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One Hundred Years of Solitude I: García Márquez on Chance and Order

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One Hundred Years of Solitude I: García Márquez on Chance and Order

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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“Gabriel García Márquez [. . .] is the best-known writer to have emerged from the ‘Third World.’” (Gerald Martin)

“If we look at the novelists of the twentieth century we discover that most of the ‘great names’ on which critics currently agree belong to its first forty years (Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, Woolf); but in the second half of the century perhaps only García Márquez has achieved true unanimity.” (Gerald Martin)

Such has been García Márquez’s success that a problem for his contemporaries and for younger authors has been how to escape his outsized shadow.

The reception and celebration of his novels under the label of “magic realism” has indelibly associated this style with Latin American literature as a whole.

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His has been a hard act to follow.

“*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the first piece of literature since the book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race.” (William Kennedy)

“The novel is [. . .] the axis of Latin America’s twentieth-century literature, the continent’s only undisputable world-historical and world-canonical novel.” (Gerald Martin)

“More grandiose still, but nevertheless true, it is part of a worldwide phenomenon which marks the end of all ‘modernity’ with the post-colonial arrival of the Third World and its literatures on the global stage; the end of the period, we could say, that began with Rabelais.” (Gerald Martin)

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a carnival that encompasses great variety and takes delight in turning it all upside down.

As in a carnival the confusion is part of the point: this is a book that appeals to many senses and generates many affects.

The narrative is over-full, excessive and both endlessly new and insistently repetitious.

Among its repetitions are recurring attempts to impose some kind of order on what can otherwise appear to be chaos, even madness.

But from the outset, we know that their (and our) agency is limited, if also sometimes enhanced, by the things that surround us.

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In the meantime, we take our chances, with the novel and with life.

AN INTRICATE GAME OF CONFUSION

“Things have a life of their own [. . .]. It’s simply a matter of waking up their souls.” (1-2)

This is the essence of García Márquez’s magic realism: the acknowledgement that objects, too, have their own lives, their own desires and destinies that can both compete and collude with human plans and expectations.

The ice is just one of a panoply of wonders that are scattered through the novel and are enduringly remembered by its countless readers.

Some of these phenomena are more “magical” than others, but the point is that they are all treated (more or less) equally, as mechanisms and apparatuses that both expand and frustrate human desire.

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The liveliness of things continues whether or not we realize or acknowledge it.

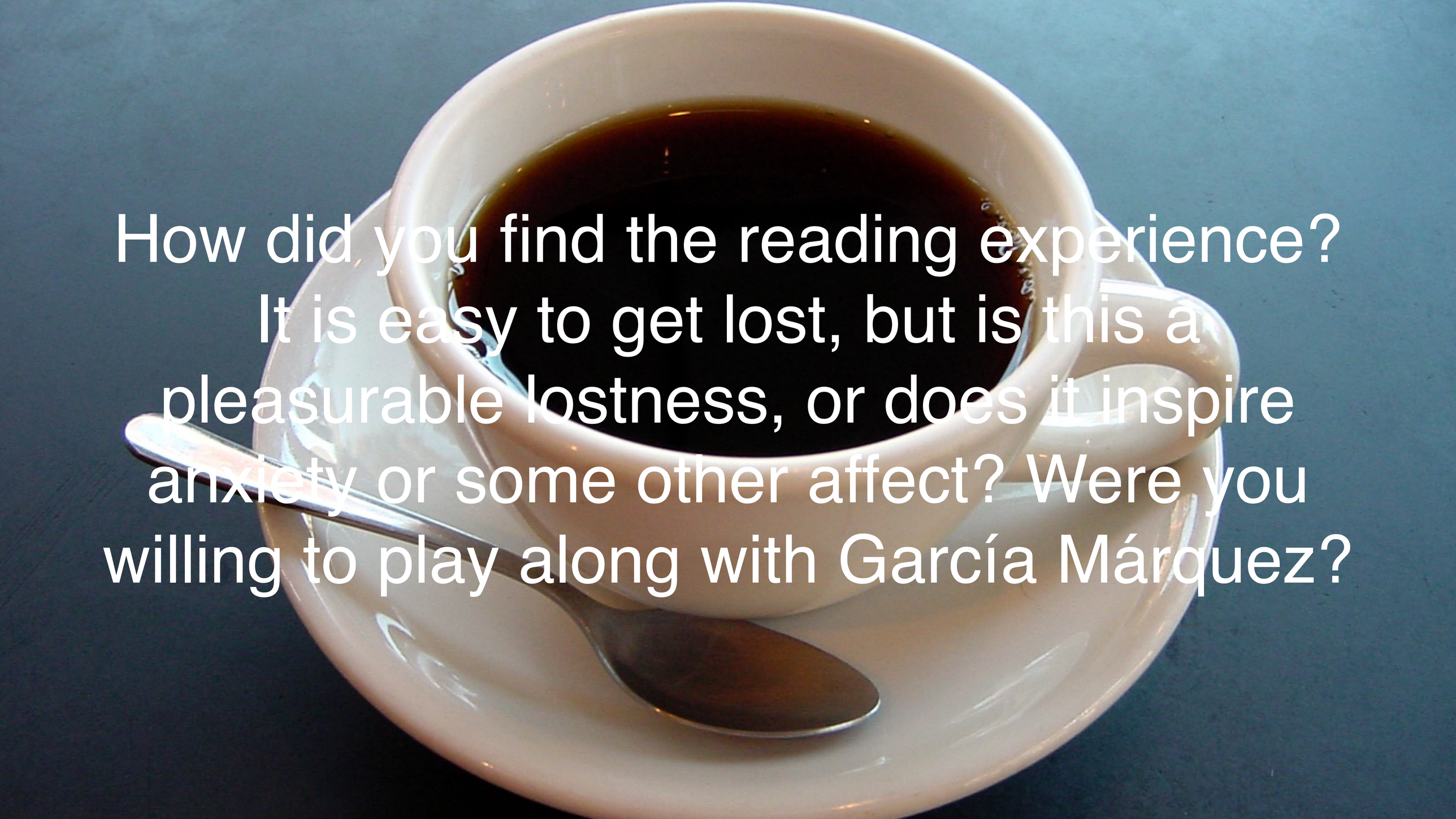
The house, town, and the Buendía family are a set of assemblages of objects and subjects that variously channel, filter, reproduce, transform, and magnify broader social forces through the mediation of a complex multitude of heterogenous parts whose interaction is frustratingly predictable at times and utterly novel at others.

There is a constant procession of new characters, a stream of novelty: children are born, grow up, and set off on adventures or obsessions; visitors, whether they be gypsies or piano tuners, soldiers or beauty queens, come at least for a while then depart, die, or fade into the background.

On the other hand, there is also so much repetition: a character may leave, may even die, but can still keep coming back; and the Buendía children especially are repeatedly given the same names.

“Úrsula still wondered if they themselves might not have made a mistake in some moment of their intricate game of confusion and had become changed forever.” (182)

How did you find the reading experience? It is easy to get lost, but is this a pleasurable lostness, or does it inspire anxiety or some other affect? Were you willing to play along with García Márquez?


How did you find the reading experience?
It is easy to get lost, but is this a pleasurable lostness, or does it inspire anxiety or some other affect? Were you willing to play along with García Márquez?

Some of the characters seek to find or impose order on what is often described as the “delirium” or “madness” that engulfs them.

“I know all of this by heart [. . .]. It’s as if time had turned around and we were back at the beginning.” (193)

“Only the vigilance and care of Rebeca kept him from being dragged off by his imagination into a state of perpetual delirium from which he would not recover.” (76)

The book militantly refuses regimentation, but is aware that “proliferation” can also be a “plague” (190), even as it flirts with excess at every turn.

A GIGANTIC ORGANIZATION OF GAMES OF LUCK AND CHANCE

“José Arcadio Buendía [. . .] had set up the placement of the houses in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort, and he had lined up the streets with such good sense that no house got more sun than another during the hot time of day.” (9)

“Within a few years Macondo was a village that was more orderly and hard-working than any known until then by its three hundred inhabitants.” (9)

“‘The only animals that were prohibited, not just in his house but in the entire settlement, were fighting cocks.” (8)

“They camped on the banks of a stormy river whose waters were like a torrent of frozen glass. [. . .] José Arcadio Buendía dreamed that night that right there a noisy city with houses having mirror walls rose up.” (24)

“He asked what city it was and they answered him with a name that he had never heard, that had no meaning at all, but that had a supernatural echo in his dream: Macondo.” (24)

“You go home and get a weapon, because I’m going to kill you.” (21)

“He was tormented by the immense desolation with which the dead man had looked at him through the rain, his deep nostalgia as he yearned for living people.” (22-23)

For all the delight and wonder that otherwise characterize the novel, from the very start guilt and shame, and the impossible desire to escape the consequences of the past, lurk uneasily in the background.

Each time they spin the wheel,
they play the game with the hope that
they can continue staving off
whatever doom shadows them.

It is as though the entire first section of the book takes place in an eternal moment as we are waiting for the firing squad to shoot.

“Almost pulverized at that time by the decrepitude of death, Prudencio Aguilar would come twice a day to chat with him. They talked about fighting cocks. They promised each other to set up a breeding farm for magnificent birds, not so much to enjoy their victories, which they would not need then, as to have something to do on the tedious Sundays of death.” (139)

Death is everywhere in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but at times it is as if the real enemy were tedium.

We play the game of life, a “vagabond carnival transformed now into a gigantic organization of games of luck and chance” (38). Everything around us has its own agency and the capacity to surprise.

MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”

PRODUCTION

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Made in Vancouver, BC

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