PART III
DIASPORIC MARVELLOUS REALISM AND IDENTITY

After the arrival of the Spanish in the American continent and as European imperialism expanded, an episode similar to that described in the Chronicles of the Indies can be identified when the first English colonizers landed in Africa and described its landscape in the missives they sent back to Europe. They talked about villages “marueilous artificially builded with mudde walles […] and kept very cleane as well in their streets as in their houses […] and whose inhabitants] doe eate [each other] alive.”

The English chronicles from Africa thus emphasized the marvellous aspect of the communities with which the explorers established contact and the ways in which these communities deviated from European standards. Similarly, yet from the opposite perspective, they report that some of the enslaved Africans believed the whites were kidnapping people to eat them. The first-known and most famous of all (British-based) slave narratives was written by Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo leader who arrived in the

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3 See, for example, Rawley & Behrendt, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 249–50.
Caribbean as a child after crossing the Atlantic on board one of the slave ships. He wrote:

I was now persuaded [...] that [the crew] were going to kill me. [...] When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate.⁴

This African perspective is significant in counterbalancing hegemonic European views, whether those of the Spanish which offered distorted images of pre-Columbian communities in South America or those of the British or Portuguese, which misrepresented African civilizations as barbarian and inferior. This eurocentrism, which has persisted over millennia and pre-dates colonization, is, ironically, cast in its true colours by pre-Columbian and African peoples, for whom the feral brutes were to be found on the other side of the fence. But history is written by the conquerors, for whom non-Western communities and their civilizations were deemed the negative ‘Other’ in accordance with racial, gender, and class interests that would better serve imperial powers to “construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”⁵ This double historiographical perspective can be aligned with the main characteristics of both lo real maravilloso americano and Diasporic Marvellous Realism.

In this vein, Magdalena García Pinto⁶ considers that one of the foremost motivations for Carpentier to include an Amerindian point of view within his literary creation was the fact that this perspective allowed Latin American writers to counteract an historical discourse dominated by the European logos. Hence, the Other becomes legitimized in a Latin American and Caribbean context through the focalization of the discourse on the indigenous or African point of view. Thanks to this, cultural syncretism and conflictual encounters with the marvellous are directly addressed in literature in order to offer an

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⁵ Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 70.