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Magic Realism in Lilliam Rivera's *Never Look Back* (2021)

This article examines the literary mode of magic realism in Lilliam Rivera's novel *Never Look Back* (2021). The paper argues that the novel provides a graspable representation of a traumatic event by combining the ancient myth with magic realism. It demonstrates how the traumatic experience of surviving Hurricane María disrupts the individual's framework of reality. Hence, the protagonist accepts magic realism in her perception of 'the normal'. *Never Look Back* was published by Bloomsbury Publications Inc., with art created by Kristal Quiles. The book is divided into two parts, the first depicting how the two main characters fall in love and the second illustrating their spiritual trials. The novel is written in the alternating first-person perspective of its two main protagonists, who, in their voices, retell the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice. The book incorporates the ancient myth by transferring its setting to the Bronx and making the main characters Afro-Latinx. Rivera blends magic realism within the novel's story when the spirits become vital to the character development and plot. The essay analyzes the elements borrowed from the Greek myth, their interaction with magic realism, and issues relating to mental health to debate themes of collective importance, such as love, loss, death, and immortality.

Nuyorican Lilliam Rivera is the author of young adult novels, including *The Education of Margot Sanchez* (2017), *Dealing in Dreams* (2019), *We Light up the Sky* (2021) and *Never Look Back* (2021). She also explores the medium of comics. Her first graphic novel, *Unearthed: A Jessica Cruz Story* (2021), was created with the illustrator Steph C. Her second comic project, *Golden Vance: The Hocus-Pocus Hoax* (2021), is directed toward young learners. Her short fiction and personal essays have appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Tin House*, and *Buzzfeed Books*. The author grew up in the South Bronx in a Puerto Rican family, but now she resides in Los Angeles, California, where

she conducts workshops on creative writing¹. Rivera felt deeply affected by Hurricane María, which hit the island of Puerto Rico on 20 September 2017². In an interview conducted for *24hr.YaBookBlog*³, the author explains her inspiration for writing *Never Look Back*: “My novel is inspired by Hurricane María and how it affected my family living on the island. I needed to find a way to write about the rage I felt during that time while I watched our government do nothing to help those on the island. *Never Look Back* was my way of searching for hope”.

The analysis of the novel requires a recollection of the ancient myth about Orpheus and Euridice. In classical Greek mythology, Orpheus is a gifted poet, musician, singer, and civilizing force who revealed mysteries to humans. In her attempt to avoid Aristaeus’ advances, his wife Euridice steps on a poisonous snake and dies prematurely. Orpheus descends to the Underworld and persuades Hades to return his wife to the world of the living through his extraordinary power in music. Hades agrees to his request, but Orpheus cannot turn back to look at Euridice until they both reach the earth. When Orpheus forgets Hades’ directive, Euridice disappears forever. Orpheus roams across the country, bewailing his lost wife, and dies at the hands of the Thracian women. According to a different version of the myth, Orpheus is killed by beasts who tear him apart⁴.

The theory of magic realism

The German art critic Franz Roh is credited with coining the term ‘magic realism’ in a short essay in 1923 and subsequently in his *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (1925), referring to newly emerging post-expressionistic art forms⁵. The Italian critic Massimo Bontempelli applied the concept in literary texts as part of his new aesthetic program for European literature, emphasizing the visibility of magic behind everyday objects⁶. In his essay published in

¹ Lilliam Rivera’s biographical details are available on her website at <https://www.lilliamrivera.com/> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2022].

² Vick K., *A Land They No Longer Recognize: Desperation and Resilience in Hurricane-Battered Puerto Rico*, Time, [online], 8 October 2017, <time.com/a-land-they-no-longer-recognize/>, [Accessed 25 Oct. 2022].

³ *24hr.YaBookBlog*. 2022. *Author Interview With Lilliam River Featuring Never Look Back*, Latinx Heritage Month Series, [online], 21 Sep. 2020, <https://24hryabookblog.wordpress.com/2020/09/21/author-interview-with-lilliam-rivera-featuring-never-look-back-latinx-heritage-month-series-2020/>, [Accessed 26 Oct. 2022].

⁴ Coronis A., *Sarah Ruhl’s “Euridice”: A Dramatic Study of the Orpheus Myth in Reverse*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, 2013, vol. 126, p. 302; Health J., *The Failure of Orpheus*, Transactions of the American Philological Association, 1994, vol. 124, p. 165; Levitas R., Moylan T., *Introduction: The Once and Future Orpheus*, Utopian Studies, 2010, vol. 21, No. 2, p. 208.

⁵ Hegerfeldt A. C., 2005. *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 11–12.

⁶ Kluwick U., *Exploring Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie’s Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 2011, p. 7.

El Nacional in 1948, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier used the term *lo real maravilloso* (“the marvelous real”), and tried to define this literary movement as a genuinely Latin American phenomenon⁷. While Carpentier emphasized the Latin American nature of the marvelous real, the Puerto Rican scholar Angel Flores highlighted the European origins of the concept in his paper “Magical realism in Spanish American Fiction”, presented in 1954⁸. The literary mode, known under the terms ‘magic realism’, ‘magical realism’, and ‘marvelous real’, has become popular since the 1980s⁹, and has frequently been showcased in Latin American fiction and postcolonial literature.

Magic realism has been designated as a critical concept denoting a mode rather than a genre¹⁰. This literary category is a hybrid mode, combining traditionally incompatible elements by the disruptive juxtaposition of the rational with the uncanny. Thus, magic realism is a postmodern discourse in which the narrative transgresses the boundaries between texts traditionally categorized as realism or fantasy¹¹. The incomprehensible and the awesome are used as part of the mundane and the common, and challenge the paradigm of reality. The fantastic components cannot be explained as hallucinations or dreams but should be accepted as ordinary elements of the fictional world.

The nature of the relationship between the supernatural and natural in magic realism fiction displays a harmonious combination of the two realms. This generically mixed literary convention establishes no hierarchy between the separate modes. Magic realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a contemporary world. Magical realism and fantasy fiction share the quality of using magical elements; nonetheless, the genres exhibit different patterns in employing them. Comparative literature scholar Theo L. D’haen, in his essay “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers”¹², argues that the fantasy genre foregrounds the magical component, and the magic realism mode emphasizes the realist elements.

The narrative mode of magic realism offers alternative approaches to reality expressed in postcolonial and non-Western literary works¹³. According to literary scholar Maggie Ann Bowers, magic realist fiction is frequently associated with specific spaces in postcolonial countries, usually rural areas and small townships. Bowers, however, does not suggest that magic realism is restricted to certain geographic locations but

⁷ Durix J-P., *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, p. 79.

⁸ Hegerfeldt A. C., op. cit., p. 24.

⁹ Bowers M. A., *Magical Realism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p.1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹¹ Bodtorf C., Jeanne G., *Big Mama in Postmodern Society: Tracing Magical Realism in Popular Culture*, Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, 2007, vol. 8, No. 2, p. 76.

¹² D’haen T. L., *Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers* [in:] Parkinson Zamora L., Farris W. B., (eds.) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham, N. C., Duke UP, 1995, pp. 191–203.

¹³ Bowers M. A., op. cit., p. 10.

rather claims that some places have been known to inspire magic realist writing¹⁴. The magic strain of narratives often combines a unique fusion of religious beliefs, myths, legends, and superstitions of the colonists and indigenous people¹⁵. The presence of ghosts frequently emphasizes the ongoing influence of the past and creates a sense of mystery. Other extraordinary occurrences include miracles, disappearances, and strange atmospheres. The next component of magic realism is a flexible view of time, which can be interminable, cyclical, or mythological. This timeless fluidity is another aspect of the relationship between the rational and the uncanny¹⁶.

Renowned American, Latin American, and European authors have experimented with magical realism and are thus associated with this literary category. Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, in the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), narrates the story of Latin America discovered by European explorers. The book's characters are haunted by ghosts, which symbolize the meaning of the past in shaping the present. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Indian-British author Salman Rushdie uses magic realism to intertwine individual and national identity questions with a broader story of India's independence. In *The House of Spirits* (1982), Chilean-American writer Isabel Allende intertwines magical realism with political turmoil and explores the historical impact on personal destinies, predominantly female struggles in a patriarchal society. Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel depicts supernatural occurrences in *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), exploring how family traditions repress the main protagonist's emotions. Cuban-American writer Cristina Garcia narrates how three generations of Cuban women responded to the revolution in the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993). English-French author Joanne Harris depicts the liberating powers of pleasure and protagonists' awakening to sensuality in *Chocolat* (1999). *The Midnight Library* (2020) by English writer Matt Haig is a story about a liminal space between life and death. The main protagonist struggles for life guidance and explores the alternative lives of the library books' characters. *Garden Spells* (2007) by American author Sarah Addison Allen is a tale about homecoming and supernatural properties of plants depicted with a dose of small-town sensibility.

Magic realism has been recognized as a popular narrative mode of writing in the last decades of the twentieth century. However, the over-association of magic realism with Latin America is controversial among critics. When a literary mode is restricted to a specific location, it may become a passing fade. When applied in a different geographical context, it may be perceived as a cliché. Another criticism derives from a Western perspective of seeing magical realism in postcolonial discourse, which values realism and undermines the irrational component of the text¹⁷.

¹⁴ Bowers M. A., op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁵ Bodtorf C., Jeanne G., op. cit., pp. 80-81.

¹⁶ Bowers M. A., op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁷ Bowers M. A., op. cit., pp. 117-119.

Realism in the novel

Literary critic Darío Villanueva emphasizes that the theoretical framework of realism presents a trend toward reproducing reality as faithfully as possible, which leads to absolute relativism in applying the realistic criterion¹⁸. The realism of *Never Look Back* incorporates the notion of Verisimilitude¹⁹, i.e., the idea that the novel's textual elements, characters, dialogues, and setting should be believable. The fictional world is complex in the story and features the ordinary lives of Latinx characters in a contemporary New York setting, but it also explicitly references Greek mythology. Rivera preserves some archetypal figures and deviates significantly from the myth. The novel retains the characters of Pheus (Orpheus) and Eury (Euridice) as the main protagonists; however, contrary to the original myth, which centers on Orpheus, *Never Look Back* accentuates Eury's story. Even the minor characters of the narrative are Latinx who reside in the South Bronx. Pheus is an African Dominican boy whose father's name is Apollo, like in the ancient myth. Eury is a Puertoriquena, Hurricane María survivor, staying in the Bronx with her cousin Penelope. Pheus believes he possesses a natural gift of music by being named after the mythological singer and poet Orpheus. Thus, his name sets his career path, and the Greek myth appears in the context of the Caribbean heritage. Despite the numerous references to the ancient myth, the novel's conceptual framework instills reality.

Rivera brings realness to the characters by capturing the diverse culture of the Hispanic diaspora in the Bronx. The protagonists sometimes identify pan-ethnically as Latinx, but they precisely acknowledge their Puerto Rican or Dominican heritage on several occasions. Caribbean ethnicity is emphasized by national symbols, such as the Puerto Rican flag tattooed on the arm of Pheus' friend and the Dominican flag that Apollo gets from his son. The protagonists do not privilege the Anglo-American culture over their Caribbean roots. On the contrary, they are fond of Hispanic names and spend time only with Latinx. Eury's cousin Penelope is named after the Spanish actress, not the wife of Odysseus from the Greek myth. Nevertheless, she would prefer her name to be "more Latinx, less white or European" (20). Pheus, as a musician, has a good ear and identifies the accents of Hispanic speakers. However, he is not a man measuring Latinx by their ability to master speaking English without an accent. On the contrary, he values the Caribbean accent and believes it is vital in shaping one's identity. "Puerto Rican accents are mad dope. Don't get it twisted; Dominican accents are fine as hell. I don't have a preference. I like them both. An accent makes you stand out, means you're from somewhere" (33). On numerous occasions, the narrative em-

¹⁸ Villanueva D., *Theories of Literary Realism*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 3.

¹⁹ Online dictionary *Literopedia* defines Verisimilitude in the following way: "Verisimilitude is a literary concept that refers to the degree to which a work of fiction or art resembles reality or the real world. It involves creating a sense of truthfulness, authenticity, or believability within the fictional world, allowing readers or viewers to suspend their disbelief and engage with the story or artwork more deeply". Team Literopedia, *What is Verisimilitude. Definition and Examples*, Literopedia. Literary Terms, [online], 28 June 2023, <https://literopedia.com/what-is-verisimilitude-definition-and-examples>, [Accessed 30 Nov. 2023].

phasizes that Hispanic musical genres directly influence the behavior and actions of the young protagonists. They listen to Latino music: salsa, bachata, merengue, and reggaeton, played according to their mood: a lively merengue or a romantic bachata. The novel's Latinas perform seductive dances when they listen to "a reggaeton tune full of heat and lust" (33). In his application for the music program, Pheus writes about bachata music and its connection to the Dominican Republic (303). All representatives of Latinx display an eagerness to preserve their ethnic identity.

The novel explores an amalgamation of spiritual beliefs that matter to Caribbean characters, exposed to syncretic religious fusions in their home countries and the USA. Nonetheless, the main male protagonist expresses a realist, not spiritual, approach to the text of the Bible. The character of Pheus is depicted as an atheist who demonstrates an open mind on religious flexibility and the "mix of Catholicism and Santería and Buddhism" (73). He does not prioritize a belief in reincarnation and Caribbean folklore over Christianity. However, attempting to understand Eury's spirituality, he begins visiting the Catholic Church and reading his father's copy of the Bible. The narrative explicitly accentuates that reasoning, not spirituality, triggers the protagonist's religious research. The Bible disappoints Pheus by not offering any consolation, "The Bible transforms into comic book epic-ness with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (110). Rivera openly suggests that Christian beliefs cannot solve the characters' complex problems.

The narrative establishes the premises of realism by exploring catastrophic hurricanes striking the Caribbeans and emphasizing the psychological aspect of the plot. In reference to Hurricane María, the novel²⁰ demonstrates actuality in its representation of the disastrous event that has caused traumatic memories. Eury's mental condition has an explicable relation to the physical damage caused by the hurricane's "unrelenting violence" (84), and her perception of the island is reminiscent of the catastrophe. Visual and sound indications of the hurricane encroaching on the island reappear in Eury's selective recollections, "Leaves from the palm trees begin to fall from the non-forceful wind. Rocks tap against the windows, louder as each minute passes" (244). Peter Brooks claims that realist fiction is "attached to visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight"²¹. This view is confirmed by Professor of English literature Niklas Salmose, who elaborates on visual and auditory sensations in the narrative and concludes that sensorial modes enrich the representation of reality²².

The novel creates a sense of continuity between the past and the present by giving the primary concern to trauma. Traumatic experience violates Eury's existing under-

²⁰ Hurricane María was one of the most intense Atlantic hurricanes ever recorded. It damaged the Island of Puerto Rico, destroying property and electrical infrastructure. Adams J. M., *Hurricane Maria and a Generation of Resistencia*, Public Health Reports, 2018, vol. 133, No. 3, p. 224.

²¹ Brooks P., *Realist Vision*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 3.

²² Salmose N., *Sensorial Aesthetics: Cross-Modal Stylistics in Modernist Fiction*, Text Matters, 2020, vol. 10, p. 334.

standing of the world, leaving her vulnerable, distrustful, and uncertain. Re-experiencing the trauma occurs because traumatic events cannot be integrated into the beliefs she held before the hurricane. The repetitive flashbacks re-enact the event because her mind cannot represent it otherwise. Trauma²³ conveys intense fear, also experienced collectively, by individuals residing in a dangerous place. The focus on a particular place in traumatic memories represents the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and “the physical landscape of the place is a referent for the individual’s sense of self and identity”²⁴. The protagonist narrates how trauma caused by the hurricane has influenced her identity, “My thoughts never came to how losing a home can strip a person of their identity” (82). The novel tackles the issue of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which Boricuas faced afterward. The author is careful in addressing mental illness, as Eury seems to manifest the symptoms of PTSD²⁵. Nonetheless, her state is much worse in many ways since she carries survivor’s guilt.

The realistic strain of the plot explores the social, political, and cultural contexts of the colonized island of Puerto Rico, openly abandoned by politicians and continually plagued by natural disasters. The author introduces contemporary attachments by presenting the post-hurricane activities of the American government representatives. The novel emphasizes the negligence of politicians and overtly criticizes the efforts made by the Trump Administration to help Puerto Rico recover from the disaster. Rivera calls Trump²⁶ appearing in the aftermath “a demented circus clown” (82) and “The racist president taking selfies with politicians” (264). The author juxtaposes the tormented Boricuas left in intense grief after the devastation from the hurricane with white Americans who talk about Bitcoins in front of San Juan Cathedral, the landmark of the destroyed island. The narrative weaves the personal story of a traumatized girl with the broader context of the colonialization theme. In the hospital, a bearded man tries to explain Eury’s state to Pheus, “What is a spirit if not the result of a colonized, traumatic state?”. He continues, “Plant yourself in the mindset of the Taínos when they first saw the conquistadores arriving on the island. They were seeing things they never witnessed before. So much pain and this pain can manifest in many ways”

²³ Trauma studies, situated initially within medicine and psychology, gained significant attention in literary criticism in 1996 with Cathy Caruth’s publication *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Trauma is related to an overwhelming event that an individual faced in the past and has particular implications on his/her mental reality. Craps S., *Beyond Eurocentrism. Trauma Theory in the Global Age* [in:] Buelens G., Durrant S., Eaglestone R., (eds.) *The Future of Trauma Theory. Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 55.

²⁴ Balaev M., *Trends in Literary Trauma Theory*, *An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 2008, vol. 41, No. 2, p. 161.

²⁵ Since the early 1980s, the medical establishment has officially recognized the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Di-Capua Y., *Trauma and Other Historians: An Introduction*, *Historical Reflections*, 2015, vol. 41, No. 3, p. 2.

²⁶ President Trump showed his complete lack of sympathy by saying that Hurricane Maria was not “a real catastrophe” like Hurricane Katrina. Abramson A., *President Trump Says Hurricane Maria Was Not ‘a Real Catastrophe Like Hurricane Katrina’*, *Time*, [online], 3 October 2017, <http://time.com/4967645/donald-trump-puerto-rico-hurricane-katrina/>, [Accessed 20 Jan. 2018].

(204). Thus, Rivera conveys a message of decolonization by suggesting that trauma has been caused by the hurricane directly and the island's colonization indirectly.

Magic in the novel

The literary mode of the novel *Never Look Back* switches into fantasy when the setting changes from the real world to the Underworld, named *El Inframundo*. The magical strain of the plot displays similarities to the Greek myth about Orpheus and Euridice, but the story's closure differs considerably. Fleeing from sexual assault, Eury falls into a coma and finds herself in the Underworld, like her ancient prototype. The accident is part of an enormous deception by the novel's supernatural protagonists trying to drag Eury into the Underworld. Pheus possesses magic musical powers but plays the guitar, not the lyre. He descends into the Underworld and persuades the gods to restore Eury to life. The hero's journey to the realm of the dead resembles a katabasis²⁷ because he travels with a well-defined purpose and intention to return. The utopian aspect of music concerns its capacity to lead from the darkness toward the light. The supernatural force of music allows Pheus to liberate his beloved, but he loses her again. His journey takes him from the secret corners of New York City to the River Styx. With Pheus and Eury returning from the Underworld to live happily, the successful conclusion deviates significantly from the ancient myth.

The appearance of a spirit named Ato signifies the supernatural strain in the novel. When Eury feels traumatized, she can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is not. She faces the challenge of confronting the demons in her mind while accepting love in reality. The evil spirit epitomizes the hurricane for the female protagonist. She believes the demon follows her from Puerto Rico to Tampa in Florida and the Bronx, reappearing in her life and explicitly initiating a series of natural disasters. The supposed occurrences of Ato bring Eury's mental stability into question. The traumatic experience of surviving the hurricane, named "an unnatural predator" (48), defies linear time through the interference of flashbacks. Eury reacts irrationally to sounds and noises that trigger traumatic memories. The most dramatic recollection of the hurricane concerns images of rain. "Raindrops slowly fall on my face, blending in with the tears" (16). The mental imagery causes her body to shake whenever it rains because the rain symbolizes the destructive force of the hurricane and a demon that wants to take her to the Underworld. Literary critic Geoffrey Hartman claims that a traumatic event bypasses "perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche"²⁸. Eury re-experiences the hurricane through intrusive memories of the traumatic event, spontaneously intruding into consciousness. At first, Pheus thinks that Eury's seeing the malicious spirit is just the result of "PTSD from the hurricane" (197).

²⁷ Bernabé, A., *What is a KATÁBASIS? The Descent into the Netherworld into the Ancient Near East*, *Les Études classiques*, 2015, vol. 83, pp. 15–34.

²⁸ Hartman G. H., *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*, *New Literary History*, 1995, vol. 26, No. 3, p. 537.

Then he sees the spirit too, "Ato isn't human. He's something unsettled. A spirit" (129). The character naturally accepts a new perspective of reality, denoting supernatural presence in his universe.

The novel's Underworld is a supernatural space inhabited by a unique combination of gods known from ancient mythology, Charon and Dis Pater, and the third deity Guabancex, distinctive for the Caribbeans. According to Greek mythology, Charon is an intermediary between the Underworld and the world of the living because he carries the souls of the dead across the river Styx. Then, Dís Pater, a Roman god of wealth, is associated with wealth and precious metals. Guabancex stands out in this spiritual team as Taíno natives of Puerto Rico associate her with turbulent weather patterns, such as hurricanes²⁹. Thus, the story about the trauma of a Hurricane María survivor features the goddess attributed with the power to control the tropical storms striking the Caribbean. The fantastic mode of narration depicts scary creatures inhabiting the Underworld. "The server is missing a jaw. Half her face is torn off. Bones and crusted, bloody skin hangs loose. Her eyes match the blood" (220). The bodily distortion of monster creatures makes them grotesque figures and creates an atmosphere of the uncanny. Rivera explains the inspiration behind the literary creation of *El Inframundo* in an interview with Bayleigh Acosta for *World Literature Today*³⁰. The author modeled *El Inframundo* on an empty building, the King's Bridge Armory in the Bronx, which used to serve as space for military practices and for boxing fights, both purposes linked with violence. Rivera says, "So I thought, even if a building is empty, all these spirits and all the fingerprints of what it used to be like still live in the building. That's how I imagined what *El Inframundo* would look like".

Magic occurs in the supernatural space of *El Inframundo*, when Pheus begins the mission of saving his beloved, resembling Orpheus' journey from the ancient myth. It seems inevitable that the power of the male protagonist's voice and his guitar skill will open the gate to the magical Underworld. Contrary to the mythical Orpheus, the Dominican Pheus is not alone but accompanied by Apollo, suggesting the power of family support in Hispanic culture. The magical strain of the mode exhibits Pheus' spirituality when he appeals to all possible supernatural powers for their support in saving his beloved. He takes Eury's rosary to please the Christian god and keeps an elephant talisman as a token of good luck. The spiritual attitude of the protagonist reflects Syncretic beliefs, fusing Christian elements with the Indigenous worshipping

²⁹ Allen D., *Mythological Girls: Guabancex*. *Girl Museum*, [online], 18 August 2017, https://www.girl-museum.org/mythological_girls_guabancex/, [Accessed 14 Feb. 2022]; SAGUE M. Jr., *The Identity of GuaBanCex*, Indigenous Caribbean Network, [online], 26 July 2014, <https://indigenouscaribbean.ning.com/profiles/blogs/the-identity-of-guabancex-spirit-of-natural-disasters>, [Accessed 14 Feb. 2022]; The Spanish word 'huracán' derives from Arawak, the language of the Taíno natives. PATTE M.-F., *Arwanak vs. Lokono. What's in a name?* HAL Open Science, 10 May 2012, p. 6.

³⁰ Acosta B., *Lilliam Rivera's Orpheus and Euridice Remix: Talking about Never Look(ing) Back*, *World Literature Today*, [online], 20 December 2020, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/interviews/lilliam-riveras-orpheus-and-eurydice-remix-talking-about-never-looking-back-bayleigh>, [Accessed 26 Oct. 2022].

of the Caribbeans. Pheus's travel to the Underworld evokes a resemblance with Joseph Campbell's monomyth known as "the hero's journey". This narrative pattern, described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)³¹, involves a hero venturing from the real world into a region of the supernatural, overcoming a crisis, gaining new wisdom and returning transformed. The journey is a catalyst for the hero's personal growth, as he discovers that he cannot accomplish his task without respecting the rules of the supernatural world. After encountering fabulous forces and doing marvelous deeds, the hero returns from the mysterious adventure, forever changed.

The narrative incorporates Latinx musical tradition into ancient mythology. Pheus's introduction to the gods inhabiting *El Inframundo* as "el Nuevo Nene de la Bachata" (229) emphasizes his Caribbean background and musical connection. In his rescue mission, the character performs Prince's song "Adore", which does not meet the acceptance of Charon, who is overtly unsatisfied with American music. Only the song "Pena por Ti" by the renowned Dominican bachata artist Luis Segura meets Charon's approval. The narrative highlights the superiority of the Caribbean over the American when the god from Greek mythology selects the Dominican bachata over the music by a celebrated American singer.

The marvelous is apparent in the astonishing Caribbean landscape created in the deceptive *El Inframundo*. The demon Ato shapes this magical place to imitate the island of Puerto Rico with its characteristic natural environment, "giant tree ferns, moss blankets of the tree trunks, white and green orchids" (258). The novel incorporates symbolism via animals like the small frog *coquís* and the tiny bird *llorosa*, both native to Puerto Rico. The selection of frogs and birds for Boricua images enhances the narrative's magical element. For indigenous tribes, frogs symbolize a dual presence in the spiritual and human world. They go through metamorphosis in life so they can guide humans through their transformation³². Frog symbolism indicates changes in Eury's life, such as spiritual healing. Birds collectively represent human life, a transition between life and death that corresponds with Eury's situation, nearly dead but still alive. The birds may symbolize bad omens and death, but at the same time, they can also mean rebirth, renewal, and the afterlife³³. The birds indicate that Eury is close to death but also that there is hope for rebirth.

The magical landscape of Boricua lures a Latina character with the exotic images remembered from the period before the hurricane. This touch of the physical surroundings indicates her mystical relationship with the island. Rivera accentuates

³¹ Joseph Campbell argued that the world's myths share an underlying structure called the monomyth, which can be applied to different genres or stories. The monomyth theory argues that in any story, the hero receives a call to adventure, steps into an unknown realm, and returns after accomplishing the task. Campbell J., *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, London, Fontana Press, 1993 [1949].

³² Pallua J. V., *What can the mythical frog tell us? The symbolism and role of the frog in history and modernity*, *Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 2019, vol. 77, pp. 63–64.

³³ Atkins C., *What do birds symbolise?*, Thayer Birding, [online], 2 Oct. 2022, <https://www.thayerbirding.com/what-do-birds-symbolize/>, [Accessed 18 August 2022].

Boricuas' sensory attachment to their island when Eury discovers her locality is not genuine Puerto Rico through the absence of familiar animals and sounds. "The coquíes aren't the only thing missing. Although there is an abundance of vegetation and greenery, no insects can be found" (222). The character's recollection of her life among humans triggers a rapid transformation of the furious demon, "Ato no longer has an angelic face. His eyes are completely black. He is unrecognizable, transformed and mutated. A monster" (225). The novel juxtaposes the tranquility of the islanders' lives before the hurricane with the brutality of the tropical storm.

The story's closure combines the ancient myth with the issue of preserving Hispanic identity. Like Pheus's mythological counterpart, he cannot look back while his beloved follows him out of the magical Underworld. If he breaks the rule, she will stay in *El Inframundo* forever. However, the presence of the demon causes extreme anxiety about Eury's safety. In the last stage of their journey, Pheus can no longer stand the pressure and slowly turns his face to Eury, saying, "Mi amor" (292). When the protagonists are about to exit the Underworld and reunite in New York, the Hispanic character does not express his emotions in English but in Spanish, the language of Latinx. The novel explicitly accentuates that the Caribbean American protagonists retain their ethnic culture. Depiction of *El Inframundo* resembles the Jungian³⁴ conception of the mythical labyrinth, with winding passages, godly creatures, and demons, all representing the heroine's traumatic memories. Like in the maze, the Underworld has just one right path to the end, symbolizing the beginning of a new life.

Conclusion

The literary mode of the novel *Never Look Back* harmoniously combines realistic and fantastic realms; however, the supernatural elements are more articulated. The theme of trauma derives from the natural setting and triggers unearthly occurrences. The traumatizing experience of witnessing the hurricane parallels the narrative's shift from the realistic mode into magic realism. The novel follows the Latin American tendency for 'marvelous real' fiction to depict postcolonial spaces and accentuates Eury's origin in postcolonial Boricua. Nonetheless, the main plot events occur in New York, not in a rural Latinx setting. The book conforms to the tradition of exploring legends in magic realism literature. However, the incorporation of a Greek myth signifies an element of novelty. The magic realism mode challenges the paradigm of reality setting rather than merely being used as a plot device. It aims to seize two conflicting perspectives: the paradox of opposites such as life and death, dream and reality. Magic and realism indispensably rely on each other to create a hybrid world within the novel. The boundaries between the ordinary and the awesome intersect in unexpected ways.

³⁴ Jung, C. G., *Psychology and Alchemy (Collected Works of C. G. Jung)*, Vol. 12, Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1980 [1944].

Rivera uses magic realism to depict the Boricua character's struggle to reclaim her identity, traumatized by Hurricane María. An evil spirit symbolizes the force of the devastating tropical storm. Hence, the hurricane occurring in the real world transcends as a ghost into the supernatural realm. The Latina character repeatedly associates any weather changes with the reappearance of the demonic creature, demonstrating that the traumatic event has had particular implications on her perception of reality. In the liminal state between life and death, the protagonist finds the real world deceptive and threatening, so she finds relief via the supernatural. The notion of post-hurricane trauma creates a sense of interconnectedness between the past and the present.

The palimpsest of the novel shows the capacity for various beliefs deriving from Greek, Roman and Taíno mythology, Christian beliefs, and Afro-Caribbean folklore³⁵. The representatives of the Hispanic minority residing in New York seem to have a sub-conscious level associated with accepting the presence of folklore and mythology in their everyday lives. The hero enters the magical world of *El Inframundo*, where the figures from ancient myths reside together with the Caribbean deity of the Taíno people. The elements of Latinx culture and spirituality intertwine with the ancient myth, creating a cohesive tale.

Rivera locates the novel within a broader conversation about the colonial status of Puerto Rico and American politics. The realistic mode is factual to the post-hurricane activities of the American president, who does not offer any consolation to the island's inhabitants. The novel's title, *Never Look Back*, provides life guidance and advice for Puerto Ricans to confront fear and move forward, since looking back causes harmful consequences. Contrary to the ancient myth, this story ends happily. Eury reawakens as she realizes that Pheus is not supposed to rescue her, but she has to save herself. The traumatic experience is essential for the protagonist's identity and renewal. The island's residents must cope with their colonial status and make meaningful decisions about their future. That is the surprising empowerment of the main character and a call for Puerto Rico's political autonomy.

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³⁵ More information on Taíno mythology and Afro-Caribbean folklore is available on the website of National Museum of African American History and Culture. *Taino Figure: Ancestry and Identity*, [online], <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/taino-figure>, [Accessed 21 May 2024]; and Old World Gods. *Caribbean Mythology: Exploring the Gods & Goddesses in the Caribbean*, [online]; <https://oldworldgods.com/other/caribbean-mythology-gods-and-goddesses/>, [Accessed 21 May 2024].

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Magic Realism in Lilliam Rivera's *Never Look Back* (2021)

Abstract: The article analyses the application of the mode of magic realism in Lilliam Rivera's novel *Never Look Back* (2021), which retells the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice. The essay examines how the elements of the myth are transformed through the Caribbean characters in the contemporary setting of the South Bronx. The first part of the article introduces the theoretical framework of the literary mode known as magic realism. The second section analyses the realistic elements of the narrative and highlights the traumatic experience of the Puerto Rican character, a Hurricane María survivor. The third part examines the magical strain of the narrative and establishes a relationship between trauma and magic realism when the protagonist finds relief via the supernatural. The paper argues that the novel provides a graspable representation of a traumatic event by combining ancient myth with magic realism and Caribbean heritage.

Keywords: magic realism, the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, trauma, the Caribbeans