Distort, Disfigure, and Destroy:
The Manipulation of History and the Failure to Rebel in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*

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The Importance of Postcolonial Literature in the Undergraduate Classroom

I remember once in a graduate seminar on postcolonial world literature discussing the life of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who was imprisoned for a time in his native Kenya for writing a play which was deemed politically subversive by the government. The professor of the course asked us if we could imagine a similar scenario playing out in the United States today, in which a writer was imprisoned for creating politically subversive fiction. We responded that we could not, not necessarily because of any type of optimistic belief in the sacredness of free speech, but simply because we could not imagine the United States Government, or its citizens, paying all that much attention to a work of literature; we could not imagine a politically subversive novel, written in the United States, having the same type of political impact that the works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have had in Kenya.

In many other parts of the world, particularly those studied in a postcolonial world literature course, literature and the written

word in general are more than simply aesthetic expressions; often they are also political weapons. Because literature does not seem to carry the same type of political weight in the United States, it can be difficult to impress the political importance of world literature upon a class of undergraduates. In fact, I have often witnessed in my own classroom a fundamental disconnect in the thinking of many students between literature, politics, and what they see as "real life." In the minds of many students, literature has little value beyond the aesthetic, and therefore they cannot imagine literature playing a significant role in the "real world." Similarly, globalization, foreign policy, and even the idea of politics in general are mere abstract concepts to many students, students who lack the ability to envision political events actually having a tangible impact on the lives of ordinary people.

The value of using postcolonial world literature in the undergraduate classroom can be found in the ability of this type of literature to bridge the gap between politics, literature, and a student's conception of "real life." Gabriel García Márquez's novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*Autumn)* can be particularly useful in this respect, for it deals with the political importance of understanding one's own history and culture, thereby reinforcing the message that literature can have a significant impact on the world. Although *Autumn* may present too great a challenge to the average class of undergraduates, there are many other postcolonial novels that are equally capable of emphasizing the importance of literature and expressing the impact of politics on the lives of ordinary human beings around the world. Latin American works include the short fiction of García Márquez, particularly "Big Mama's Funeral" and "The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother," *Death in the Andes* and *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa, *One Day of Life* by Manlio Argueta, *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows* by Isabel Allende, *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez, and *The Postman* by Antonio Skármeta; from Africa, one might consider *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The Collector of Treasures* by Bessie Head, and *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta; from the Middle

East and India, students may find it easy to connect with such works as *The Map of Love* by Ahdaf Soueif, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy; Irish novels include *Cal* by Bernard MacLaverty, *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* by Patrick McCabe, and *Eureka Street* by Robert McLiam Wilson; finally, for a work that particularly emphasizes the political importance of literature and culture, there is the Chinese novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Dai Sijie.

While all of the works listed above can be used to aid undergraduates in the process of connecting with and humanizing persons from other parts of the world, certain works of postcolonial theory should be considered as a means of highlighting and reinforcing common postcolonial themes. Two works which I have found to be particularly accessible, and which therefore lend themselves to use in undergraduate courses, are *Moving the Centre* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the chapters "On Violence" and "On National Culture" from Frantz Fanon's brilliant work *The Wretched of the Earth*. Selected readings from these works can be used not only to familiarize a class of undergraduates with the concept of postcolonial literature, but also to demonstrate the important political role which postcolonial literature plays around the world and to generate a discussion of the differences between that role and the one played by literature in the United States.

What follows is a postcolonial analysis of García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* using both *Moving the Centre* and *The Wretched of the Earth* as critical lenses through which to view the novel. It is my hope that the approach taken here may be used as a means of exploring and understanding other postcolonial works more appropriate for the undergraduate classroom.

The Manipulation of History and the Failure to Rebel

Although Gabriel García Márquez's novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* ends with the optimistic statement that, upon the death of the dictator known as the Patriarch, "the uncountable time of eternity had come to an end," there is no real evidence within the novel to suggest that the unnamed nation will be able to break free of the bonds of dictatorship (255). Because the proletariat did not end the Patriarch's reign through an active movement for liberation, the Patriarch's death does not guarantee the full decolonization of the nation, and thus a great deal of uncertainty still exists at the end of the novel as to whether or not the nation has truly escaped the shackles of military dictatorship and neocolonial oppression. The question then becomes, why, in light of the unending cruelties perpetrated by the Patriarch and his regime, does the proletariat fail to take up arms against the dictator and "thoroughly challenge the colonial situation" established by the West and enabled by the Patriarch (Fanon 2)?

One factor that scholars have yet to fully explore is the role which the manipulation of history plays within the novel in undermining the proletariat's ability to form a revolutionary movement. From the very moment of contact between Europe and the Americas, the history of the peoples of the Americas began to be rewritten using a European interpretive framework. As José Hernán Córdova has pointed out, "the absence of reciprocal understanding with the Indians left Columbus free to impose his own meanings on everything" (66). Thus one of the earliest historical documents of the Americas, Columbus's journal, speaks not of the true history of the Americas, but of a European interpretation of that history. García Márquez explores this phenomenon in *Autumn* at the end of the first chapter, when the moment of contact is retold from the perspective of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. As an anonymous indigenous witness to the contact explains to the Patriarch:

> … we didn't understand why the hell they were making so much fun of us general sir since we were just as normal as the day our mothers bore us and on the other hand they were decked out like the jack of clubs in all that heat … and they shouted that they didn't understand us in Christian tongue when they were the ones who couldn't understand what we were shouting.… (39)

The Europeans make fun of the natives which they encounter because they are unable—or unwilling—to interpret Latin America's reality with any lens other than that which is based on a European framework. Therefore, early historical documents such as Columbus's journal characterize the indigenous Americans as different or "other" based on a European-centered world view, and this indigenous "otherness" becomes ingrained in the history of the Americas.

During the colonial period, efforts to rewrite the history of the colonized took place all over the world. Frantz Fanon writes of this effort on the part of the colonizer in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (149). This colonial effort to manipulate history was done with the intention of convincing "the indigenous population it [colonization] would save them from darkness" and that if "the colonist were to leave they [the indigenous population] would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (149). What Fanon is implying, and what colonial governments recognized, is that without a clear sense of their true history, the colonized cannot rebel against the colonizer. Because their pre-colonial history has been manipulated, the colonized have no basis for imagining a positive postcolonial future, and thus the possibility of revolution is remote.

In *Autumn*, the Patriarch uses the very same techniques of which Fanon writes in order to prevent the proletariat from forming a revolutionary movement. This type of appropriation of colonial techniques by the Patriarch speaks to both the knowledge which neocolonial empires pass on to loyal dictators in their neocolonies, as well as the Patriarch's role as colonizer of his own people. One of the Patriarch's primary venues for manipulating the history of the nation and therefore controlling his "*unhistoried* people who don't believe in anything except life" is the classroom (147, emphasis added). In fact, the institution of public education in general is clearly used by the

Patriarch as a means of controlling the people, a method which, according to Fanon, is not uncommon: "In capitalist societies, education, whether secular or religious, the teaching of moral reflexes handed down from father to son … those aesthetic forms of respect for the status quo, instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents of law and order" (3-4). This is precisely what the Patriarch seeks to do through the public school system which he establishes and controls:

> … he [the Patriarch] ordered a free school established in each province to teach sweeping where the pupils fanaticized by the presidential stimulus went on to sweep the streets after having swept their houses and then the nearby highways and roads so that piles of trash were carried back and forth from one province to another without anyone's knowing what to do with it in official processions with the national flag and large banners saying God Save the All Pure who watches over the cleanliness of the nation…. (35)

Here we see a clear progression from the establishment of a system of schools whose main goal is to teach the people to be docile to the creation of a generation of citizens who have been brainwashed into believing that the Patriarch has the best interests of the nation at heart.

Within the public school system, children study the official history of the Patriarch in textbooks created by the regime for the purpose of making the Patriarch appear god-like and invincible:

> Contrary to what his clothing showed, the descriptions made by his historians made him very big and official schoolboy texts referred to him as a patriarch of huge size who never left his house because he could not fit through the doors, who loved children and swallows, who knew the language of certain animals, who had the virtue of being able to anticipate the designs of nature, who could guess a person's thought by one look in the eyes, and who had the secret of a salt with the virtue of curing lepers' sores and making cripples walk…. (44)

The Patriarch's manipulation of history through the falsification of textbooks is important, for, as the novel makes clear, events, ideas, and institutions which are not recorded in the official history of the nation simply cease to exist: "he had them tear the pages about the viceroys out of school primers so that they *would not exist in history* …" (131, emphasis added). The act of removing information about the viceroys from the official textbooks of the nation is enough to cause viceroys to disappear completely from the history of the nation. The deliberate failure of the public school system in the novel to teach the people about the true history of the nation protects the Patriarch's reign and impedes the people's ability to form a revolutionary movement. The Patriarch, as a colonizer of the people, denies the people access to the truth about their history because "Truth is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime, what fosters the emergence of the nation. Truth is what protects the 'natives' and undoes the foreigners" (Fanon 14).

One of the important truths which the nation's textbooks seek to cover up is the truth of the Patriarch's origins. For example, when the school textbooks mention the history of the Patriarch's birth, they "attributed [to his mother Bendición Alvarado] the miracle of having conceived him without recourse to any male …" (44). Beyond this reference to the Patriarch's apparently miraculous conception, it is said that "all trace of his origins had disappeared from the texts …" (44). In fact, much of the Patriarch's effort to manipulate the history of the nation involves obscuring his own origins and creating a false past for himself. One of the most prominent examples of this takes place during the very same scene of contact previously mentioned between Europe and the Americas. The key to understanding the Patriarch's use of colonial techniques in the domination of the people in this scene is the fact that the Patriarch himself is present—and not only present but in power—at the moment of first contact. The Patriarch is described as "evok[ing] again and reliv[ing] that historic October Friday when he left his room at dawn and discovered that everybody in the presidential palace was wearing a red biretta …" (38). Unable to understand what

has happened to his nation, the Patriarch finally finds someone "to tell him the truth general sir, that some strangers had arrived who gabbled in funny old talk"; and, being "so confused that he could not decide whether that lunatic business came within the incumbency of his government," the Patriarch apparently allows the colonization to begin (39-40).

So as not to dispute the nation's official history which places the Patriarch at the scene of Columbus's landing, the regime obscures the Patriarch's past by creating multiple birth certificates for the dictator. At one point, three separate birth certificates are found for the Patriarch, "and on all three he was three times different, conceived three times on three different occasions, given a bad birth three times thanks to the *artifices of national history* which had entangled the threads of reality so that no one would be able to decipher the secret of his origins …" (141, emphasis added). This passage explicitly reveals the way in which history has been manipulated by the regime. The Patriarch's origins have been destroyed so as not to refute the official history which dictates that the Patriarch has ruled for hundreds of years. Returning to Fanon's description of colonization's distortion of history, we see once again the way in which the regime has adopted this practice in order to make it impossible for the people to imagine a time before the Patriarch. The Patriarch has no origin, he has simply always been, and thus it is nearly impossible for the people to imagine that he will not simply always be. Just as the manipulation of history by colonial powers prevents the colonized from imagining a potentially bright post-colonial future, so too has the regime's manipulation of history impeded the people's ability to imagine a positive post-Patriarch future.

It could, perhaps, be argued that the Patriarch's description of the contact does not represent the official history of the nation as constructed by the regime; that it does not represent an attempt to manipulate history, but rather expresses the addled workings of a mind which has crumbled under the weight of absolute power. However, there is some evidence to indicate that whatever the Patriarch conceives to be the history of the nation

becomes, before long, the nation's official history. This can best be seen at a later point in the novel when the Patriarch, reflecting on a distant memory, realizes that "not even he himself could have been sure with no room for doubt whether they were his own memories or whether he had heard about them on his bad nights of fever … or whether he might have seen them in prints in travel books … but none of that mattered, God damn it, they'll see that *with time it will be the truth* …" (161, emphasis added). Thus the Patriarch transforms his own memories into the truth—into the official history of the nation—regardless of the source or accuracy of those memories. And, it seems, the Patriarch's version of history is rarely challenged:

> … he [the Patriarch] put an end to all disagreement with the final argument that it didn't matter whether something back then was true or not, God damn it, it will be with time. He was right, because during our time there was not one who doubted the legitimacy of his history, or anyone who could have disclosed or denied it because we couldn't even establish the identity of his body, there was no other nation except the one that had been made by him in his own image and likeness where space was changed and time corrected by the designs of his absolute will, reconstructed by him ever since the most uncertain origins of his memory as he wandered at random through that house of infamy…. (159)

In this way, the Patriarch's presence at the moment of contact can be understood as both a distortion of memory caused by the corruption of power, as well as a representation of the official history which the regime constructs for the people in order to impede their ability to form a revolutionary movement. There is no difference between the Patriarch's memories and the official history of the nation, and therefore the Patriarch's memory of colonial contact is historically accurate according to the official version of events.

By tracing his origin back to the moment of contact, the Patriarch becomes the beginning of the nation. According to Fanon: "The colonist makes history. His life is an epic, an odyssey. He is invested with the very beginning: 'We made this land' " (14-15). The nation, in its modern form, begins with the Patriarch. Therefore he, like the colonist, "is the guarantor for its [the nation's] existence: 'If we [the colonists] leave, all will be lost, and this land will return to the Dark Ages' " (Fanon 14-15). The Patriarch echoes this very sentiment, saying "when I finally die the politicians will come back and divide up the mess the way it was during the time of the Goths[1] …" (159). Not surprisingly given the level of historical manipulation achieved by the Patriarch's regime, the people come to believe that the Patriarch really is the beginning and the end, at times questioning "what's going to become of us without him …" (27).

The people are kept in the dark as to the true history of their nation, and because of this they come to believe that the Patriarch really is the beginning and that his reign ended the time of the Goths; in fact, they cannot imagine the nation without him. This inability to imagine the future without understanding the past is not unusual. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes:

> An oppressed class, or nation, that believes in itself, *in its history*, in its destiny, in its capacity to change the scheme of things, will obviously be stronger in its class and national struggles for political and economic survival. Similarly an oppressed class or nation that loses faith and belief in itself, *in its history*, in its capacity to change the scheme of things, becomes weakened in its political and economic struggles for survival. Such a class or nation can only work out its destiny within the boundaries clearly drawn by the dominating class and nation. (54, emphasis added)

In *Autumn*, the people cannot believe in themselves or their history because they are prevented from understanding their true

1 García Márquez's use of the term "Goths" alludes to the Patriarch's role as the embodiment of dictatorship throughout history, going back at least as far as the Roman Empire. This theme can be found throughout the novel, but is particularly in evidence during the dream/vision sequence (pgs. 85-6) in which the Patriarch experiences the assassination of Julius Caesar first hand.

history and are instead fed lies about the past. Because of this, the Patriarch is "the only one among us [the people] who knew the real size of our destiny …" (97) The Patriarch controls the destiny of the people—and thus naturally controls their ability to form a revolutionary movement—by preventing the people from having access to their past.

In *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes of the subversive power of history. He says that "Change, movement, is … the eternal theme in history.… Therefore no society is ever static.… History is ever reminding The Present of any society: even you shall come to pass away" (96). By perpetually wearing the gold spur which official history records as a gift from Columbus, the Patriarch is attempting to create the image that history is, in fact, static. History tells the story of change, but, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains, official history does just the opposite:

> Tyrants and their tyrannical systems are terrified at the sound of the wheels of history.… So they try to *rewrite* history, make up *official* history; if they can put cottonwool in their ears and in those of the population, maybe *they* and *the people* will not hear the *real* call of history, will not hear the *real* lessons of history. (96-97, emphasis in original)

Evidence of change—of the dynamic nature of history—is a source of hope and a call to revolution in an authoritarian state. In light of this, the Patriarch's decision to "chop down all trees in village squares to prevent the terrible spectacle of a Sunday hanged man … [prohibit] the use of public stocks, burial without a coffin, everything that might awaken in one's memory the ignominious laws that existed before his power," can be seen as an attempt to erase all evidence of change (161). Despite the fact that evidence of the "ignominious laws" of the past could potentially improve the image of the dictator's regime, the Patriarch recognizes that all evidence of change is potentially subversive. Thus he adorns himself and the pages of the official history with evidence of stasis, while destroying all evidence of history's dynamic nature. The people are unable to recognize

that the potential for change always exists; they are unaware that history proves this fact, because the only history which they have been exposed to is one which has been manipulated and distorted by the regime, and therefore they are unaware of their own potential to bring about the change they so desperately need.

In distorting the past, the regime seems to have created a real fear amongst the people that, without the Patriarch, the nation would "regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (Fanon 149). Following the death of the Patriarch's perfect double Patricio Aragonés[2], the Patriarch is described as having watched as one woman "embraced the perfumed corpse sobbing aloud that it was him, my God, what's going to become of us without him …" (27). This sentiment is echoed later in the novel when the people say of the dictator's rumored death that "we no longer wanted it to be true, we had ended up not understanding what would become of us without him, what would become of our lives after him …" (207). History has been distorted and destroyed to such an extent that, in the minds of the people, life before and after the dictator is equally unimaginable. The regime's policy of historical manipulation has been so effective that, in the end, the people cannot even bring themselves to wish for the Patriarch's death, let alone create a revolutionary movement to bring that death about.

Unfortunately for the people of the nation, the Patriarch's death does not necessarily imply an end to the manipulation of history by the government. In fact, following the Patriarch's supposed first death, one of the first acts of those who step in to lead in the absence of the Patriarch is to destroy the history of his existence:

> … he watched the ferocious leaders who dispersed the procession with clubs and knocked down the inconsolable fishwife … those who gutted the insides

2 Patricio Aragonés appears primarily in the first chapter of the novel. The incredible physical resemblance between the Patriarch and Patricio Aragonés allows the Patriarch to use Aragonés as a stand-in at public events. This continues until Aragonés is mistakenly assassinated in place of the Patriarch (pgs. 21-30).

> of that paradise of opulence and misfortune thinking they were destroying the lair of power forever, knocking over the papier-mâché Doric capitals, velvet curtains and Babylonic columns crowned with alabaster palm trees … *annihilating that world so that in the memory of future generations not the slightest memory of the cursed line of men of arms would remain*…. (27-28, emphasis added)

It is not clear whether the leaders mentioned in this passage are acting on their own or on the orders of the heirs to the regime, but what is clear is that an attempt is being made to destroy the memory of the Patriarch's reign. Once again history is being destroyed, and therefore the people are being robbed of their opportunity to learn from the Patriarch's reign and draw strength from the proof of his mortality.

Although the passage above describes events which take place after the Patriarch's first death, there is no reason to think that the same series of events will not be carried out following his actual death at the end of the novel. After all, in many other respects the nation's reaction to the Patriarch's actual death is identical to their reaction to his first, and thus it is in fact probable that the heirs to power will destroy any memory of the Patriarch's reign of infamy before continuing their exploitation of the people as if nothing has happened. Unless the people find a way to reconnect with the true history of their country, they will be just as powerless under the new regime as they were under the Patriarch. Understanding one's history is vital to the formation of revolutionary movements in neocolonial societies, and unless the people of García Márquez's *Autumn* immerse themselves in their history and draw strength from that history, they are doomed to repeat the same neocolonial pattern enacted under the Patriarch indefinitely. As Fanon puts it, "The immobility to which the colonized subject is condemned can be challenged only if he decides to put an end to the history of colonization and the history of despoliation in order to bring to life the history of the nation, the history of decolonization" (15).

Making the Connection Between Postcolonial Novels and Modern World Events

In order to facilitate a student's ability to connect with a postcolonial text such as *Autumn*, or any of the postcolonial texts listed above, it is important to always relate the texts to modern political and cultural events throughout the world. Clearly such neocolonial relationships as that described in *Autumn*, as well as mythologized dictators like the Patriarch, still exist in the world today, and helping students to see the link between fiction and reality is vital. An obvious example of mythologized dictatorship, and one which most advanced high school and undergraduate college students are familiar with, is Kim Jong-il. In Kim Jong-il we see a dictator who, much like the Patriarch, has constructed a mythological, god-like image for himself, making it very difficult for the people of North Korea to form a revolutionary movement. Another modern example, one which is perhaps even more appropriate than Kim Jong-il, is Saddam Hussein. Like Kim Jong-il, Saddam Hussein has the advantage, in terms of connecting fiction with reality, of being widely known amongst undergraduate and high school students.

And, in fact, the similarities between the reign of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Patriarch in *Autumn*—not to mention the dictators in novels such as *The Feast of the Goat*, *The House of the Spirits*, *Of Love and Shadows*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *The Postman*, to name a few—are even more apparent. Like the Patriarch, Saddam Hussein enjoyed, at least for a time, the support and aid of the United States. And, like the Patriarch, Saddam Hussein's fall from power was accompanied by the distortion and dismantling of the history and memory of his reign: the video of Hussein's statue being pulled down, for example, could almost be taken directly from the conclusion of *Autumn*. Finally, like the Patriarch, Saddam Hussein's reign was not ended by a people-based revolutionary movement; thus, years later, the possibility of a positive postcolonial future, one which is free from oppression and exploitation, has still not been secured in Iraq.

Kim Jong-il and Saddam Hussein are merely two examples

of modern dictators in the mold of the Patriarch; there are many others throughout the world, any one of whom could potentially connect the fiction of the postcolonial novel with the reality of the postcolonial/neocolonial world. Although the names and countries of modern dictators may change over time, the themes and realities expressed in postcolonial novels such as *The Autumn of the Patriarch* remain relevant. This fact, above all others, reveals the importance and necessity of using postcolonial world literature in the undergraduate classroom.

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