

# Decolonising Categories: Learning from “Water” by Ellen van Neerven

MYLÈNE CHARON  
CY UNIVERSITY CERGY-PARIS (FRANCE)

Discussing the reception of Waanyi author Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria*, Wiradjuri writer and academic Jeanine Leane rejects its frequent labelling, by non-Aboriginal readers, as a work of “magic realism” (Leane “Historyless People”). As Leane puts it, “From where I stand such readings [of Blak works through the lens of “magic realism”] assimilate our knowledge and stories of time and place to the familiar discourse of the settler readers’ comfort zone” (Leane “Historyless People”). Leane quotes Alison Ravenscroft, according to whom magic realism “paradoxically tames and familiarises” because it imposes a binary framework on the work whilst pretending to acknowledge its specificity (Leane “Historyless People”). For Ravenscroft, magic realism projects two representational codes onto two communities, where non-Western worldviews are associated with mere magic and hence delegitimised, and the Western worldview is positioned as the only valid reality (Ravenscroft 196). Ravenscroft contends that magic realism operates in postcolonial literary criticism as a way to dream of others without recognising it (Ravenscroft 205). Attempting to decolonise the category of magic realism, Leane proposes an alternative inspired by “Alexis Wright [who] resisted the term magic realism to describe *Carpentaria*” (“Historyless People” note 14), rendering it instead as “Aboriginal realism” (Wright qtd by Ravenscroft 216). Following Wright’s lead, Leane advocates for a further revision of magic realism that acknowledges the validity of the “subjugated knowledges” of Aboriginal people. Famously coined by Michael Foucault in *Dits et écrits* (164), the concept of subjugated knowledges was later adapted, among others, by Black feminists such as African-American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, to refer to forms of knowledge held by minorities that the majority discredits as being “naive” (Hill Collins 46). In this context, the category of magic realism can be understood as obscuring forms of Blak knowledge that other descriptors might better reveal. Explaining how Wright is inspired by Waanyi culture passed on to her by her grandmother, Leane considers *Carpentaria* a work of “Aboriginal realism,” and more specifically “Waanyi realism,” referencing an opposition to the problematic homogeneity of the term “Aboriginal.” In this essay, I argue that Ellen van Neerven’s short story can be considered a work of Murri realism, in which beings called the Jangigir first appear as strange and fantastical according to the colonial worldview and are finally acknowledged as spirits within the Murri worldview.

Published in 2014 in her collection *Heat and Light*, “Water,” by Yugambah writer van Neerven, takes place in the immediate near future in Queensland. Its setting is both recognisable and futuristic, with Brisbane as a referent, and describes the construction of “Australia2,” a large island meant to separate Aboriginal peoples from settlers. In addition to conventionally described human characters, the story features fantastic aquatic characters, who supposedly emerged with the drilling that took place during the construction of the new island. This co-presence of realism and mysterious elements is typically construed as magic realism. Charles W. Scheel traces the history of this difficult-to-define genre, from its first occurrence in early twentieth century German art, to its various adaptations under the name of “marvelous realism,” in the context of mid-twentieth century South American and Caribbean literatures. Following Amaryll Chanady, Scheel defines magic realism as a “literary mode” where two antinomic codes coexist: a natural code and a supernatural one (Scheel 87–100). Accordingly, van Neerven’s short story might be categorised as magic realism. However, as with its application

to Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria*, such a label is problematic. The problem is not so much the category's geographic origin but the epistemic geography it invokes when embedded in the coloniality of knowledge. As Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo explain, coloniality is a concept global in scope that originates from South America and is used to define the ongoing power relations that have emerged since colonisation in the sixteenth century (Tlostanova and Mignolo 7). Coloniality has an ontological and an epistemological dimension, as colonised peoples are not only dehumanised but also defined as irrational and ignorant, at best possessing pre-modern forms of knowledge (Tlostanova and Mignolo 56–57). Rather than glossing the different uses of “magic realism,” I address here the perverse effect that the term and category itself may convey when it is not decolonised by critics—that is, when it inferiorises non-Western worldviews by reducing them to mere magic, perpetuating a colonial “geography of reason” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 10).

Moving from essentialising debates around readership (Heith 98), I consider how “Water” challenges the borders of Western literary genres. I advocate a reading strategy that neither applies uninterrogated Western literary descriptors, nor forgoes attempts at comprehension. Rather, I adopt a mode of reading that questions these descriptors, by learning from the work itself and particularly from its choices at the level of enunciation—the primary concern of decolonial projects in the context of the coloniality of knowledge (Tlostanova and Mignolo 34–35 and 57–58). How does this short story call for revisions of literary categories? I begin by investigating how this story adapts the *bildungsroman* to “postcolonising” conditions. I then link this work to Aboriginal futurisms, rather than science fiction. Following Leane's redefinition of Wright's so-called magic realism as “Waanyi realism,” I examine the ways in which van Neerven's story functions as a work of “Murri realism.”

In addition to being read through the lens of “magic realism,” another genre through which “Water” might be interpreted is the *bildungsroman*. The story centres around a young main character called Kaden, whose growth is narrated through a series of realisations and learning processes. Kaden, a young queer woman, born of a white Australian mother and a Murri father from Ki Island, starts a new job for the Australian Government. She is hired to help the Government complete its project of building Australia2, a super-island off the Brisbane coast, designed to host First Nations peoples. Following a phase of sea-mining, fantastic aquatic beings first referred to by the Government as “sandplants” have emerged. In order to form this new island, people are evacuated from existing islands, including Ki Island, where Kaden's father's relations once lived. In her new role as Cultural Liaison Officer, Kaden is expected to sail every day between three islets to give the sandplants “formula”—a government-coded word for poison—which is supposed to help uproot them so that they, too, can be removed. As Kaden bonds with Larapinta, the female leader of the “sandplants,” she also reconnects with her Murri family through her cousin Julie. She discovers the Murris are opposed to Australia2, which would remove them from their traditional land. With the help of the sandplants, whom she discovers are actually Murri spirits, she plans to lay siege to Ki Island and take it back. Despite initial concerns that she will lose her lover Larapinta, she eventually joins the fight and plays an important role in resisting the implementation of Government policy, which is ironically called “reconciliation.”

Kaden's evolution unfolds in a specific political context: a colonial one. Because the story is based on the experience of colonialisation, it may be called, after Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (232), a work of postcolonial literature. However, following Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's insistence on the continuous, uninterrupted experience of coloniality lived by Indigenous peoples in the settler colony (10), I adapt the term “postcolonising” to describe the conditions under which this character's development takes place. What does Kaden—who is both the main character and the narrator of the story—learn about this postcolonising world? What does she learn about herself, and who does she become? Who does she learn from? These

questions are characteristic of the *bildungsroman*, yet here, they echo questions posed by what Tlostanova and Mignolo have termed “the decolonial option.” Contrary to postcolonial theory, much of which applies knowledge developed by Western thinkers to the situation of colonised peoples (Tlostanova and Mignolo 33–35), the decolonial option takes as its starting point the knowledge of peoples who have seen their epistemological rights denied as part of the dehumanising process of colonisation (55–57). Insofar as Kaden learns from First Nations characters—her cousin, her uncle Ron, and Larapinta—“Water” actualises decoloniality. Moreover, as Kaden becomes aware of the genocidal nature of the Australia2 project and becomes resistant, the story resonates with Maria Lugones’s definition of decolonial feminism: Kaden is subjected to a set of colonial dichotomies, but is not merely oppressed by these differences. Indeed, she resists them, as suggested by her forbidden relationship with Larapinta (Lugones 747).

Thus, while the story contains traces of the *bildungsroman*, it is a specifically decolonial *bildungsroman*. The introduction depicts the main character embarking on a journey from which no return is possible: “When I look at it [the boat ticket] again I realise the lady has given me a return ticket, and I haven’t twigged. I won’t be needing it—it is only of use today” (69). The anecdote operates as a metaphor for the character, who is unable to return to her former self. Towards the end, once she uncovers the maleficence of the criminal Government and learns about First Nations resistance, Kaden states that she can no longer be satisfied with being mildly sympathetic to First Nations fights from afar. What she has learnt makes her an activist: “How can I go back [to her life]? How can I unknow what I know now? I have been in the dark for far too long. I know who I am now. I know what we have to do” (117). Perhaps the story could be qualified as a Murri *bildungsroman*, in that its main character is on a quest for identity, in relation to her Aboriginal belonging to Ki Island. The lexical field of ignorance is well developed throughout the story: “[My mum] tells me a bit about my family but I don’t know much” (71). She interprets this ignorance in terms of painful lack. This sense of loss motivates her quest: “When the position for a ‘Cultural liaison Officer’ came up I thought great, I’d love the chance to work with other Aboriginal people, because that’s another way of finding out about my culture and what I missed out on growing up” (74).

The story’s account of a character’s journey towards reconnecting with Murri identity and acknowledgment of her Aboriginal belonging is coupled with a refusal to fix the character in terms of racial, gender, and heterosexist classifications. At the beginning of the story, Kaden defines her quest as “get[ting] closer to” her family on her father’s side (71). Her Aboriginal belonging is encoded in the text through associations with the art world: “I don’t know much. I know they were all artists” (71). A few pages later, Kaden identifies as Aboriginal, ironically commenting on the renaming of Brisbane’s public transport routes: “The buses whoosh by and I feel a strong sense of displacement. I’m not sure if it comes from being an Aboriginal person, or if it’s as disconcerting for the rest of the public transport users” (73). She reasserts her identity a few pages later, when she speaks with Larapinta for the first time: “‘You’re a native Australian?’ She asks. I’m taken aback by her observation. I’m not yet used to her forthright nature. ‘Yes’” (79).

Kaden’s identification as Aboriginal challenges “the white gaze” (Griffiths 132) in that she does not conform to racist norms of “Aboriginality.” Commenting on journalist Andrew Bolt’s denial of several public figures’ self-identification as Aboriginal because of their mixed heritage and looks, critic Michael R. Griffiths explains that the open refusal to fetishise Europeanity and give precedence to white ancestry is what scandalises the non-Aboriginal majority (158). Griffiths critiques the external “adjudication on identity” that deligitimises people who embrace their Aboriginal heritage (131–64). Against this process, Kaden refuses to pass (“I tell her that it is easy to pretend that I am someone else, but I don’t want to pretend” [95]); that is, she refuses to be complicit with a social order that confers race privilege to white

people, even though she does not look the way a white person expects an Aboriginal person to look: “[I wanted to t]ell them I’m Murri, too, even though I don’t really look it” (105). By identifying herself as Murri, Kaden rejects racist categories that are founded on blood quantum or visual criteria. Moreover, as her skin gets darker over the course of the story, Kaden interprets this positively as a sign that she is adapted to her ancestral land, unlike her mother who gets “burnt from getting the newspaper off the porch stairs” and has “had a melanoma cut out of her hand.” (91). By contrast, she repeatedly refuses to put on sunscreen, with the dismissive remark: “I don’t burn” (83). Insisting that her skin has always been a shade darker than white people’s, she interrogates tan, a signifier of blackness that is lusted after by white people precisely because it is only temporary (Moreton-Robinson 37): “After a week I am getting fit from rowing, my arms are built and tanned. My skin, which was always quite brown, the colour white people are when they are really tanned, is darker” (91).

Just as Kaden resists racist categories, she also challenges gender and sexual norms. Very few details about Kaden’s physical appearance are given, except for her hair—a symbol of femininity in hegemonic representations—which is mentioned repeatedly in the text. Kaden’s hair is short when she starts her job. This prompts Larapinta to ask her if she feels like a woman despite her haircut: “She asks me if I feel like a woman, even though I have short hair. I tell her that hair is the least of it” (95). Diet comes across as another signifier of gender. Kaden has an appetite for fatty foods, like the Portuguese custard tarts that she eats every day after work (91). Kaden’s appetite sets her in opposition to her cousin Julie, who conforms to hegemonic standards of feminine beauty, especially the modern imperative of thinness and its association with fitness. While Kaden orders lasagna and chips, Julie orders a salad and moans about the failures of her diet (100). Although Kaden herself does not conform to such standards, she is not dismissive of Julie’s gender performance. Rather, Kaden and Julie are identified by two different performances of female gender and sexuality, although neither is judged superior by the narrator (111). The short story encompasses a broad reflection on gender and sex: about how individuals perform their gender with a variety of signifiers such as haircuts or diets, what identification with gender identity means, and how it becomes associated with biology. Further, because the “sandplants” are not permanently divided into sex categories and their gender is purely performative, these elements of the story also make visible the notion that gender is both a social construct and a colonial one. Kaden and Larapinta find themselves in opposite positions: while Kaden is biologically a woman but does not conform to patriarchal standards of femininity, Larapinta performs a woman’s identity without her sex being fixedly determined.

In this sense, Kaden narrates a unique experience situated at the intersection of race and gender, by not conforming to colonial adjudications of identity, or to patriarchal standards of femininity. As such, the story can be read through the lens of intersectionality, first elaborated in the North American context of Black feminism (Crenshaw 140) which illuminates how racism simultaneously informs sexism. Intersectional analysis offers ways of approaching domination that take into account the complexities of social structures. Kaden develops such intersectional reflections particularly in relation to the character of Tanya Sparkle who operates as a powerful means to interrogate women’s identity and feminism. By showing how Sparkle, a white woman and politician, fails to create better conditions for all women, the story reveals that being a woman does not necessarily mean acting in the interests of all women and particularly of non-white women. In other words, there is no continuity between biology and politics. Black feminism calls into question “feminist” positions that are homogenous and centered on the figures and interests of white middle-class women (Puig de la Bellacasa 57–58). President Sparkle represents this kind of hegemonic feminism, supported by a majority of women but also symbolically and practically excluding Kaden’s Aboriginal and queer femininity. Not only does Sparkle fail to improve conditions for all women, she does not substantively improve the lives of First Nations peoples, instead focusing on symbolic and

tokenistic measures such as renaming public transportation routes (72). Although she seems to embody hope, Sparkle is incapable of advancing the rights of all women, especially those like Kaden, whose experience is always simultaneously co-determined by her Aboriginal self-identification and queerness. What Sparkle achieves might only be her own individual advancement in a position of power that does not benefit the community as a whole: “Tanya Sparkle has really thrived as a female leader of this country” (72). The type of feminism she represents, which strives to achieve equality with white men, has been condemned by African-American writer bell hooks, for being individualistic, complicit with the capitalist and patriarchal order, and fundamentally racist (175–91). Having a woman president changes very little for Kaden, whose identity is simultaneously co-modelled by her belonging to several minorities.

Having discussed the story’s decolonial representation of race and gender relations in ways that challenge the traditional *bildungsroman*, and offer in its place a decolonising Murri *bildungsroman*, I now return to questions of literary genre and particularly the story as a work of Indigenous futurism. “Water” is a fictional work that anticipates the short-term future of Australia, showing the persistence of coloniality. These anticipated developments are justified by modern scientific rhetoric, as the Government engages in the eradication of the beings they know as “sandplants.” Biology is instrumentalised to serve colonial and genocidal politics, as the sandplants’ existence challenges the construction of the super-island destined to rehome Aboriginal peoples. The imagined future in “Water” condemns colonial Australia as a “biopower”—a term coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault to describe how modern states regulate life by controlling biological processes at a population level (*La volonté de savoir* 182–83, 188 and 191). Furthermore, the main character’s realisation of the inhuman actions undertaken in the name of modern science introduces an epistemological reflection on knowledge and power. Rapidly losing its privilege over the course of the novel, modern science appears imbued with a linear vision of time and a belief in progress which, in turn, finds itself defeated by an alternative Murri worldview.

The final revelation by Kaden’s Murri uncle reverses the story’s significations: the so-far (scientifically) undefinable creatures have not emerged in the future; instead, for the Murri peoples they are spirits who have always been there. Some have always known what others struggle to know. What looks like future to some is to others “for all times” (Leane, *Guwayu*). In her foreword to the poetry anthology *Guwayu*, Leane writes: “*Guwayu*—a Wiradjuri word—means *still and yet and for all times*. *Guwayu* means all times are inseparable; no time is ever over; and all times are unfinished . . . . In all First Nations languages, there is a word for all times” (Leane, *Guwayu*). This affirmation of the Murri peoples’ historically denied epistemological rights decolonises anticipatory fiction by defeating modern science as the main technology of colonial biopower.

The story’s hesitation about the naming of the aquatic beings—known as “sandplants” by the Government’s agents and “Jangigir” by the Murri—exemplifies the co-existence of different epistemologies. Nonetheless, the partiality of all knowledge is denied by the Eurocentric perspective, which claims to be the only correct worldview (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 42). When Milligan, Kaden’s boss, initiates her into the officially acceptable sexual code of conduct (97), she is called “naive” in order to discredit her alternative point of view on “sandplants.” The narrator also uses this coded term to reflect on her past self as a *bildungsroman* character would, referring to her former support of the Government’s policy: “Milligan tells me some nasty truths about the Gov, and the more switched-on I become, the more I am uncomfortable. I realise how naive I was before coming here” (103). Her story is one where she loses her naiveté with regard to Aboriginal affairs: she plunges into politics as she discovers that science is not a separate and impartial field but is imbued with power. Feminist standpoint theory makes similar criticisms of established knowledges for their use of

neutral objectivity as an alibi to conceal the interests of the dominant social group that are actually at play in the production of knowledge (Puig de la Bellacasa 53–54 and 73–74). From this perspective, Larapinta appears as a feminist auxiliary to Kaden’s quest, in a statement that resonates with feminist standpoint theory: “There isn’t anything that isn’t political” (79). Kaden’s gradual conversion to this alternative epistemology is expressed in the text through a hesitation about the lexicon to be used when referring to the “sandplants”: “These creatures, beings, I’m not yet comfortable on how to place them, were formed when they started experimenting here, mining the sea in preparation for the islandising” (76). From the start, she expresses ethical concerns with a categorisation that she feels is racist, or speciesist: “I don’t want to call them ‘sandplants’—‘sandpeople’ or ‘plantpeople’ seems more sensitive, but I don’t know which to use” (75). She feels ill-at-ease with the dominant lexicon, without being able to explain why, or fight it: “They call them ‘specimens’ here, I notice, and I try to follow suit but it’s an odd word on my tongue” (77). However, throughout the first part of the story, Kaden keeps referring to hegemonic classifications that exclude the “sandplants” from humanity. She repeatedly sends Larapinta back to the non-human category she has been assigned to, while continuing to refer to her with a gendered pronoun: “But she’s not human, so I feel better” (87); “She is not human, so she can stare until her eyes tear up and it doesn’t mean anything” (95); “I’m being seduced by a plant” (100); “I see her eyes are open, those green unhuman eyes, watching, looking at me, but not” (102). At the end of the story, by reminding her how she used to relate to “sandplants,” with a gently sarcastic comment, Larapinta reveals how much Kaden has grown: “‘I’m not human,’ Larapinta reminds me. ‘You never used to let me forget it’” (119). The revelation of the ontological status of the “sandplants” happens during a conversation with Kaden’s uncle Ron and Julie’s father, who refers to them as a “mob,” a Blak Australian English term used to designate a group of people: “Jangigir. . . . They are our old people. Spirits. Something happened when the dug brought the sea up. They rose with it” (113). Jangigir are “warriors” (114) who help the Murris resist a regime that can be called “biopolitical” after Foucault (Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société* 214–22; Stoler 206). The story’s government indeed demonstrates all the features of a biopolitical regime, with a micro-management of individuals that translates into extreme surveillance (e.g. the social media ban, 73), social engineering of its population (e.g. the planned extinction of a group, 109) and the formulation of rules about sexual promiscuity (e.g. the fear of mixing, 97).

In her discussion of the literary descriptor “magic realism,” Ravenscroft asks “Whose magic? Whose reality?” (qtd in Leane, “Historyless People”). This double interrogation reveals the meaning of the terms magic and reality as subject to multiple interpretive worldviews that are hierarchised when the words are offered as antonyms. In the context of a speculative work of fiction suggesting that science is imbued with power in Australia’s biopolitics, the question could be slightly changed to ask: Whose science? Whose fiction? As the main character gradually becomes aware of the inhumane actions of a biopower using scientific knowledge to control its population through eradication and displacement, the Western notion of modern science loses its privilege and becomes questionable. The parameters of authoritative knowledge shift in favour of a group whose epistemic rights have been denied, the Murri people.

A common feature of speculative fiction is to cast a retrospective and critical gaze on contemporary societies, which makes it comparable, in this respect, to other socially engaged literatures. To the extent that all Aboriginal speculative fiction speaks about the past (Kwaymullina, “Respect, Relationships, Renewal” 126), it might thus be the best way to tell the truth about the postcolonising conditions under which we all still live. In an essay about Indigenous futurisms, Ambelin Kwaymullina questions the notions of truth and fiction, suggesting that elements belonging to Aboriginal worldviews are frequently denied as truths and discredited as fictions:

There is a degree to which the writing of speculative fiction is no different to telling any other Indigenous story, because the very notion of “speculative” depends on where, and how, the borders of “the real” are drawn. . . . [T]o the extent that Indigenous stories challenge Eurocentric realities and myth-making about Indigenous peoples, all of our stories might be viewed as speculative. (“Literature, Resistance and First Nations Futures” 150; see also “Respect, Relationships, Renewal” 121)

Kaden is meant to distribute to the “sandplants” a formula whose dosage has been discreetly changed by decision of the Government and which will eventually eradicate them. She expresses her moral opposition to this policy (93–94). An epistemological dispute follows: How is knowledge being produced? By whom? For whom? In this debate, Kaden’s colleague personifies a human-centric point of view (“we have to put humans first” 94), whereas Kaden advocates for an alternative epistemology, where the objects of research are treated respectfully, whatever their species may be. She draws a parallel between the way “sandplants” are treated in the present of the story and the way black people were treated by science in the past—thereby highlighting the stakes of the futuristic work, which reflects on both past and present: “This is sounding like social Darwinism, like the twisted justification of treating black people worse because of their race and skin colour” (94). Kaden’s concerns about the methodological bias of the project end up being dismissed, as if both colleagues merely had differing opinions, equally valid and fair—when, in fact, one is imbued with a form of power that results in the eradication and murder of living beings: “Look, obviously, we’re from different schools of thought. But as long as we keep doing our individual *jobs*, we’ll be fine” (94). The narrator marks her disagreement with italics, highlighting the cynicism of the human-centred standpoint. A work relationship that began with a commonality—a vegetarian diet, which becomes ironic given the position of the young botanist on species (“So you got the satay tofu one, too, hey?” the young botanist says to me)—leads to an irreconcilable, epistemological dispute (93). The narrator now has the confirmation that the “sandplants” are being treated unjustly on the basis of the category they are being put in, which excludes them from humanity. From this feeling of unfairness, a series of reflections on the validity of categories as social constructs, the borders of humanity, and the misuse of Nature and biology in ideological discourses, emerges. The unequal treatment of the “sandplants” is justified by their exclusion from the human species. Milligan presents the sexual norm to Kaden in terms of limits that must not be crossed, employing the lexicon of Nature and religion (97). The inscription of this sex ban into a heterosexist norm adds an element of comic absurdity, demonstrating that what is at stake in forbidding intimate relationships is the maintenance of social order:

Now, strictly off the record, as a male I find, say, Larapinta, slightly of an attractive quality, it’s natural she’s more human-like than the others in the way she looks. And females may feel the same way about Hinter [the male leader of the “sandplants”]. But it is unnatural if you take it that couple of steps further. The government has recognized the danger—it is, of course, illegal to be in any way romantically involved with them. (97)

The project of Australia2 is inscribed in a colonial future, which defines complete segregation on separate super-islands as the ironic completion of the politics of reconciliation. It is achieved through biological techniques and results in the urbanisation of the landscape. Subverting the codes of science fiction adopted at the beginning of the story, Uncle Ron’s final revelation is that the beings the Government calls “sandplants” are not of the future and they are not of the past either. Rather, they are of all times.

The story of Indigenous futurism draws a parallel between the treatment of Aboriginal peoples and this group of beings—initially defined from the settler’s point of view as “sandplants,” before being referred to as “old people” and “spirits” by the Murris. It therefore reflects on present times and ongoing forms of coloniality that justify calling contemporary conditions “postcolonising” (Moreton-Robinson 10). The analogy is introduced from the outset (“I wasn’t actually going to be working with Aboriginal people in my Cultural Liaison Officer role. I’ll be working with what they call the ‘sandplants’” 74). This powerful comparison reflects on past and present practices of displacement and segregation. Nevertheless, the Jangigir, meaning “mangrove” in the Yugambah language, are presented as ancestral rather than fictitious beings, belonging to an alternative epistemology to the Western one.

My point is that this alternative epistemology means that “Water” can arguably be read as a work of “Indigenous futurism” because it “challenge[s] colonialism and imagine[s] Indigenous futures,” in the very way that Anishinaabe academic Grace Dillon defines the genre (qtd in Kwaymullina, “Respect, Relationships, Renewal” 121). Indeed, the Jangigir are finally presented not as fictitious creatures from the future, but as spirits belonging to another, non-Western, worldview. Non-linear time is also part of this Indigenous worldview (Kwaymullina, “Respect, Relationships, Renewal” 126), as Larapinta notes after being first rejected by Kaden: “Humans never see what’s coming. Everything is seasonal, cyclical, dependent on environment and weather conditions” (96). This observation can be taken as an ironic comment on the rhetoric of modernity, which is really only the dark side of coloniality (Tlostanova and Mignolo 8, 37–39). The phrase also operates on a metatextual level, anticipating the readerly drive for the conclusion of the narrative. The story operates as a dystopia, where the latest reconciliation policy consists in displacing Indigenous peoples from Australia and regrouping them on artificially-built land, where they can effectively self-govern. Australia2 is thus the latest government policy to achieve the project of the settler colony by removing First Nations peoples from their lands:

The re-forming company are going to create new land between the twenty or so islands off the Brisbane coastline, joining them to create a super island. This is where Aboriginal people can apply to live. In the application criteria they are required to show how they have been removed or disconnected from their country—priority given to those who don’t even know where they’ve come from. (74)

Ironically, the project of Australia2 is inscribed in the political language of “reconciliation,” when it actually completes a segregation process that began with colonisation (“She [Tanya Sparkle] gave a spiel about reconciliation, which she stylized to ‘recon’” 71). The story affirms Blak criticism of Australian reconciliation policy as being a further form of colonisation, in the wake of assimilation (Heiss 189–90). The story also affirms First Nations sovereignty through its portrayal of Aboriginal resistance to the segregation obscured behind the term “reconciliation”: “We are going to fight. We are the Traditional Owners. We’re going to secure our islands so they can’t be harmed. Starting with Ki. . . . They want to segregate us. Cast us out for good. Everything that this president has done has drifted us—blackfellas and whitefellas—further apart” (113).

If “Water” is an example of Indigenous futurism, I argue that it is also possibly an example of “Murri realism.” “Water” is a realist project only to the extent that the story asserts that another worldview exists, and yet refuses to explain it ethnographically. It thus troubles the epistemic position of the non-Aboriginal reader, welcoming them into an uncomfortable space. Instead of resorting to literary descriptors that reduce the work to comfortable binaries, Ravenscroft suggests that works labeled as magical realism such as Wright’s could be seen as



relying on an “aesthetics of uncertainty” (Ravenscroft, 195). This makes the non-Aboriginal reader unsure of how to adjudicate the levels of reality within the text and thus challenges their desire to use the text as an ethnographic resource. “Water” thus resists the very definition of realism as “an anthropological and pedagogical project” (Hamon 166, my translation) as well as the realist topology of knowledge (Hamon 145; see also his schema 142). In other words, Kaden’s quest for her Aboriginal “roots” should not be confused with the information transmitted by the realist story: “Water” does not seek to define “Aboriginality” but it challenges the coloniality of knowledge with its choices of enunciation. Claiming the epistemic rights of Indigenous people, it protects their knowledges through a strategy of “opacity” (Griffiths, 15–16). That is to say, what is at stake is not the content of knowledge, but the story’s “geography of reason” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 10) and its representation of knowledge’s distribution and circulation, a representation that is decolonial in the sense that it belongs to peoples who have historically seen their epistemic rights denied by the coloniality of knowledges. Uncle Ron appears as the informed character who possesses true knowledge about the Jangigir, which he transmits to the uninformed character Kaden. Therefore, the decolonial realist project interrogates the very notion of credibility, asking: What is credible and according to which worldview? It also questions the codes that are common to the author and their readers and asks how these are respectively situated in a historically colonial geography of knowledge.

The literary imagination of a decolonial future is an inalienable right of First Nations writers, as Unangax scholar Eve Tuck and non-Aboriginal scholar Wayne Yang affirm: “Decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (qtd by Kwaymullina, “Respect, Relationships, Renewal” 133). This essay attempts to practise this form of decolonial thinking as an engagement to learn from the peoples who have been socially constructed by colonial difference as modernity’s others (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 16). Symbolically, at the end of “Water,” settlers are represented at the Murri’s side when they plan their fight against Australia2: “There are more families: Aboriginal, Islander and non-Indigenous” (116). Van Neerven’s sovereign imagination of the future operates as an empowerment of readers on the path towards greater social justice, echoing the project of intersectionality (Hill Collins 319 and 413). In the context of literary criticism, learning from a Murri work leads to reflecting on how literary categories as apparently “neutral” as genre can be embedded in the coloniality of knowledge and reproduce colonial epistemic positions when they are left uninterrogated. In this case, I have attempted to engage with how van Neerven’s work appears to unsettle the colonial categories of magical realism, the *bildungsroman*, and science fiction through reasserting the status of Murri knowledge through such categories as Murri realism, the decolonial *bildungsroman*, and Indigenous futurism. Unlearning the coloniality of literary criticism thus implies a shift from the position where the critic examines the degree to which a work conforms to established categories, to one that opens up a to a productive revelation of their hidden forms of epistemic violence and reasserts the value of other ways of being and knowing.

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