

# The Alaskan Connection: The World of Macondo in Eskimo Tales

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When reading Frank Ellana's (a King Island Eskimo) tale, "The Cormorant Hunters," or Aloysius Pikonganna's (an Inupiat Eskimo) story, "Two Great Polar Bear Hunters," one notes a resemblance to the dynamic "magical realism" style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Similar to the Colombian author, Eskimo writers create a Macondo—a fantastical never-never land or a potpourri of actualities and absurdities—in their own short fiction. One can thus appreciate and re-evaluate the South American post-modernist's "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" after having explored similar juxtapositions of reality/surreality in Eskimo literature.

First, though one must understand the historical-sociological roots of both the Arctic creators and contemporary Colombian writer, especially since the cultures of these writers are based on superstition and magic. The Eskimos follow an oral tradition in which stories are not conceived to be read but rather to be narrated by tribal historians who stress vocal interpretation, action, and long colorful descriptions. Pertinent is the fact, according to American writer Edward Keithahn who lived amongst the Eskimos of Alaska's Seward Peninsula and recorded their stories that the Eskimo culture did *not* rely on scientific explanations of Nature. Their fantastical accounts of Nature are traced back to the "angetkoks" (witch doctors or Shamans) and their supernatural powers and supremacy (*Alaskan Igloo Tales* 6). In fact, according to Daniel Merkur in his "Arctic: Inuit," the word "Shaman" was first applied around 1900 and, then, became the norm in the 1920's, when famed Alaskan Eskimo writer and explorer Knut Rasmussen utilized the term (Walker 12). Shamanism, as opposed to witchcraft, is considered a "socially licit and responsible practice that included the detection and annulment of witchcraft" (12). Witchcraft is an *illicit* "magico-religious" practice which opposes or endangers the balance of mankind and the spiritual being or power (*numina*). Behind the great silences of Eskimo narrators and the concentration of the Inuit society on animals, and talking or possessed animal forms, is the philosophy of the power of words which can establish contact with the named "thing's" very spiritual being or essence. Linguistic expression therefore, 'produced through *breath* or the "physical expression of the sacred life principle," is a sacred act and one associated with the deity *Sila* or Air (Brown 142). A concomitant point, too, is that language, in the Arctic world, is not limited to the human condition, as all created beings have their own special meaningful language (144). Verbal exchange extends to all natural phenomena—voices of thunder, birds, bears, etc. Thus, Eskimo stories are inherently "magical," due to the divinity of words and to verbal communication between natural phenomena.

Likewise, Garcia Marquez's mythical setting of Macondo, really an old banana

plantation situated nearby the author's birthplace of Aracataca, becomes in his fiction simultaneously a magical "wonder-land" and an embodiment of all legends, myths, and superstitions of Latin America. Garcia Marquez, in many of his interviews, reminds his audience that Latin American culture is intrinsically fantastical. Especially his birthplace of Aracataca, a small Caribbean town along Colombia's north coast, is known for a people whose descendants were pirates, smugglers, and black slaves. The writer's fictional Macondo, which is a guise for Aracataca, flourished in the early 1900's when the North American United Fruit Company strengthened economically this area, but became a ghost town in 1941 when this company withdrew from Colombia. What did remain, though, were the oral stories/myths of ghosts and superstitious beliefs or happenings which were passed down from Garcia Marquez's grandparents and aunts (Swanson 141-42). Gypsies were not uncommon to this area either and their tales enriched Colombian literature. Interesting, like the magical power of the word in the Eskimo culture, so too "Macondo" conjures a multitude of magical *and* religious connotations. It is Bantu in origin, most likely brought to Colombia by Bantu-speaking slaves who worked the coastal plantations of the Caribbean (Minta 144). "Kondo" and "makondo" (plural) mean "banana" in many Bantu languages and, according to critic German de Granda, this fruit in the Bantu world can cure illnesses as well as it can represent the preferred food of the devil (144). Therefore, resembling the arctic literature, the region of Aracataca—and the world of Macondo—is saturated with fiction dealing with ordinary experiences tinged by supernatural incidents. Also, Macondo, which represents the rise (between 1909-18) and fall (afterward 1918) of the banana company, symbolically suggests the rise/fall of man's/woman's spirits. According to Garcia Marquez himself in an interview, his own grandmother vivified for him his famous attributed style of "magical realism:"

[She] could tell the story of an event, or provide an explanation for something which had happened, in a way that carried complete conviction, and seemed to obey some internal logic, and yet which was, from an objective point of view, beyond all reason, fantastic. (Minta 36-37).

How alike, therefore, is Frank Ellana's "The Cormorant Hunters," a tragic perspective of the Alaskan wilderness told through "magical realism," to Garcia Marquez's tragicomic piece of short fiction, namely "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." For instance, the former's tale of infidelity of the cormorant hunter's wife, her eventual murder, and the quasi-humorous suicide of the hunter himself, recalls the extreme realism of the tragicomedy of the latter's women folk in Esteban who provocatively prepare the dead body of a washed-ashore fisherman for a proper burial. Turning to Ellana's short story, a husband and wife traditionally in the fall journeyed to the northeast point of King Island, toward Putu a huge cavity in the cliffs along the eastern shore of this island. Here amongst the crags and crevices would nest the cormorants, tall long-necked birds, characterized by a large pouch under the bill used to retain captured fish. The husband, as

customary, would tie around his waist a piece of walrus rope and slowly lower himself down the treacherous cliff to kill the sleeping sea birds, accumulating at least ten of them before beginning the equally dangerous upward return to safety. Somehow he fell; miraculously, he whirled the rope in the strong sea winds and managed to land on another pinnacle of rock, Qulaguq. The poor hunter's wife who had mysteriously left her position was found back at home in a *truly embarrassing and humorous position* with another man. Fearing the loss of his life, the wife's lover escaped. Although the hunter realized now the connection between his inconceivable fall and adulterous wife, he took no action throughout the winter. However, in the spring, he invited all of the King Islanders for a celebration on the crest of King Island, on the rocky pinnacle of Naniurait. After eating and dancing, he began to harass, then to beat his wife mercilessly. When she died, he continued to throw rocks at her, completely burying her. Then, fantastistically, he ran with full speed to the edge of the cliff. Leaping down, he landed on a rock between his legs and was severed in two. As the writer, Ellana, concludes: "It was a terrible thing they did, that couple, those two" (Murray 300).

In a similar tale of a man and the sea, Garcia Marquez paints a realistic yet fantastical tale of a deceased man washed ashore and found by islanders. Again, death (reality) and comedy and magic are intermingled. Namely, in "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," when the corpse of the huge Esteban is dragged from the deadly webs of the sea, and after the children have "played with" this strange creature, the women of the village visualize him as a god or as something larger than life itself. They fantastistically paint him as having been condemned to go through doors sideways and to hitting his head on low ceiling beams. They spin tales of his former greatness and even sexually fantasize, like a group of, whores, about his superman-like physical organs:

They secretly compared him to their own men, thinking that for all their lives theirs were incapable of doing what he could do in one night, and they ended up dismissing them deep in their hearts as the weakest, meanest, and most useless creatures on earth. (*Innocent Erendira and Other Stories* 198)

Needless to say that the husbands of these women were annoyed by this "womanish frivolity" and even jealous and hateful. Yet, the sexual comedy continues, echoing the provocative cormorant hunter's wife playfulness with her lover, as these fishermen's wives bedeck the deceased hunk with a scapular and wrist compass and as they perversely dress Esteban in all newly sewn clothes. Magic and actuality co-mingle at the finale of "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" as the mythic dead body is tossed back into the sea, resembling the cormorant hunter's wife who is beaten and flung to her death after a day of dancing and festivities; yet, the power of fantasy remains. For, at the end of the story, the women's actualities have been reconstructed as now everything would be different:

. . . their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors so that Esteban's memory could go everywhere without bumping

into beams and so that no one in the future would dare whisper the big boob finally died, too bad, the handsome fool has finally died, because they were going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban's memory eternal . . . (201).

The tale ends with the female protagonists' recreating a new legend, a novel town (that of Esteban's village), and, most significantly, an unorthodox perspective on life which will be in continual renovation.

Furthermore, Aloysius Pikonganna, on the other hand, evokes the mystical element of the arctic wilderness and of his heritage as an Inupiat Eskimo in his tale entitled "Two Great Polar Bear Hunters." This magical-realistic tale of the immortality and spirituality of a huge bear appears, likewise, in Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" where an aged angel refuses to die and "spirituality" is reviewed—since he does not fit the typical mode of a youthful, Latin-speaking angel. In the first short story two hunters, Avuk and Kuguk, begin their hunt on the pack ice at King Island. The latter started out earlier; his friend discovers enormous polar bear tracks. Fantastically, both Kuguk and the giant polar bear are found, lying exhausted, on the ice, after a long day's chase. Kuguk is unable to kill the divine like beast, hence his companion Avuk must slaughter the polar bear. On their night trek back home, pulling their trophy behind them, they begin to hear the eerie cries of a non-human being. Mysteriously, behind them walks a giant polar bear that, at the divide in their trail, rolls over on its back and then heads east toward Twin Peaks on the mainland. Suddenly, in the blackness of night, it completely disappears, but the same strange cries resound. Even the large brave Avuk refuses to kill this new apparition. The style of "magical realism" again infiltrates this story as an actual account is retold realistically, but, somehow magical elements are interwoven throughout without any jolting of the readers' perception or frame of reference. Real and surreal incidences simultaneously co-exist on the same level. The magical incidences, such as the strange noises, unreal size of the bear, and the bear's ghost, all are presented as realistically and as convincingly as the hunters Avuk and Kuguk.

Resembling the tale of Pikonganna, Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (subtitled "A Tale for Children") is an amalgamation of stark reality, human comedy, and shocking fantasy. Yet, the way the story is told, no one questions the authenticity of the angel and its immortality. In fact, Pelayo and Elisenda, poor sea-folk with a newborn child who is very ill, capitalize on the fact that they have discovered an aged man with enormous wings in their backyard. They keep him in their chicken coop outside and, when the infant miraculously wakes up the next morning healthy, they attribute her cure to the strange creature outdoors. Elisenda decides to charge five cents admission to their yard for a peek at the angel, after throngs of neighbors and curious pilgrims from afar begin to jam their dwelling. With the money collected from curiosity seekers, the couple is able to build a better home. The old angel wanders in and out of the house due to his failing sight, gets the chicken pox at the same time as their child, and survives a series of ailments, regaining miraculously each time his health. During the winter months his

feathers began to grow on his wings and, suddenly, one morning, while the wife was preparing lunch, she heard a loud flapping of wings. She was relieved that a strong sea breeze aided the decrepit angel to gain altitude and to rid him from her already too busy life. The story concludes nonchalantly, as in the tale of Pikonganna, with fantastical and realistic elements mingling in harmony:

She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea. (*Leaf Storm and Other Stories* 112).

The world of Macondo, in the fictions of Garcia Marquez, exists too in the polar culture. In fact, Ellana and Pikonganna's creations are extensions of their own personal living environments which provoke the intermingling of fantasy and reality, of the superstitions of Shamanism and the life-force of Sila with the harsh actualities of arctic existence. Similarly, the Latin American author in his short fiction records his background of Bantu superstition, the spiritual potency of the word itself "Macondo," and the depressed elements of his Colombian society with its poverty and futility of socio-economic and cultural improvement. The "Alaskan connection" is further strengthened by the Eskimo writers' and the contemporary Latin American author's tremendously potent sense of creative imagination and artistic flair in trying to capture universal man's/woman's miracles and mysteries: their fantastical actualities.

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