

**EXTRAORDINARY OBJECTS, EXCEPTIONAL SUBJECTS:
MAGIC(AL) REALISM, MULTIVOCALITY, AND THE MARGINS OF
EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKS OF TOM ROBBINS**

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ABSTRACT

Through a critical examination of the works of Tom Robbins, this thesis interrogates the historical evolution and appropriation of the magic(al) realist tradition. In so doing, it situates Robbins' writing within the framework of postmodernism, and explores the ontological implications inherent in Robbins' use of magic(al) realist concepts and conventions. With a specific emphasis on the notion of cultural consciousness, this thesis analyzes the object-oriented cosmologies embodied and espoused in three of Robbins' novels: *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), and *B is for Beer* (2009). It unpacks the ideological figuration of various textual devices evident in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) – particularly the gendered use of unreliable narrators – and, with reference to *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), relates Robbins' appropriation of the magic(al) realist tradition to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. Employing poststructuralist, feminist, ecofeminist, and postcolonial discourses, this thesis ultimately seeks to position Robbins' writing within the context of a radical emancipatory politics that views (and uses) literature as an ideological space in which to challenge, reinterpret, and democratize Western metanarratives.

Keywords: Tom Robbins, magic(al) realism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, ecofeminism, postcolonialism, object-oriented ontology, it-narrative, Russian formalism, counterculture, The New Physics, Eastern mysticism, consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

[Y]ou should never hesitate to trade your cow for a handful of magic beans.

-- Tom Robbins, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (234).

In his recent autobiography, aptly entitled *Tibetan Peach Pie: A True Account of an Imaginary Life* (2014), Tom Robbins insists that his greatest gift, in life and in literature, is his “ability to live simultaneously in the rational world and the world of imagination” (361-362). This self-proclaimed capacity to exist at the interface of real and unreal landscapes, and to transition seamlessly between them, itself indicative of a broader literary fascination with unstable, contingent, or liminal sites, certainly makes for an unusual, at times even unsettling, reading experience. Whether it is the epic journey by which the mythic goat-god Pan arrives at a modern-day Mardi Gras parade in *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), or the reappearance of the mummified corpse of Christ at a roadside hotdog stand in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), Robbins’ novels, which do not so much reinvent as recast reality, continue to challenge readers’ perceptions of real and unreal long after the pages have closed. Given the extent to which he “mix[es], intermingle[s] – even fuse[s] – ... [in his] novels the tragic with the comic, the ugly with the beautiful, the romantic with the gritty, fantasy with reality, mythos with logos, the sensible with the goofy, [and] the sacred with the profane” (Robbins, *Tibetan Peach Pie* 67), one can easily be forgiven for struggling to situate Robbins’ writing within any sort of critical or conventional framework. Such a task is problematized further by the invariably outlandish characters with which Robbins populates his novels: these include a philosophizing can of pork and beans, a three hundred-pound dimension-crossing clairvoyant, and a sexually depraved sake-swilling demigod with aerodynamic testicles, to name but a few. Yet, there is one genre of writing that embraces and encourages precisely the

excessiveness with which Robbins writes, and the mercuriality with which he subverts, conflates, and transcends neat epistemological and ontological categories. Indeed, it is within the context of magical realism that Robbins' writing, elsewhere labelled "superficial pap" (Hoyser and Stookey 25), truly comes to life.

As a literary genre, magical realism is widely associated with the geopolitical context of Latin America, and is often exemplified by reference to authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende. The blending of realist and magical narratives that characterizes magical realism, its "in-betweenness" or "all-at-onceness" according to Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris ("Introduction" 6), which ultimately functions to diversify and destabilize the metanarratives that structure and sustain normative Western discourse, has become a key narrative mode for authors writing from a postcolonial perspective. In her seminal text *Magic(al) Realism* (2004), however, Maggie Ann Bowers argues that, within a contemporary setting at least, the magical realist genre has also evolved beyond the postcolonial context, and become able to represent and express the broader spatial, epistemological, and ontological power dynamics between centres and margins. The "vocabulary of 'otherness'" that underscores the tradition (68), she contends, has meant that magical realism has "become a common narrative mode for fictions written from the perspective of the politically or culturally disempowered" (33). Within the context of Robbins' novels, this emancipatory identity politics, which, insofar as it explicitly problematizes the notion of a "transcendental signified" (Shin 7), is also poststructuralist in nature, is deployed on an intersectional axis, in that it deals with culture, gender, ability, and age – amongst 'other' discursively degraded ontological and epistemological positions. Indeed, the concept of a transcendental signified, which is drawn from Jacques Derrida's critique of structuralist linguistic theories in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", and which communicates a central "organizing principle" – God, for

example – that determines the “coherence of a system ... [and] permits the play of ... elements [or signs] inside the total form” has become a key point of contention under postmodernism (352). Terry Eagleton asserts that “[s]igns which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are by that token authoritarian and ideological” (*Literary Theory* 117). Robbins’ novels, then, which are deliberately oriented within a number of discourses that “question the concept of a transcendental signified” (Shin 8) – The New Physics, modern language theory, and postmodern philosophies of indeterminacy, for example – seek to uncover the systems of power that define and discipline dominant worldviews, and subsequently to hijack (or at least to ‘play’ with and in) the space between signifier and signified in order to better represent those individuals who are excluded from, and silenced by, these dominant worldviews.

Robbins’ association with magical realism is not limited to, or exclusively defined by, his affinity with the genre’s more recent literary manifestations and traditions, however. He is also influenced by, and routinely draws upon, the stylistic and technical conventions associated with the earlier magic realist movement – an artistic embodiment of the minimalism, austerity, and instability endemic to the Weimar Republic. This earlier movement, out of which contemporary magical realism also, ultimately, emerged, was fundamentally designed to denaturalize and defamiliarize hegemonic representations of reality by imbuing those representations with a pervasive sense of otherworldliness. This effect was often achieved through the use of unlikely juxtapositions, odd spatial arrangements, and a combination of techniques. Given the fact that he began his career as an art critic (Robbins, *Tibetan Peach Pie* 183), Robbins’ frequent references to this earlier form of magic realism are perhaps unsurprising. It is precisely this relationship with the whole history of magic(al) realism, moreover, that secures Robbins’ relationship with Russian formalism – a critical framework that essentially views literature as a process of

defamiliarization through which perceptions of the familiar are enriched (Margolin). In exploring the myriad conceptual and stylistic connections between Robbins' writing and the magic(al) realist tradition – the manipulation of conventional teleologies and temporalities evident in Robbins' novels, the metafictional self-reflexivity with which Robbins' narrators engage readers, and the seemingly panvitalist vibrant rhetoric that underscores Robbins' representations of the nonhuman natural world, for example – this thesis ultimately seeks to demonstrate the extent to which Tom Robbins is a postmodern magic(al) realist author.

I begin Chapter One, "Alternative Realities and the Extraordinary Object", by rehistoricizing the magic(al) realist tradition – unpacking and examining three distinct, yet thoroughly interrelated movements, which I label magic realism, marvellous realism, and magical realism. In so doing, I tease out a number of recurring themes, at once ideological and technical in nature, the most significant of which, at least insofar as Chapter One is concerned, relates to the function and figuration of physical objects within magic(al) realist art and literature. I thus proceed to describe and discuss the self/other and subject/object dichotomies inherent to normative Western culture, aided and informed by poststructuralist theory, before moving on to the main part of the chapter – in which I interrogate the presentation and preponderance of physical objects in three of Robbins' novels: *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), and *B is for Beer* (2009). To this end, I draw upon a critical framework referred to as object-oriented ontology, as well as upon the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "it-narrative" tradition (Lamb 133).

In Chapter Two, "Authorship, (Women's) Agency, and Appropriation", I turn my attention to a number of textual devices evident in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) and *Another Roadside Attraction*. Situating Robbins' fiction within feminist and ecofeminist discourses, I analyze Robbins' representations of femininity and otherness as embodied in the characters Sissy Hankshaw and Amanda Ziller, and explore the gender politics implicit in his

use of the unreliable narrator tradition. Reading Robbins' writing through the lenses of Russian formalism and magic(al) realism respectively, and finding conceptual and contextual links between these two traditions as well, I argue that Robbins' redefinition of a number of conventional Western (meta)narratives exemplifies Arran Gare's concept of the new grand narrative – which is effectively a recapitulation of, and response to, Jean-François Lyotard's criticism of the *grand récit* (Buchanan).

In Chapter Three, "Cosmological Compatibilities and Consciousness", I relate Robbins' appropriation of the magic(al) realist tradition to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. Keeping the counterculture's preoccupation with consciousness in mind, I identify a number of commonalities between the counterculture movement and magic(al) realism – as well as a number of tensions. This assessment frames my analysis of *Jitterbug Perfume*. Documenting the advent of The New Physics, and its subsequent assimilation into mainstream Western culture, I then examine the multidimensional interrelationship between quantum indeterminacy, Eastern mysticism, and postmodernism, particularly as this triumvirate relates to Robbins' project. I conclude Chapter Three by looking at Frederic Jameson's "[a]ntinomies of ... [p]ostmodernity" (1) – or arrested dialectics – both in relation to Robbins' writing, as well as in regards to magic(al) realism broadly. In my concluding section, I seek to use the arguments advanced in each of these chapters in order to position Robbins' writing within the context of a radical emancipatory politics that views (and uses) literature as an ideological space in which to challenge, reinterpret, and democratize Western metanarratives.

CHAPTER ONE:

ALTERNATIVE REALITIES AND THE EXTRAORDINARY OBJECT

Have you ever felt – or imagined – that there is more than one world? Does it ... [some]times seem to you that there is the familiar world you wake up in every morning and another world to the right or left of this one, just out of reach, where interesting things (some wonderful, some rather creepy) are occurring ... where trees, certain rocks, and maybe even shoes live secret lives of their own?

-- Tom Robbins, *B is for Beer* (20).

Introduction

To the student of literature, whose job it is to recognize, interpret, and reconcile ideological and aesthetic motifs, it is perhaps a difficult task to accommodate, at least in any critical sense, an author whose cast of characters includes (amongst formidable others) the corpse of Christ, a spoon, a hitchhiker with oversized thumbs, a statuesque street performer, a one thousand-year-old janitor, and the Beer Fairy. Indeed, the fact that Tom Robbins' novels, by his own admission, both whimsically elude, and willfully defy generic convention, may have much to do with his limited reception within scholarly communities, "self-proclaimed experts ... [and] critics" being quick to dismiss his lowercase 'l' literature as "superficial pap" (Hoyser and Stookey 25) – popular, but intellectually suspect. Yet, a discreet remark – uttered, again, by one of his larger-than-life characters, earth mother Amanda Ziller – seems effortlessly to capture, and to render quite plain, the outrageous caricatures, materialized metaphors, and stylistic excesses that pervade Robbins' oeuvre: "folks who are concerned with freedom, real freedom ... must use style to alter content. If our style is masterful, ... we

can re-create ourselves” (*Another Roadside Attraction* 208). It is this emphasis on the potentially emancipatory function of style, or the ability to make and unmake reality through perception and artistic expression, that ultimately situates Robbins’ fiction within the magic(al) realist tradition, and also reflects his postmodern sensibilities. By rehistoricizing and engaging with magic(al) realism, one can begin to make sense of Robbins’ shamanic representation of art as catharsis, appreciate his overt and unlikely wordplay, understand the significance of his band of “inanimates” in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) (190), and glean the poststructuralist agenda that motivates his use of sympathy. Like the magic(al) realist genre itself, Robbins is disruptive. He undercuts and delegitimizes the compartmentalization inherent to traditional Western rationalism, problematizing the supposedly antinomical relationships between self/other, subject/object, fact/fiction, and author/reader, whilst embracing and occupying the liminal spaces between these poles. At the same time, his writing embodies a “vocabulary of ‘otherness’” (Bowers 68), substantiating and particularizing various identities which have been historically generalized and reduced by the term ‘other’. It is by this logic that his ostensibly ridiculous characters become ontologically revolutionary. The multivocality and multireferentiality to which this vocabulary of otherness gives rise sits comfortably within the context of the postmodern bricolage, itself a bedfellow to magic(al) realism, and using the “[f]ool’s bag” as a recurrent metaphor for this effect (Hoyser and Stookey 147), Robbins crafts a series of dynamic narratives, the speculative natures of which “bring to realization [Franz] Kafka’s belief that ‘a novel should be an ax for the frozen seas around us’” (Robbins, *Wild Ducks* 187 citing Kafka source unspecified).¹

The Emergence of the Magic(al) Realist Genre

To speak of magic(al) realism is often to speak of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende. Popularly understood, it is a genre firmly planted within

the geopolitical context of Latin America. However, magic(al) realism, as Maggie Ann Bowers, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Wendy B. Faris respectively demonstrate, is actually a superordinate term that refers to three distinct, yet interrelated movements. The first movement, “[m]agischer ... [r]ealismus or magic realism” (Bowers 2), denotes an artistic project nascent to the German Weimar Republic. Formed in 1919, following “the German defeat in the First World War and the abdication and flight into exile of the Kaiser in 1918” (11), the Weimar Republic, a semi-presidential representative democracy, was instituted both to replace the former imperial system, and to manage the severe economic reparations and territorial restrictions imposed on Germany according to the settlement of the Treaty of Versailles. Increasingly plagued by revolutionary action from both left and right wing groups, including Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party, which was established in 1920, the Weimar Republic was ultimately characterized by fragility and violence. It is precisely in the midst of this volatility and austerity that *magischer realismus*, a name coined originally by art critic Franz Roh, developed (9). In ways related to but distinct from the techniques employed by early surrealist painters, whose aesthetic stemmed from a “more cerebral and psychological reality”, German magic realists took as their focal point “the material object and the actual existence of things in the world” (12). Effectively, the movement was defined by the “severe representation of objects from unfamiliar angles” (10). In its capacity to make “ordinary things ... strange” (Wechsler 297), *magischer realismus* articulated the very defamiliarization and denaturalization that marked the German post-war period. The irrefutable physicality attributed to the magic realist object, moreover, served to lend a sense of verisimilitude to all of the political unreality of the time, blurring, in effect, the strict partition between real and unreal. As Jeffrey Wechsler contends: “[m]agic realism does not invent a new order of things; it simply reorders reality to make it seem alien. Magic realism is an art of the implausible, not the impossible; it is imaginative, not imaginary”

(293). Herein lies the cognitive precedent adopted by later magic(al) realist art and literature. The objects that magic realism presented were real, but at the same time their mimesis in art was underwritten by a pervasive sense of otherworldliness: their representations simultaneously reflected and contravened the parameters of conventional reality. Compositions characterized by unlikely juxtapositions, odd spatial arrangements, and a combination of techniques meant that although the movement testified to a concrete materiality, it was a materiality changed by perspective. The ambiguous angles featured in these paintings, at times anamorphic, even enabled multiple possible viewing positions. Magic realism's defiance of monological interpretation, its "in-betweenness" or "all-at-onceness" (Zamora and Faris, "Introduction" 6), would later become central, though in an appropriated form, to the boom in cultural production that coincided with, and stemmed from, the postcolonial reclamation of indigenous ideologies and identities in a number of Latin American countries during the 1940s.

The second of the movements to which the overarching term magic(al) realism refers occurred during the 1940s in Latin America. Communicated through art and literature, "*lo real maravilloso* or marvellous realism ... was ... an expression of the mixture of realist and magical views of life" that coalesced "in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America" (Bowers 2). At the forefront of this movement were two diplomats and authors, "French-Russian Cuban ... Alejo Carpentier ... and Venezuelan Arturo Uslar-Pietro" (14). Both were "strongly influenced by [the] European artistic movements [they observed] while living in Paris in the 1920s and 30s". Carpentier, especially, "recognized a need for art to express the non-material aspects of life but also recognized the differences between ... European and ... Latin American contexts" (14-15). His interest in the magic realist aesthetic ultimately centred on the congruity he saw between its fusion of materiality and strangeness, and the lived experiences of those in Latin America. He identified it as an efficacious

framework for accurately representing the realities of Latin American life. “[I]mprobable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures”, Carpentier was to argue, “exist by virtue of Latin America’s varied history, geography, demography, and politics – not by manifesto” (Zamora and Faris, “Editors’ Note” 75). Carpentier thus anticipates one of the key tenets of the modern magical realist genre: that magic should grow organically out of the real. Around the same time that Carpentier and Uslar-Pietro were attempting to invent a distinctly Latin American mode of expression – which makes identifying the temporal gap between marvellous realism and its successor magical realism rather tricky – Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges is credited with importing many of the European artistic and literary trends that would come to shape the third of the magic(al) realist movements, “*realismo mágico* or magical realism” (Bowers 2). This third movement, overlapping though it does in time and political orientation, is distinct from marvellous realism in that it specifically articulates the eruption of Latin American fiction, or the emergence of a uniquely Latin American literary aesthetic, from the 1950s onwards. Rather than communicating the more general marvellous realist cultural consciousness envisioned by Carpentier and Uslar-Pietro, magical realism relates to the codified literary genre through which this cultural consciousness was subsequently illustrated and negotiated. Bowers describes Borges’ effect on the contemporary notion of magical realism in the following way:

[Borges] had been strongly influenced ... by the writer Kafka, whose realist writing which verged on surrealism he had anthologized and translated into Spanish ... Despite the lack of a direct acknowledgement by Borges of Roh’s influence on his work, it is considered probable that Borges had knowledge of Roh’s ideas when he wrote his influential essay “*El arte narrativo y la magia*” (Narrative Art and Magic) in 1932. For these reasons, he is often seen as the predecessor of current-day magical realists, gleaning influences from both European and Latin American cultural movements. The mixture of cultural influences has remained a key aspect of magical realist writing. (18)

Though the specific nature of the importation and appropriation of the magic(al) realist tradition by Latin America remains somewhat contentious, there is a widely recognized

delineation between marvellous realism and magical realism. Marvellous realism explains the extent to which an amalgamation of magical and realist epistemological frameworks is appropriate to the expression of life within the context of Latin American geopolitics, whereas magical realism pertains explicitly to the application of this collaged cosmology to fiction. It is in reference to this literary genre – magical realism – that it becomes appropriate again to speak of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and, in its more recent manifestations, Salman Rushdie, Yann Martel, and Etgar Keret.

As a literary genre, magical realism provides a framework for discussing “alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy” (Bowers 1). In particular, it challenges the central tenets of Cartesian rationalism, which, continued in the forms of liberal humanism and positivist methodology, has both permitted and sustained European imperialism. For this reason, combined with and evidenced by its actual geo-historical usage, it is well suited to use by postcolonial authors – “[a]s Jean-Pierre Durix memorably puts it: ‘... [i]mperialistic powers deprived ... colonized people not only of their territories and wealth but also of their imagination’” (Hart 7). In other words, the European colonial project operated simultaneously on external and internal terrains. As a result, colonized peoples were stripped not only of material and legislative power – the right to govern themselves and the landscapes in which they lived, for example – but also of the discursive power to codify or narrativize reality in their own ways. From this point of view, magical realism can be seen as a restorative or curative genre, reclaiming – through its disruption of the Western/European rationalist distinction between real and unreal, its occupation of the liminal spaces between this binary, and its (re)constitution of external and internal realities – the identities and imaginative territories that were lost during the colonial process. Indeed, to strengthen and sustain the tangible reclamation of indigenous governance within the present postcolonial setting, magical realism sets itself the task of decolonizing the mind. In so doing, it

delegitimizes the monopolistic power by which Eurocentric rationalism governs the translation of phenomenal events into meaningful knowledge. Moreover, magical realism's collaged character more accurately reflects the multireferential experiences and histories of people caught between indigenous and European epistemologies than either one of these forms of consciousness alone.

Citing Catherine Belsey, Bowers "explains that ... '[r]ealism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar'" (22) – the question of to whom realism is discursively familiar, however, is an indication of the latent privilege attached to the very concept of realism, insofar as realism relates to a series of dominant (Western) modes of representation and organization. As Bowers suggests, however, this "approach to literary realism is the most relevant to magical realism, as magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real". Unlike conjured magic, which creates the "illusion that something extraordinary has happened", magical realism assumes "that something extraordinary *really* has happened [emphasis in original]" (21). To contextualize the radical nature of magical realism, that is, to understand why the genre is so politically entangled, both within and outside of a postcolonial context, it is necessary to review the processes by which human experience and knowledge, at least in those societies significantly shaped by European imperialism, have come to be articulated by a set of privileged and exclusionary metanarratives. From such a position, one can better appreciate the function of certain magical realist techniques and devices, as well as magical realism's broader relationship to postmodernism and identity politics.

Postmodernism and Identity Politics

For the purposes of this discussion, postmodernism, which is essentially an intellectual and stylistic response to, or result of, modernism, relates to a series of differing, though interrelated theoretical platforms including poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and posthumanism. Although the terms modernism and postmodernism are highly contested, much like the broader cultural and temporal conditions with which they are associated (modernity and postmodernity), Brian McHale's assertion – albeit sweeping – is a useful starting point from which to understand some of the fundamental differences and perceived discontinuities between the two ideological or artistic frameworks: “modernism is epistemological, concerned with questions of knowledge ... postmodernism is ontological, concerned with questions of being” (Faris 166). Whilst the distinction is not quite so clean, nor quite so simple as he suggests, especially considering the extent to which postmodernism rejects dichotomous thinking, McHale's proposition does serve to communicate a significant point of divergence between modernism and postmodernism, which is represented by, and expressed through, the very use of the terms epistemological and ontological. Indeed, in articulating the radical conception of the ‘modern condition’, according to which something or someone could be novel in relation to the seeming stasis of tradition, modernism, which was propelled by modernity's widespread industrial and technological advances, sought to reinvent, on a paradigmatic scale, the conditions of social, political, and economic life. Underwritten by a sense of self-awareness, insofar as it recognized that the conditions of human life were inextricably linked to one's position within an ever-progressing, linear flow of time, modernism posited that it was through sustained progress that humans would come to realize and understand their own innate identity (or essential nature), as well as the forms of organization and interaction with which this nature was most compatible. Karl Marx's communist synthesis is one example of this sort of approach to socioeconomic and

technological progress. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), Marx explains (or prescribes) the process by which humans will move logically through various stages of economic and social organization until they naturally and systematically arrive at the communist conclusion, which both represents and facilitates the intrinsic tendencies and desires of humans. Free-market capitalism and liberal democracy are other examples.² In its preoccupation with human progress, however, modernism (and modernist philosophies) inadvertently invested in and promoted a number of very specific ontological assumptions, primary amongst which was the idea that there *was* an essential human nature. Recalling McHale's assertion, modernism, purely by virtue of its ontological omissions – its failure to interrogate the universalized 'I' inherent to its own logic – positioned itself as an epistemological movement. This is not to say that modernism did not have its own ontology or was ontologically neutral. But this ontology, which centred upon what is now known as the liberal-humanist subject, was a tacit feature of the production and distribution of knowledge at this time. By contrast, postmodernism, which exposes and unpacks the ontological biases inherent to various modernist epistemologies and intellectual trends, revises and redefines the very notion of epistemology in order to account for ontological diversity – in other words, epistemology presupposes ontology. Thus, postmodern epistemologies are fundamentally underlined by a sense of ontological uncertainty, and are grounded in a critical analysis of ontological assumptions.

To this effect, postmodern theorists argue that Western modernism, and the processes with which it is associated, such as imperial expansion, industrial production, and empirical inquiry, has served to entrench a set of metanarratives that implicitly order experience and construct knowledge according to the subjective qualities of an exclusive ontological 'I'. This 'I' is generally characterized as being white (European), masculine, rational, affluent, and heterosexual, and represents the locus of power during the invention and exportation of what

are now global epistemological systems: liberal democracy, scientific method, and free-market capitalism, for example (Campbell 204). These systems, having been both violently and coercively applied on a universal scale, not only replicate and perpetuate the power relationships evident within their original historical context(s), but limit, linguistically, imaginatively, and politically, the scope of human experience by defining the normative parameters of discourse. Postmodern theorists, then, seek to demonstrate how these systems are not natural or neutral, but rather, are historically contingent and ontologically exclusive. Within the context of poststructuralism, the paradoxical phrase “both arbitrary and nonarbitrary [sic]” is often employed to explain how these modes of creating and organizing knowledge are both random (George and Campbell 287), since they constitute only a small range of possible methods for engaging with the world (or only one possible way of linking signifier to signified in the case of linguistic analysis), and yet motivated, in that they preserve the privileges of a certain group of people, whilst negating the experiences and consciousnesses of others. Indeed, in implicitly accepting the ontological ‘I’ inherent to its logic, Western modernism is charged with manufacturing a fundamental dichotomy between the self and the other. Many postmodern theorists argue that the mutually constitutive nature of this binary has since worked to establish an epistemological precedent by which all other qualities and ideas are valued. The self, being white, masculine, and affluent, is positioned against the negatively constituted other. Though the other is widely defined as being non-white, feminine, poor, irrational, and/or sexually deviant, which is often true, insofar as it accrues all of the qualities with which the self does not want to be associated, in the final analysis, it is merely ‘not the self’. It is a nonexistent, undefined, non-identity. To be sure, some discourses, particularly those associated with the physical or psychological dichotomy between health (or order) and disease (or disorder), have sought to profile in greater detail that which is other to, or outside of, normative ontology. Michel Foucault’s *The History of*

Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge, Volume One (1976) is a particularly good analysis of this tendency. In such instances, however, attention to specific forms of otherness has meant that the implicit figure of health that these diagnoses rely on, the self, remains unexamined or elides categorization – such as in the case of female hysteria, for example, in which the psychosexual impulses of women were pathologized without implicating the power structure – a patriarchal image of sexuality by which women were understood to be sexually passive, subservient, and anatomically incapable of experiencing certain forms of pleasure – that deemed them a breach of legitimate or normative behaviour (Lawlor 904). In either case, the underlying system that produces and sustains the self/other dichotomy favours those already in a position of power, and ultimately remains intact.

Working from the dichotomous precedent set by the self/other dualism, postmodern theorists identify a series of values and ideologies with which the self is associated, and by which it is expressed, significant amongst which are the notions of empirical analysis and Cartesian rationalism. Both centre on the assumption that an independent, observable reality can be sufficiently understood and explained either through objective scientific inquiry, or a priori rational deduction. In fiction, these epistemologies have been translated into the genre of realism. But, as Graham Harman contends, once again referring to the interrelationship between ontology and epistemology, “the notion of a reality that is not a reality *for someone* is dubious [emphasis in original]” (188). In other words, realism is not necessarily neutral – it is a mode of representation that stems from a particular hierarchy of knowledge. Thus, the political orientation inherent to magical realism becomes evident. In destabilizing, deconstructing, and transgressing the real/unreal dichotomy, magical realism asserts that there are multiple realities that are inextricably linked to, and accessed by, multiple ontological and epistemological matrices. Moreover, by textualizing the concept of reality, magical realism establishes a parallel between readers and characters – between fiction as

text and extra-textual reality as text – thereby restructuring the relationship between fiction, reader, and extra-textual reality (the world outside of the literary text). In so doing, it seeks to effect a change in the way that the reader engages with and understands the ‘real’ world. The genre, therefore, often exposes global systems to be power-laden constructions, and opens up an imaginative space in which new cosmologies and ontologies can be explored.

Accordingly, it is highly compatible with postmodern identity politics – a broad framework for political theory and activism that hinges on the shared experiences of individuals who identify in certain ways, rather than on a specific political programme or doctrine (“Identity Politics”). As Bowers explains:

magical realism has become associated with fictions that tell the tales of those on the margins of political power ... This has meant that much magical realism has originated in many of the postcolonial countries that are battling against the influence of their previous colonial rulers, and consider themselves to be at the margins of imperial power. It has also become a common narrative mode for fictions written from the perspective of the politically or culturally disempowered, for instance indigenous people living under a covert colonial system such as Native Americans in the United States, women writing from a feminist perspective, or those whose lives incorporate different cultural beliefs and practices from those dominant in their country of residence. (33)

It is no coincidence, then, that magical realism has been variously associated with the postcolonial, culturally tempestuous, or multicultural contexts of Prague during the early decades of the twentieth century (Kafka), Ireland during the same period (James Joyce), Latin America throughout the twentieth century (García Márquez) the Indian Subcontinent post-Partition (Rushdie), and Israel following World War II (Keret) – amongst others. In aid of this marginal agenda, magical realism employs a number of textual and ideological devices in order to transgress and transform normative notions of reality. These techniques commonly include a deviation from linear time, or a non-chronologically sequenced plot (a feature that directly problematizes modernism’s linear language of progress), the apparition of ghosts, the manifestation of extraordinary talents or physiologies (the near immortal life spans or animalesque appendages found in the works of García Márquez, for example), the inclusion

of magical objects, and the use of myth or hearsay to explain events. Like Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement, however, which describes the crafting of a relationship between narrative plot and lived reality – a relationship ultimately generated by striking a balance between familiarity and unfamiliarity, “estrangement and cognition” (C. Freedman 16 citing Suvin) – these magical occurrences all rely “upon the full acceptance of the veracity of the fiction during the reading experience” (Bowers 4), hence their articulation via a “matter-of-fact ... [or] realist tone” (3). Kafka's deadpan account of Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect in “Metamorphosis” is a good example of this narrative style: “[o]ne morning Gregor Samsa woke in his bed from uneasy dreams and found he had turned into a huge verminous insect” (3). The genre, therefore, also makes use of dense historical fact and highly detailed descriptions, often in the form of lists, to attest to its realistic nature. Like many other genres associated with postmodernism, magical realism takes the reader “beyond the boundaries of his or her own mundane environment, into strange ... realms thought to be in fact unknown ... but not in principle unknowable” (C. Freedman 15). Echoing the assertion made by Robbins' character Amanda Ziller (cited at the start of this chapter), we can say that magical realism ultimately uses style to alter content (in the sense that it aligns this content, through its political, geographical, and ideological orientation, with the ‘alterity’ of the other as well). By linguistically, textually, ontologically, and metaphorically recoding reality, magical realism seeks to reconstitute reality itself.

Still Life with Woodpecker

In his 2005 collection *Wild Ducks Flying Backward*, Robbins celebrates the multireferential, almost possibilian nature of the magical realist tradition.³ In so doing, he not only aligns himself with the genre, a position corroborated by his frequent homages to Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende (Hoyser and Stookey 20), but also contextualizes his

commitment to multivocality, providing some insight into his extra-textual project:

Latin novelists invoke the dream realm, the spirit realm, the mythic realm, the realm of nature, the inanimate world, and the psychological underworld. In acknowledging that social realism is but one layer of a many-layered cake, in threading the inexplicable and the goofy into their naturalistic narratives, the so-called magic realists not only weave a more expansive, inclusive tapestry but leave the reader with a feverish exaltation rather than ... deadening weariness. (Robbins, *Wild Ducks* 185-186)

It is to this end that Robbins experiments epistemologically, ontologically, and textually. By presenting a number of different realities from a number of different perspectives, Robbins challenges his readers in two fundamental ways. First, he asks whether there are certain realities to which his readers are either not usually privy, or have not considered, thereby lifting them out of their own subjectivities. Second, he enjoins readers to acknowledge the extent to which their own behaviours might (need to) change in order to accord with these speculative or sympathetic realities. What is perhaps more important to note at this point, however, is that the possibility of alternate realities, whether material, spiritual, or political, is presented as exciting, inspiring, and positive. Channelling the poststructuralist interrelationship between theory and practice – according to which theory is itself a sort of practice (Edkins 48) – Robbins seeks to elicit a shift in thought that is designed wholly to encourage social innovation – the invention of new creative and inclusive means of engaging with the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his third novel *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980).

Still Life with Woodpecker centres on the life of Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcelona, a twenty-something-year-old princess who, along with her parents, a pair of deposed European royals, lives under CIA protection in Seattle. Seeking to restore their royal privileges, Leigh-Cheri's parents, King Max and Queen Tilli, spend most of their time embroiled in various schemes that aim to reinstall their dynasty – a task that requires an advantageously wed Leigh-Cheri to assume the family throne. To their dissatisfaction,

however, Leigh-Cheri, a young, idealistic, liberal American (significantly caught between two cultural frames of reference), has little interest in the prospect of becoming a monarch. Instead, she has chosen to commit herself to a life of environmental activism. The novel thus opens as Leigh-Cheri is due to attend an international Care Fest in Hawaii. The Care Fest, a vaguely leftist, almost utopian gathering, which somewhat ambitiously aspires to resolve all of the world's environmental, political, and social problems, creates the impetus for the novel's progression. As it turns out, the Care Fest is reduced to little more than a series of impromptu outdoor discussions when the venue at which it is to be held is targeted by infamous bomber and self-proclaimed outlaw Bernard Mickey Wrangle. Serendipitously, Leigh-Cheri comes to realize that Bernard is responsible for the bombing. Yet, instead of alerting authorities as to his whereabouts – her original intention – she ends up falling in love with him, and a whirlwind romance ensues. Sadly, the love affair between Leigh-Cheri and Bernard is cut short when, upon their return to America, Bernard is intercepted by police and sent to jail. In an effort to offset their separation, Leigh-Cheri constructs a makeshift cell in her parents' attic. Here, she attempts not only to recreate Bernard's penal surroundings, but also to simulate his experiences, hoping that this sympathetic connection will preserve their intimacy. Having condemned herself to a life of solitary confinement, at least until Bernard is released, it is at this point that Leigh-Cheri, furnished only with "a cot, a chamber pot, and a package of Camel cigarettes" (10), begins to sensitize herself to the world of objecthood. Leigh-Cheri's experiences in the attic ultimately function to introduce to the reader the concepts of objecthood and object-oriented ontology, and it is these concepts that structure the rest of the novel.

Discursive Objects

In an interview with Tom Robbins, “Sinda Gregory lists two main issues that she sees in *Still Life*: ‘romantic love and outlawism’ ... Robbins responds to her statement by adding to that list ‘objecthood’” (Hoyser and Stookey 88 citing McCaffery and Gregory). *Still Life with Woodpecker* is set during the last quarter of the twentieth century, a time, according to Robbins’ narrator, marked by political uncertainty and an underpinning sense of anticipation. Everyone seems to be waiting, he says, “for something momentous to occur” (3). Tellingly, the narrator frames this cultural anxiety not in terms of human activity, but rather, in terms of object-oriented activity. “Would [the] Mona Lisa sprout a mustache?” he asks (3), suggesting, moreover, that no one “quite knew what to make of the moon any more” (4). Paralleling McHale’s assertion that postmodernity is ontologically minded, Robbins characterizes this period in terms of an unstable relationship between subject and object. The climax that his narrator anticipates appears to have much to do with the recalibration of the term *object*, as well as with the refiguration of objectivity more broadly. Could it be, Robbins asks in another novel, that as “the millennium winds down, ... certain ... objects [are] growing increasingly and uncharacteristically impatient?” (*Skinny Legs* 280). Robbins’ preoccupation with objecthood is immediately significant in two ways. First, by attributing unfamiliar or agentic properties to objects, surrounding them “with words that intensify and illuminate them” (Reising 111), Robbins resurrects the sentiments artistically embodied by the early magic realist painters. Second, his allusion to the spontaneous or sudden reintegration of the object into Western discourse, symbolized by the unlikely expectations of the Mona Lisa and the moon, for example, is metaphorically reminiscent of the reclamation of subjectivity by objectified postcolonial or postmodern others – a parallel that Bruno Latour touches on when he wonders whether “it isn’t the othering of people that the thingness of things discloses” (Brown 12). Indeed, the self/other dichotomy explicated earlier, in which the positive

qualities attributed to the self are contrasted with the degraded or negatively constituted qualities associated with the other, extends to the binary relationship between subject and object. The human subject or self, having been granted the liberty to produce and order knowledge, is not only positioned in opposition to the passive nonhuman object, but is effectively the object's creator. At the centre of normative discourse, the subject defines the objects of 'his' own cognition, thus silencing the objectified other at the same time that 'he' self-actualizes. But, as historical others (people of colour and women, for example) have begun to reclaim their own diverse identities, magical realism being but one example of the way that this liberatory project is enacted, the term object has become increasingly problematic. Accordingly, Robbins materializes this uncomfortable dynamic between subject and object, effectively turning a conceptual figure of speech into a tangible relationship between human subjects and inanimate objects, by positing that a kind of myopic "animate chauvinism" may be preventing humans from truly appreciating the authentic natures of some objects (220). Evidently, "just as modernity is the historical scene of the subject's emergence, so postmodernity is the scene of the object's preponderance" (Brown 14).

The "germ for Robbins' *Still Life with Woodpecker* was the idea of writing about objects '*for their own sake*' rather than symbolically [emphasis in original]" (Hoyser and Stookey 79 citing McCaffery and Gregory). Indeed, Robbins accomplishes this on two levels: in reference to material objects, as well as to discursive or representational objects. My discussion will return to the less anthropocentric, more agentic treatment of in(ter)dependent physical objects shortly in its exploration of object-oriented ontology, but first it is necessary to explore in fuller detail the intersectional dovetailing of human and nonhuman fates as presented in the novel. This will not only enable a more accurate reading of Robbins' magical realist extra-textual project, but also provide an efficacious vantage point from which to analyze his use of sympathy in other novels. In *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), Robbins' narrator

explains that “[w]hen we accept small wonders, we qualify ourselves to imagine great wonders” (115). This thoroughly magical realist sentiment, in essence, contends that a small shift in thought – a willing suspension of disbelief, one might say – can preface an entirely new approach to the world at large. It is precisely this notion that underpins Robbins’ representation of objecthood, in all its nuanced manifestations, in *Still Life with Woodpecker*. After its chaotic inauguration, the Care Fest, a liberal convention aimed at envisioning more sustainable, egalitarian modes of living, is reassembled at a local park. In attendance, Leigh-Cheri soon finds herself “immersed in Dr ... John Lilly’s lecture on the role of marine mammals in the future of the human race” (78). In this discussion, which is lifted directly from the ‘real’, extra-textual world, Lilly posits the idea that “a continuing dialogue with cetaceans could transform our view of all living species and the planet we share” (86). Lilly is challenged, however, “by a segment of the audience ... [who] consider ... it a waste of time and money to try to communicate with animals when ... [they cannot even] communicate with each other” (87). “Is any big fish”, as one attendee avers, “gonna get my people outta the ghetto and onto the payroll? If not, I ain’t wasting my breath on the sucka”. To this, Robbins’ narrator responds as follows:

[t]here is a particularly unattractive and discouragingly common affliction called tunnel vision, which, for all the misery it causes, ought to top the job list at the World Health Organization. Tunnel vision is a disease in which perception is restricted by ignorance and distorted by vested interest ... It is complicated by exposure to politics. (86)

What Robbins is ultimately advocating in this passage is the concept of intersectionality, which, at its most basic level, refers to the systemic dynamic by which all oppressions – racism, sexism, ableism, and speciesism, for example – stem from the same ideological structure and are reinforced by each other. Intersectionality is, therefore, inextricably linked to the self/other and subject/object dichotomies. By adding the voices of nonhumans (imagined or otherwise) into this debate, Robbins introduces to the reader the idea that

humans are inevitably affected by the relationships they have with the nonhumans and objectified others that also inhabit their environments. Moreover, he implores his readers willingly to suspend their disbelief when it comes to the vastly non-anthropocentric realities he is later to illustrate. Whilst in her attic, wondering “how the moon, two hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles above the roof, could affect her as profoundly as it did” (168), Leigh-Cheri is deeply affected by the intersectional theories advanced during this Care Fest session. In keeping with the magical realist genre, Robbins uses a real world figure, Dr John Lilly, whose interest in consciousness and psychonautics is deeply significant (see Chapter Three), to preface both a rather magical examination of the unlikely interdependence of physical objects, as well as an overt didacticism that hinges on the establishment of communication channels (however hypothetical) between humans and nonhumans – subjects and objects. This project is accomplished through the attribution of agency to, and unlikely juxtaposition of, the objects in the novel.

Object-Oriented Ontology

In line with this logic of interdependence, *Still Life with Woodpecker* also aligns itself with an emergent field of critical inquiry that hinges on the consideration of inanimate objects outside of, or independent to, human cognition and activity. This theory is commonly referred to as object-oriented ontology. Though object-oriented ontology’s inherent project might seem like a contradiction in terms (after all, how can humans contemplate objects outside of their own cognition?), this critical framework, like magical realism, relies on a willing suspension of disbelief. It presents objects in excess of human imagination, because, by its logic, a contingent ambiguity associated with physical objects is more useful than an immutable or limiting definition. In fact, in an argument similar to that of various other postmodern theorists, scholars steeped in the study of object-oriented ontology suggest that inanimate

objects, or things, are negatively constituted, and, as a result, both objectified and ontologically degraded, by the epistemological framework that positions them in opposition to the liberal-humanist self. As Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins assert: “[w]ithin Western rationalism, objects are generally considered to be inanimate; they are perceived instead of perceiving and acted upon rather than being active themselves” (11). Their status as objects is thus twofold – “at once material and meaningful” (6) – insofar as the term object refers to the materiality of a thing, as well as to the aforementioned ideological or symbolic meanings with which a thing is associated and understood. Object-oriented ontologists, in contrast, much like magical realism, with a priori rationalism broadly, instead contemplate the extent to which objects exist independently of human discourse. The rationale behind this theory is not simply hypothetical, however, as it is designed to affect praxiological change in the way that objects are represented, considered, and treated within normative discourse. In a roundabout way, object-oriented ontology places anthropocentrism on hiatus in order to reevaluate the interdependence of humans and nonhumans within contemporary society. Jane Bennett, for example, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), deliberately replaces the qualities of inertia, instrumentality, and inanimacy conventionally attributed to most organic and inorganic nonhuman matter with a more vibrant, dynamic, and agentic characterization.⁴ This recoding, she asserts, is designed to encourage creative and responsible thoughts about, and responses to, those current political issues, such as waste disposal, environmental stewardship, and industrial production, which increasingly transcend the parameters of the strictly human. Bennett’s hypotheses, like those of other eminent object-oriented ontologists, ultimately function not as a negation of human knowledge, but as a means of positively challenging conventional assumptions about reality in its various spiritual, intellectual, and praxiological forms. Object-oriented ontology, though initially demanding a rather extravagant leap of intellectual faith, serves to democratize and diversify

human discourse by tentatively liberating nonhuman objects from their objectified moulds. Employing, again, the poststructuralist interrelationship between theory and practice, and again in line with postmodern identity politics, object-oriented ontology contends that a hypothetical acceptance of the independence (or interdependence) of objects will act as a precursor to more egalitarian and responsible modes of human behaviour. As one of Robbins' narrative personas attests: “[y]ou may protest that it is too much to ask ... Of course it is asking too much. The price of self-destiny is never cheap, and in certain situations it is unthinkable. But to achieve the marvelous, it is precisely the unthinkable that must be thought” (*Jitterbug Perfume* 85). Evidently, Bennett's almost panvitalist rhetoric is not only compatible with, but perhaps provides a strong template for, the representation of nonhuman agents and objects within a magical realist setting.

Aligning himself with the emergent field of object-oriented ontology, Robbins attributes unlikely and agentic properties to a number of objects within *Still Life with Woodpecker*. Just as the original magic realist painters used bricolaged techniques and spatial arrangements to alter the objects in focus, Robbins uses overt wordplay, improbable juxtapositions, and absurd metaphors to lift these so-called “inanimates” out of their mundane environments (Robbins, *Skinny Legs* 190). In an interview with Russell Reising, Robbins explains that he animates the objects in his novels by surrounding them “with words that intensify and illuminate them”, as well as through “the roles ... [he] assign[s] them in the narrative” (111). In his own words: “roles that give them a kind of, I guess you'd have to say *magical* quality. Magic realism? [emphasis in original]”. These roles relate not only to the more conspicuous ‘it’ characters featured in novels like *Skinny Legs and All*, but also to the dynamic objects that structure Robbins' poetic language and basic narrative descriptions. In describing a pair of high heels as the shoes oestrogen “would wear if ... [it] had feet (*Skinny Legs* 294), or by declaring that a certain conch shell looks like a “vagina blowing bubble

gum” (54), Robbins exemplifies this approach to the marvellous metaphor. Speaking to this linguistic or literary agenda, and citing another author whose work has long been associated with magical realism, Robbins adds that words (themselves objects) can “handle anything we throw at them, including the kitchen sink. *Finnegans Wake* [1939] proved that” (*Fierce Invalids* 108). As Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey assert, Robbins’ narratives are thoroughly influenced by Irish author James Joyce, “the primary twentieth-century language inventor and experimentalist” (28). Given the poststructuralist assertion that power lies in the ability to define (and, in turn, produce) objects through language, Robbins’ absurd or unlikely metaphorical associations can be read as a rebellion against traditional Eurocentric modes of representing reality. As Robbins himself says: “Foucault was spot on. Power is intrinsic in virtually every human transaction. ... What we can and must do, however, is ... use every trick in our repertoire to prevent too much power from coalescing in any one person or place” (Purdon and Torrey, “A Literary Conversation” 179). He adds, in more explicit terms, that if, “as Terence McKenna [another psychonaut famously associated with the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s] contended, the world is actually made of language, then metaphors and similes (puns, too, I might add) extend the dimensions and expand the possibilities of the world” (Robbins, *Wild Ducks* 251). Robbins’ fantastical language style also works to naturalize the equally fantastical content featured within his novels. In essence, Robbins uses style to alter, or to facilitate the alteration of, content.

In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Robbins begins by illustrating a number of interdependent objects and nonhuman agents, amongst which are a squeaky heart valve, which prevents King Max from playing poker because it audibly betrays his excitement at a good hand, and a highly prolific blackberry bramble, the constant growth of which cannot be controlled. Not only does King Max suspect the bramble of stealing various items from the

royal household, he even suggests that he “may be the first monarch in history to be assassinated by blackberries” (8). Significantly, in terms of Robbins’ relationship to magic realism, Bernard contends that the overgrown bramble could be trained to establish a canopy over the entire city of Seattle: “[t]he pale green illumination that filtered through the dome of vines could inspire a whole new school of painting: centuries from now, art critics might speak, as of chiaroscuro, of ‘blackberry light.’” (129-130). It is perhaps to this effect that Robbins quotes Erica Jong in his epigraphs: “there are no such things as still lifes” (source unspecified).⁵ As his agentic treatment of numerous conventionally passive objects implies, the inertia and inanimacy typically attributed to nonhuman objects is a matter of perception and context. To alter these variables, as the early magic realists did, is to alter the figuration of objects within human discourse. Just “as love can be *made*, using materials no more ethereal than an erect penis, a moist vagina and a warm heart, so, too, can magic be *made*, wholly and willfully, from the most obvious and mundane ... it is a matter of cause and effect [emphasis in original]” (Robbins, *Cowgirls* 302) – or, as far as magic(al) realism is concerned, a matter of disrupting and/or hijacking the teleological notion of cause and effect.

Though *Still Life with Woodpecker* is littered with references to extraordinary objects, it is undoubtedly the holy trinity of his narrator’s typewriter, the cigarette package, and the folkloric golden ball that cements Robbins’ object-oriented project. Throughout the novel, Robbins’ authorial persona makes a number of first-person, supposedly factual interjections, in which he comments on the writing process synchronous to the reader’s reading of the text. In these recurrent asides, he explains that the novel is being composed on his new Remington SL3 typewriter – an “animal typewriter, silent until touched”, capable of “filling the page with growls and squeals and squawks, yowls and bleats and snorts, brayings and chatterings and dry rattlings from the underbrush; a typewriter that ... [can] type real kisses, ooze semen and sweat” (35). According to the narrator, “[t]his baby speaks electric Shakespeare at the

slightest provocation and will rap out a page and a half if you just look at it hard” (ix). If “this typewriter can’t do it”, he says, “I’ll swear it can’t be done” (x). Hoyser and Stookey assert that the “Remington SL3 typewriter ... is presented as the actual creator of this narrative. It is fused to the narrator so that the narrator uses the first-person plural ‘we’ during discussions of the Remington SL3’s mood, opinion, and health” (90):

[s]omehow the typewriter is more than the recorder of the author’s words; it is a creative force of its own freed by the writer’s fingers. The fantasy of the machine as capable of creating also introduces the idea of the object as an entity unto itself rather than as a symbol. (87)

Parodying authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, “who asserted that God directed her writing, filling pages with words through the use of her body and pen” (86), Robbins hereby links *Still Life with Woodpecker* not only to object-oriented ontology and magic(al) realism, but also to the eighteenth-century it-narrative tradition, as well as to the genre of self-reflexive metafiction. This chapter will conclude with a more exhaustive explanation of the it-narrative tradition, specifically as it relates to *Skinny Legs and All*, but for now it will suffice to say that “nearly all eighteenth-century object tales” or it-narratives, which effectively chronicle, frequently in first person, the lives and experiences of objects, “are framed ... by an additional story that describes the convoluted process leading to their publication. They are, in other words, specifically linked to the circulation of the author’s work in a modern print economy” (Flint 213).⁶ *Still Life with Woodpecker* “opens with a prologue personifying a typewriter as the cocreator of the text” (Hoyser and Stookey 87), and, as such, overtly indicates the extent to which the novel will deal with the concept of authorship. Whereas the speaking object in eighteenth-century fiction often “depicts the loss of individual storytelling power” (Flint 214), or the “the death of the author” (Harman 201), articulating, that is, the overwhelming anxiety experienced by authors uncertain about the effects of an industrialized or mass print economy on the quality and profitability of their work, Robbins’ typewriter, by contrast, symbolizes the author’s rebirth. More precisely, the

SL3, whose voice directly contributes to the reality of the narrative, stands for the democratization of authorship in general. It represents the beginning of an era in which objects – in both the symbolic and material sense of the word – are credited for their role in the construction of reality – a sentiment that directly invokes the tenets of postmodern identity politics. In the end, the SL3, like the Mona Lisa and the moon, is used to demonstrate the redefinition and changing role of the object within (post)modern culture.

Robbins' typewriter, whilst facilitating a number of magical realist textual devices – the manipulation of conventional chronology, for example – ultimately functions to textualize the reader so that both the reader and Robbins' authorial persona become characters that interact with and affect the progression of the narrative. In so doing, the typewriter manages to call into question the reliability and veracity of Robbins' narration – an effect that locates *Still Life with Woodpecker* within the genre of metafiction. Patricia Waugh describes the term metafiction in the following way:

[m]etafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text [emphasis in original]. (2)

Metafictionality is often at work in magical realist writing. Bowers suggests that “Borges is best known for his meta-fictional narratives ... [which] challenge the reader's perception of what an author and a book are” (38), and it has been noted earlier that in textualizing the reader, a process that necessitates the use of discursive realism, magical realist writing exposes the constructedness of extra-textual or macro-political realities. This is precisely the project inherent in Robbins' use of the Remington SL3. At one point in the novel, Robbins' narrator declares that in “the event that I don't make it, in the event that you, dear reader, must finish without me, well, you've been a good audience, probably better than an underdeveloped novelist with an overdeveloped typewriter deserves” (204). This self-

referentiality, coupled with his use of dense historical fact, which he elsewhere labels “the Michener zone” (*Villa Incognito* 133) – a reference to James A. Michener’s meticulous incorporation of facts into his own novels – enables Robbins to displace the correlative dichotomy between fiction/text and fact/reality. Effectively, Robbins textualizes the reader so that the reader becomes both a character and a co-author. The reader is, in other words, explicitly implicated in the construction of Robbins’ narratives: “[r]eader, will you share a cup of the bubbly with me? You prefer French to domestic? Okay, I’ll make it French. Cheers!” (*Cowgirls* 301), and actively participates in the “meaning-making process” (Shin 130). Because the reader is a real person, and because the text appears to be compatible with the reader’s discursive understanding of reality, the text is afforded a sense of legitimacy. When, however, the text and its narrator are eventually presented as being unreliable, the narrator explicitly calling attention to his own fictionality and vulnerability – in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Robbins’ narrator frequently explains that his SL3 typewriter is incapable of recording certain words, sentences, and ideas, adding that “the Remington warranty doesn’t cover ‘typing of this nature ...’” (204) – the reader’s complicity in the narrative means that, instead of rejecting the text, he/she rejects the absolute veracity of the narratives or ideologies by which the real world is articulated and organized. Explaining the praxiological implications of the metafictional project, Carolyn Merchant suggests that once “we identify ideology as a story – powerful and compelling, but still only a story – we realize that by rewriting the story, we can begin to challenge the structures of power. We recognize that all stories can and should be challenged” (241). In *Villa Incognito* (2003), Robbins echoes Merchant’s assertion in the following way:

[m]en live by embedding themselves in ongoing systems of illusion. Religion. Patriotism. Economics. Fashion. That sort of thing. If you wish to gain the favor of the two-legged ilk, you must learn to fabricate as wholeheartedly as they do. Actually, by sabotaging their static illusions, we can sometimes help turn their stale deceptions into fresh possibilities for their race. (7-8)

If Robbins' typewriter teaches the reader that all narratives, within the text or outside it, are constructed, then Leigh-Cheri's packet of Camel cigarettes serves to demonstrate that each individual is capable of choosing the stories (or realities) to which they subscribe. Having locked herself in her makeshift cell, Leigh-Cheri, originally out of boredom, begins to take account of the only ornamental object in her attic: the packet of cigarettes. Over time, her sense of physical space comes "to be less defined by the walls of the attic, [and] more defined by the Camel pack" (165). She spends her time throwing the packet in the air and catching it, subjecting it to each of her senses, and attempting to decode the pictorial elements that adorn it. Significantly, the Camel packet moors a surreal or psychological reality to a physical one, echoing the original magic realist movement. Holding the packet up to a mirror, Leigh-Cheri sees that "in its reflection ... the word *CHOICE* reads the same in its mirror image as it does on the pack [emphasis in original]" (162). Thinking back to the Care Fest delegates, "who rallied most liberally against racism, sexism, and ageism [but] discriminated hourly against the inanimate objects around them", Leigh-Cheri, cured of "animate chauvinism" (220), ultimately chooses to accept a broader definition of reality. Suspending her disbelief, she chooses to "consider the smallest, deadest thing as if it ... [has] some life of its own" (221). Recalling the arbitrary and non-arbitrary argument advanced by poststructuralist theorists, Robbins' narrator explains that if a person is "looking for a simple truth to live by, there it is. *CHOICE*. To refuse to passively accept what we've been handed by nature or society, but to choose for ourselves" (253). This rather individualist didacticism may appear to hint at a concealed neoliberal, even modernist agenda, but, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, Robbins' politics are much more complex than this, having more to do with the unlikely marriage of a 1960s form of 'drop-out' anarchism to an Eastern or Taoist sympathy for, and connection with, all life forms. Regardless, there is great irony in this revelation given Rawdon Wilson's supposition that magical realism constitutes the

“‘speaking mirror’ of the colonial encounter” (224) – the genre being (in its use of discursive realism) a reflection of hegemonic projections, and yet, simultaneously, a subversive response to these projections, magically distorting the expectations of the spectator. In this instance, it is literally through a mirror that the ‘truths’ of individual agency and alternate realities come to light.⁷

Throughout the course of the novel, Robbins allegorically represents this choice, either to entertain or to discount an object-oriented reality – itself representative of any reality that exists as an alternative to Eurocentric rationalism – through a fairy tale that Leigh-Cheri is told by her minder Gulletta. In the story, Gulletta depicts a young princess tossing a golden ball whilst playing by a stream. Suddenly, the princess drops the ball into the stream and is unable to retrieve it. At this point, a magic toad intervenes, offering to fetch the ball for the princess if she promises to befriend him and take him back to her mansion. The princess, in haste, agrees, but quickly runs off after having regained possession of the ball. Later, back at the palace, the princess hears a knock at the door, and, upon opening it, is horrified to find that it is the toad, who subsequently sets about explaining to her father, the King, the nature of the deal he has struck with the princess. The King tries to persuade his daughter to fulfil the promise she has made. Her response, however, is to throw the toad against a wall – true to the original Grimm Brothers’ version of “The Frog Prince”. Upon impact, the toad is magically turned into a prince, and, as the proverbial story goes, the princess and prince live happily ever after. Leigh-Cheri, having had this fairy tale recited to her since birth, is well acquainted with the story, but it is not until she is locked in the attic that she begins truly to think about it. It is not until she has been sensitized to objecthood, in other words, that she turns her attention to the fate of the golden ball:

[f]or all her reservations about the tale ... it had never occurred to her to puzzle over the fate of the golden ball. True, the story initially made a big deal about the ball, only never to mention it again, but it was the characters who were important, the ball was just a prop, a toy, an *object* [emphasis in original]. (141)

Within the context of the story, the golden ball is, essentially, a MacGuffin – an otherwise meaningless device that serves to facilitate the progression of the story. A MacGuffin, as Sara Bernardi explains, “is a device [originally] described by [Alfred] Hitchcock” as “a detail which ... drives the plot and motivates the actions of the characters within the story, but whose specific identity and nature is unimportant to the spectator” or reader (citing Hitchcock source unspecified). Like the mysterious suitcase in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), a MacGuffin is usually a physical object. Leigh-Cheri, whilst in isolation, spends “a lot of time tossing the Camel pack in the air and catching it” (165). Unlike her allegorical analogue, however, she does not drop the metaphorical ball by accepting the instrumentality of objects – nor conceivably the instrumentality of the objectified others whose generalized identities have sustained modern Western societies’ own narratives. Bringing together, in the final chapter, the golden ball, the cigarette packet, and the typewriter, Robbins concludes the novel by saying that “the Remington, although too pseudo-sophisticated for my taste, is an object, after all, and wasn’t the possibility of a breakthrough in relations between animate and inanimate objects one of the subjects of this book?” (271). He adds that whilst “it may not have disclosed *exactly* what happened to the golden ball, it stated plainly why the question needed to be raised [emphasis in original]”. Robbins, in the end, implores his readers to follow in Leigh-Cheri’s footsteps – at the novel’s end she is living with Bernard and has taken to painting (not so) ‘still lifes’ – by accepting a broader definition of reality. Doing so, he implies, will allow the reader to experience a richer, freer life.

Skinny Legs and All

“*Within the normal range of perception* [emphasis in original],” asserts the narrator in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, “the behaviour of objects can be measured and predicted” (85). That is, if you ignore “the far more interesting possibility that every object might lead a secret

life". *Skinny Legs and All*, in preoccupying itself with precisely these secret lives, serves to develop further the object-oriented discussion begun in *Still Life with Woodpecker*. In so doing, it aligns itself with the traditional it-narrative genre, and yet, at the same time, serves to reassess and rework the conceptual significance of the speaking object in fiction. *Skinny Legs and All* opens by introducing readers to newlyweds Randolph 'Boomer' Petway III and Ellen-Cherry Charles, an engineer and artist respectively. The couple, who are travelling cross-country in a motorhome designed and built by Boomer to resemble a giant turkey, are on route to New York, where they eventually intend to begin their married life together. Midway through their journey, the pair decides to pull over and lunch by a cave that sits adjacent to the highway. Having later resumed their travels, however, the human protagonists come to realize that they have left behind a number of objects: namely a spoon, a dirty sock, and a can of pork and beans. It is at this point that the narrative splits, subsequently alternating (in synchronous fashion) between the lives of Ellen-Cherry and Boomer, who struggle to negotiate the increasingly interrelated worlds of art and marriage in their new hometown, and those of the forgotten animate objects, who are similarly presented with the difficult task of surviving in a hostile and alien environment. The two plots, which, for the most part, remain textually separate, continue to influence each other through their use of theme, location, and character reference, and, at the novel's close, merge into a single, unified narrative. Robbins' modern take on the it-narrative genre is, in essence, used to demonstrate the interdependence, simultaneity, and complementarity of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric realities. Like magical realism broadly, Robbins asserts – through his textual arrangement – that there are multiple interpretations of reality, and that these interpretations are ontologically contingent: simply put, different 'readings' stem from different perspectives. Moreover, the recurring themes of sympathy and artistic expression, which structure both plotlines and frame the text's sense of material vibrancy, cement the

text's relationship to the magic(al) realist tradition, channelling, at once, the sensibilities of the early magic realist painters, as well as the emphasis on reconciling internal and external landscapes central to contemporary magical realist fiction. Robbins' appropriation of the conventionally Eurocentric it-narrative tradition also exemplifies Bowers' assertion that a "mixture of cultural influences has remained a key aspect of magical realist writing" (18).

It-Narratives and Object Tales

According to Jonathan Lamb, the eighteenth century bore witness to the emergence of a "subgenre of fiction" known variously as the "it-narrative", "object tale", or "novel ... of circulation" (133). "[P]reponderantly in English" (133), these stories chronicled, frequently in first person, the lives and experiences of objects – usually currencies or consumer products whose "mobility and anonymity ... endow[ed them] ... with the authority to tell tales" (Flint 212). Facilitating the construction of a literary space in which the concept of narrative subjectivity could be manipulated, the 'objective' positions established within these tales effectively permitted authors to "reflect and [vicariously] comment upon larger social phenomena" (Blackwell 13). Of particular interest to the genre, as Christopher Flint explains, were the "conditions of storytelling in an age of mechanical reproduction" (212). Like the Remington SL3 in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the "satiric vision of the world" espoused by the eighteenth-century "speaking object", which, appropriately, was "almost always a product of manufacture", communicated the increasingly unstable nature of narrative authority and identity – albeit to a different end. Unlike Robbins' animate objects, however, these commodities were doubly *manufactured*, insofar as they, echoing the concept of the MacGuffin, were explicitly contrived in order to disseminate (surreptitiously) the opinions and anxieties of their authors. Although the objects featured in these tales displayed a consciousness that breached what Bennett refers to as the "partition of the sensible", or the

“habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (vii), their ontological statuses were not based on what it was authentically or uniquely like to be a nonhuman object. Rather, they were constructed out of anthropocentric or anthropomorphic projections that related purely to human discourse. Evidently, the objects that figured in the it-narrative genre existed as vehicles, or literary devices, through which the author could communicate his or (less frequently) her own political beliefs. It is fair to say, then, that both the eighteenth-century it-narrative and the objects that it featured were symptomatic of a privileged ontological status grounded in patriarchal and imperial power. Although Robbins’ objects, too, are inevitably a product of authorial invention, and similarly work to express his own didactic agenda, the fact that this agenda promotes an object-oriented cosmology means that they are vehicles to their own end. Robbins’ objects, channelling an object-oriented worldview, speak to their own experiences and methods of engaging with the phenomenal world, thus providing a different perspective from that of their human counterparts. Unlike the eighteenth-century objects, they are designed to challenge contemporary structures of power, rather than sustain them.⁸ Moreover, because Robbins’ objects are sufficiently humane as characters – with recourse to Darko Suvin’s notion of cognitive estrangement (C. Freedman 16), just discursively familiar enough to be plausible – they serve to generate a sense of sympathy that is crucial to Robbins’ extra-textual project. In *Skinny Legs and All*, this sympathetic project is framed through a discussion of the use and value of art, particularly in its capacity to reconstitute reality.

Art and Sympathy

In the first chapter of *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins’ narrator celebrates the artistic prowess of the common mockingbird, insisting that it, like all artists, is “out to *rearrange* reality. Innovative, willful, daring, not bound by the rules to which others may blindly adhere, the

mockingbird collects snatches of birdsong from this tree and that field, appropriates them, places them in new and unexpected contexts, [and, in so doing,] recreates the world from the world [emphasis in original]" (6). In line with Linda Hutcheon's supposition that postmodern fiction is governed by an ironic and "critical reworking" (4), according to which the concept of reality is not so much reinvented as recast (an idea that will be unpacked further in Chapter Two), Robbins ultimately presents the mockingbird as a bricoleur, a term that Larry Ellis defines as "a sort of mythic handyman who 'cobbles' reality in the form of a *bricolage* out of the available material [emphasis in original]" (58 citing Ramsey). Like the early magic realist painters, the mockingbird juxtaposes the most unlikely and wide-ranging of elements, thereby reconstituting, in a subjective way at least, the very notion of reality itself. Its birdsong is a collage that, in bringing together various natural and artificial noises, better reflects its engagement with, and perhaps view of, the world, which it inhabits with humans and nonhumans. Significantly, the mockingbird also serves to introduce to the reader the kind of vibrant rhetoric, and the sense of nonhuman agency, that will underscore the rest of novel. Rather than simply being a part of the scenery, the mockingbird is depicted as an active subject who interacts with the world in a unique way. It is to similar effect that Robbins presents Ellen-Cherry and her artwork, which is the product of an eye-game she devises to counter childhood carsickness. During long car rides, Ellen-Cherry deters nausea by squinting her eyes to create new landscapes, "sliding her focus to muffle or distort the normal associative effects of object and space, stripping them of common meaning or symbolic function, forcing them to settle in the highly mysterious region that lies between the cornea and the brain" (15). As a result of this eye-game, Ellen-Cherry begins to see "the world from a different perspective". Terence and Dennis McKenna posit the idea that "it is the ability to *cure* that is the real basis of the shamanic status [emphasis in original]" of the artist (24), adding:

[that the] shamanic role of the artist in modern cultures extends not only to his work, but to his very life. Through manipulation of his physical medium, the artist seeks to express his personal vision of reality – a vision arising from the roots of the unconscious and not dependent upon public consensus, in fact, often actively opposed to it. More than that, the artist exemplifies in his life a freedom that is similar to the superhuman freedom of the shaman. (17-18)

In the same way that magical realism is curative and restorative, helping to rediscover and sustain identities that have been historically marginalized and/or pathologized by advancing and legitimizing more suitable versions of the subjective realities associated with these identities, so too is Ellen-Cherry's art a means of actualization – of reconciling internal and external realities. In recreating through her paintings, for example, "mountains not as she had originally seen them but as she eventually chose to see them" (91), Ellen-Cherry not only acknowledges her own unique subjectivity, but actually performs it. The "finished product? Well, it was neither a harsh slice of reality nor a harmless fluff of fantasy, but something *in between* [emphasis added]". Like the magical realist genre, her cathartic paintings embrace and occupy the liminal space between real and unreal so as to better reflect her own unique identity and means of engaging with the phenomenal world. Using what Robbins frequently refers to as the "[f]ool's bag" (Hoyser and Stookey 147), a metaphor for the collaged collection of semantic knowledge one uses to craft a 'narrative identity', Ellen-Cherry ultimately turns sickness – a physical sickness comparable to the existential sickness experienced by marginalized others⁹ – into a positive statement about her existence. To the tune of the mockingbird, she crafts an identity through artistic expression.

Robbins advances this shamanic sense of artistry further in his depiction of a statuesque street performer, whose subtle work functions to demonstrate the role of art as a means of experiencing different realities. Having, at a later point in the novel, separated from Boomer due to a disagreement over the value of certain forms of art, Ellen-Cherry, whilst wandering the streets of New York, discovers an unusual street performer whom she affectionately dubs Turn-Around Norman. So-called due to his seemingly inert performance,

Turn-Around Norman simply turns three hundred and sixty degrees around, though at a speed so slow as to be imperceptible to the human eye. As Ellen-Cherry explains, it is only over a substantial period of time, and through close scrutiny, that one notices his changed position. To Ellen-Cherry's displeasure, Turn-Around Norman is either ridiculed or ignored completely by other passersby who cannot perceive his motion, or the motivation behind it. Unlike these indifferent spectators, she sympathizes with his performance, and admires his ability to commit so fully to enacting his own artistic understanding of, and approach to, reality. Unbeknownst to Ellen-Cherry, however, Turn-Around Norman does have other fans. Having mastered the art of locomotion, the band of forgotten objects have also made their way to New York – signalling the approach of the narrative merger – and are enthralled by Turn-Around-Norman's seeming inaction:

[o]f all the human beings that they, singularly or together, had ever encountered, he was the most like them. Heretofore, they had neither known nor imagined a human animal who operated on something so similar to object time. Maybe the man or woman in the street could not register his movements, his glacial rotations, but to the ... inanimates, they were overt, familiar, and up to speed. (190)

Turn-Around Norman captures the inanimates' "fancy for the inverse reasons that the animated cookie jar in the first Disney cartoons had caught the fancy of human moviegoers". As Robbins' narrator contends, it "was anthropomorphism in reverse. And it was refreshing". Evoking Bennett's "partition of the sensible" (vii), Robbins effectively uses Turn-Around-Norman to upend the dichotomous assumption that nonhuman objects are always passive, whilst human subjects are always active. In fact, not satisfied by a mere role reversal, Robbins problematizes this binary even further, having his narrator depart, at one point, from the narrative to discuss the various forms of vibrancy that can be observed in even the most mundane of objects. To detect this dynamism, however, the narrator explains that the reader will require either "a magnifying glass, which, incidentally, glass being essentially a liquid, is hardly the passive, inactive object we regard it, either: it just drips and flows at rates we

normally fail to register” (61), or an electronic microscope. He goes on to explain that on “the atomic and subatomic levels, weird electrical forces are crackling and flaring, and amorphous particles ... are spinning simultaneously forward, backward, [and] sideways” (62).

As I indicated in my earlier discussion of Jane Bennett’s work, this vibrant rhetoric is not only compatible with magical realism, but is actually a highly useful and nuanced means of rendering objects within a contemporary magical realist setting. Not only does it work to attribute a sense of agency or liveliness to nonhuman objects, but, given the fact that it frequently uses empirical knowledge to express this vitality – within the realm of quantum physics the vibrancy of matter is well documented (see Chapter Three) – it also works to incorporate the discursive realism crucial to magical realism’s success. Using scientific method as a metaphor – in which it is necessary to augment the powers of human observation through the use of technological *objects* – Robbins, recalling the notion of animate chauvinism, ultimately suggests that to truly appreciate the vibrancy of the nonhuman phenomenal world humans must learn to view things from a number of different perspectives. As his narrator expounds: “how can we be so sure that we know what things are doing when we aren’t looking at them? When our eyesight is inadequate to truly look at them?” (61).¹⁰ Encouraged by Ellen-Cherry’s obvious appreciation of Turn-Around-Norman, the band of objects suppose that the “fact that she has such interest in *him* could mean that she may be capable of accepting *us* [emphasis in original]” (193). Turn-Around Norman’s performance, as well as facilitating Robbins’ object-oriented project, ultimately serves to establish an almost magical portal through which the spectator can be transported into different subjectivities. Like the shaman who mediates between the phenomenal and spiritual worlds, he acts a conduit, establishing a liminal space in which a sympathetic dialogue between humans and nonhumans can be negotiated.

This sympathetic sentiment is also exemplified by Robbins' depiction of Ellen-Cherry's workplace. Because she is unable to support herself financially, given both her recent separation, and the unpopularity of her work within the context of New York's exclusive art scene, Ellen-Cherry is forced to take employment as a waitress at a local restaurant – the mythologically dubbed “Isaac and Ishmael's” (126). This restaurant, jointly owned by an Arab and a Jew, which is situated across the road from the United Nations building in New York, is intended to mitigate the cultural tension evident between Middle Easterners living in America. It is a place where “Greeks [can] actually ... [sit] down next to Turks, Arabs next to Jews” (258). The restaurant, at once a theoretical and praxiological endeavour, is fundamentally designed to alter the geopolitical landscape of hostility that marks Middle Eastern international relations by instilling a sense of sympathy. As the co-owners explain: “[i]f it could be demonstrated on a small scale that traditional, ‘natural’ enemies could join together for a common purpose profitable to both, then might it not inspire adversaries on a global level to look into one another's eyes, to explore avenues of mutually beneficial friendship?” (127). Once again, the magical realist logic by which an acceptance of small wonders can predicate the conception and realization of larger wonders becomes apparent. The inverted commas that encase the word ‘natural’ also reflect Robbins' recurrent tendency toward poststructuralist denaturalization of inherited ideological truths and/or governmental systems: “[p]eople tend ... [mistakenly] to regard those shapes, those comparatively brand-new, arbitrary, political subdivisions [such as disputed territories in the Middle East] as if they were natural facts, ancient and inviolable” (83). Robbins, adopting an object-oriented or interdependent cosmology, demonstrates how inanimate objects, too, are affected by this apparently human tension: in the frenzy of war, “nothing, living or inanimate, is sacred” (108). It is, rather suitably, within the restaurant that Robbins' two narratives finally merge. The inanimates are reunited with Ellen-Cherry, who, objects in tow, travels to

Jerusalem to resume her relationship with Boomer. In reconciling the two narratives, Robbins takes it upon himself to atone for and reverse the estrangement of nonhumans from conventional anthropocentric discourse. As two of his objects lament: “[i]s it not time that inanimate objects – and plants and animals – resume their rightful place in the affairs of the world? How long can humankind continue to slight these integral pieces of the whole reality?” (77). Echoing his earlier statement, Robbins’ seeks to show the reader how “social realism is but one layer of a many-layered cake” (Robbins, *Wild Ducks* 185).

In appreciating the work of Turn-Around Norman, “whose street art is presented in the arena of popular culture”, Hoyser and Stookey suggest that “Ellen Cherry supports one of the main tenets of cultural studies, that which argues that defining a society in light of the values represented by its so-called ‘high culture’ is insufficient ... to the task of identifying much of that which has significance within people’s lives” (136). Indeed, in his final testimony to the democratic and transcendent properties inherent to artistic expression – its capacity to represent and bridge the vastly different ‘lives’ of subjects and objects alike – Robbins depicts Boomer’s transition from hostile critic to artistic genius. Within the context of the New York art scene, Ellen-Cherry’s abstract landscapes are said to be lacking the edge and subversiveness required to be profitable. According to major critics and dealers, her paintings lack a clear or resonant message. Boomer, on the other hand, who has never even considered the prospect of becoming an artist, and who is, throughout the novel’s opening chapters, presented as being both artistically illiterate and indifferent, is shot to fame when his mobile home is discovered by eminent art dealer Ultima Somerville. The motorhome is deemed a pertinent comment on the discourses of commodification and super-sizing prevalent within contemporary American culture, much like Nicolas Lampert and Micaela O’Herlihy’s 2006 art installation “Attention Chicken!” (Figure 1): a ten-foot tall polystyrene rotisserie chicken that was erected in various public spaces in Milwaukee, including Walmart

stores, during October in 2006. Boomer's success essentially serves to preface the dissolution of his marriage to Ellen-Cherry, who resents the fact that he has become famous despite having little to no appreciation of art. She resents, moreover, that his fame is predicated on something (the giant turkey) that she perceives not to be art. Taking a cue from the success of his motorhome, and heeding some advice he gleaned earlier from Ellen-Cherry – that to “see the things he wants to see he will have to create them for himself” (Hoyser and Stookey 135) – Boomer goes on to create a series of artworks that “aspire ... not to defeat or suspend ... [their] own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood” (McArthur 48 citing Fried). In this regard, Boomer is, arguably, presented as a magic realist artist. Boomer's many works include a spy jacket whose pockets are filled with hundreds of coded messages, and a monumental statue of Pales, the androgynous trickster referred to in ancient Middle Eastern folklore. Like the Isaac and Ishmael's restaurant, this statue is intended literally to erect a common ground between Middle Easterners.



Figure 1. Nicolas Lampert and Micaela O' Herlihy's 2006 art installation "Attention Chicken!".

Ignoring the hype generated by his work, Boomer simply enjoys creating things that do not exist already within the world. Having previously failed to grasp the purpose of art, he comes to understand that it is the act of creation itself that makes art necessary and valuable. In other words, the function of art is to bring into existence (unlikely) artefacts that, by virtue of their very materiality, reconstitute reality. As Robbins explains in an interview with Nicholas O'Connell, art "creates the world as it ought to be, and therefore is a protest against the world as it is" (68). Perhaps unwittingly, Robbins manages to provide a fairly solid explanation of the function of the magic(al) realist tradition: through the channels of visual and literary art, magic(al) realism rebels against entrenched notions of high culture, and dismantles the Eurocentric/rationalist narratives that continue to discipline the way that humans engage with their environments and each other. Ironically, Robbins' sentiment is also reflective of his own orientation within academic communities. Regardless of his lack of critical acclaim, the very fact that Robbins' novels exist is testament to his extra-textual project. Whether or not they deftly demonstrate some sort of high culture is unimportant because, ultimately, they are a declaration of the artist's capacity to create the things that he wants to see in the world. Perhaps it is not simply Robbins' characters that use art as a means of actualization – of creating artefacts that serve better to align external landscapes with internal ones. In their time apart, both Ellen-Cherry and Boomer reflect on their respective attitudes toward the role of art, and both end up regarding it as a personal tool that, regardless of profitability or popularity, is most relevant in its ability to change the way that artists and art consumers alike interact with the world at large. This realization effectively enables them to resume their relationship, which is, as a result of their heightened sympathetic connection, more supportive, enriching, and open.

B is for Beer

Given that much of the literary criticism directed at the it-narrative genre has centred on its function within, and connection to, British imperialism, Robbins' use of the conventionally Eurocentric tradition alongside magical realism may seem an odd or uncomfortable authorial decision, hinting, perhaps, toward a continued ideological struggle between colonizer and colonized. Because imperial and neoliberal power structures often work to render their critics impotent by subsuming them into a wider system of order,¹¹ it is imperative that any truly critical analysis of the meeting of Western and non-Western ideological traditions be similarly wary of the potential for an implicit restaging, and consequent perpetuation, of existing power relationships. As such, Bowers' assertion (cited earlier) that magical realism is characterized by a mixture of cultural influences is not necessarily adequate to the task of unpacking the actual figuration of these cultural influences in terms of distribution of power. From a magical realist perspective, then, the fact that the eighteenth-century it-narrative chronicles the supposed experiences and opinions of capitalist artefacts (which have materially and ideologically enabled the global application of European privilege), whilst simultaneously seeking to rationalize European superiority by means of a surreptitious didactic agenda, is cause for concern. As Aileen Douglas contends, the eighteenth-century it-narrative frequently seeks "to 'repair' the damaging consequences of trade on human nature by linking such commerce to the positive effects of empire" (Flint 215). Indeed, the global imposition of a Eurocentric class structure, and economic exploitation of developing countries resultant from colonization – manifest, for example, in the privatization of natural resources – is often legitimized by reference to the moral and technological benefits of imperialism, which allegedly serves to bring democracy and progress to otherwise 'backwards' nations. Within the context of Robbins' novels, however, the magical realist capacity to manipulate and challenge Eurocentric metanarratives is not simply *retained in*

spite of the use of the it-narrative tradition. Rather, the efficacy with which Robbins' novels engage with, and subsequently disrupt, normative assumptions about reality is *enhanced because* of the figuration of the it-narrative motif – a parallel to the way that discursive realism operates within magical realism broadly. In fact, Robbins' decision to marry the two genres – magical realism and the it-narrative – is a judicious one. It allows him to incorporate and emulate the object-oriented conventions evident within the original magic realist movement and consistent throughout the broader magic(al) realist tradition, and yet, at the same time, permits him to appropriate and refigure these conventions in light of contemporary discourses: the subject/object dichotomy, object-oriented ontology, and a vibrant New Physics, for example. Turning the tables on imperial epistemologies and power structures, Robbins' magical realism exploits the it-narrative genre in order to undermine its historic foundations. This is precisely the dynamic at work in *B is for Beer* (2009).

Identifying yet another productive overlap, albeit often overlooked, between magical realism and the it-narrative genre – insofar as both traditions have strong connections to children's fiction – *B is for Beer* at once strengthens Robbins' position as a magical realist writer, whilst, at the same time, satirizing the Eurocentric moralism employed within children's it-narratives.

Communicated by way of a first-person narrator, whose verbal style reads much like a children's bedtime story, *B is for Beer* essentially chronicles the events surrounding the sixth birthday of Gracie Perkel. Due to an outbreak of stomach flu at Gracie's school, Gracie's mother, known simply as Mrs Perkel, is forced to cancel Gracie's party. On the day of her birthday, a dejected Gracie also finds out that her father has been called out of town on business. To make matters even worse, Gracie's favourite uncle, Moe, has called to say that he will not be able to see her, having whimsically decided to move to Costa Rica with his new girlfriend Madeline Proust. Upset by the fact that no one seems to care that it is her

birthday, Gracie spends the morning moping in her bedroom. Too “hurt to stamp her feet or throw things, too angry to weep. She knew she had to do *something*, though, or else she would just curl up in a knot and die [emphasis in original]” (56). Emulating the adults in her life, who are respectively shown (in the novella’s opening chapters) to use beer as a means of managing stress and anxiety, Gracie eventually finds herself at the refrigerator, whereupon she proceeds to scull an entire can of beer. Spirits improved, Gracie goes back to her bedroom, Aretha Franklin CD in tow (the idea that children should be ‘respected’ is a recurrent theme to which I will return), to dance her “monkey dance of life” (58).

Unfortunately, the beer begins to make Gracie sick, and, after vomiting on her bed, she falls into a deep sleep. The narrator explains that Gracie “might have slumbered that way for hours had she not been awakened by a gentle but persistent scratching or tapping sensation just below her throat” (59). Upon waking, Gracie finds herself confronted by a small, winged creature. Dissatisfied with Gracie’s obvious lack of recognition, the creature exclaims: “[w]hat I am is the Beer Fairy, for crying out loud” (60). The Beer Fairy thus proceeds to take Gracie on a magical journey into another dimension. Here, she teaches Gracie about the process of brewing, and about the mystery that motivates alcohol consumption. In typical magical realist style, Gracie’s journey disrupts normative temporality – “[d]on’t worry. We’re going far away, but we’ll be back before you know it” (65) – and engages the “speaking mirror” motif articulated earlier in this chapter (Wilson 224): to get to the Beer Fairy’s dimension, she and Gracie must pass through “The Seam between the Earth and the sky, between the *it* and the *is*, between the fire and the smoke, between the mirror and the reflection [emphasis in original]” (67).¹² This dimension reflects Gracie’s own reality, but manages to subvert it at the same time. Moreover, the illustrations featured in the novella, which replicate the kind of woodcut aesthetic used in conventional fairy tales, also appear to resonate with the original magic realist movement. In juxtaposing images of the Beer Fairy

and the industrial machinery used to process beer, these illustrations contribute to an even greater sense of otherworldliness.

Whilst the relationship between *B is for Beer* and magical realism is fairly easy to identify and substantiate, the text's connection to the it-narrative tradition is far more tenuous at first glance. Although the novella frequently makes reference to agentic objects, and the possibility of their secret lives, it falls short of actually depicting any speaking objects – unless, of course, one reads the Beer Fairy as the embodiment of the can of beer that Gracie imbibes, an interpretation that sits well with the speaking Can o' Beans depicted in *Skinny Legs and All*. Indeed, this reading would appear to substantiate Robbins' "affinity with popular objects" – his desire "to take something out of the supermarket and use it, hopefully in a profound way" (McCaffery and Gregory 37). Regardless, *B is for Beer* is not so much an independent representation of the it-narrative tradition – at least not the eighteenth-century version – but rather, a logical extension of the historic overlap between the it-narrative and magical realism. To grasp the significance of *B is for Beer*, the text must be read in light of the way that these respective genres have been employed within the realm of children's fiction, as well as in regards to Robbins' earlier work. Lynn Festa argues that the goal of the children's it-narrative, which became prominent during the nineteenth century, was to create "a pedagogical wonderland in which animated objects and speaking animals [could] delight and instruct humans" (309). She adds that the "novelty of the narrator – whether an animal or an inanimate object – arrests the straying fancy of the youthful mind and gilds the didactic pill" (316) – a pill that effectively represents normative behavioural codes within an imperial European context. These fanciful narrators often taught (white, middle-class) children about their moral responsibilities, or about the systems of order they would necessarily inherit as adults (such as capitalist trade), whilst simultaneously instilling a sense of dominion over the natural world. The nineteenth-century tales ultimately primed a specific class of children to

accept and participate in dominant Eurocentric social structures. Significantly, magical realism is also associated with a form of didacticism when employed within the realm of children's fiction. Its function, however, is to offer "the opportunity for children to explore disruptions in their ordinary world secure in the knowledge that such magic and extraordinariness can be contained" (Bowers 104). In both cases, the aim is to prepare children for life in the adult world. *B is for Beer* effectively models itself upon each of these aforementioned narrative modes – it uses a fairy to teach a young girl about a very 'adult' topic, it allows for a narrative resolution whereby Gracie is returned to her normal life, and it utilizes popular magical realist conventions – but its purpose is to delay, or even to prevent, the 'moral' indoctrination of children. As the Beer Fairy explains: "[c]hildren such as you, Gracie, [unlike beer] are best left unfiltered while you age, although some parents and institutions ... do attempt to filter the young souls in their charge" (85-86). Recapitulating concepts featured within Robbins' earlier novels, specifically the idea that positive behavioural "traits such as curiosity about the world, flexibility of response, and playfulness ... are usually rapidly [and regrettably] lost with the onset of maturity in ... humans" (*Still Life* 19), *B is for Beer* ultimately contends that adults consume alcohol to reconnect with "the *Mystery* [emphasis in original]" (93), an ability that is lost as a result of the normative socialization of children. In so doing, it undermines paternal authority, and rejects the unquestioned inheritance of what is purported to be the 'real' world.

B is for Beer is, in effect, a bildungsroman – a coming-of-age narrative – except insofar as it completely contradicts the usual tenets and techniques associated with a conventional (masculine) bildungsroman story. Gracie is a girl, after all, and so it makes sense for Robbins to manipulate a narrative tradition historically geared toward expressing the transition into an adult world constructed by, and for, normative masculinity. Whilst Gracie is shown to grow, and in some loose sense mature, as a result of her magical journey,

her heightened awareness (of her own sense of self, and of others) is based on the idea that it is maturity itself, defined here as an acceptance of the ‘real’, adult world, that prevents people from living productive and fulfilling lives. Considering the adults in her life, Gracie comes to understand, albeit in an appropriately ‘naïve’, child-like way, that it is through the internalization of normative adult behaviour (otherwise articulated as the exclusive metanarratives that frame legitimate social discourse) that people lose the capacity to dream, sympathize, pursue happiness, and appreciate magic. Alcohol, it would seem, is a poor attempt at trying to reconnect with these positive qualities and behaviours. As a result of her journey through *The Seam*, Gracie is able to identify problems in her parents’ relationship (which ultimately lead to their divorce), and actively influences a new romance between her mother and her paternal uncle Moe. Whereas before her journey, Gracie had been aching for her birthday – aching to grow up – she now has the confidence to appreciate her youthful perspective. The adults in the story have also learnt to respect Gracie’s worldview, as Moe comments: “I don’t know if I’m exactly gaga over children, but I do respect them. I respect their deeper feelings and deeper thoughts, layers to which many adults, even the most dotting of parents, too often seem oblivious” (54). What is most significant about the novella’s resolution, however, is that it places Gracie, Moe, and Karla (Mrs Perkel is, at the end of the text, actually referred to by her first name, conceivably because she is now an active agent) in Costa Rica. Suitably at home in Latin America, the trio are now able to marvel at the beauty and magic of life. In this respect, the novella can perhaps be read as a metaphor for the infantilization of colonized peoples by colonial forces, as well as for the subsequent reclamation of indigenous epistemologies and values within a postcolonial era. Couched within the modernist rhetoric of Eurocentric progress is the idea that colonized peoples are less mature than imperial powers. *B is for Beer*’s ending would seem to suggest that this notion of a dominant maturity (which, like the bildungsroman tradition, has failed to

adequately represent women and marginalized others) has been rejected in favour of a more suitable worldview – one much like that envisioned and advocated by Carpentier and Uslar-Pietro. Aptly substituting his cake analogy for a more thematic beer reference, Robbins concludes *B is for Beer* by reminding his readers that the “ordinary world is only the foam on top of the real world, the deeper world” (125).

Conclusion

Robbins’ novels are, in the end, fundamentally framed by a single idea, albeit a deceptively simple one: that the conventional metanarratives that have come to structure and sustain normative Western discourse are neither suitable, nor adequate, to the task of representing the diverse subjects and dynamic objects that populate the world. Though he acknowledges that the construction of a consensual reality necessarily involves abstraction – an admission that exemplifies his own postmodern sensibilities – Robbins contends that by unequivocally and universally conflating this ‘working definition’ of reality with the historically privileged and ontologically exclusive epistemological hierarchies inherent to Western rationalism, humanity ultimately serves to self-limit and homogenize the means by which phenomenal events are translated into meaningful knowledge. Ironically, in marginalizing the voices of the ‘others’ that these epistemological frameworks implicitly create, such ideologies similarly self-marginalize in terms of their own capacity to creatively and appropriately respond to the increasingly unignorable environmental, economic, and political issues that face – and transcend – human societies. Robbins’ project, then, at once literary and extra-textual, hinges on his ability to provide a platform for multivocality by envisioning a series of alternative realities. These realities seek to better represent the alterity of those individuals who have been systematically excluded from, and silenced by, the confines of legitimate Western discourse. It is perhaps no surprise that this project is articulated according to a magical

realist worldview, which is inherently geared toward resisting monological interpretation, and reclaiming, often within a postcolonial context, the discursive power to (re)codify and (re)narrativize reality – a project that must inevitably contest both material and discursive conditions. By rehistoricizing the multidimensional and multi-temporal magic(al) realist movement, one can begin to make sense of Robbins' recurrent disruptions to the supposedly antinomial relationships between subject/object, self/other, fact/fiction, and author/reader. In problematizing these dichotomies, Robbins enables himself to denaturalize inherited metanarratives, and to emulate and appropriate the ideological and textual conventions associated with magic(al) realism. In the cases of *Still Life with Woodpecker*, *Skinny Legs and All*, and *B is for Beer*, this strategy is facilitated through the presentation and preponderance of extraordinary objects – at once material and symbolic. If one imagines that 'style' is a metaphor for the ontological or situational subjectivities that produce discursive objects, or 'content', then it becomes evident that Amanda Ziller's position (cited earlier), that "folks who are concerned with freedom, real freedom ... must use style to alter content" (*Another Roadside Attraction* 208), stands for the ways in which the inclusion of historically marginalized perspectives can potentially reconfigure the narratives (or content) deployed by humans in order to engage with each other and their environments.

CHAPTER TWO:

AUTHORSHIP, (WOMEN'S) AGENCY, AND APPROPRIATION

God is a fixed point, naturally, God is eternal and absolute, God doesn't change. But man's concept of God, man's interpretation of God, the way we view God has changed many times over history ... Yes? And what would our ideas of God, of religion, be like if they had come to us through the minds of women?

-- Tom Robbins, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (247).

Introduction

Whether it is through his curiously dubbed 'author' Dr Robbins in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), or his purportedly objective compiler Marx Marvelous in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), Tom Robbins consistently displaces traditional expectations in regards to narrative identity and authority. Like Jorge Luis Borges, he establishes, and then has his narrators occupy, a series of contingent or unstable narrative sites in order to pose questions about the fundamental purposes of an author and a book. Cementing his status as a metafictional writer, Robbins makes no direct apology for the fact that he repeatedly and explicitly implores readers to speculate as to the origins – or embodied sources – of his narratives, and to reflect, moreover, upon their methods of construction. As he explains in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory: “[w]hat I’ve ... [tried] to do ... [is] break into the narrative and say, ‘... [l]ook, this is a book – you’re reading a book’” (33). This tendency to intrude upon the illusion of an otherwise seamless reality, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s use of theatrical alienation – for which Brecht coined the term *verfremdungseffekt* (“Biography of Bertolt Brecht” 13) – seems appropriate given Robbins’ ties to the magic

realist experiments of the Weimar Republic. It was, after all, within the context of the Weimar Republic that Brecht developed his politically inspired dramaturgy, which aimed to empower audiences intellectually by distancing them emotionally from the spectacle of the performance – an effect achieved through the use of explanatory placards, visible ropes and lights, and spoken stage directions. Unlike Brecht, however, who arguably had a more extensive set of tools with which to work, Robbins establishes narrative distance, and creates a sense of self-reflexivity, by employing multiple, often competing narrative voices. These myriad voices, each distinct in terms of identity and location, and yet simultaneously entangled, much like the narrator and his typewriter in *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), exemplify Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. Given the fact that Brecht and Bakhtin are themselves linked under the conceptual framework of Russian formalism, which views literature as a process of defamiliarization through which perceptions of the familiar are enriched (Margolin) – a theory that sits comfortably alongside Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement (C. Freedman 16) – these alliances, at once technical and ideological, are particularly salient. Connected to this intricate play of voices – of which the reader, too, is a part – is Robbins' use of the unreliable narrator tradition. Whilst this literary device serves to communicate and complement a number of Robbins' themes, its primary purpose is to undermine the authority of his conspicuously white, male narrators – an effect that serves to elevate and affirm alternative voices, specifically those of women. It is to similar effect that Robbins employs the postmodern technique of bricolage, both by having his narrators collage together scraps of information – in the form of diary entries, newspaper articles, and letters, for example – and by skipping episodically between plotlines in his own textual arrangement. By all these means, Robbins ultimately seeks to demonstrate the subjectivities that inevitably shape stories, and illustrates the extent to which authors actively filter information – hierarchizing certain bodies of knowledge, and, given the postmodern interrelationship

between epistemology and ontology, physical bodies as well. In so doing, he assumes the “painstaking work of recovering what [and who] has been hidden historically” (Lahar 99), a project that lends itself to, and is appropriately expressed by, a magical realist worldview.

Feminism

In order to understand, and adequately assess, the political, authorial, and textual dynamics at work within Robbins' novels, especially those evident in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and *Another Roadside Attraction*, it is imperative to engage with the extra-textual contexts in which these novels were written, and to which they make frequent and deliberate reference. For each of the aforementioned texts, published in 1976 and 1971 respectively, this involves an exploration of various feminist ideologies – specifically, those ideologies developed and disseminated during the advent and extended course of second-wave feminism in the United States of America. To grasp these ideologies fully, one must thus understand the historical progression of the feminist movement, at least insofar as it relates to mainstream Western culture. Indeed, a certain fluency in feminist ideology is crucial to interrogating the accusations levelled against Robbins by some feminist critics, who interpret his mostly female characters as fetishized “caricatures” to be exploited “for sexual titillation” (Hoyser and Stookey 16). As Peter Whitmer quips: “Tom Robbins is a heroine addict” (53-54) – but whether or not Robbins' heroines are (re)presented as authentic, agentic characters is a matter of some contention, and a point to which I shall return. Given the fact that Robbins' unreliable narrators are invariably men, a brief historical account of Western feminist ideology will also serve to establish a solid platform from which to examine the gender politics implicit in Robbins' use of the unreliable narrator tradition – that is, the degree to which his unreliable narrators represent the male gaze, and the subsequent orientation of Robbins' female characters in relation to this gaze. In more direct terms, this course of

inquiry will allow me, eventually, to situate Robbins' representations of female sexuality within the context of the "Feminist Sex Wars" (Basiliere 1) – a series of intense ideological conflicts that came to characterize second-wave feminism, and which relate to the roles, responsibilities, and ramifications of pornography and sex work in regards to women's empowerment and liberation.

In the broadest of terms, feminism refers to a series of interdisciplinary approaches to the pursuit of gender equality. Within the context of Western culture, the onset of feminist activism is associated largely with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suffragette movements, particularly those endemic to the United Kingdom and the United States of America, which effectively centred on the demand for civil equality through the enfranchisement of women.¹³ Retroactively dubbed first-wave feminists, these activists – predominantly white, middle-class women – successfully campaigned for the meaningful ratification of their citizenship by securing political representation, manifest in the rights to vote and hold office within government, and by obtaining access to education and employment. Despite first-wave feminism's success in challenging, and effectively overturning, state-sanctioned sexual discrimination in these contexts, however, normative social discourse at this time maintained a fundamental counter-position between men and women, insofar as the dispositions, desires, and domains with which each were respectively affiliated remained subject to axiomatic assumptions about the nature of the sexes. Men, for example, were understood to be inherently rational, strong, and decisive, whilst women were associated with morality, emotions, nature, and domesticity – indeed, various suffragette campaigns were based on the notion and legitimacy of a maternal vote ("The National Council of Women"). Although this partition was no longer perceived to authorize statutory inequality, it continued to limit the extent to which women were able to express the liberties for which they had fought. To this effect, first-wave feminism, at once owing to the exclusive

demographic of its activists, and as a result of strategic pragmatism, sought to improve the welfare of women by including them in normative society, rather than by dramatically altering the structure of society itself. To be sure, some early feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [1792]), did advance more radical positions, anticipating – or rehearsing – Marxist critiques of marriage, for example, which often view marriage, and the constitution of the nuclear family itself, as an extension of exploitative capitalist institutions – implicated in the commodification of female bodies, and in the gendered division between paid and unpaid labour. Generally speaking, however, these positions were not broadly recognized or accepted within the context of mainstream first-wave feminism.

By contrast, second-wave feminism, also known as the Women's Liberation Movement, which emerged both in the United States of America and elsewhere during the 1960s and 70s, adopted a more comprehensive approach in its advocacy of women's rights, extending beyond legislative redress to consider the implications of ideological constructions of femininity. Central to this project was the significant distinction that second-wave feminism posited between sex, one's biological identity, and gender, the discursive constructions that shape one's performed identity as a man or a woman ("Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender").¹⁴ Whilst second-wave feminism's "the personal is political" rhetoric did secure a number of landmark freedoms for women (Lee 163), notably with regard to reproductive rights, the rejection of conventional feminine stereotypes was undoubtedly its primary focal point. Refuting the ideas that women were, or should be, sexually subservient, solely responsible for and satisfied by domestic duties, perpetually well-groomed, intellectually inferior to men, and innately closer to the nonhuman natural world, many second-wave feminists thus interpreted the concept of equality as meaning qualitatively equal to men, rather than promoting equality in difference – a problematic assumption given

that it failed to acknowledge the intersectionality of oppression, or the oppressions faced by men of colour, queer men, and disabled men, for example. Indeed, it was this interpretation of equality that ultimately served to call attention to a number of fractures, evident and emerging, within the movement. In rejecting traditional feminine stereotypes, second-wave feminism endeavoured to liberate women from the confines of customary gender roles. Yet, this project, in suggesting that women who conformed to these allegedly repressive standards were either ignorant, or else complicit in society's subjugation of women, essentially served to alienate many of the women that second-wave feminism claimed to represent. Moreover, it divided feminists themselves along ideological and ontological lines. In other words, second-wave feminism struggled to define exactly what it meant to be a woman, and became subject to increasing factionalism when it came to the task of promoting women's interests. The disunity within second-wave feminism became most apparent, however, in debates about the nature of sex work and pornography, colloquially articulated as the "Sex Wars" (Basiliere 1), and in emerging theories about the intersections between sexism, capitalism, racism, and speciesism. Accordingly, the transition to third-wave feminism in the 1990s was marked by an acceptance of diversity and difference, and by the rejection of essentialist feminine identities.

Responding to the theoretical and praxiological crises evident within second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism, in many ways, assumed a more individualistic approach to gender equality, embracing multivocality, and eschewing any fixed or universal assumptions about gender in general. Having retained the distinction between sex and gender, recognizing, however, that even the former was becoming harder to define, third-wave feminists, in attempting to dismantle the man/woman (male/female) binary inherent to Western culture, began to associate themselves with other identity-based movements – such as queer theory and postcolonial theory – under a broader framework articulated as critical theory. Third-

wave feminists thus sought to problematize notions of masculinity and femininity by replicating, appropriating, and thereby undermining conventional gender stereotypes. The Riot Grrrls, an underground punk movement, exemplified this tactic by catachrestically referring to themselves as 'sluts' and 'bitches' in order to give a voice to controversial issues such as rape and abortion.¹⁵ In absorbing and appropriating a number of negative feminine stereotypes, third-wave feminists were essentially reclaiming the power that had once been used to oppress their predecessors. Third-wave feminism's deliberate departure from a single, coherent feminist theory did contribute, however, possibly equally deliberately, to the continuation of some of the major debates associated with second-wave feminism, particularly those expressed by the "Sex Wars" (Basiliere 1), insofar as third-wave feminism was capable of accommodating both sex-positive and anti-pornography ideologies. The sense of individualism (sometimes known as "choice feminism" [McKelle]) upon which mainstream third-wave feminism was premised also meant that as a worldview, and as a political tool, it became more sympathetic and conducive to capitalist values and institutions. In this way, third-wave feminism laid the foundations for contemporary liberal feminism, which generally approaches women's empowerment from within, and imagines it according to, established capitalist structures. Facebook's Chief Executive Officer Sheryl Sandberg exemplifies the liberal feminist position. As bell hooks explains: Sandberg's definition of feminism "begins and ends with the notion that it's all about gender equality within the existing social system" – it implicitly asserts, in other words, that the broader "structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy need not be challenged" ("Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In"). Much like the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s (about which I will have more to say in Chapter Three), some varieties of third wave feminism inadvertently allowed the entire movement to be co-opted and confined by capitalism.¹⁶

Ecofeminism

Similarly aligning itself with critical theory, ecofeminism draws on the concept of intersectionality in order to address and promote the welfare of women, and that of the nonhuman natural world. Rather than targeting the discrimination of women exclusively, ecofeminists argue that normative Western culture is fundamentally premised on the construction of a degraded other, and thus contend that sexism is simply one manifestation of the ontological and epistemological exclusion engendered by Western societies.

Consequently, ecofeminists seek to deconstruct the myriad discourses that privilege certain subjects over others by exploring, and sometimes embracing, the metaphorical, historical, and performative interrelationships between femininity and nonhuman nature. According to Carol Glasser, this project inevitably involves a critical examination of “[t]wo of the most salient dichotomies” evident within Western culture (54-55): “man/woman and man/nature” (55). To this effect, ecofeminists suggest that in defining what it meant to be human, dominant historical discourses, both religious and secular, essentially established an elemental dichotomy between both humanity and animality, and culture and nature. Paralleling the binary logic that structures the self/other dichotomy, humanity and culture were regarded as privileged terms, whilst animality and nature, being negatively constituted by their perceived alterity, were relegated to the realm of degraded other. Where humanity was associated with rationality, nonhuman nature was deemed irrational, governed not by intellect, but by visceral impulse, where culture was articulated by way of progress, nature was decidedly primitive and regressive, and, crucially, where culture was conceived of as being built by, and representative of, masculinity, the natural world was feminized. Predicated on the assumption that humanity's progress necessitated the domination of nonhuman nature, symbolized internally by the conquest of one's base instincts, and externally represented by the commodification and consumption of natural resources, the discursive correlation between

nature and femininity thus metaphorically cemented women as equally in need of domination. As Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan assert: “[h]istorically, the ideological justification for women’s alleged inferiority has been made by appropriating them to animals: from Aristotle on, women’s bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality” (1). Janis Birkeland adds that:

the systematic devaluation of the “feminine principle” has been a fundamental basis of domination. In Western ... [p]atriarchal culture, “masculine” constructs and values have been internalized in our minds, embodied in our institutions, and played out in power-based social relations both in our daily lives and upon the world stage. (17)

“The major attack against ecofeminism”, however, as Birkeland explicates, “has been that it allegedly claims that women possess an essential nature – a biological connection or a spiritual affinity with nature that men do not” (22). Insofar as it embraces this association, ecofeminism appears to advocate an essentialist identity with which contemporary feminists (third-wave and beyond) are often uncomfortable. This is especially true for feminists (or women) of colour who have experienced a much more violent and degrading association with nonhuman nature. Indeed, the discourses that perpetuate an epistemological and/or ontological connection between femininity and nonhuman nature often differentiate between Western, or white women, who exemplify a benevolent and pure mother nature, and women of colour, who are conceived of as being animalistic and wild, a treatment routinely underscored by sexual fetishism (hooks, *Black Looks*). Again, the dichotomous thinking behind the self/other binary can be seen to establish an epistemological precedent by which other qualities are subsequently encoded: white/black and virgin/slut, for example. Of course, the extent to which ecofeminists actually embrace the multiple associations between femininity and nonhuman nature – outside of acknowledging the existence of shared or tied oppressions – differs according to a broad spectrum of political ideologies and ontological statuses. However, contemporary ecofeminism generally contends that the “very idea of one

group of persons being 'closer to nature' than another is a 'construct of culture'" (Birkeland 22). As Carolyn Merchant explains:

[s]ymbols such as nature and culture or maleness and femaleness are not binary opposites with universal meanings encoded into the very "essence" of what it means to be a man or a woman. Nature, wilderness, and civilization are socially constructed concepts that change over time and function as stage settings in the progressive narrative. (143)

Ecofeminists working under the banner of critical theory thus endeavour to deconstruct the epistemological systems that privilege terms like culture and masculinity over 'other' terms like nature and femininity, and advocate for the welfare of animals and nonhuman nature, often by drawing parallels to the exploitation of female and/or feminized animal bodies within an industrial or capitalist setting. This project often involves an interrogation of the corollary subjects of objectification, consumption, and rape culture. Although ecofeminism is similar to third-wave feminism in some ways, then, particularly in its dual emphasis on both popular and academic discourses, its necessary focus on processes of commodification and economic coercion have meant that it has managed to engage with capitalist structures in a more critical way. Like poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism broadly, ecofeminism is fundamentally geared toward dismantling the metanarratives that structure and sustain normative Western discourse.

Grand Narratives

In *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (2004), Carolyn Merchant argues that normative Western discourse is premised on a series of discursive metanarratives. Merchant is particularly interested in a specific metanarrative, which she defines as the "Recovery Narrative" (118). Responding to an historically entrenched lapsarian worldview, according to which the original sin purportedly committed by Eve led to humans being cast out of the Garden of Eden, and into a more Hobbesian natural environment, the Recovery

Narrative is ultimately built upon the assumption – inextricably linked to the central tenets of modernity that I described in Chapter One – that it is through sustained progress and technological resourcefulness that humans are able to restore the nonhuman natural world to its former Edenic glory. Merchant asserts that in “the mainstream Recovery Narrative, nature is portrayed as undeveloped ‘virgin’ land whose bountiful potential can be realized through human male ingenuity”. Evidently, as far as ecofeminism is concerned, there is a very conspicuous gender dynamic apparent in this rhetoric, which positions men as active subjects and women as passive objects – their bodies similarly geomorphized and instrumentalized. Merchant explains that this gendered narrative is especially relevant to symbolically masculine landscapes such as the American Frontier: “[f]rom Daniel Boone and Kit Carson as frontier heroes who explored the land to the Yeoman farmer who converted the desert into a garden, it was men who acted on the land to bring it to fruition” (123-124). Indeed, this symbolism can be seen to continue in the form of the American road genre, wherein masculinity is negotiated and attained through the symbolic conquest of geographical landscapes. What is most significant about Merchant’s text, however, especially in terms of this thesis’ ultimate project, is the extent to which Merchant perceives the ontological redefinition of Western metanarratives as being a remedy to contemporary mythologies and practices that privilege masculinity, whilst objectifying and exploiting a feminized natural world. It is to this effect that Merchant explores Arran Gare’s concept of the new grand narrative, which essentially recapitulates and develops Jean-François Lyotard’s critique of the *grand récit* – otherwise defined as Grand Narrative or metanarrative (Buchanan).

According to Gare, says Merchant, the new grand narrative, which is hypothesized eventually to succeed the exclusive metanarratives that dominate contemporary Western discourse, “must allow people, as active participants, to construct narratives for themselves, rather than submitting to a ‘master narrative’ that has constructed them as passive,

controllable entities. In the new stories, people will recreate themselves through culture and act out their own roles” (202). Merchant adds that:

[a]ll grand narratives ... entail a cosmology that reveals people's places in the universe, how their cultures came to exist, and who within [those cultures] ... hold[s] positions of reverence or privilege. The problem with the narratives of Western culture for today is that they are too simplistic for living in the present global order. Gare's idea is that a new grand narrative will contain a multitude of stories told in many voices, integrated through alternative cosmologies and metaphysics. These stories will take into account the environmental crisis, needs for liberation and salvation, and the self-formation and self-determination of the participants.

It is precisely this kind of cultural heteroglossia, envisioned by Gare and articulated by Merchant, that Robbins demonstrates in his novels, which juxtapose – typically masculine – Western perspectives with the historically ‘othered’ voices of women, ethnic minorities such as Indigenous Americans and Japanese Americans, and individuals whose sexualities transcend the strict parameters of legitimate heteronormativity. In presenting a variety of cosmologies that deal with the same events as Western positivism, for example, but which translate these events according to different values or cultural consciousnesses, or by illustrating and emphasizing the alternative realities that have played out alongside those that have dominated mainstream historical accounts, Robbins destabilizes the supposed universality of Western realist monologism, and achieves a kind of narrative symbiosis that succeeds in connecting his characters and readers on a grander scale – one that embraces and accounts for diversity, whilst also retaining a sense of wholeness (arguably a more meaningful sense of wholeness precisely because it accommodates diversity). Indeed, it is by this logic that Robbins reconstitutes the very notion of ‘narrative totality’, redefining it through the postmodern technique of bricolage. Despite Gare's sometimes confusing, and perhaps slightly imprecise use of the term,¹⁷ the new grand narrative is, in many ways, analogous to magical realism. Read as a kind of meta-genre, or a method of storytelling, the new grand narrative, like magical realism, can be viewed as a style through which different stories and bodies come together, rather than an awkward replication of the monolithic

metanarratives it seeks to replace. In using Gare's concept of the new grand narrative as a lens through which to read Robbins, one can begin to make sense of the seemingly indeterminate logic (or the kind of crazy wisdom) so often espoused by his characters: "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred ... I believe in nothing, everything is sacred" (*Cowgirls* 238). Because of the kind of multivocality inherent to Gare's new grand narrative, itself fundamentally born out of postmodern or poststructuralist linguistic theories, this course of inquiry also provides a suitable foundation from which to transition into further analysis of the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia, which is evident in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and *Another Roadside Attraction*.

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues ultimately chronicles the life of Sissy Hankshaw. An otherwise immaculate embodiment of southern beauty, Sissy is, to her conservative parents' horror, born with abnormally large thumbs – appendages reminiscent of the pig's tail with which Aureliano III is born in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) (García Márquez). These thumbs effectively render it impossible for Sissy to dress unassisted, and preclude her from any type of 'normal' or 'productive' work. Somewhat fortuitously, at least insofar as her parents are concerned, Sissy is already debarred from most of this normal and productive work simply by virtue of her gender. Despite having been pathologized and stigmatized by her family, multiple medical professionals, and her admittedly bigoted community, Sissy considers her thumbs to be a defining and altogether positive aspect of her own identity. She describes her thumbs as though they are additional sensory organs, and throughout the course of the novel they are shown to tingle and react to various circumstances and people, thus guiding Sissy's emotions and behaviours. Over time, Sissy comes to realize that her thumbs actually have a rather supernatural power: they can control the direct movement and flow of

traffic. Sissy is able to hone this skill even further, and is eventually capable of hitching gusts of wind, animals, and occasionally even people. Ironically, and in line with narrator's early observation that, at least in an evolutionary sense, "the ... preaxial digit of the human hand" is fundamentally designed to allow for "[g]reater freedom of movement [emphasis in original]" (13), Sissy goes on to become the world's most notable and accomplished hitchhiker. In order to facilitate her travels, which are not so much a vocation as a necessary means of existence and self-expression, Sissy occasionally takes on work for feminine hygiene mogul The Countess. The crux of the narrative thus arises as a result of Sissy being stationed at The Countess' health and beauty spa The Rubber Rose. Here, Sissy meets Bonanza Jellybean, a self-proclaimed cowgirl, and The Chink, a Japanese hermetic mystic who lives atop the ridge that overlooks The Rubber Rose.

The Feminine Body

In "The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women's Fiction", Marian Scholtmeijer posits the idea that "[l]iterature gives material reality to otherness, and ... empower[s] otherness by locating it securely in bodies, identities, and worlds" (257). This is certainly true of Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the allegorical nature of which, as Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey argue, "captures the tensions of the women's movement of the early seventies" (37). In the same way that he materializes the subject/object dichotomy in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Robbins uses Sissy's thumbs to embody, or to give material reality to, his exploration of female mobility.¹⁸ Given the fact that "freedom of movement has not been a part of the female experience", often precisely because of the way that the female (or feminine) body is controlled, objectified, and pathologized within Western culture, it is clear that Sissy's wanderlust, and her ability to transcend that which society has deemed a disability – her thumbs, her body – parallels the feminist struggle to transcend the limits of

conventional gender roles and their respective realms, both of which are often rationalized by reference to the 'othered' feminine body. Because her thumbs literally hinder any other form of employment, and because she is otherwise beautiful according to traditional standards, Sissy undertakes a number of modelling jobs for the feminine hygiene mogul The Countess – an entrepreneur who deals exclusively in products designed to control, obscure, and mask the natural processes associated with the feminine body. Although Sissy quickly becomes The Countess' favourite and most profitable model – partly because she is still a virgin, and is, therefore, devoid of the natural odours that he finds so offensive – he nonetheless goes to extreme lengths to ensure that Sissy's thumbs never make it into any of his promotional material. Instead, they are cleverly hidden by costumes, or cropped out of shot altogether. In this regard, The Countess objectifies Sissy's body, concealing the reality of her person behind a consumable package. Early in the novel, The Countess informs Sissy that she is to take up residence at his health and beauty spa The Rubber Rose – a reference to The Countess' flagship product. Because the last ever flock of American Whooping Cranes is due to stop over at the ranch, The Countess has decided to orchestrate his most cinematic advertisement yet: a made for television spectacle that features Sissy, cloaked in feathers, dancing alongside the majestic birds. To those of an ecofeminist persuasion, the interwoven consumption of femininity and nonhuman nature – at least insofar as each is constructed according to Western metanarratives – will not go unnoticed. On route to the ranch, however, Robbins makes a considerable point of depicting Sissy using her thumbs to masturbate: “as if looking up Eros in the Yellow Pages, [she] let her fingers do the walking” (117). Robbins' detailed account of this sexual display is significant on two counts. First, it serves directly to link Sissy's thumbs, through a chain of association at once material and metaphorical, to feminine sexuality and mobility. Second, it anticipates the extent to which the ranch will serve as a

backdrop to Sissy's quest for self-determination, which centres largely on the way she experiences and perceives her own sexuality and body.

Though it is staffed mostly by nutritionists, beauticians, and fitness instructors, The Rubber Rose is also home to a crew of self-proclaimed cowgirls, whose official task it is to oversee the small, admittedly infirm, herd of cows used to supplement the economic viability of the ranch. Sissy's arrival at The Rubber Rose coincides with an orchestrated rebellion wherein the cowgirls, embittered by The Countess' ambivalence toward the herd's welfare, and politically opposed to the fundamental purpose of his range of feminine hygiene products, succeed in ejecting the ranch's staff – and its paying guests – and ultimately in usurping control of The Rubber Rose. Significantly, it is by exposing their unwashed, unshaven vaginas that the cowgirls, most of whom identify as lesbian, signal the beginning of their revolt. Upon gaining control of the ranch, the cowgirls, who have meanwhile taken hostage the last ever flock of American Whooping Cranes, issue a list of demands in which they argue that The Countess should submit ownership of the ranch to them as recompense for his success. Their logic being that, as cowgirls, they have been prevented from pursuing their chosen lifestyle because of their gender, so The Countess, whose business deals in the denial, denigration, and devaluation of the feminine body, is liable for what is essentially restorative justice. It is important to note that it is within this context that Sissy has her first authentic, consensual (lesbian) sexual encounter, a point that illustrates the degree to which the cowgirl rebellion is both personal and political in nature. During the standoff, however, in which the federal government eventually becomes embroiled, the cowgirls are confronted by a major internal ideological rift, which essentially hinges on the contested figuration of femininity, especially insofar as it relates to nonhuman nature. The two major positions that constitute this rift are embodied respectively within two of the cowgirls: Debbie and Delores. Debbie argues:

that sexual reproduction is the basic and primary difference between men and women ... She says the ability to bring life into the world puts a woman closer to the Divine Mystery of the universe than males are, and that her motherly feelings are what gives her her [sic] protective and peaceful qualities, thus accounting for what is best in her – and best in the human race ... If we're ever going to get the world back on a natural footing, back in tune with natural rhythms, if we're ever going to nurture Earth and protect it and have fun with it and learn from it – which is what mothers do with their children – then we've got to put technology (an aggressive masculine system) in its proper place, which is that of a tool to be used sparingly, joyfully, gently and only in the fullest cooperation with nature. (177)

Debbie's assertions sit comfortably alongside Birkeland's position (cited earlier), that “‘masculine’ constructs and values have been internalized in our minds, embodied in our institutions, and played out in power-based social relations both in our daily lives and upon the world stage” (17). By contrast, Delores argues “that if women have any hopes of ceasing to be enslaved by men, then they've got to control and escape their biological roles, they've got to free themselves from motherhood” (177). Evidently, this ideological disagreement is both ecofeminist in nature, since it hinges on the extent to which women should embrace the metaphorical and performative associations between traditional feminine gender roles and nonhuman nature, and analogous to second-wave feminism, which effectively broke down when it could not integrate certain roles (like motherhood) into its paradigm for emancipation. Indeed, the loss of connection between doctrinal second-wave feminism and the actual experiences of women, as represented by the ambivalence, even open hostility, shown toward women who were content with, or who pursued, domestic lives, is reflected in the cowgirls' treatment of the Whooping Cranes, which, at this point in this novel, have effectively become ideological fodder to be used as leverage against the forces of the federal government.

The conflict amongst the cowgirls is finally resolved when Delores, after having been supposedly visited by Niwetúkame, an Indigenous American earth mother figure, declares that:

[t]he enemy of women is not men ... No, and the enemy of the black is not the white. The enemy of capitalist is not communist, the enemy of homosexual is not heterosexual, the enemy of Jew is not Arab, the enemy of youth is not the old, the enemy of hip is not redneck, the enemy of Chicano is not gringo and the enemy of women is not men. We all have the same enemy. The enemy is the tyranny of the dull mind. (342)

It is thus apparent to the cowgirls that it is the binaries by which Western culture is organized and understood that must be challenged and transcended. In other words, the real enemy is a system in which negatively constituted dichotomies are pitted against each other at the expense of diversity. This realization prompts the cowgirls to free the Whooping Cranes from their drug-induced lethargy, and, in the style of third-wave feminism, to adopt a cosmology in which totality is the product of diversity and freedom of experience, rather than a single or uniform ideological doctrine. Significantly, and although at this point *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* appears to maintain no explicit relationship to the geopolitical context with which magical realism is associated, Robbins' narrator explains that the Whooping cranes, enacting "the singular as opposed to the rule" (252):

[continued] southward, they rested in Yucatán for a while, then flapped on down to Venezuela and lunched on leopard frogs in the swamps of the Orinoco. In Bolivia, their droppings fell on a revolution. Over Paraguay, they stained the cathedrals of Asunción ... They veered into Chile, maybe to pay tribute to the assassinated poet Pablo Neruda; next stop, Patagonia. (359)

Recalling the story of Leda and the Swan, the narrator says that in "Burma, a woman claims [even] to have had sexual intercourse with one of the cranes" (360). It is, evident, then, that the Whooping cranes symbolize not only the agency of nonhuman nature, but also the freedom that comes from escaping the strict and exclusive systems of thought central to Western rationalist thought.

Like the cowgirls, Sissy also realizes that she must escape and transcend the social and psychological discourses that have worked to other and pathologize her, albeit at the expense of one of her magical thumbs. Having fled the scene of the original cowgirl rebellion, partly due to ideological ambivalence, mostly because her thumbs are aching for

more travel, Sissy eventually ends up in New York. Newly married, Sissy is encouraged to seek formal therapy by her husband Julian Gitche, who is concerned that Sissy's thumbs are intruding upon the harmony of their marriage. Sissy is summarily diagnosed with "[i]nadequate feminine role identification – poor identification with that which in our society constitutes womanhood" (174). This diagnosis appears to be a metaphor for hysteria, a condition that was often fallaciously (though not necessarily deliberately) used to pathologize women who did not conform to society's constructed expectations of femininity. Significantly, hysteria was colloquially referred to as a "wandering womb" (Fraize), the theory being that the womb was roaming the body and interfering with other body parts, thus causing problematic behaviour. Sissy's similarly wandering thumbs seem to substantiate the metaphorical link between hysteria and her own diagnosis in the novel. Aptly, insofar as the Western history of medicalizing and pathologizing cultural 'others' is concerned, Sissy's therapist goes on to compare her with "[s]ocial deviates [sic] such as homosexuals and drug addicts":

who ... congregate in enclaves or live in small communities and take the line that they are not only as good as, but actually better than, "straights," and that the lives they lead are superior to those led by the majority. The socially stigmatized individual, by entering a subculture, accepts his alienation from the larger society, and by identifying himself with like souls claims that he is a full-fledged "normal" or even a superior human being and that it is the others who are lacking. (171)

Having thus been, again, pathologized according to the dictates of normative society – significantly on an intersectional axis that involves gender, sexuality, and ability – Sissy is consequently passed over to Dr Robbins, a young therapist who takes a special interest in her after her original therapist concludes that she is unable to be effectively rehabilitated: that is, effectively (re)assimilated into normative society. Dr Robbins, however, perhaps because he has not yet been institutionally conditioned, rejects any formal diagnosis, and supports Sissy's belief that her thumbs are an important aspect of her identity – directly tied to her experiences and worldviews. Commenting on the methods by which Sissy ideologically

appropriates the meanings associated with her thumbs so as to integrate them into a healthy and positive sense of self, Dr Robbins suggests that there is a “parallel between the manner in which the oyster, when beset by impurities or disease, coats the offending matter with its secretions, thereby producing a pearl ... and the manner in which Sissy Hankshaw, adorned with thumbs that many might consider morbid, coated the offending digits with glory” (9). By embodying otherness in Sissy's thumbs, as well as in the sexually liberated bodies of the cowgirls, Tom Robbins democratizes and diversifies the constitution of ‘normal’ feminine physiology. In so doing, he rebels against the discursive narratives that underscore Western discourse, and supports the ethic of self-determination central to the magical realist genre of writing – radically populating the liminal space between self and other, thereby undermining the very legitimacy of the self/other dichotomy.

Reinterpreting Metanarratives

In Chapter One, I referenced Linda Hutcheon's assertion that postmodern fiction is governed by an ironic and “critical reworking” (5), according to which the concept of reality is not so much reinvented as recast. I will now turn to a more comprehensive interrogation of this claim, especially insofar as it is compatible with magic(al) realism. In my explication of the original magic realist movement endemic to the Weimar Republic (see Chapter One), I explained that magic realism was fundamentally designed to alter normative representations of reality by imbuing those representations with a sense of otherworldliness. This otherworldliness was not achieved by using totally foreign concepts or materials, though. Rather, it was the product of deploying familiar concepts and materials in an unfamiliar way. Otherwise mundane objects, for example, were situated within unlikely contexts, so that it was the process of juxtaposition – or of bricolage – that served to manipulate their meaning, as opposed to the objects themselves. This process of defamiliarization is very similar to the

dramaturgical approach adopted and developed by Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and Marxist whose works were also born of out the Weimar Republic, and which are now associated with the critical framework known as Russian formalism. “[M]ore an ongoing process of self-conscious theorizing than a finished theory”, explains Uri Margolin, Russian Formalism holds that the “value or purpose of art, embodied in the devices [used], consists in creating in readers or viewers a heightened awareness, making them see things anew”. Margolin adds that this “is achieved through disrupting or radically modifying the familiar, automatic perception habits as regards literature, language, or reality and (re)casting instead novelty, surprise, strangeness, and unfamiliarity”. In Brecht’s case, this effect was achieved through the intrusion of explanatory placards, visible ropes and lights, and spoken stage directions upon the otherwise illusory reality of his plays (“Biography of Bertolt Brecht” 13). Brecht believed that these techniques would encourage spectators to think critically about the stories he was presenting – to apply them intellectually to their own realities – thereby effecting a change in the way that spectators engaged with and perceived their own political and social environments. In collaging together various textual materials, cultural cosmologies, and physical bodies, in appropriating the metanarratives that structure and sustain normative Western discourse, and in altering content through the unlikely use of style, this, too, I argue, is the crux of Robbins’ project. Within the context of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, this project is facilitated through the reinterpretation of conventional Western metanarratives – a form of rehistoriography, so to speak – as well as through the intrusion of Robbins’ unreliable narrator (and namesake) Dr Robbins.

Throughout his oeuvre, Tom Robbins’ frequently reinterprets and redefines conventional Western metanarratives, defamiliarizing and democratizing these narratives by aligning them with a variety of ‘othered’ bodies and beliefs. In an interlude toward the end of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, for example, Robbins depicts a conversation between a thumb

and a brain. In this conversation, the thumb laments its status as “a goddamned *metaphor* for civilization [emphasis in original]”: “‘I’m just sick and tired of it, that’s all.’ ‘Sick and tired of what?’ ‘Taking the blame. Being called ‘the cornerstone of civilization’” (313). The thumb goes on to blame the brain for the unfortunate state in which humanity now finds itself, to which the brain eventually responds:

[e]verybody assumes consciousness is the exclusive province of the Brain. What a mistake! ... The Knee has consciousness and the Thigh has consciousness. Consciousness is in the Liver, in the Tongue, in the Prick, in *you*, Thumb. It’s coursing through you, too, and you’re acting it out. You’re each a part of it. In addition, there is consciousness in butterflies and plants and winds and waters. There is no Central Control! It’s everywhere [emphasis in original]. (318)

In this interlude, Robbins essentially refers to the metanarrative by which human evolution and consciousness are understood by many within Western society. His vibrant and holistic characterization of otherwise objectified or ‘disembodied’ body parts serves to undercut the dichotomous distinction between body and mind central to Western philosophy. This distinction, which Adams and Donovan associate with Aristotle (1), is problematized by ecofeminists, who work to challenge the correlative dichotomies between masculine/feminine and mind/body. The conversation between the thumb and the brain, then, functions to destabilize the Western ‘evolution of man’ metanarrative, the very language of which hints at more than a biological process of natural selection. Indeed, it would appear that although evolution simply describes a natural process, the terms by which this process is made discursively meaningful are inevitably subject to the power relations inherent to culture. The nature/culture dichotomy, therefore, is not adequate to the task of understanding how humans came to exist, and to where they will foreseeably go in the future. In case the implications of this passage are not already clear, Robbins concludes *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* by positioning Sissy as an archetypal Eve character, who, rather than condemning humans through some perceived original sin, serves as a secular saviour, of sorts – the next iteration in the chain of human evolution. Her children, whose parentage will ensure that they are

culturally diverse – Sissy having been left pregnant by a fleeting sexual encounter with The Chink – and who will conceivably boast thumbs like hers, will be unable to continue the modus operandi of *Homo habilis* (the tool maker), and will, therefore, need to invent new ways to survive and interact with the world. As the narrator explains: Sissy's children will be capable of relating “to the environment in very special ways” (357). Since they will not be able to “use weapons or produce sophisticated tools ... [they will] have to rely on ... wits and ... senses ... to live with animals – and plants! – as virtual equals”. Once again making otherwise abstract metaphors material and meaningful, Robbins essentially asserts, through his ontological redefinition of what is perhaps the most entrenched metanarrative of all – the origin of the human species – that by diversifying the actual bodies who populate contemporary metanarratives, human societies (or Western societies) open up a plethora of new avenues for future progression – ones that would seem to be compatible with Gare's concept of the new grand narrative given that they “take into account the environmental crisis, needs for liberation and salvation, and the self-formation and self-determination of the participants” (Merchant 202). As the brain in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* similarly speculates:

[o]ver the centuries a handful of humans – poets, madmen, artists, monks, hermits, composers, yogis, shamans, eccentrics, magicians, anarchists, witches and rare bizarre subculturites such as the Gnostics and the Sierra Clock People – have used my thinking machinery in unusual and unpredictable ways, with interesting results. Perhaps if more of these “off-beat” kinds of thinking were done, I might be more useful to the Universe. (317)

Because *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is set within a typically masculine environment, and because it utilizes many of the conventions associated with the American road genre, Sissy's femininity has further implications for the way that conventional metanarratives are redefined and reinterpreted. Elizabeth Patricia Wheeler, for example, argues that “Sissy is an exaggerated imitation of Dean Moriarty. In [Jack Kerouac's novel] *On the Road* [1957] Moriarty's bandaged thumb ‘became the symbol of Dean's final development.’ In *Even*

Cowgirls Get the Blues Moriarty's thumb has grown into the hitchhiking protagonist, Sissy" (citing Kerouac 155).¹⁹ Hoysler and Stookey have also picked up on this parallel, stating that within the context of "United States writing, Robbins continues the American tradition of heroes who head out for the territories, as Huck Finn first said. Although Robbins derives the road novel from a long history of literary texts, he revises the tradition by using females as the focal point of his road adventures" (29). Indeed, the notion of a frontier, which has come to characterize the traditional American road genre, and which pervades many American mythologies relating to progress and expansion,²⁰ is appropriated and redeployed consistently throughout Robbins' writing, particularly where psychedelic drugs are concerned (as I will explicate further in Chapter Three). As Wheeler asserts: "[f]or Tom Robbins, the historical frontier is closed, but the desire for regeneration lives on. Now only 'perceptual transformations' that allow movement in the imagination function as the escape route from the 'paranoia and depression' of contemporary society" (134). By repopulating the frontier with marginal characters, Robbins seeks to encourage, and even to actualize, this perceptual transformation.

The physical frontier territory in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is populated not only by sexually liberated cowgirls and the evolutionarily advanced Sissy, but also by a Japanese hermetic mystic, ironically referred to as The Chink. Like Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), a metafictional novel that seeks to reclaim a history of otherness by chronicling the internment of Japanese Canadian citizens during World War II, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* rehistoricizes mainstream – ontologically loaded – narratives by documenting The Chink's experiences as a Japanese American during the Second World War:

The Chink had been asked if he supported the American war effort. "Hell no!" he replied ... He waited for the logical next question, did he support the Japanese war effort, to which he would have given the same negative response. He was still waiting when the military police shoved him on the train to Tule Lake. (180)

The narrator goes on to explain that “The Chink busted out of Tule Lake because he believed there ought to be an exception. After enough provocation, he took it upon himself to enact the singular as opposed to the general, to embody the exception rather than the rule” (184). During his breakout, however, The Chink is faced with having to conquer the ruinous Sierra Nevada Mountains – much like the infamous Donner Party, a group of American pioneers who embarked upon a westward journey to California, but who ultimately fell victim to extreme weather conditions and starvation (Calabro). After similarly succumbing to treacherous weather conditions and a lack of food, The Chink is resigned to death. He is, however, rescued and revived by a reclusive group of Indigenous Americans known as The Clock People – mentioned by the brain as an example of a group of humans who are using the brain in “unusual” and “unpredictable” ways (317). In documenting The Chink’s breakout, and in relaying the subsequent journey by which The Chink arrives at the ridge that overlooks The Rubber Rose, Robbins effectively serves to redefine conventional frontier narratives, both by populating the frontier with marginalized others, as well as by using it as a backdrop to alternative historical accounts. It is perhaps worth noting that The Donner Party’s legacy of transgression, symbolized by their desperate turn to cannibalism, is often metaphorically employed within literature to undermine the glory of American frontier narratives relating to progress and expansion, as is the case in Joan Didion’s *Play it as it Lays* (1972). To some extent, however, Robbins redeems the Donner Party’s history of transgression by having The Chink survive the same journey across the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In so doing, he demonstrates the degree to which familiar narratives can be positively redefined by including different historical perspectives. Robbins’ writing is not only characterized by deconstruction, then, but, perhaps more significantly, by reconstruction as well (an idea to which I will return in Chapter Three). This transformative project is also advanced by his use of a highly unreliable narrator.

Dr Robbins

As is the case in *Still Life with Woodpecker, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*' central narrative is accompanied by an additional storyline that serves to call attention to the problematic concept of authorship. The narrator, who remains largely anonymous, is recurrently shown to be unreliable, frequently acknowledges blind spots within the text, relies heavily on third party evidence to fill in gaps, and is self-reflexive to the point that he openly challenges the reader – both to guess his identity, and to assess his credibility as an author. At one point in the novel, the narrator openly asks the reader whether “the author [is] ... trying to ease you into something here, trying to manipulate you a little bit when he ought to be just telling his story the way a good author should?” (50). Recalling the magic(al) realist convention whereby normative temporality is disrupted, the narrator, eventually identified as Dr Robbins, explains that:

we have come to expect, for better or worse, some sort of chronological order in the books we read, for it is the function of literature to provide what life does not. In light of that, then, your author is calling “time out” to inform you that those events described in the opening chapters of Part III, as well as most of those reported in the various Cowgirl Interludes of Parts I and II, occurred *after* Sissy Hankshaw Gitche had come to the Rubber Rose and gone again ... If he has confused you, the author apologizes. He swears to keep events in proper historical sequence from now on. He does not, however, disavow the impulses that led to his presentation of cowgirl scenes out of chronological order, nor does he, in repentance, embrace the notion that literature should mirror reality [emphasis in original]. (107)

Patricia E. Cleary Miller argues that the purpose of Dr Robbins is “to make ... [Tom Robbins'] story believable, to create the illusion of verisimilitude” (226-227). Insofar as Tom Robbins employs discursive realism to blur the distinction between fiction and extra-textual reality, this is certainly true, however, the function of his narrator goes much further than this, and, at times, appears even to contradict Miller's statement altogether.

It would appear that the primary purpose of Dr Robbins, the self-exposing, biased, romantically compromised narrator and supposed author of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, is

to undermine the authority of the masculine liberal-humanist subject. Though he is effectively a microcosmic representation of 'the self' – a white, heterosexual male endowed with institutional authority – Dr Robbins is ultimately presented as unreliable within the context of the novel. His ability to speak for other characters – for their thoughts and motives, for example – is, therefore, illegitimate and untrustworthy. For a novel that chronicles the self-determination of women, this is perhaps the only genuine means of reconciling a male narrator (and male author) with an authentic feminism. The overall effect of this implied lack of universality is a pervasive sense of indeterminacy, which, according to Doo-ho Shin, is “representative of the transformed social reality in postmodern times” (1). Shin's point is corroborated by Alan Wilde, who suggests that “[p]ostmodern irony is suspensive: an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty to tolerate and, in some sense, welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even at times, absurd” (238). Recalling the vibrant rhetoric employed by Robbins in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), this uncertainty or ambiguity is reflective of The New Physics that Robbins seeks to use discursively to validate his object-oriented prose. In a sense, postmodern fiction “rests on a version of the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle: an awareness that ... it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed” (Waugh 3).

The second function of Robbins' unreliable narrator is, of course, to textualize the reader, and to implicate the reader in the “meaning-making process” (Shin 130). For those readers who have read all of Robbins' novels, this textualization is emphasized by the intertextuality that surrounds his characters and records of events. Whether it is the “cherry on top of the cowgirl” referred to in *Still Life with Woodpecker* (ix), the “shadow of a wild duck flying backward” in *Villa Incognito* (2003) (193), or the Daughters of the Daily Special, who feature in *Skinny Legs and All* and *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), the metafictional self-

referentiality that pervades Robbins' novels functions to create a world of interconnected stories that is at once discursively corroborated, whilst also paradoxically and unashamedly fictional. Like Brecht, Robbins essentially "makes ... readers aware of the act itself rather than pretending that the act of writing is seamless reality" (Hoyser and Stookey 87). He reminds readers, moreover, "that all history recorders have their own agenda and biases" (50). Robbins novel are, in the end, characterized by participation. Like the self-participation and determination that Gare advocates, the incorporation of the spectator that Brecht sought, and the reader participation that Shin describes as "an important feature of postmodern literature" (56), Robbins' participation, embodied in, and achieved through, his textual devices – a fact which, given Margolin's assertion that Russian Formalism is "embodied [largely] in the devices [used]", aligns him even more closely to Russian formalism and to the Weimar Republic – is fundamentally designed to force readers to become "politically cognizant of what goes on in ... different 'worlds' ... [to see] matters from many different angles ... [and to] challeng[e] ... the dualistic thinking inherent in Western political thinking" (Mack-Canty 167). Not only is this the case in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, but so too in Robbins' first novel *Another Roadside Attraction*.

Another Roadside Attraction

Hailed as *the* "quintessential countercultural novel" (Rogers 3) – a snapshot of the spiritual renaissance of the Sixties as it transitioned into the "postmodern anarchistic, anti-humanist feminine consciousness ... [of] the Seventies" (Purdon and Torrey, "Introduction" xv) – *Another Roadside Attraction* chronicles the events surrounding the unlikely second coming of Jesus Christ. The novel opens by introducing readers to newlyweds Amanda, an archetypal earth mother figure – whose lips, "[f]ull and petulant ... pronounce ... vowels as if they ... [are] fertility symbols" (140), whose womb is said to contain "swallows circling" (105), and

whose first child, “born with electrical eyes” (4), is rumoured to be the son of lightning – and John Paul Ziller, a commensurately mythic embodiment of the noble savage, at once exoticized, fetishized, and yet, appropriately anglicized. Having invested what is essentially Amanda’s dowry in an abandoned roadside restaurant, soon to become the Captain Kendrick Memorial Hot Dog Wildlife Preserve, the pair proceeds to build a life for themselves, as well as Amanda’s son Thor and John Paul’s companion baboon Mon Cul, by serving vegetarian hotdogs, running a flea circus (Amanda having been blessed with an uncanny knack for communicating with animals), and subsiding off foraged fungi – psychotropics included. Early in the novel, the pair also becomes hosts to a disillusioned, though admittedly brilliant, postgraduate scientist: Marx Marvelous. After learning that he had tried to steal a baboon from a local zoo, Amanda and John Paul, as much out of intrigue as sympathy, decide to post bail for Marx, and end up bringing him back to their roadside restaurant. At the same time, the pair, who is in regular correspondence with John Paul’s friend Plucky Purcell, is informed that Purcell has unwittingly infiltrated a secret brotherhood of assassin monks known as the Society of the Felicitator. Faking his way up the ranks of the brotherhood, which is essentially a military-trained band of religious zealots commissioned by the Vatican, Plucky, stationed in Rome during an earthquake, stumbles upon the mummified body of Christ hidden in the Vatican’s catacombs. Existentially confronted by the implication of the find – if this is truly Jesus’ dead body, then he can never have ascended to heaven and the entire doctrine of Christianity is founded on a fallacy – Plucky decides to steal the corpse and take it to the Captain Kendrick Memorial Hot Dog Wildlife Preserve. The novel’s climax arrives when Plucky and John Paul, having fled from the wrath of the Society of the Felicitator, break into a governmental meteorological facility. Although Plucky is killed during the break in, John Paul and the corpse of Christ manage to board an experimental weather balloon destined for the edge of the Earth’s atmosphere, where they are eventually disintegrated by

solar radiation – a satirical re-enactment of the ascension of Jesus. Meanwhile, Amanda and Marx, who develop an almost Oedipal, and ultimately unsustainable sexual relationship, end up parting ways at the novel's conclusion. Marx Marvelous, who finally identifies himself, like Dr Robbins in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, as the 'author' of the novel, concludes by intimating that the world is, for the first time, entering an age of goddesses, Amanda having, in the end, outlived Jesus Christ.

Marx Marvelous

Marx Marvelous is, in many ways, almost identical to Dr Robbins, both as a character, and as a narrator: a white male who represents some sort of institutional authority – in Marx's case, his status as an academic, in Dr Robbins', his position as a therapist. Yet, for all of the supposed objectivity and authority that his role is supposed to carry, he is still a highly unreliable narrator. Like Dr Robbins, Marx Marvelous cobbles his narrative out of newspaper articles, letters, and diary entries. He is also romantically compromised by his desire for, and relationship with, Amanda, a fact that Hoyser and Stookey argue "forces readers to reread and reevaluate all of the earlier material in the book" (48). Marx Marvelous comments variously on the limitations of his narration, which is ironically dubbed a "report" (225), explaining that he has had frequently to "skip over a great deal of dialogue" (238), and that because of the nature of his "historical document", which collages together myriad pieces of third party information, he has become impressionable to the idioms "of those parts of ... [the] report written ... [by] John Paul Ziller [and] ... Plucky Purcell", for example (225). For these transgressions he asks the reader to forgive him.

When he first arrives at the Zillers', Marx is essentially a stereotypical scientist, unable to accommodate emotion, hearsay, or myth into his worldview, and committed only to the scientific method – the only legitimate and verifiable means of accruing and assessing

knowledge. Throughout the course of the novel, however, and as a result of his frequent epistemological and methodological conflicts with Amanda, he “undergoes a symbolic baptism and rebirth” (Hoyser and Stookey 48). Whereas at the beginning of the novel, Marx believes firmly in the strict separation of scientific and artistic worldviews, he now finds himself able to accommodate and reconcile the two under a new framework for knowing. It is this cosmological shift that motivates Marx to expose himself as narrator:

Here the reader has probably noticed that the author has begun to write in the first person singular, and he may have thought ah ha, the autobiographical first person singular is always the choice of men in trouble, whereas only those writers who are safely disengaged from their subjects may indulge in third person motifs or that most cowardly of all voices, the first person plural – the pompous and devious editorial *we*. Actually, I have slipped into first person singular on several occasions during the drafting of this report, but always I went back and corrected the oversight. You see, it had been my intention to serve up this report as a strip of lean, rare meat ungarnished by the sauces of my own personality. What has become increasingly apparent, however, is that I am irreversibly enmeshed in the events this document will henceforth describe, so even had I time to restore a third-person treatment to the preceding paragraph (and time is growing precious) it could serve no honorable purpose. It might as well be known here and now that it is I, Marx Marvelous, who is your host and narrator at this most anticipated of all encores, the second appearance of you know who [emphasis in original]. (224)

Marx Marvelous' realizations about the objectivity and reliability of his report (its lack of both, in other words) are born directly out of Amanda's teachings, which hinge, ultimately, on the abstractive functions of language – the space between signifier and signified I alluded to in my first chapter. Acknowledging that consensual reality is constructed according to a complex economy of signs, the discursive translation of which is inevitably mediated by culture, Marx reconciles seemingly opposing frameworks of knowledge by concluding that although an objective reality exists and can be observed, the meaning attributed to observations, as well as the very things that individuals choose to observe, are inextricably linked to subjective value systems – which can either be used to sustain existing power relationships and social structures, or, alternatively, to hijack and redefine the systems of organization and knowledge that produce a consensual, practically viable reality. It is at this

point in my discussion that Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia becomes both relevant and enlightening.

Ken Hirschkop articulates Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" as "discourse ... embodied in unique configurations of lexis, syntax and grammar, in short, what Bakhtin will call 'styles.'" (69). Becky Francis adds that, in "contrast to Saussurean structuralism, Bakhtin sees language as 'living dialogue'; embodied, emerging from specific users for specific purposes, and thence always evolving" (5). Put simply, heteroglossia refers to the myriad discursive traditions, power relationships, and identities that are embodied within language, and the interface between them. Bakhtin's styles, then, refer to the various forms of jargon, slang, and culturally expedient signs that are employed by humans to represent (and, in turn, produce) the multiple identities, hierarchies, and material relationships out of which reality is constructed. In this sense, Marx's report, which incorporates different styles through the collaging of diverse resources, and which, in so doing, marries together the idiomatic experiences of other characters under a single grand narrative, exemplifies Bakhtin's heteroglossia: the co-mingling of alternate realities embodied in the co-mingling of narrative styles. Like linguistic signs themselves, Bakhtin's "styles" both represent and reproduce ideological objects (69). In this sense, they not only capture reality, but also create and control the way that reality is conceived of and engaged with. According to Lyall Watson, this discursive interrelationship is proof "of our capacity, not just to see one thing in another – as Blake saw the world in a grain of sand – but to change the very nature of things" (43). It is this interpretation of actualization that is perhaps most relevant to magic(al) realism, even more so than the personal journeys that specific characters undergo within magical realist texts, because it is this fundamental act of creation that gives literature or art the power to transform and change the terms by which consensual reality is conceived of, understood, and engaged with. If language is the tool by which reality is constructed, then the act of using

language to accommodate diverse bodies, cosmologies, and even ideas themselves permits an author to actually carve out an ideological, discursive, and perhaps ultimately material space that can then be occupied by these very bodies, cosmologies, and ideas. This is exactly why magical realism is so thoroughly radical, especially in the hands of postcolonial or postmodern others. Indeed, Marx's realization about the constructedness of consensual reality forms the basis for Amanda's ascendance as the archetypal earth mother.

Goddesses

Throughout his oeuvre, Robbins recurrently discusses the concept of the mother goddess, or of goddesses generally. Illustrating his penchant for rehistoricizing Western metanarratives, he argues that Christianity was fundamentally conceived of in order to erect a system of power in which masculinity was privileged, and femininity inversely degraded. In *Jitterbug Perfume*, he asserts that Christianity "is merely a system for turning priestesses into handmaidens, queens into concubines, and goddesses into muses" (51). He goes on to explain that:

[a]t first they used Apollo as the wedge, and the abstract logic of Apollo made a mighty wedge, indeed, but Apollo the artist maintained a love for women, not the open, unrestrained lust that Pan has, but a controlled longing that undermined the patriarchal ambition. When Christ came along, Christ, who slept with no female, ... who played no musical instrument, recited no poetry, and never kicked up his heels by moonlight, this Christ was the perfect wedge.

In *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins ultimately seeks to reinstall the mother goddess figure, and to reconcile the binaries that patriarchal doctrine, both religious, and then subsequently secular, necessarily created in order to ensure the erasure of the mother goddess, and to denigrate and control femininity more broadly. Within the context of the novel, Amanda Ziller facilitates, and is the embodiment of, this project. At the end of the novel, for example, Marx Marvelous gifts his manuscript – supposedly the book with which the reader is now engaging – to Amanda. He relinquishes power over the report, asking

Amanda to decide whether or not (and how) it should be published. His final words are specifically directed at the reader: “[r]eader! Let this be a signal to you. If this manuscript has survived, it will mean that Amanda has survived. And if AMANDA IS ALIVE ... And JESUS IS DEAD...” (336). The implication is that Amanda is now (consensually, which is important in terms of assessing Robbins’ feminist credentials) the earth mother goddess, Jesus having been incinerated, along with John Paul, by solar radiation. Here the symbiotic interrelationship between signifier and signified – between language and reality – reaches its climax. Robbins ultimately uses language to transform Jesus from an ideological symbol (a buttress, one might say, upon which monotheistic patriarchal doctrine is predicated) into a material body. Once his is a material body, Jesus can then be legitimately destroyed. Simultaneously, Robbins uses language to create a fictional, though radically particularized, body for the earth mother: Amanda. Because Amanda, now in a physical body, is able to ‘live’ in the most real way possible within a literary fictive world, and continues to live on, for all intents and purposes, after the reader has closed the book, the earth mother can now viably exist within the real, extra-textual world. To qualify, Amanda’s out-survival of Jesus does not materially change reality – it does not mean that the extra-textual world is suddenly governed by a widespread belief in a real earth mother – but it does work to establish an ideological or metaphorical space in which an earth mother could conceivably exist. If one accepts the poststructuralist interrelationship between theory and practice, then Robbins’ ability to provide a theoretical space for Amanda does, in some way, amount to a practical act, at least insofar as it hijacks and occupies the epistemological foundations on which material conditions – the treatment of women, for example – are predicated. This is also true for Robbins’ representation of femininity broadly, and feminine sexuality specifically.

At the very end of the *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins includes a short epilogue – only three sentences long – entitled “Pine Cones on the Tent”: “[i]t’s a cold clear morning;

the sun has come over the canyon wall, but you're still dozing around, when something hits the tent. Open the flap and the sun's in your face; the world is ready. Let Amanda be your pine cone" (337). Robbins is essentially asking his readers to let Amanda jolt them into a seeing the world afresh. But this does not mean that she is simply a vehicle to Robbins' didactic end. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Robbins has been criticized for populating his novels with sexualized women, articulated by Hoyser and Stookey as "caricatures" to be exploited "for sexual titillation" (16). It is certainly true that Robbins' female characters are frequently described as being arousing, explicitly sexually active, and, at times, are even fetishized – the Chink's explicit desire for Sissy's thumbs in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* being one example. However, immediately to interpret the sexualized aspects of these characters as being a source of objectification or ambivalence on Robbins' part is to neglect the figuration of these characters within the broader context of Robbins' writing, and is, moreover, an assumption that one should be wary of, precisely because it carries with it an ideological agenda – one that can only be understood by referring back to the "Sex Wars" of the 1960s and 70s (Basiliere 1). In essence, the "Sex Wars" is a term used to explicate a series of intense ideological disagreements that came to characterize second-wave feminism, and which relate to the way that pornography and sex work were perceived in regards to female liberation and emancipation. On the one hand, sex-positive feminists believed that pornography and prostitution, for example, could be empowering to women if undertaken in the right settings, that is to say, when women engaged in these activities free from financial or emotional coercion. They argued that sexual subservience, or the notion that women should be passive and docile within sexual relationships, was a huge part of conventional gender roles, and that it was a woman's right to engage in sex or sexual activities freely, and without being labelled for doing so. Sexual liberation for sex-positive feminists was a site of struggle for gender equality as much as employment was, in that they perceived that women

could never hope to be equal whilst they were denied the freedom to be sexually autonomous individuals with legitimate desires and preferences. By contrast, anti-pornography feminists contended that there were no conditions under which pornography or prostitution could not be exploitative, and that pornography, for example, contributed to unrealistic physical standards for women and was subject to, and indeed worked to perpetuate, a voyeuristic male gaze. It would seem that the criticisms levelled against Robbins fit squarely into the latter school of thought. Yet, these criticisms fail to take into account the extent to which Robbins uses various textual devices, such as an unreliable narrator, to destabilize patriarchal supremacy. More than anyone, it is Robbins' male characters who serve as objectified vehicles through which a radical feminine consciousness is celebrated and pursued. One is, again, reminded of Amanda Ziller's assertion that "folks who are concerned with freedom, real freedom ... must use style to alter content" (208), because, essentially, although there are sexually explicit details that relate to their personalities and behaviours, Robbins' heroines are not reduced by, or used for, their sexuality or value within a patriarchal sexual economy. Whereas Robbins does sexualize his female characters, he ensures that the techniques and tones used are appropriate to advancing the concept of an authentic feminine agency,²¹ and that these techniques, moreover, contribute to a wider feeling of surprise or novelty, which sits well given his connections to Russian Formalism. As Margolin explains, Russian Formalism disrupts and radically modifies "familiar, automatic perception habits as regards literature, language, or reality ... [by] (re)casting instead novelty, surprise, strangeness, and unfamiliarity". This novelty is not ambivalent in Robbins' work, as it is deliberately designed to thrust upon the reader a diverse set of female (or feminine) characters. Coupled with the metafictional elements that he incorporates into his novels, this ultimately compels the reader to ask why they have not (if they have not) encountered these kinds of femininity before, and,

moreover, to challenge the extra-textual social structures that may account for the otherwise homogenized versions of femininity evident within the reader's own life.

Conclusion

By exploring the myriad textual devices employed within Robbins' novels, especially those that relate to the problematic concept of authorship, one is able to further substantiate Robbins' position as a postmodern magic(al) realist author. Because there remains an aesthetic and ideological connection between contemporary magical realist fiction and the magic realist experiments endemic to the Weimar Republic – and subsequently adopted by the conceptual framework now articulated as Russian Formalism – the parallels between Robbins' works and those of Bertolt Brecht and Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, are particularly salient. Indeed, these similarities serve to elucidate further Robbins' treatment of the complex interrelationship between style and content, and assist in interrogating, as well as in eventually placing, Robbins' unreliable narrators. Effectively, Robbins' narrators, and their bricolaged narratives, exemplify Bakhtin's theory of linguistic heteroglossia. Accordingly, they embody a radical language of subjectivity, which is a testament to the postmodern capacity to reclaim the power to (re)codify and (re)constitute reality. It is by exploring the symbiotic interrelationship between signified and signifier that this radical vocabulary of otherness can be shown to be a powerful tool where postcolonial or feminist activism is concerned, providing, as it does, a method for actualizing ontologies and cosmologies that have been historically marginalized or erased by the dictates of normative Western culture. Moreover, in reconciling Robbins' works with the extra-textual realities in which they were written, and to which they make frequent and deliberate reference – the historical course of second-wave feminism in the United States of America, and the invention and development of ecofeminist theories, for example – it becomes clear that Robbins' sex-positive

representations of femininity, and his reinterpretation of historically gendered metanarratives, particularly those that apply a vibrant rhetoric to the nonhuman natural world, sit comfortably alongside progressive feminist thought and practice. In fact, in taking into account the urgent question of how humans will relate to their environments in the future, Robbins' multivocal stories and alternative historical accounts would appear to lend credence to the hypothesized democratic propensities of Arran Gare's concept of the new grand narrative. In the end, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and *Another Roadside Attraction* work to challenge readers by deploying familiar content in unfamiliar ways, and, in so doing, create imaginative pathways to a more egalitarian and enlightening future.

CHAPTER THREE:

COSMOLOGICAL COMPATIBILITIES AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Embedded in it as I was, it took time to recognize that the show I sought was unfolding all around me. Faulkner had his inbred Southern gothic freak show, Hemingway his European battlefields and cafés, Melville his New England with its tall ships: I had, it finally dawned on me, a cultural phenomenon such as the world had not quite seen before, has not seen since; a psychic upheaval, a paradigm shift, a widespread if ultimately unsustainable egalitarian leap in consciousness.

-- Tom Robbins, *Tibetan Peach Pie* (242).

Introduction

From the object-oriented experiments of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s and 30s, to Latin American geopolitics and the development of a distinctly postcolonial literary aesthetic in the 1940s and 50s, to contemporary postmodern literature and identity politics, magic(al) realism has frequently (re)emerged as a means of envisioning, articulating, and reifying alternative cultural consciousnesses. At once a reflection of, and subversive response to, normative Western discourse, the magic(al) realist tradition, which ultimately serves to engineer a productive interface between interior and exterior landscapes – between subjective and objective, mythological and material, theoretical and practical – has necessarily been adapted to suit myriad social contexts and corresponding extra-textual projects. What binds each significant manifestation of the tradition, however, notwithstanding the use of certain intellectual and stylistic devices, is the extent to which magic(al) realism is deployed to destabilize and denaturalize existing power structures and systems of dominance,

functioning, in effect, to carve out an ideological or metaphorical space in which a radical emancipatory politics can be created, communicated, and embodied. Given the “vocabulary of ‘otherness’” that underscores the tradition (Bowers 38), or the otherwise peripheral nature of magic(al) realism – the various ways in which it disrupts and reorients hegemonic relationships between centres and margins – it is perhaps unsurprising that Tom Robbins, an author thoroughly embedded in, and irrefutably shaped by, the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, has adopted the tradition as a primary mode of writing. Like Alejo Carpentier and Arturo Uslar-Pietro, who developed marvellous realism as a framework for situating a uniquely Latin American cultural consciousness, Robbins appropriates magic(al) realist concepts and conventions to express, and to subsequently extrapolate upon, the cataclysmic shift in collective consciousness that provided the impetus for, and simultaneously grew out of, the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. His use of the magic(al) realist tradition is particularly resonant, therefore, given the focalizing role that consciousness played during this period, whether in relation to mind-altering or psychoactive substances, new-age spiritual practices – often imported or ‘borrowed’ from Eastern mystical traditions – or generally regarding political orientation and the sudden juxtaposition of mainstream narratives with the increasingly organized voices of marginalized groups. Indeed, the kind of Copernican socio-spatial transformation that occurred during the 1960s, whereby traditional modernist metanarratives were challenged, and sometimes even outmoded completely, by pluralistic, ontologically-grounded, arguably postmodern perspectives, sits comfortably alongside the similarly Copernican shift from classical to quantum physics, colloquially framed as The New Physics, which also characterized this period. Fundamentally underlined by a sense of indeterminacy, curiously similar to the “in-betweenness” or “all-at-onceness” by which Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris define magic(al) realism (“Introduction” 6), The New Physics, having been

assimilated into mainstream social dialogue, not only paralleled the grand epistemological shift from modernism to postmodernism, but also served to predicate the realization of a number of commonalities between Western and Eastern philosophies – thought to be intrinsically counter-poised, but for the meditative musings of hippies, psychonauts, and other cultural outsiders. It is precisely these perceived compatibilities between Western scientific methodology and Eastern mysticism that Robbins explores in his novels.

Employing a distinctly postmodern lens to navigate this complementarity, Robbins continues to promote a collective shift in consciousness, apparent, for example, in *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), which essentially hinges on the acceptance of paradox, the existence of arrested or irresolvable dialectics, and the transcendence of artificially constructed binaries. This cosmology is not only evident in Robbins' content, however, but so too in the textual techniques by which he redefines the novelistic form. Though his relationship to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s has necessarily changed over time, postmodernism having seemingly established a suitable space in which to resolve some of the tensions and contradictions endemic to the original counterculture movement, Tom Robbins remains devoted to envisioning new forms of cultural consciousness and new modes of collective organization. In the words of Liam O. Purdon and Beef Torrey, Robbins' devotion is not so much "to the bourgeois notion of the counterculture", but rather, to "the postmodern anarchistic idea of the thought of the ... [o]ther and the imaginative space most conducive to its expression" ("Introduction" ix).

The American Counterculture Movement of the 1960s and 70s

"Whether for good or ill", explain Irwin and Debi Unger, the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s "transformed ... perceptions and values and left an indelible mark on our own times" (160): "[I]f blueprints were rejected ... [and] people struck out on

new courses” (1). Like the original magic realist movement endemic to the Weimar republic, the 60s counterculture movement also emerged out of a post-war climate marked by unfamiliar material conditions and radical new social relations. Whereas the Weimar Republic was characterized by austerity, however, manifest, for example, in the crippling economic reparations imposed on Germany following the First World War, the United States of America, having effectively won control of the global means of production, experienced a widespread and unprecedented level of economic prosperity in the wake of the Second World War. Reflected in the post-war baby boom, the affluence that pervaded American society in the late 1940s, and which increased exponentially throughout the 1950s and 60s, ultimately enabled a whole generation of young Americans to move beyond the provision of life’s basic necessities, and to reflect upon the nature of a radically changing world – to access tertiary education, and to engage in extracurricular social and political activities, for example. Motivated, moreover, by changing values and expectations, the Second World War having irrevocably altered the terms by which historically marginalized groups participated in mainstream society – women necessarily entered the domestic workforce, and heretofore racially segregated African Americans fought patriotically alongside white Americans in order to overcome a common enemy – this young generation effectively sought to envision and enact a more egalitarian society, and to correct the political mechanisms that prevented many Americans from enjoying the fruits of the wartime effort. Indeed, the post-war disconnect between expectations and existing political and social structures ultimately provided the impetus for a number of emergent platforms for social justice: the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, the gay liberation movement, and the budding environmental movement, for example. Inextricably enmeshed in these broader movements, the counterculture movement also sought to envision and enact new modes of living and forms of social organization. Yet, instead of engaging with mainstream society, members of

the counterculture movement, who had become disillusioned with what they perceived to be an overwhelming sense of bourgeois materialism, fundamentally rejected conventional forms of activism and authority, focusing, instead, on a more personal political project grounded in the exploration and expansion of human consciousness. Like Leigh-Cheri in *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), who rejects the politics of the Care Fest in favour of her own personal psychological development (as I discussed in Chapter One), members of the counterculture refuted the efficacy of liberal politics, and chose, instead, to pursue and perform a more individualized and interiorized version of political activism. To this end, they experimented with various alternative cultural and spiritual practices, usually imported or ‘borrowed’ from Eastern mystical traditions, and utilized psychoactive drugs, such as marijuana, psilocybic mushrooms, and, most commonly, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD).

The use of psychedelic drugs was, in many ways, a logical outlet for the counterculture movement, since it not only reflected broader concerns about the constitution of the self, but also paralleled the anti-establishment sentiment that marked the counterculture, whereby institutionalized or traditional forms of authority were eschewed in favour of individual autonomy. Timothy Leary, for example, whose “turn on, tune in, drop out” rhetoric came to symbolize the broad countercultural ethos, describes the countercultural preoccupation with psychedelics in the following way:

the characteristics of the psychedelic-spiritual quest are these: it’s highly individual, highly personal ... We have discovered, as men have discovered for thousands of years, that the only temple is the human body and the place of worship is the shrine within your own home, prepared and lovingly designed for your spiritual procedure ... When I say that the ... movement is highly individual, I do not want you to think that I am talking about individuality in the personality sense. John Doe. Or Timothy Leary. I am saying rather that it’s all located inside. (Unger and Unger 159)

In assuming a number of alternative versions of ‘the self’, at once anarchistic, in the sense of the drop-out ethos that characterized the movement, and yet simultaneously holistic, insofar as many members of the counterculture adopted an Eastern conception of the self as

irrefutably linked to the nonhuman natural world (a sentiment also reflected in the dissolution of the self that occurred during acid trips), the counterculture sought to dissolve many of the internal pretensions or beliefs that it believed to be at the root of normative social and political systems.

The great irony of the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, however, is that it ultimately became the very bourgeois institution that it sought to subvert. Despite Timothy Leary's romantic exaltation of individuality and interiority, it was essentially this emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the individual that contributed to the ascension of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s – the dismantling of the welfare state in America, for example, was often rationalized according to an individualist rhetoric that saw people as responsible for their own success, wellbeing, and prosperity, and similarly responsible for any poverty, violence, and/or failure that they might experience. Irving Kristol, perhaps unsurprisingly given his neoconservative orientation, argues that “[c]ountercultures are dangerous phenomena ... Their destructive power always far exceeds their constructive power” (39). Indeed, in rejecting material concerns, the counterculture similarly rejected any practical hope that it might have of actually effecting change in society – it created a kind of vacuum, in other words, that capitalist structures ultimately came to occupy through co-optation and depoliticization, much as third-wave feminism's rhetoric of individual choice inadvertently allowed it to be similarly co-opted by capitalism. As Tiebing Shi explains: “[t]hrough mass production and marketing, corporations ... [commodified] the subversive ideologies underlying ... [the] counterculture's creative products” (107). Speaking about countercultural movements more broadly, Shi adds that in “this assimilating, negating, and commercializing process, the mainstream culture maintains and reproduces its dominant status, [and] empties and decontextualizes the rebellious political and cultural meanings of ... countercultures”.

In Chapter Two, I argued that Robbins' creation of an ideological or metaphorical space for the archetypal earth mother figure in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) potentially amounts to a practical change for women, insofar as it seeks to alter the discursive foundations on which many material conditions are predicated. In fact, it is not quite so simple as this. Real social change requires both psychological (or ideological) and material change – it cannot exist without both. Poststructuralist scholars assert that theory (in a sort of changing minds, changing paradigms way) is a form of practice, and this is true, at least insofar as the terms of social organization cannot be altered adequately or permanently without some sort of mass buy-in from the people who live within these structures. That said, simply changing minds will not necessarily result in social or political change. The counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s did not do anything particularly dramatic with its newfound knowledge and values, and thus it became ineffectual. Whilst there are many aspects of the American counterculture movement that are conducive to, or compatible with, magic(al) realism, therefore – like magic realism, the counterculture emerged as a response to unfamiliar material conditions and radical new social relations, and like marvellous realism, it sought to envision and enact new forms of consciousness better suited to representing cultural 'others' – there are also overwhelming tensions between the two. As a tradition, magic(al) realism is (often) anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, and it seeks to effect both ideological and material changes in the real world – one cannot simply believe that colonial forces no longer exist, for example. It is precisely this tension – between the ambivalence and ultimate impotence of the counterculture movement, and the materialist or structural criticisms offered by magic(al) realism – that emerges in Robbins' writing. Whether it is by illustrating the "Dance of the Seven Veils" in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) (376), whereby each veil dropped by a neo-Canaanite belly dancer symbolizes the dropping of one of Western society's illusions, or the frequency with which Robbins' characters experiment with

consciousness-altering drugs,²² or even the fantastical object-oriented prose out of which his novels are constructed, Robbins does seek to elicit in his readers a shift in consciousness that is wholly designed to effect new creative and inclusive means of engaging with the world. Having been so immersed in the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, he draws on the styles, values, and phenomena evident within this movement in order to facilitate this project. A chronological reading of Robbins' writing shows, however, that the extent to which he praises certain aspects of the counterculture movement changes over time: in *Another Roadside Attraction*, his first novel, from 1971, Robbins celebrates the revolutionary and transformative potentialities of the counterculture, whereas in *Jitterbug Perfume*, for example, published in 1984, he is more critically engaged – still using the counterculture as a backdrop for his writing, but emphasizing the limitations and contradictions inherent to the movement, as well the need to think of the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s as a temporary state, rather than a final goal. In my discussion of Fredric Jameson's arrested dialectics (toward the end of this chapter), I shall return to the tensions between materialist and non-materialist ideologies, as well as to the theory/practice dilemma evident within the magic(al) realist tradition, as well as within postmodernism itself. For now, it is necessary to interrogate the presentation of countercultural, magic(al) realist, and postmodern themes within *Jitterbug Perfume*.

Jitterbug Perfume

Jitterbug Perfume opens by introducing readers to three central characters: “Priscilla Partido, Seattle's ‘genius waitress’”, “Madame Devalier, ‘Queen of the Good Smells’ within the French Quarter of New Orleans”, “and Marcel LeFever, owner of ... [Paris'] most sensitive nose” (Hoyser and Stookey 100). All are “the recipients of unexplained and anonymous gifts of beets”, and all are respectively “intent upon finding the special ingredient needed to

perfect an extraordinary jasmine scent”. Though Robbins’ narrator identifies a number of common goals, locations, and relationships, which serve to connect these three, seemingly isolated, characters, it is primarily through an epic fourth storyline, which spans approximately a millennium, that the characters are thematically, and eventually physically, united. Accordingly, readers are transported, “by means of an enthralling flashback”, to an earlier era, in which an unlikely chain of events is catalyzed by an eighth-century Bohemian King’s decision to outwit death. This fourth narrative, which ultimately structures the entire novel, lays the foundations for Robbins’ speculative exploration of human consciousness, embedded in what Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey call a “vegetable mysticism”, and enables Robbins to develop many of the ideas associated with the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s – an “embryonic golden age”, explains one of Robbins’ characters, prematurely “aborted” (*Jitterbug Perfume* 248). Insofar as Robbins depicts a number of decentralized, chronologically disruptive storylines, he also demonstrates his literary connection to magical realism.

Jitterbug Perfume’s focalizing narrative ultimately chronicles the unusually long lives of King Alobar and his partner Kudra, both of whom live to be approximately one thousand years old. Their tale essentially begins when Alobar (at this point Kudra has not yet been introduced) is customarily sentenced to death. Alobar’s tribe, for whom “the concept of the uniqueness of a single human life ... [is] alien to the point of babble” (26), believe that a King should exemplify virility and vigour. As such, they ritualistically kill off Kings who display any physical sign of aging. For Alobar, “the ritual of putting the king to death had seemed ... natural, inevitable, and just” (20) – that is, until grey hairs begin to pepper his own head. At first, Alobar tries to conceal his aging by pulling out any rogue grey hairs, and by publically affecting various other signs of youth, such as a heightened libido. In so doing, however, he is confronted by an unnerving ontological dilemma. On the one hand, he maintains his

tribe's belief that "[d]eath is not a personal matter ... It is the business of the clan" (22), yet he also experiences an undeniable, though utterly foreign, sense of individual agency: [i]n yanking out the grey hair, he felt that he had betrayed his people, his gods – and himself. Himself? Self? What did *that* mean? [emphasis in original]" (20). Robbins' narrator explains that what Alobar sought "was to become something singular out of his singular experience" (26). When his tribe discovers that he is aging, therefore, Alobar decides to stage his own death – utilizing shamanistic herbs to temporarily obscure any obvious or measurable signs of life. He then organizes for his most trusted concubine, Wren, to take his body to a nearby glen, where, upon regaining consciousness, he proceeds to set out on an epic journey. Robbins essentially embodies the 'othered' concept (within the context of eighth-century Bohemia, that is) of individuality in Alobar. In so doing, he navigates the evolution of the self/other dichotomy inherent to contemporary Western culture – a dichotomy that he is later to undercut. As one of Robbins' characters, perplexed by Alobar's curious decision to directly flout the cultural customs of his tribe, comments: "it will be this new idea of individuality that leadeth many future men astray, causing them to feel superior ... to the land, which they wilt set upon to rape and spoil" (150).

At the beginning of his journey, Alobar stumbles upon the mythic goat-god Pan, with whom he begins a long-lasting friendship. Pan sympathizes with Alobar's flight from death, and explains that he, too, is similarly threatened – widespread belief in a new god figure referred to as Christ has caused belief in Pan to dwindle. As a result of this, as well as humanity's increasing alienation from the natural world, Pan's physical body has started to disappear. Accordingly, Alobar endeavours to save Pan from 'death' as well. Having united with a teenaged Kudra, who has similarly fled from her consignment to her dead husband's funeral pyre, Alobar thus proceeds to chase down the secrets to eternal life, whilst simultaneously seeking to restore belief in Pan. To this end, the trio eventually settles in

Paris, where Kudra undertakes a career as a perfumer. Kudra's proficiency in the art of perfumery enables her to invent an olfactory disguise for Pan, whose malodorous goat-like stench causes nearby Parisians to have nightmarish dreams, and to subsequently engage in lecherous behaviour. The perfume that Kudra invents, dubbed K23, is composed of jasmine, citron, and beet pollen, and it is this scent that Priscilla Partido, Madame Devalier, and Marcel LeFever are attempting to recreate – each having been fleetingly acquainted with, and captivated by, K23 sometime before the novel's sequence of events begins. It is at this point that readers understand the significance of the anonymous gifts of beets received by Priscilla, Madame Devalier, and Marcel at the beginning of the novel – all three have worked out the jasmine and citron elements of the fragrance, but cannot identify the earthy bottom note (the beet pollen).

Synchronous to Priscilla, Madame Devalier, and Marcel's respective efforts to recreate (and to market) K23, Robbins relates Kudra's successful attempt to dematerialize and rematerialize in another dimension. Having apparently secured eternal life – by means of a regular diet of beetroot, hot baths designed to simulate the womb, frequent sex, and circular breathing (earth, water, fire, and wind respectively) – Kudra and Alobar come to the conclusion that eternal life is worthless if it does not enable individuals to pursue life's ultimate meaning: to “expand their minds” and “enlarge their souls” (147). To this effect, Kudra practices, and is eventually capable of, dematerialization. Alobar is not – he cannot seem to let go of his individuality (or sense of self), and is, therefore, unable to relinquish his ties to his body and to the material world. Because the pair had anticipated the possibility of being separated through the process of dematerialization, they had previously decided to use K23 as an identifying scent through which to reconnect – in the material world or otherwise. Alobar awaits Kudra's rematerialization for many years, during which time he learns of a new ‘promised land’, the allegedly Edenic nature of which, he believes, may provide a

suitable living environment for Pan – the urban Parisian environment in which Pan currently lives having been meanwhile attributed to his increasing physical weakness. Alobar and Pan thus set out for the new world – America – but, in so doing, end up exhausting their supply of K23, which is necessarily used to conceal Pan’s oceanic passage. Having thus caught up to the modern day storylines that also feature in the novel, Alobar becomes obsessed with the task of procuring more K23 (without which, he fears, he may never reconnect with Kudra). It is for this reason that he surreptitiously encourages, through the anonymous gifts of beets, Priscilla, Madame Devalier, and Marcel to uncover K23’s composition. It is also to this end that he develops a working relationship with Wiggs Dannyboy: a “[b]rilliant young anthropologist who left his native Dublin to teach at Harvard, where he experimented with mind-altering chemicals beyond the call of academic duty” (206). Wiggs Dannyboy appears to be modelled on Timothy Leary himself, with whom Robbins admits to experimenting with LSD (Luck).

Midway through the novel, Priscilla, Madame Devalier, and Marcel each receive an invitation to a Last Laugh conference, to be held at the residence of infamous psychonaut Wiggs Dannyboy. Priscilla, however, is the only one capable of attending the conference. At the conference, which turns out to be a small dinner party for individuals interested in the field of psychonautics, Priscilla learns about Alobar’s story. She is also subject to Dannyboy’s lecture on human consciousness and its ultimate relationship to the evolution of the human species. Recapitulating Terence McKenna’s stoned ape hypothesis, according to which the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms by *Homo sapiens*’ evolutionary ancestors, *Homo erectus*, led to the development of the abstract cognitive faculties that now characterize modern-day humans (*Food of the Gods*), Dannyboy explains that:

[a]bout two hundred thousand years ago, the human brain tripled in size. Science has been unable to explain this relatively sudden enlargement, since beyond a certain size, a size that the brains of our ancestors had already reached two hundred thousand years ago, intelligence does not increase with brain volume. (227)

This sudden evolutionary leap, according to Wiggs Dannyboy, begs the following question: [w]hat evolutionary purpose was served ... by tripling our cerebral real estate?”. It is from this platform that Dannyboy relates his theory of floral consciousness. Dannyboy explains that he has an interest in smell, that is, “an interest in the evolution o’ consciousness. Smell is the only sense to communicate directly with the neocortex” (244) – the area of the brain that developed suddenly two hundred thousand years ago. He elaborates on this curious interrelationship further, and supposes “that ... if we can learn to speak” the language of the smell, which is uniquely understood by the neocortex, then “we may be able to manipulate the cortex through the nose” in order to expedite “the evolution o’ consciousness”. He goes on to say that humans have evolved through three significant forms of consciousness: reptile consciousness, mammalian consciousness, and the nascent floral consciousness. Reptile consciousness “is cold, aggressive, self-preserving, angry, greedy, and paranoid” (320): “[w]hen we are in a cold sweat, a blind rage, or simply feeling smugly dispassionate, we may be sure that, for the moment, our reptile brain is in control of our consciousness” (321). By contrast, the “[c]haracteristics of mammal consciousness are warmth, generosity, loyalty, love (romantic, platonic, and familial), joy, grief, humor, pride, competition, intellectual curiosity, and appreciation of art and music”. According to Dannyboy, however, both reptilian and mammalian consciousnesses have served their evolutionary purpose:

[w]hen life was a constant struggle between predators, a minute-by-minute battle for survival, reptile consciousness was necessary. When there were seas to be sailed, wild continents to be explored, harsh territory to be settled, agriculture to be mastered, mine shafts to be sunk, civilization to be founded, mammal consciousness was necessary. In its social and familial aspects, it is still necessary, but no longer must it dominate. (322)

Wiggs Dannyboy’s notion of a ‘budding’ floral consciousness, then, is predicated on the assumption that humans now require a “more relaxed, contemplative, gentle, flexible kind of” consciousness. He rationalizes his theory by discussing the extent to which the brain itself is plantlike in nature: “[t]he whole brain is described in science as a *bulb*. The neurons of

which it is composed have *dendrites: roots and branches*. The cerebellum consists of a large mass of closely packed *folia*, which are bundles of nerve cells described in the literature as *leaflike* [emphasis in original]" (321-322). He posits, moreover, that there are similarities between the world humans now live in, and the world that plants have always lived in:

[w]e live now in an information technology. Flowers have *always* lived in an information technology. Flowers gather information all day. At night, they process it. This is called photosynthesis. As our neocortex comes into full use, we, too, will practice a kind of photosynthesis. As a matter of fact, we already do, but compared to the flowers, our kind is primitive and limited [emphasis in original]. (323)

Significantly, Dannyboy compares the evolutionary stage at which humans are now positioned to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. Something similar, he says, "was brewing in America in the years 1964 to 1971":

Maybe it was sentimental, if not actually stupid, to romanticize the sixties as an embryonic golden age, Wiggs admitted. Certainly, this fetal age of enlightenment aborted. Nevertheless, the sixties were special; not only did they *differ* from the twenties, the fifties, the seventies, etc., they were *superior* to them. Like the Arthurian years at Camelot, the sixties constituted a breakthrough, a fleeting moment of glory, a time when a significant little chunk of humanity briefly realized its moral potential and flirted with its neurological destiny, a collective spiritual awakening that flared brilliantly until the barbaric and mediocre impulses of the species drew tight once more the curtains of darkness [emphasis in original]. (248)

Even though he suggests that "in social terms, the sixties had failed" – the "barbaric and mediocre" impulses he references seem to implicate the reactionary politics of individualism and capitalism that ultimately rendered the counterculture movement ineffectual – Dannyboy maintains that by "evolutionary terms they were a landmark, a milestone": a "dizzy period of transcendence and awareness (transcendence of obsolete value systems, awareness of the enormity and richness of inner reality)" (249).

Jitterbug Perfume thus concludes with Priscilla, Madame Devalier, and Marcel each successfully reproducing K23 – though deciding collectively not to mass-market the perfume – and with the long-awaited rematerialization of Kudra, whose journey into the afterlife corroborates Dannyboy's hypothesis that smell is linked not only to consciousness, but to

eternal life itself. The novel also ends by positioning Dannyboy's daughter, Huxley Anne, as a sort of floral deity – a swarm of bees having assumed permanent residence atop her head.

Robbins' narrator subsequently suggests that Huxley Anne's brain is so active that it produces "a sort of neocortical honey" that "actually attracts bees" (326). The narrator goes on to say that:

[w]hen Western artists wished to demonstrate that a person was holy, they painted a ring of light around the divine one's head. Eastern artists painted a more diffused aura. The message was the same. The aura of the halo signifies that the light was on in the subject's brain. The neocortex was fully operative. There is, however, a second interpretation of the halo. It can be read as a symbolized, highly stylized swarm of bees.

Developing the sort of reinterpretation (or reconstruction) of religious narratives evident in many of his other novels – *Another Roadside Attraction*, for example – Robbins ultimately seeks to restore a kind of naturalistic equilibrium to human discourse by positing that a reunification between humans and the nonhuman natural world is necessary to actualizing the full potential of humans as a species. Significantly, it is Robbins' female characters that are most attuned to this regenerative and restorative interrelationship between humanity and nonhuman nature. Kudra's more flexible understanding of the self, as interconnected to, rather than isolated from, a broader scheme of being, allows her to dematerialize, for example, and Huxley Anne is described as being evolutionarily advanced (like Sissy Hankshaw) – exemplifying a new floral consciousness in humans. This implicit gendering sits comfortably alongside the ecofeminist discourses embedded and espoused in novels like *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976). Though it may appear that Robbins is advocating a rather essentialist link between nonhuman nature and femininity – something that contemporary (eco)feminists generally reject (as I discussed in Chapter Two) – his project is not so much about pigeonholing women as closer to nonhuman nature, as it is about rediscovering the others (human and nonhuman) who have been excluded from, and silenced by, normative Western discourse. Moreover, his ecofeminist sensibilities work to introduce

and ideologically justify a new conception of the self (or, rather, an old conception appropriately renewed) – undermining the belief in a binary relationship between man and nature, and replacing it, instead, with a self that is embedded in nature. Robbins’ techno-shamanistic portrayal of human evolution – his assertion that it is chauvinistic to assume that “the human species ... [is] the end product of the evolutionary process, its culminating and crowning glory” (*Half Asleep* 374) – also exemplifies his affinity with posthumanism. By literally positing that humans are still evolving, Robbins undermines the modernist assumption that humans have an essential nature, let alone one that is white, affluent, and rational. Robbins’ tendency to blend and bricolage spiritual and scientific narratives – itself compatible with the magical realist tendency to blend realist and magical narratives – and effectively to envision and embody new cosmological and ontological matrices through this blending, is a recurring theme throughout his oeuvre. In terms of Robbins’ relationship to the American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s, this metaphysical project is facilitated through the recollection and redeployment of many of the ideas associated with The New Physics.

The New Physics

Within a scientific context, The New Physics relates to a number of revolutionary discoveries that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century: the discovery of radioactivity, the emergence of quantum theory, and the conception and continued relevance of relativity theory, for example (Davies 1). Though these theories pre-date the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, in some cases by many decades, it was not until the height of the counterculture movement that they began to be understood and discussed within mainstream social dialogue. Quantum theory and relativity theory, in particular, were perceived to corroborate many of the values and ideas circulating within the counterculture movement, and profoundly influenced much of the metaphysical and philosophical debate

that subsequently occurred throughout the twentieth century. It is important to note that within scientific communities, these discoveries, though undoubtedly paradigm-changing, did not have quite the same implications or consequences, specifically in relation to the perceived veracity and adequacy of scientific methodology. The New Physics, therefore, though broadly related to actual scientific discoveries, communicates more precisely the way that these discoveries were translated and assimilated into mainstream culture, and the effects that this had on the perception of science and scientific metanarratives. Insofar as public imagination is concerned, then, The New Physics became a shorthand phrase for Werner Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle, the relativistic nature of scientific observation, and for the observer effect with which quantum mechanics was associated. In essence, "Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle, which Robbins refers to frequently, asserts that we cannot know both the position and momentum of a subatomic particle with a high degree of accuracy" (Nadeau, "Physics and Cosmology" 64). Since the methods by which each of these variables can be observed necessarily cancel each other out, Heisenberg's principle came to symbolize the indeterminate, duplicitous, and hypothetical nature of scientific inquiry. To qualify again, this indeterminacy did not undermine scientific methodology generally, at least insofar as scientists themselves were concerned, but it did serve, at the level of public understanding, to undercut the definitive, almost omniscient status of science within normative culture. Indeed, since the Enlightenment period, science had gradually acquired an almost God-like status, insofar as it was understood as being an infallible, complete, and concrete means of observing and understanding the phenomenological world. The advent of quantum theory, and its seeming association with contingency and instability, thus served to cast doubt on the universal applicability and flawless authority of scientific methodology. This perception was emphasized, moreover, by the observer effect also associated with Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle. In essence, the observer effect states that "it is impossible to

describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed” (Waugh 3). Closely related to various relativity theories, which similarly contend that the nature of the observable will change according to the position from which it is being observed, the observer effect seemed also to undermine the cultural valuation of science as objective, dispassionate, and lawful. Finally, the chaos or vibrancy with which matter was understood under quantum theory transformed ontological perceptions of the nonhuman natural world, and subsequently came to influence and characterize the environmental movement also developing during the 1960s. No longer was the nonhuman natural world conceived of as being inert, inanimate, or passive. Instead, the “new postmodern sciences of ecology, chaos and complexity theory” entrenched “the idea of nature as actor” (Merchant 230). As such, the means by which humans engaged with nonhuman nature (consciously or otherwise) became an intense political and social focal point. Ultimately, The New Physics “set a new direction for contemporary science and ... affected Western metaphysics in major ways” (Shin 41).

The metaphysical aspects of The New Physics not only appeared to substantiate the counterculture’s preoccupation with consciousness – or the extent to which the counterculture movement held that consciousness mediated all ‘real’ phenomena – but also served to expose a number of perceived commonalities between Western scientific methodology and Eastern mysticism, the latter already a central focus for the counterculture movement. As Doo-ho Shin explains: “[i]ndeterminacy has been constantly accepted in Eastern mystical traditions, while in the West it has only recently gained attention” (v). The realization of quantum mysticism, for example, which many early twentieth-century scientists even subscribed to, was a direct response to the deeply ontological implications of the scientific discoveries associated with The New Physics. According to Terence and Dennis McKenna, for example, “[t]he world as dynamic process, an idea basic to Vedic and Taoist viewpoints, makes the wave mechanics of postquantum physics seem quite natural, although in the Western

scientific tradition it marks an extreme reorganization of thought that involves nothing less than the abandonment of determinism and materialism” (146). Terence and Dennis McKenna actually sought to explain both Eastern mystical traditions and the nature of consciousness under this new scientific framework. In *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching* (1975), for example, the pair attempts to scientifically rationalize various experiences with consciousness altering drugs (such as Ayahuasca, a psychedelic plant frequently used by Indigenous Amazonians) and relates *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (1964), an ancient Chinese divination text, to the principles that underscore quantum theory. Noticing the coalescing of Eastern mystical traditions, The New Physics, and poststructuralist or postmodern language theory, Shin suggests that “[s]ince the tendencies of indeterminacy and immanence have become crucial concerns of Western postmodern culture, literature, and literary criticism, East and West now share a key common element by which each culture has a better chance to understand the other” (23). Indeed, it is precisely the perceived compatibilities between Western scientific methodology and Eastern mysticism, which emerged during the 1960s, that Robbins explores in his novels. Crucially, Robbins positions these two epistemological traditions within the broader framework of postmodernism. In juxtaposing and comparing The New Physics, modern language theory, and contemporary postmodern philosophy, all of which “question the concept of a transcendental signified” (Shin 8) – Jacques Derrida’s term for an overarching organizing principle that controls the movement and play of signs within a given semiotic economy – Robbins seeks to destabilize conventional Western metanarratives. In so doing, he also commits to understanding Eastern ideological traditions in a much more genuine way than the American counterculture did – the movement having retained an overwhelming sense of ambivalence toward Eastern traditions, which were commodified, misappropriated, and fetishized.

Reconciling Science and Spirituality

In *Jitterbug Perfume*, Robbins' narrator explains that there "is a long-standing argument about whether perfuming is a science or an art" (228). This argument, the narrator contends, "is irrelevant, for at the higher levels, science and art are the same. There is a point where high science transcends the technologic and enters the poetic, [and] there is a point where high art transcends technique and enters the poetic". It is to similar effect that Robbins depicts the interrelationship between Western scientific methodology and Eastern mysticism. Essentially, Robbins subverts the science/spirituality dichotomy that has come to characterize the relationship between East and West, and, in so doing, democratizes the various methods by which humans understand and engage with the phenomenal world. In *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, for example, Robbins makes a number of references to The New Physics broadly, and to Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle specifically. Robert L. Nadeau, for instance, describes the extent to which Sissy serves to symbolize the metaphysical ethos associated with The New Physics: "[w]hen her thoroughly bourgeois, analytically minded husband-to-be criticizes Sissy for traveling her whole life without 'destination,' she alludes to the Indeterminacy Principle in her response: 'What is the 'direction' of the earth in its journey; where are atoms 'going' when they spin?'" ("Physics and Cosmology" 70). The best example of the co-mingling of scientific and mystic philosophies in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, however, comes in the form of the "clockworks" (209) – another name for The Chink's residence atop the Siwash Ridge. In Chapter Two, I explained how The Chink came to be rescued by a community of Indigenous Americans known as The Clock People. The Chink, who is effectively on the run from the American government, thus decides to live with The Clock People in their underground village. The Chink explains to Sissy that The Clock People, who had once lived 'normal', urban lives, established a cloistered community after what they say was a huge catastrophe: "[h]istory knows the catastrophe as the Great San

Francisco Earthquake. That is not how the Clock People know it, but, then, the Clock People don't believe in earthquakes" (186). Elaborating further, The Chink asserts that:

The Clock People regard civilization as an insanely complex set of symbols that obscures natural processes and encumbers free movement. The Earth is alive. She burns inside with the heat of cosmic longing. She longs to be with her husband again. She moans. She turns softly in her sleep. When the symbologies [sic] of civilization are destroyed, there will be no more "earthquakes." Earthquakes are a manifestation of man's consciousness. Without manmade follies there could not be earthquakes. In the Eternity of Joy, pluralized, deurbanized man, at ease with his gentle technologies, will smile and sigh when the Earth begins to shake. "She is restless tonight," they will say. (194)

The Clock People's society is ultimately premised on predicting the next earthquake (not that they would call it that). Having established a naturalistic underground clock, in which they use catfish to monitor the Earth's vibrations, The Clock People thus await future earthquakes, which they believe will lead to a deconstruction of normative Western culture. The Chink, in assuming residency atop the Siwash Ridge, also creates a physical mechanism for measuring time, which he dubs the "clockworks" (209). Dr Robbins describes The Chink's clockworks in the following way:

Garbage can lids and old saucepans and lard tins and car fenders, all wired together way down in the middle of Siwash cave. Every now and then, this contraption moves, a bat will fly into it, a rock will fall on it, an updraft will catch it, a wire will rust through, or it'll just move for no apparently logical reason – and one part of it will hit against another part. And it'll go *bonk* or *poing* and that *bonk* or that *poing* will echo throughout the caverns. It might go *bonk* or *poing* five times in a row. Then a pause; then one more time. After that, it might be silent for a day or two, maybe a month. Then the clock'll strike again, say twice. Following that there could be silence for an entire year – or just a minute or so. Then, *POING!* so loud you nearly jump out of your skin. And that's the way it goes. Striking freely, crazily, at odd intervals [emphasis in original]. (210)

The Chink's clockworks ultimately symbolize the indeterminate nature of scientific observation associated with The New Physics, and, moreover, align this indeterminacy with Eastern mystic traditions – the Chink being an Eastern mystic himself, who accepts and delights in paradox: "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred ... I believe in nothing, everything is sacred" (238). The vibrancy that The Chink attributes to the nonhuman natural

world, and which is evident throughout Robbins' oeuvre (see Chapter One), also exemplifies the meeting ground between Eastern and Western philosophies. The object-oriented cosmologies embodied and espoused in Robbins' novels are explicitly communicated in the language of The New Physics, and yet simultaneously reflect the sort of panvitalism central to many Eastern philosophies, as is evident in another of Robbins' novels:

[r]ecently physicists have started to conclude that in the entire universe there may be only two particles. Not two *kinds* of particles, mind you, but two particles, period. One with a positive charge, one with a negative. And listen to this: the two particles can *exchange* charges, the negative can trade off to become positive and vice versa. So, in a sense, there's only *one* particle in the universe, it being a pair whose attributes are interchangeable [emphasis in original]. (Robbins, *Fierce Invalids* 385)

Robbins translates this scientific revelation metaphysically by suggesting that:

[i]f God's aim is stability, then he's a monumental, incompetent failure, the biggest loser of all time. This universe he's credited with creating is dynamic, in almost constant flux. Any stability we might perceive in it on any level is as temporary as it is aberrant. Symbiosis, maybe; even a kind of harmonious interaction, but not stability. (173)

Indeed, Robbins' mysticism is one of the recurring themes in his writing, and he even "states that the key ... to understanding his writing ... [is] a knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhist concept of 'crazy wisdom'" (Hoyser and Stookey 9). This makes sense when one considers the extent to which Robbins appropriates many of Lao-Tzu's maxims. Stephen Mitchell explains that people "usually think of Lao-tzu as a hermit, a dropout from society, dwelling serenely in some mountain hut, unvisited except perhaps by the occasional traveler arriving from a '60s joke to ask, 'What is the meaning of life?'" (vii). It would appear that Robbins rematerializes this mythological figure in *The Chink*, especially given the frequency with which Lao-Tzu's teachings are espoused within *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Indeed, in his famed text *Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way* (1989), Lao-Tzu asserts that "[t]rue words seem paradoxical" (78), a sentiment undoubtedly manifest in *The Chink*'s own catchphrase (cited above). Lao-Tzu's teachings are also underscored by a persistent belief in the restorative power of the circle, or the nature by which the circle reflects the

interconnectedness of all life (29). Unsurprisingly, the group of cowgirls in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* believe that women “must educate men about the feminine circle to deflect men from the dualism, square shapes, and Cartesian philosophy that have lulled people into perceiving them as logical and, therefore, as the only way to look at the world” (Hoyser and Stookey 37). They contend, moreover, that the “feminine circle, which shows that all life is connected, will save the planet from the destructive and exploitative worldview of the patriarchy”. In an even more obvious homage to Lao-Tzu, who wrote that “[w]hen they lose their sense of awe, people turn to religion. When they no longer trust themselves, they begin to depend upon authority” (72), Dr Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*’ narrator, suggests that “disbelief in magic can force a poor soul into believing in government and business” (69). Hoyser and Stookey suggest that Robbins employs Eastern mystical constructs “not to suggest that Westerners adopt the Eastern philosophical perspective but rather ‘to hammer away relentlessly at those assumptions about self and world in Western cosmology which he feels are injurious to our safety as well as our emotional and psychological well-being’” (26 citing Nadeau, “Physics and Cosmology”): in essence, “Robbins’s novels question the basis of Western philosophy”. Not only does Robbins’ employ alternative cultural cosmologies to this end, however, but so too the complementary sentiments associated with postmodernism.

Postmodern Indeterminacy

Doo-ho Shin asserts that “[p]ostmodern indeterminacy ‘challenges the totalizing will,’ [by] asserting [the] primacy of [the] Many over the [primacy of the] One” (20), adding that postmodern immanence – “the increasing capacity of the mind to ... intervene in nature, to act upon itself through its own abstractions, and to end up becoming its own environment” (Juan-Navarro 22) – similarly works “to disperse the will of the One by letting everyone recreate his/her reality through his/her consciousness” (Shin 20). Though Shin’s supposition appears

to be quite counter-intuitive, insofar as it sees individuality, subjectivity, and individual choice (all of which, in Shin's words, veer uncomfortably close toward solipsism) as being prefatory to the establishment of collective, inclusive narratives and social structures, the point he appears to be making, which sits comfortably alongside Arran Gare's definition of the new grand narrative, is that by emphasizing the extent to which all humans discursively mediate the phenomenological world, postmodernism undermines the disproportionate legitimacy attributed to hegemonic metanarratives. In recognizing diversity and difference, it allows human societies to accommodate a range of worldviews, rather than a single worldview (or two binary worldviews: real and unreal, right and wrong, central and marginal). With recourse to Ihab Hassan's ideas about postmodernism's "fanatic will to unmaking" (4) – the nature of postmodernism as fundamentally deconstructive, in other words – Shin contends that, within postmodern literature, indeterminacy manifests itself in the "deformation ... decenterment, displacement, ... dedefinition, ... detotalization, and delegitimation" of conventional Western metanarratives (20). In collaging together alternative cosmologies, othered ontologies, and textual devices, all aimed at defamiliarizing and denaturalizing normative expectations and assumptions, and in explicitly focusing on "the ways in which word and grammar ... [interface] with actions and activity – the 'post-historical' nature "in which words, relieved of some of their traditional burden, might be employed not to describe realities but to create ... [*l*]iteral realities [emphasis in original]" (Robbins, *Fierce Invalids* 71, 69) – Robbins exemplifies both the indeterminacy and immanence that Hassan and Shin respectively ascribe to postmodern literature, as well as the reconstructive and transformative propensities attributed to magic(al) realism, and (less frequently) associated with postmodernism.

In exploring the indeterminacy inherent to postmodernism, Robbins' writing also invokes and complements Fredric Jameson's assertions about the existence of various

arrested dialectics – embedded simultaneously in postmodern theories, as well as in the broader conditions related to postmodernity. Indeed, in discussing Robbins’ magic(al) realist fiction alongside Jameson’s arrested dialectics, one can begin to understand not only the relationship between postmodernism and magic(al) realism, but so too the multidimensional (and often contested) interrelationship between theory and practice evident within the magic(al) realist tradition, postmodernism, and contemporary radical leftist politics. Writing in regards to utopian fiction, Simon Stow defines the dialectic as that which occurs “when some way is found to reconcile ... two conflicting positions, by locating ... [a] third position that both accounts for and explains the apparent conflict in such a way as to make the conflict disappear” (42). The dialectic, a method of argumentation central to modernist philosophies and most notably associated with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, is, therefore, fundamentally designed both to mediate and resolve ideological conflict. In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), however, Jameson asserts that there are a number of theoretical dualisms to which the dialectic does not, and cannot, apply. These antinomies, or arrested dialectics, each of which, Jameson suggests, presents a logical paradox to the traditional dialectical method, insofar as they communicate the theoretical stasis between concepts that, despite being counter-intuitive, are equally conceivable and simultaneously valid, include space and time, subject and object, nature and human nature, and utopia and dystopia. Rather “than positing a position in which we have to choose between two categories ... contradiction standing for the modernist option perhaps, while antinomy offers a more postmodern one”, Jameson contends that “it might be worthwhile using them both against one another, insofar as each is uniquely equipped to problematize the other in its most vital implications” (4). Indeed, this is precisely the sense of indecision, or the distaste for ideological dichotomies, that Robbins attributes to his main character in *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* (2000):

Switters was always nettled when expected to choose between two modes of behavior, two political, social, or theological systems, two objects or two (allegedly)

mutually exclusive delights; between hot and cold, tart and sweet, funny and serious, sacred and profane, Apollonian and Dionysian, apples and oranges, paper and plastic, smoking and nonsmoking [sic], right and wrong. Why only a pair of choices? And why not choose both? Who was the legislator of these dichotomies? (220)

Much like The Chink's clockworks in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Jameson characterizes the suspensive nature of postmodern indeterminacy as a situation in which there is "a kind of breathlessness, as we listen for the missing next tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis" (71). He posits, moreover, that "[a]t best, in postmodernity, we will witness new postmodern versions of [these antinomies] ... as ... [they] adapt to the shifting boundaries and margins of new peripheries and new centers" (485). It would appear that, like the arrested dialectics identified by Jameson, magic(al) realism also hinges on the simultaneous viability of contradictory cosmologies – the un-synthesizable relationship between magical and realist worldviews – and like Jameson's antinomies, magical realism is efficacious precisely because each of the 'realities' that it illustrates illuminates the blind spots of the other.

According to Marcial González, however, the absent first step of renewed praxis to which Jameson refers is actually an irrefutable product of postmodernism itself – "Jameson remains limited in his ability to envision the 'first step of renewed praxis' [precisely] because his dialectical criticism has come under the influence of postmodernist theory" (citing Jameson). The dialectic needs to be resolved, in other words, in order for humans to envision and enact any kind of future markedly different from the present. Indeed, within the context of Western radical politics, and within the Western academy itself, there is a pervasive belief in the mutual opposition between postmodern and materialist (or Marxist) ideologies. For many Marxist activists and scholars, for example, postmodernism constitutes, at best, "an illusion", and, at worst, a barrier to meaningful and successful (or measurable and tangible) working-class politics. According to Terry Eagleton, postmodernism's "dismissal of so-called grand narratives and triumphal announcement of the End of History" has served to substitute the transformative and collectivizing framework of class consciousness with the divisive,

nebulous, and altogether bourgeois notion of identity politics (*Why Marx Was Right* 6).²³ The perceived antagonism between Marxism and postmodernism, however, appears to hinge on what is essentially a more complex re-enactment of the discursively dichotomous relationship between theory and practice. In basic terms, Marxism, although intensely ideological and theoretical, is often viewed as a ‘practical’ worldview. In its calls for revolution, and in its allegiance to historical materialism, Marxism is seen to be a framework for effecting real change, primarily through the realization of class consciousness: an international, all-encompassing means of collectivizing otherwise atomized and alienated individuals. Postmodernism, by contrast, which has effectively come to represent a broad range of theoretical platforms and paradigms, is understood as being abstracted from the real lives of dispossessed and oppressed individuals, and is thought to offer no real or measurable means of changing of the world – it is (a) ‘theory’ in the pejorative sense of the word. Moreover, in emphasizing the centrality of identity politics, which acknowledges and focalizes the differences between certain groups of people (women, people of colour, and people with varying levels of ability, for example), and in prioritizing the local over the global, postmodernism, it is argued, plays into (and reproduces) the individualistic rhetoric of capitalism (especially evident in late-capitalist, neoliberal culture), and erodes any sense of a cosmopolitan working class – or any notion that people in different locations share the same interests. By this logic, postmodernism can be seen as being similar to the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s.

The problem with this constructed opposition, however, is that it assumes some kind of competition between Marxist and postmodern ideologies, when, in fact, postmodern (and particularly poststructuralist) ideologies actually grew out of Marxism – differing only in their emphasis: upon linguistic and discursive superstructures rather than economic ones. In reality, the two are not only compatible, but perhaps even interdependent. Marxism provides

a practical platform for changing economic (and social) structures, and postmodernism does the same for ideological and psychological structures. In other words, Marxism has the capacity to unite groups of people in order to bring about effective and wide-ranging change, and postmodernism has the capacity to make people actually buy into these changes by similarly changing the ideological and cognitive foundations on which these material systems are built: theory and practice. Although the Marxist theorists to which I refer would not like the point I am about to make, it would appear that, within the context of magic(al) realism at least, materialist and postmodern ideologies themselves constitute a kind of arrested dialectic that should not be resolved. Postmodernism enables magic(al) realism to acknowledge, legitimize, and negotiate the differences between people (which cannot be erased just because they are inconvenient), and in reconciling ontological positions with epistemological ones, reinvigorates the kind of imagination needed to envision new futures for human societies – by including different people and different experiences, it shows us that we have not yet exhausted all possibilities for organization. It also functions as a sort of check and balance on the totalizing potential of class politics (which, in practice, has often benched the concerns of women and migrant workers so as to maintain an ideologically pure and outwardly unified front). In the same way, materialism ensures that the thought experiments that occur within a postmodern framework actually have a relationship to the real world, and the ability to improve the lives of real people. It can also serve as a check and balance, in that its critical engagement is necessary to protecting postmodernism from the co-optation and depoliticization that is a constant threat from capitalism: like magical and realist narratives, materialist and postmodern positions have the potential to illuminate the blind spots of each other.

Rethinking the Novel

In his endeavour to redefine the novelistic form in order to better represent and express the indeterminate nature of consciousness and life in a postmodern era, Robbins utilizes a number of techniques that are closely aligned with Jameson's arrested dialectics. Indeed, these techniques serve to resist the totalizing will of modernity (and/or capitalism), and, instead, embrace the liminal spaces between conventional categories and cosmologies. In this way, Robbins works to undo many of the dichotomies that have come to structure and sustain normative Western discourse, or at least to imbue these dichotomies with a sense of ambiguity. Directly implicating the antinomical relationships between space and time, subject and object, and nature and human nature, Robbins, undoubtedly influenced by the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, but also seeking to resolve some of the tensions and contradiction inherent to it, ultimately seeks to open up a metaphorical space in which new narratives can be envisioned and embodied.

In a 2011 interview, Robbins insists that in writing *Another Roadside Attraction*, his first novel, he had to reinvent and redefine the novelistic form: "I had a vast array of subjects I wanted to explore, but it was going to be set in the sixties and what I wanted to do was to recreate the sixties on the page. I realized intuitively that the traditional novel could not really capture the sixties ... it was too much mythology in action, it was a very mythological period" (Mason). In his recent autobiography, he expounds upon this dilemma by asserting that "[f]antasy being inscrutable under the microscope of social realism, I ... knew I must compose *Another Roadside Attraction* ... in a fashion for which there was no satisfactory model" (*Tibetan Peach Pie* 243):

it became clear to me that I must construct *Another Roadside Attraction* in short bursts, modeled perhaps on Zen koans, on Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes, and on the little flashes of illumination one experiences under the influence of certain sacraments. My book's goal, then, was not so much to simulate reality as to *become* reality, a reality paradoxically steeped in fantasy [emphasis in original]. (244)

Accordingly, Robbins wrote *Another Roadside Attraction* episodically, “in little flashes like little flashes that someone might get when they’re stoned or little flashes that you might get from listening to music” (Mason). Indeed, this episodic narrative arrangement is consistent throughout Robbins’ oeuvre, be it in the chronologically disordered installments and interludes in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, or the synchronicity of human and nonhuman plots in *Skinny Legs and All*. Significantly, Robbins realizes the extent to which *Another Roadside Attraction*, at once bricolaged and metafictional, is also postmodern in form: “it was ... postmodernist in a way in that it was often or occasionally self-referential. I would interrupt the narrative flow and ... I the writer would intrude upon the story”. Shin suggests that the “assimilation of the new physics into the art of the novel is evident in a much changed notion of the narrator and author”: “[t]he observer in the new physics as well as in Eastern mystical traditions is not a disinterested spectator. S/he is a vital participant in the activity of the experiment and meaning-making process” (93). Because the “idea of what is real is essentially related to human perception ... [s]uch human conscious participation has become an important feature of postmodern art and literature” (88-89).

It is at this point that the figuration of many of the magic(al) realist concepts and conventions in Robbins’ novels becomes apparent. Though Robbins utilizes many of the techniques associated with magic(al) realism – disruptive teleologies and temporalities, self-referential narrators and characters, extraordinary objects and vibrant representations of nonhuman nature, and supernatural physiologies, for example – these techniques are actually an organic response to the nature of reality in the period in which Robbins began writing: to the perception of reality, in other words, that characterized the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, and the myriad scientific, social, and spiritual revelations with which the counterculture movement coincided and is conflated. Although he undoubtedly has knowledge of the magic(al) realist tradition, exemplified by his references to

the original magic realist movement, and his frequent homages to canonical magical realist authors (not to mention the many ways in which he orients his writing geographically and ideologically within “South too-goddamn-vivid America” [Robbins, *Fierce Invalids* 3]), his writing responds naturally to the grand epistemological shift from modernism to postmodernism, as well as to the altered state of reality under postmodernism itself. His disruptive chronologies gesture toward the radically transformed notion of causality inherent to The New Physics, or the ways in which conventional teleologies are decentralized and undermined, his self-referential narrators and characters similarly point toward the increasingly contested notion of objectivity in a postmodern climate, and his vibrant representations of physical objects and nonhuman nature also reflect the postmodern realization of nature as actor. Moreover, Robbins’ characters, who embody, appropriate, and celebrate otherness, sit comfortably alongside the ascendance of postmodern identity politics as a framework for understanding and expressing the historical interrelationships, at once epistemological and material, between various selves and others – particularly as they have been categorized and negotiated within the context of normative Western discourse. It would appear that, like magic(al) realism, the myriad manifestations of which emerged as a response to the seeming disconnect between interior and exterior landscapes – between the exclusive psychological parameters of real and unreal – Robbins’ writing articulates the same desire to realign and redefine consciousness with consensual reality. This project, which is necessarily ontological in nature, demonstrates precisely the poststructuralist conception of theory as practice, but also sits naturally alongside more materialist positions. In accepting and embracing the indeterminacy and immanence inherent to postmodernity (and postmodern literature), Robbins essentially captures John Barth’s assertion “that literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its ‘meaning’ residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language”

(176). In the end, Robbins' novels point toward a more immediate human concern, broader even than the political and existential orientation of magic(al) realism, in that they demand readers to think about, and to act upon, the ideological constructions that give rise to human societies and modes of organization, and the hypothetical situations to which these modes of organization (ideological and institutional) will transport humans in the future. As Nadeau explains: “[p]hilosophers and theologians may provide us with the clearest description of the intellectual dilemmas posed by a Copernicus or a Darwin, but it is the artist who insinuates these threatening ideas into the emotional fabric of our lives” (*Readings* 13-14).

Conclusion

Like magic realism, marvellous realism, and magical realism respectively, Robbins' novels seek to envision, articulate, and reify an alternative cultural consciousness. This form of consciousness, which is inextricably tethered conceptually and contextually to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, ultimately hinges on the radically transformed nature of reality under postmodernism. Responding to the political, social, scientific, psychological, and grand epistemological revelations that occurred during, and subsequently came to characterize, the late twentieth century, Robbins' novels embrace indeterminacy and immanence as natural conditions of human existence. In so doing, they reflect, and bring to the fore, the metaphysical commonalities between Western scientific methodologies, particularly those that arose out of The New Physics and Eastern mystical traditions. Moreover, Robbins' overt references to postmodern or poststructuralist linguistic theories – his explicit problematization of the liminal spaces between signified and signifier, for example – also reflect the postmodern preoccupation with consciousness, at least insofar as cultural lexicons work to condition the interrelationship between interior and exterior landscapes. His identification of the relationship between normative expectations and

assumptions and dominant social institutions, which reflects the poststructuralist interrelationship between theory and practice, forms of basis of his recurrent didactic agenda. Like Leigh Cheri in *Still Life with Woodpecker*, who eschews conventional liberal politics in favour of a more personal political project, Robbins essentially contends that by eliciting perceptual transformations in his readers, his novels will work similarly to elicit more egalitarian modes of behaviour. It is precisely this position that cements his relationship to postmodern identity politics, and which underscores his promotion of a new conception of the 'self' – one that is more inclusive, and which relates more appropriately, to the nonhuman natural world. In the end, Robbins' novels are not so much a contrived appropriation of the magic(al) realist tradition, but rather, an organic representation of broader questions relating to the relationship between consciousness and consensual reality. In attempting to answer these questions, however, Robbins draws upon a long history of artistic and literary works, which have also sought variously to communicate (and even to hijack) this interrelationship in order to diversify and democratize the metanarratives that have come to structure and sustain Western metanarratives. Like many artists and authors before him, Robbins ultimately seeks to defamiliarize and denaturalize normative representations of reality so as to encourage new, more egalitarian thoughts about, and approaches to, human interactions and identities.

CONCLUSION

To the extent that this world surrenders its richness and diversity, it surrenders its poetry. To the extent that it relinquishes its capacity to surprise, it relinquishes its magic. To the extent that it loses its ability to tolerate ridiculous and even dangerous exceptions, it loses its grace. As its options (no matter how absurd or unlikely) diminish, so do its chances for the future.

-- Tom Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (295).

Throughout the course of this thesis, the primary objective of which has been to discuss and develop my claim that Tom Robbins is a postmodern magic(al) realist author, I have sought to centralize the interrelationship between theory and practice. For the most part, this is because the interrelationship between theory and practice recurs within, and is relevant to, Robbins' magic(al) realist writing, especially insofar as he negotiates, in his novels, various discourses that seek to alter – or to reorganize – extra-textual social and political structures through the denaturalization and deconstruction of hegemonic Western metanarratives. There is, however, a second (perhaps more pressing) reason for my repeated emphasis: within the context of radical leftist politics, and within the Western academy itself, there is a pervasive and, according to my argument at least, paralyzing belief in the mutual exclusivity of what are crudely referred to as 'theoretical' and 'practical' paradigms – postmodernism and historical materialism, for example. We currently live in a world in which the Left loudly laments its own decimation – in which imperialist and capitalist structures, in other words, have seemingly succeeded in rendering the majority of people impotent, isolated, and indifferent. Unfortunately, the blame for this decimation is often attributed to certain political platforms and programmes within the leftist camp itself – there is a widespread belief, for

example, that the losses sustained by the broad political left stem from the “politics of defeatism that stand ... at the center of postmodernist theory” (González). These are dire times, to be sure. What has become evident as this thesis has progressed, however, is that the tendency to pit theoretical and practical platforms against each other – to construct some sort of opposition between the rallying cries for revolution associated with Marxism, and the self-reflexive politics of difference and locality inherent to postmodernism – is, in fact, not only fallacious, but at the heart of the stagnation and suffering that currently plagues the (Western) political left. It is, in other words, to replicate and perpetuate the exclusive and limiting system of binaries that is at the heart of normative Western culture: either/or, real/unreal, theory/practice. Of course, it is important that particular and unique ideologies maintain the capacity to engage critically with others. I am not suggesting that activists and academics defang themselves by participating in some sort of neoliberal (‘all opinions are equal’) charade. What is clear, however, is that there are certain traditions within both materialist and postmodern cosmologies that share similar goals, and it these goals – self-determination without other-exploitation, ‘positive’ equality, the dissolution of fascist or authoritarian regimes, and an end to racism, imperialism, sexism, and ableism – that lie at the very of core of Robbins’ appropriation and application of the magic(al) realist tradition.

In the first chapter of this thesis, “Alternative Realities and the Extraordinary Object”, I identified the extent to which the magic(al) realist project relies on the contestation, redefinition, and problematization of physical objects. Whether it is the magic realist focus on defamiliarizing familiar material conditions, or the marvellous and/or magical realist method of advancing an authentically postcolonial consciousness through the manipulation of a priori and rationalist assumptions, magic(al) realism consistently implicates physical objects (or the discourses associated with physical objects, to be more accurate) in the reconstruction and diversification of exclusive modernist Western epistemologies. In interrogating the

presentation and preponderance of physical objects in three of Robbins' novels – *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), and *B is for Beer* (2009) – I illustrated the degree to which Robbins develops this convention. Situating his object-oriented writing within the context of object-oriented ontology, the subject/object dichotomy, and a vibrant and indeterminate New Physics, I argued that Robbins deploys physical objects both symbolically and literally. That is to say, Robbins' objects are at once metaphorically reminiscent of way that postmodern and postcolonial others have been objectified and silenced according to the dictates of legitimate Western discourse, and yet simultaneously reflective of the interdependence and agency that scholars such as Jane Bennett seek to attribute to nonhuman matter within a contemporary climate in order to rethink and reinvigorate the relationship between humans and nonhumans – as well as to encourage new and creative means of engaging with the world.

In Chapter Two, “Authorship, (Women’s) Agency, and Appropriation”, I contended that the unreliable narrator tradition frequently employed within Robbins' writing sits comfortably alongside both the magic and magical realist genres. Robbins' tendency to intrude upon, and to undermine, the legitimacy and believability of his fictional narratives (an effect achieved through the construction of a number of distinct and competing narrative voices) not only echoes Bertolt Brecht's concept of dramaturgical alienation – or *verfremdungseffekt* (“Biography of Bertolt Brecht” 13) – but also exemplifies the Russian formalist theory that literature is a process of defamiliarization through which perceptions of the familiar are enriched (Margolin). I also demonstrated the extent to which Robbins' redefinition and appropriation of a number of conventional Western metanarratives – the American road genre, and the ‘evolution of man’, for example – cements his relationship to magic(al) realism, postmodernism, and feminism. Indeed, Robbins' unreliable narrators, which are designed symbolically to reference the liberal-humanist subject, aid Robbins in

developing a pro-feminist aesthetic, which portrays and prioritizes an authentic feminine (sexual) agency. Indeed, Robbins particularizes and promotes a number of alternative versions of femininity, embodying these characterizations in the figures of Sissy Hankshaw and Amada Ziller, for example, and, in so doing, dismantles the psychological and political systems that maintain and perpetuate a gender hierarchy, whilst, at the same time, undermining the male gaze.

In my final chapter, “Cosmological Compatibilities and Consciousness”, I endeavoured to analyze and assess Robbins’ relationship to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. Although this relationship has necessarily changed over time, postmodernism having apparently provided the requisite space in which to resolve some of the tensions and contradictions endemic to the counterculture movement, Robbins continues to be influenced by the American counterculture, and, equally, continues to promote a collective shift in consciousness – albeit one that acknowledges the danger of the depoliticizing forces of capitalism. Using Fredric Jameson’s arrested dialectics as a lens through which to read Robbins’ writing, and through which to examine, moreover, the connections between magic(al) realism and postmodernism, I asserted that the radical political project that underpins magic(al) realism relies on the un-synthesizable dialectic between magical and realist worldviews. Like materialist and postmodern perspectives more generally, magic(al) realism is effective precisely because it employs two epistemological frameworks, each of which are “uniquely equipped to problematize the other in its most vital implications” (Jameson 4). I also showed how Robbins positions the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s as a step in the ongoing evolution and development of humans, rather than as a romanticized utopia. In so doing, and in critiquing the counterculture movement itself, I was able to expand upon the points I had made in Chapter Two regarding the capitalist co-optation of third wave feminism, and allowed myself

to develop more coherently my claim that Robbins' erection of a metaphorical space for the archetypal earth mother figure in *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) could potentially amount to a practical change in the material conditions that control and limit women within Western society.

Tom Robbins' fiction has been examined within the context of academic writing before, particularly insofar as it relates to the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, The New Physics, postmodernism, and the American road genre. During the 1970s and 80s, especially, there were a number of papers that positioned Robbins' writing alongside, and compared it to, various texts written by authors such as Robert M. Pirsig (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* [1974]) and Richard Brautigan (*Trout Fishing in America* [1967]). His writing has also been discussed by a number of feminist critics – both of a sex-positive and anti-pornography persuasion. This thesis, however, at least to my knowledge, constitutes the first look at Robbins' writing in relation to magic(al) realism. In so doing, it develops existing research by linking Robbins' writing to the magic realist experiments of the Weimar Republic, as well as to the marvellous and magical realist traditions that grew out of the geopolitical context of Latin America. The connection between Robbins' writing and the magic(al) realist tradition is a productive one – it allows one to understand, in a more comprehensive way, the figuration of Robbins' vibrant and magical objects, to situate Robbins' use of stylistic and technical conventions such as the unreliable narrator tradition within the broader scheme of identity politics, and it provides, in its compatibility with a number of postmodern theories and sensibilities, a solid and crucial platform from which to understand the changes in Robbins' writing and attitudes over time. Given the fact that the magic(al) realist tradition is fundamentally geared toward envisioning and enacting new modes of perception and new forms of social organization, this course of inquiry also allows one to make more of the positive, funny, absurd, and even happy

elements of Robbins' writing – qualities that are often denigrated within the context of Western literature. As Robbins explains in an interview with Nicholas O'Connell: "I'm not particularly interested in the tradition of Western literature. I'm interested in the tradition of word as celebration, metaphor as magic, language as an agent of liberation, and narrative as cosmic connection. That tradition is much older than Western literature" (75). Indeed, Robbins' writing makes us "want to go on living" (Robbins, *Jitterbug* 320), and in showing us that we have some agency and power when it comes to shaping the world in which we live, he provides us with some of the tools that are evidently missing (or are at least unrealized), but are undoubtedly vital, to actually effecting social, political, and economic change in the 'real' world. His writing ultimately exemplifies a radical emancipatory politics that views (and uses) literature as an ideological space in which to challenge, reinterpret, and democratize Western metanarratives.

NOTES

1. In this instance, Tom Robbins has actually misquoted Franz Kafka. The original sentence, which comes from a letter written by Kafka to Oskar Pollak in 1904, reads as follows: “[a] book must be the axe for the frozen sea *within us* [emphasis added]” (“Kafka on Books”). I have deliberately included Robbins’ misquotation, however, as it exemplifies the extent to which Robbins’ writing is fundamentally concerned with the interrelationship between internal and external realities – or the extent to which his fiction looks both inward and outward. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter Three, Robbins’ writing is undeniably geared toward effecting real and measurable changes in society, and so it makes sense for him to alter Kafka’s sentiments (whether consciously or not) in order to reflect his own thoughts about the interrelationship between fiction and extra-textual reality.
2. In discussing modernism, I am referring not to literary modernism, but to modernism as the ideology and epistemology of (especially technological) modernity.
3. Neuroscientist and author David Eagleman coined the term possibilianism after the publication of his first collection of short stories, entitled *Sum: Tales from the Afterlives* (2009). Possibilianism has since emerged as a philosophy of uncertainty, insofar as it rejects conventional forms of theism, but, unlike atheism, maintains that humans do not yet know enough to discount the possibility of divine creation, or even to understand fully the origins of life on Earth. Eagleman contends that “our [humans’] ignorance of the cosmos is too vast to commit to atheism, and yet we know too much to commit to a particular religion” (“Why I am a Possibilian”). He adds that possibilianism “emphasizes the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities. Possibilianism is comfortable holding multiple ideas in mind”. This sense of indeterminacy, as I will explicate further in Chapter Three, is a key condition of postmodernity, and a feature of postmodern writing. It is reflected in Robbins’ own writing –

particularly in his treatment of The New Physics and Eastern mystical traditions – and sits comfortably within the ideological purview of magic(al) realism.

4. Jane Bennett advances this sense of material vibrancy by deploying, and advocating for, a kind of strategic anthropomorphism: by representing nonhuman matter according to animist and/or vitalist traditions. These techniques are drawn from the rhetoric of fiction, and so it makes sense to discuss Bennett's panvitalist aesthetic in relation to Robbins' similarly fictional treatment of object-oriented ontology.

5. This quote, which Robbins correctly attributes to Erica Jong, is actually taken from Jong's 1971 poem "Fruits and Vegetables". In the poem, Jong uses fruits and vegetables as motifs through which to explore concepts of eroticism, sexual agency, and an authentic *écriture féminine* – Elaine Showalter describes *écriture féminine* as "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text", and calls it a "significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism" (185). Robbins often emulates Jong's imagery in his own writing. In *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), for example, he mimics Jong's description of the vagina as a peach (23), and in *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984) he spends a great deal of time discussing the qualities associated with various fruits and vegetables: "[t]he beet is the most intense of vegetables. The radish, admittedly, is more feverish, but the fire of the radish is a cold fire, the fire of discontent not of passion. Tomatoes are lusty enough, yet there runs through tomatoes an undercurrent of frivolity. Beets are deadly serious" (1). Whilst it would be far too generous (to the point of inaccuracy) to say that Robbins' writing also fits into the genre of *écriture féminine*, his references to Jong are telling. Both writers use fruits and vegetables to create a sense of vibrancy in their works, and both writers use organic nonhuman matter to invoke discourses of otherness. If nothing else, Robbins' decision directly to quote Jong in *Still Life with Woodpecker* shows that he has at least some

understanding of the relationship between feminist theory and creative writing – a relationship I will explore further in Chapter Two.

6. Robbins' writing is also associated with anxieties relating to mass publication. In a "precedent-shattering" move (Robbins, *Tibetan Peach Pie* 275), Bantam Books, at the time "a mass-market paperback publisher", bought the rights to Robbins' second novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976). In an affront to custom, Bantam Books then auctioned off the hardcover rights to the novel. When Houghton Mifflin eventually bought the hardcover rights, the two publishing houses were able simultaneously to issue hardcover and trade paperback editions (typically books were published in hardcover format first, and issued as paperbacks only after interest in the hardcover editions had faded). This mode of publication ultimately served to democratize the reading experience, insofar as it allowed new groups of people, who could not necessarily afford the higher market prices for hardcover books (students and the working classes, for example), immediately to access *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. This mode of publication substantiates my claim that Robbins' SL3 typewriter represents the democratization of authorship, rather than "the death of the author" (Harman 201).

7. Robbins does, in fact, depict a speaking mirror in *Skinny Legs and All* (1990). Can o' Beans attempts to converse with it, but the mirror only reflects Can o' Beans' words: "the angle of reflection is always equal to the angle of incidence, but *why?* Can you explain it? [emphasis in original]", to which the speaking mirror replies: "?ti nialpxe uoy" (311). Unlike the speaking mirrors commonly found in fairy tales (the wisdom-dispensing mirror in *Snow-White* (1995), for example), which often serve as plot devices, providing explanatory information, or establishing particular goals for central human characters, Robbins' speaking mirror does not conveniently conform to (or reflect) Can o' Beans' expectations – nor does it satisfy those of the reader. Robbins' satirical speaking mirror adds nothing to the story,

except evidence of its own existence. In so doing, however, it exemplifies Robbins' broader object-oriented project. As Bill Brown argues: "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (4). By upsetting conventional assumptions relating to the role of a speaking mirror in fiction, Robbins seeks to present physical objects on their own terms, rather than on those discursively constructed for them.

8. Although many of the literary critics I am using to support my examination of the eighteenth-century it-narrative tradition view the tradition as reactionary – a manifestation of patriarchal and European privilege – some of the it-narratives written during this period were, in fact, quite progressive, and sit more comfortably alongside Robbins' own appropriation of the it-narrative tradition. Christopher Flint, for example, acknowledges the extent to which Jonathan Swift's characteristically satirical *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) is an early manifestation of the "cultural obsession with stories as things" (214). He suggests, moreover, that Swift's "conflation of story, object, and author in his title provided a conceptual foundation for later [it-]narratives". Evidently, there is an existing precedent for the expression of progressive politics within the it-narrative tradition, despite the tradition's broader political and imperial orientation.

9. In her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the psychological conflict endured by individuals caught between two or more cultures or cultural frames of reference. This contest, which she asserts is played out within the "inner" space of the body (109), is the result of an "absolute depot duality that says we [border people] are able to be only one or the other" (41). Using her own experiences – an embodied melting pot given her "white, Mexican, [and] Indian" heritage (44), and a "queer" who is "both male and female" (41) – Anzaldúa goes on to explain how writing (or

artistic expression more generally) is a healing process that, in reconciling internal and external realities, serves to “overcome the tradition of silence” (81).

10. The extensive use of time-lapse footage in David Attenborough’s 1995 documentary series *The Private Life of Plants* is an excellent (and aesthetically striking) example of the ways in which new technologies have allowed humans to perceive the vibrancy of organic nonhuman life. Though plant life exists and grows at a different pace to human life, time-lapse footage shows that it is no less dynamic.

11. Imperial and neoliberal power structures often work to mystify and/or contain perceived challenges by co-opting them into existing ideological frameworks: the incentivized language of cost-benefit analysis that pervades contemporary environmental movements like Generation Zero (Moon), for example, or the ‘brand’ of feminism espoused by Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013).

12. In *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), an actual children’s book, as opposed to a satirical take on traditional children’s fiction, Salman Rushdie employs many of the same rhetorical devices. There are seams between the real world and the magical world, for example, which are right-handed and left-handed respectively. This phenomenological distinction between right and left, which Luka and Gracie each transcend, is frequently evident in *B is for Beer* (2009): “[h]ave you ever felt – or imagined – that there is ... another world to the right or the left of this one[?]” (20).

13. First-wave feminism (or similar feminist movements) also emerged elsewhere in the world. In New Zealand, for example, women were granted the right to vote in 1893 (“The National Council of Women”). In discussing the waves of feminism, I am (in some ways necessarily) concentrating on the more mainstream centres of feminist activism. It should be noted, however, that the wave structure, although helpful for understanding the broad progression of feminism, fails to take into account feminist thought and activism outside of

Western contexts – it is overwhelmingly Eurocentric. It also fails to recognize many of the women's movements that occurred in between the neat chronologies of the accepted first, second, and third waves.

14. Within the context of second-wave feminism, the distinction between sex and gender was still largely heteronormative in nature, insofar as feminism challenged conventional feminine and masculine gender roles, but did not necessarily challenge the man/woman binary itself. This gender binary between man and woman is frequently challenged within a contemporary climate, however, and a gender spectrum, which accommodates agender and trans identities (amongst many others), is becoming more accepted within mainstream Western dialogue. In February 2014, for example, Facebook launched a new set of gender profile options. This allowed Facebook users to choose from over fifty different gender identities ("Facebook Offers New Gender Options"). Whilst Facebook's move was largely celebrated as progress, the degree to which these new options could potentially play into and facilitate a capitalist system, according to which provisions for new gender identities could serve to allow online corporations to target individual consumers in a more tailored way, has not yet been widely discussed.

15. For more information on the Riot Grrrl movement, see Sara Marcus' *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (2010).

16. For a history of feminism, see Estelle Freedman's *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2003). For a critical analysis of, and comprehensive introduction to, (intersectional) feminist theory, see bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000).

17. Though he has attempted to modify the term Grand Narrative by removing the capital letters, and by introducing the word 'new' (new grand narrative), Arran Gare's reference to the original Grand Narrative is still a little uncomfortable. Gare's new grand narrative

effectively opposes the totalizing or oppressive form of the Grand Narrative, and yet this reconceptualization is undermined – or at least made less clear – by the rhetorical similarities between the original Grand Narrative and his new grand narrative.

18. It is worth noting that the word ‘female’ has been criticized within some feminist, and many transgender communities, since it is perceived to conflate sex and gender, thus perpetuating the erroneous notion that some body parts – a vagina or ovaries, for example – belong solely to the province of women. Insofar as it is indicative of a cissexist discourse – the term ‘cis’, in contrast to the term ‘trans’, having been created to describe individuals whose gender identities align with their assigned-at-birth biological sexes – the term female can be seen as contributing to trans, intersex, and non-gender conforming erasure. In this context, however, I am using the word female as an expedient to reference the hegemonic model of embodied femininity, rather than commenting on the otherwise diverse constitution of specific feminine and/or masculine bodies (or those that identify as neither). Here and throughout, I have used the terms female and male only where appropriate, or where a coherent alternative is not available.

19. It is interesting that Robbins plays on Jack Kerouac’s work in order to feminize the traditionally masculine American road genre given that in *B is for Beer*, which similarly serves to feminize the typically masculine bildungsroman tradition, Robbins makes reference to Kerouac through Gracie’s “monkey dance of life” (58).

20. For the classic account of Frontier mythology, see Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Frontier in American History* (1921).

21. Robbins’ depiction of an authentic feminine (sexual) agency is reminiscent of Angela Carter’s similarly agentic treatment of feminine sexuality. According to Michelle Pfeifer, Carter’s magical realist writing reconceptualizes “sexual curiosity ... as a form of female sexual agency” (7). Moreover, Pfeifer contends that Carter’s “re-writing of folktales [a

specific reference to Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979)] ... [is] a successful strategy ... [for] undermining dominant sexual ideologies" (7). In so doing, asserts Pfeifer, Carter demythologizes "the ideologies of sex negativity" (9). There is, evidently, an existing tradition within magical realism – a tradition in which Carter's work is situated – that uses explicit or overt feminine sexuality to displace and subvert the male gaze. Significantly, the efficacy of this tradition hinges not on deconstruction, but on the reconstruction of oppressive or exclusionary discursive metanarratives. In appropriating and rewriting a series of existing narratives in order to centralize feminine agency, Robbins also contributes to this tradition.

22. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Robbins uses a cocaine addiction developed by Gulietta to facilitate the progression of some of the novel's key events. Literary critics have suggested that Gulietta's addiction undermines Robbins' assertion that "drugs can raise consciousness and that persons with elevated consciousness are less apt to be violent, greedy, fearful, or repressed" (Robbins, *Jitterbug* 206) – cocaine being a degenerative substance, as opposed to an enlightening one. In *Tibetan Peach Pie* (2014), however, Robbins addresses this apparent tension by stating that his "biggest regret as a novelist" is the extent to which he "extolled the virtues of coke ... in *Still Life with Woodpecker*" (290). This admission demonstrates that Robbins' attitudes have, in fact, changed over time. Whereas his earlier work appears indiscriminately to praise drugs, for instance, his recent writing indicates that he has developed a more thoughtful, critical, and discerning approach toward them. Indeed, the so-called "War on Drugs" currently being waged in America (Cummings), not to mention the mass incarceration, gangster politics, racism, and punitive responses to addiction with which the War on Drugs is now associated, not only requires Robbins to adjust his position to a new social context, but also exemplifies the disconnect between the counterculture's exaltation of perceptual transformations through the use of recreational drugs, and the actual material

conditions that have come to characterize widespread drug-use in America. This ideological shift, I argue, is also true for Robbins' broader feelings about the American counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s: in the forty or so years since *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) was published, Robbins has moved from a position of uncritical glorification of the counterculture movement, to a more a shrewd position grounded in historical materialism – or at least a position that is compatible with historical materialism.

23. Terry Eagleton's reference to the "End of History" actually appears to be a misapplication of Francis Fukuyama's rather imperialist liberalist politics to postmodernism (*Why Marx Was Right* 6) – see Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

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