's national economy" as he tries and fails to connect Macondo to the road leading to the capitol *(Norcross, 7)*. By this point in time, the Colombian economy had become solely dependent on the exporting of gold. However, when Colombian gold reserves became depleted, the country, having been heavily centered around the success of a single export, was incapable of developing the infrastructure necessary to transport

other crops, leaving isolated towns such as Aracataca with no alternative source of profit. *(Norcross, 6).* As a result, many towns such as Aracataca reached a standstill in their technological development, subjecting their populations to gradual yet inevitable exploitation executed by the neo-colonial powers of the time.

The historical parallels Marquez employs are also used as an important tool in the author's representation of colonialism. This can be seen in the symbolic meaning of the great Insomnia plague that strikes Macondo early on in the novel. The plague, which causes a collective loss of memory throughout the population of Macondo, is unintentionally introduced by the Buendía's "Indian" servants Visitación and Cataure. These servants along with the plague they subject upon the town serve to memorialize the complete loss of culture and historical consciousness of indigenous populations in South America which occurred as a result of European colonialism *(Taylor, 9)*.

The most significant of these historical parallels, however, is the Massacre which occurs in the latter half of the novel detailing the mass shooting of three-thousand workers during an organized strike against the imperialist fruit company at which they worked. The fictional events Marquez describes in his novel almost perfectly resemble a painfully real massacre that occurred in Cienaga, Colombia on December 6, 1928. Workers employed on the banana plantations of Colombia, tired of endless exploitation on behalf of the United Fruit Company, gathered in the town square to express their grievances at which point they were promptly executed by the colonial government army. Due to the mass "campaigns of misinformation and propaganda" following the shootings administered by the neocolonial powers controlling economy, "the reaction of much of the country wasn't much different" from that of the townspeople in Macondo who simply acted as though the events of the past never occurred *(Norcross, 14)*. In

reality, “many simply did not know what to believe. If it sounded unbelievable it was... dismissed as propaganda..” *(Norcross, 15).* As the novel advances, the Massacre becomes the central focus of Marquez’s writing, accelerating Macondo’s eventual annihilation.

These parallels between Colombian society and Macondo presented by Marquez exist in prevalence throughout the *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, highlighting and solidifying the historical narrative of Latin American colonialism that serves as a backbone for Marquez in his writing.

History Through the Lenses of Magical Realism

Having made evident, the various historical parallels in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is now important to understand how Marquez utilizes each instance within the context of Magical Realism. As stated in the previous section, while Marquez’s use of Magical Realism causes difficulty in understanding the chronological history represented in the novel, his choice of genre is essential to Marquez’s presentation of colonial history as subjective, an idea closely related to his later arguments against both individual and official history. In fact, this intentional eradication of chronological time is emphasized by the author through the “Enigmatic texts” of the magical Indian Melquiades *(Green).* In the final pages of the novel, the only remaining Bunedía, Aureliano, is finally able to decipher Malquiade’s hieroglyphs, revealing that they are in fact a detailed account of the Buendía family’s history in the past, present and future. He describes the manuscripts as having “concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant” *(415).* This description of Melquiades' writing can be applied to the novel itself in which linear time also does not exist, and thus events in each tense are presented simultaneously. Additionally, this fluidity of time echoes the fluidity of colonial

history, emphasizing the idea that an accurate representation of pre-colonial history is seemingly non-existent *(Norcross, 3).*

Marquez's use of Magical Realism is more than a stylistic device to emphasize the subjectivity of history. The author also uses it as a means of criticizing the ironic nature of history as a whole. An overwhelming majority of the events occurring in the novel and their respective historical parallels are of an extremely tragic and violent nature. However, when detailed in Marquez's writing, they are described in an almost mockingly nonchalant tone, which is characteristic of Magical Realism. This serves to normalize the violence that occurs both in the book and in the history of Colombia, highlighting the blatant disregard of such cataclysmic events throughout documentations of colonialism as a whole. This criticism is further developed by Marquez in his account of the exploitation of workers on Macondo's banana plantation. Marquez describes the abhorrent conditions in which the employed work as seeming like a farce. In his description he continues to use a very matter-of-fact, logical tone in order to convey the message that no amount of flowery prose has the ability to accurately describe the deeply devastating proceedings of neo-colonial exploitation- at times, language simply does not suffice in accurately describing the truth of the past. Marquez further illustrates this idea by having the American lawyers countering the complaints of the plantation employees by *using* the manipulation of language to logically prove that the workers in question simply did not exist, as they were hired on a "temporary and occasional basis" and are therefore not under the service of the company *(302).* The linguistic slight of hand carried out by the lawyers in order to craft a false truth rather than describe reality shows the irony that exists in the documentation of the past. Often times, when chronicling controversial and tragic historical events, particularly those which occurred in neo-colonial Latin America, it is easier to manufacture a pseudo-truth, using

manipulation of language to make the unfounded believable, rather than using the written word to chronicle a truthful series of past events, causing history to lack a basis in truth, despite being considered fact.

Two Presentations of the Past: Individual History Versus "Official" History

Having analyzed the way in which Gabriel Garcia Marquez uses Magical Realism in conjunction with historical parallel to manufacture a unique perspective of neocolonial history, we can now shift our attention to the two categories in which Marquez places history within *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The first category of historical documentation, and more prevalent of the two, is an individualized recollection of the past, observed through the individual characters of the novel. The second category of historical documentation is referred to as "official" history, meaning that it is a documentation of the past issued by the central power of a nation, often widely accepted as fact regardless of its actual basis in truth. Marquez utilizes these two historical documentation methods and where they fall short in order to convey how a collective historical consciousness, or lack thereof, influences the evolution of society *(Taylor, 5)*. In doing so, Marquez successfully displays the cataclysmic consequences that accompany an inability to establish such a consciousness.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the members of the Buendía family view time in a cyclical manner, causing them to lack a point of view that is based in reality. This idea is almost perfectly shown in Ursula's realization "that time was not passing as she had just admitted, but that it was turning in a circle" *(335)*. From Ursula's perspective, as well as the perspective of all members of the Buendía family, the events of the past repeat themselves, reappearing over and over again as time moves on. This cyclical point of view is emphasized by the repetition of names in the novel, each generation of the Buendía family sharing the names of their

predecessors, conveying that while time *appears* to move forward, human nature and history do not change. Using the same names over multiple generations, Marquez blurs the boundaries of individuality, showing that, in the Buendía family, the past, present, and future exist cyclically and simultaneously. However, while the characters of the novel are unable to see the true nature of time, to Marquez's readers it is evident that the events and characters in the novel do not in fact repeat themselves, but are simply paralleled through the intermittent presence of reoccurring themes such as incest and war, their "repetition [taking] place in a degenerated form" *(Taylor, 6)*; a flaw that leads to the eventual decimation of Macondo.

Their inability to experience chronology causes the characters within the novel to view time as "circular and fatalistic" *(Taylor, 5).* The large majority of characters in Marquez's novel have an acrimonious view of the past, having been subjected to the numerous tragedies of war and love. Being fated to repeat the events of their past, the members of the Buendía family choose to eradicate aspects of their personal histories that are unfavorable from their memories. This psychological pattern prevents the town of Macondo from developing a collective history, or rather a history at all, due to the fact that its inhabitants "interpret the past almost exclusively as it affects them individually" *(Taylor).* An example of this personalized denial of the past can be seen in the reaction of Macondo's population to the Banana Massacre that occurs just outside of the town's borders. As Jose Arcadio Segundo attempts to relay the tragic events of the afternoon to the oblivious townspeople, many respond in denial saying, "Aquí no ha habido muertos", which translates to "Here there are no dead" *(261),* disregarding Arcadio as delusional. Jose Arcadio's apparent madness is a result of the normalcy of individualized histories- because the members of the town are unable to see a reality beyond themselves, those who experience the clairvoyance of historical context appear insane, and are their interpretations of reality ignored.

This, along with many other instances of repression, serve to show that a history based in individual denial not only causes the inability to develop a history, but a cyclical view of time as well. When historical consciousness is not present, society is destined to repeat the mistakes of the past, unable to learn from the tragedies of times before. It is this ignorance that results in Macondo's devolution, as their repeated mistakes allow them to fall into the trap of Colonialism and thus exploitation. Here we are able to see the meaning of the final quote in the novel, "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude [do] not have a second chance on Earth" *(417)*. The solitude to which Marquez refers is that which is found when one views history form a strictly personal lense which causes the characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to feel as though they travel through time alone, causing their history to be provisional and personal, never becoming solidified.

The notion that the characters in Marquez's novel experience life solitarily leads to the discussion of the flawed nature of "official" history. When a society is composed of individuals who do not share a collective view of the past, it inevitably becomes subjected to the history that those in power project upon it. In the case of Macondo, this is represented by the history of the town written and distributed by the neo-colonial government. The colonial government, controlled by the American Fruit Company, manufactures and promotes a false historical account of the Banana Massacre, allowing the vulnerable population of Macondo to believe that "the workers had left the station and returned home in peaceful groups" *(309)*, implementing the false history of Macondo as a place where "nothing has happened, and nothing ever will happen. [It] is a happy town." *(310)*. The process by which the neo-colonial government of Macondo erases the memory of the atrocities they have committed details the process by which the reality of the past is effaced, showing that much of the history generally accepted by society is colored

by those in privileged positions who document it. In relying on the central government to provide a chronology of the past, the general population endows them "with means that had been reserved for Divine Providence in former times…" *(227).* This presentation of official history within the novel serves to highlight the consequences Macondo faces due to lack of historical consciousness, connecting back to the flaws of individualized histories and the importance of historical development as a whole.

In examining the flaws present in each type of historical account, the main argument of Marquez's novel becomes clear: In order to preserve the truth of past reality, a speculative approach to history is needed. By combining the many interpretations of history- individual, official, or even creative- a far more accurate view of the past is obtained. This is due to the historical context that accompanies the unification of multiple historical perspectives. It is not until the very end of the novel that historical awareness is reached by Aureliano, the last remaining Buendía, as he deciphers Malquiade's texts. Aureliano is able to break free from his family's cyclical view of time, as he reads their prophesied history, past, present, and future. Unfortunately, Aureliano arrives at this enlightenment much too late, as the town he once called home, now a "city of mirrors", falls into annihilation *(417)*. Had the people of Macondo obtained this historical context, perhaps they would have escaped desolation.

One Hundred Years of Solitude "is a story concerned not so much with the facts, but with the truth" *(William Faulkner)*. In his presentation of history and colonialism, Marquez illuminates the dangers that not only colonial societies faced, but that continue to threaten the histories of current societies as well. If we continue to individualize the past, accepting the histories we are assigned, perhaps we too will reach the same fate as Macondo and Aracataca. While Marquez does not provide a specific solution to the deficiency of truth in documentations

of the past, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* gifts readers the awareness that we are not as alone in history as we may think- an awareness gained far too late by Aureliano Buendía. With this new found historical context, it is now up to those who read Marquez's work to fight for historical consciousness in the present, granting humanity "a second opportunity on Earth" (*417).*

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