

# Magical realism and irony's 'edge': Rereading magical realism and Kim Scott's *Benang*

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## Introduction

Since its emergence in the Latin American 'boom' years, magical realism has been the subject of earnest theorising that implicates the narrative mode in postcolonial projects of cultural regeneration not only in Latin America but also around the world. What Amaryll Beatrice Chanady calls magical realism's 'territorialisation' (131)—its mobilisation for ex-centric identity politics; the claim that its hybrid worldview simultaneously transgresses and supplements Western ratiocinative epistemologies—has seen the mode become overdetermined and dismissed as a postcolonial cliché. Rarely noted, however, is the ironic nature of the literary mode. Yet the trademark representation of the magical in a realist narrative is marked by a conspicuous incongruity, which is not only necessary to magical realism's aesthetic effect but which also provides a strong incentive for ironic readings. It is also the case that irony is consistently thematised in magical realist texts, which often reveal a particular interest in ironising the colonial discourses of history.

As Linda Hutcheon contends in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, irony is a 'discursive practice or strategy' (3) and is therefore always contextually generated. Irony, as Hutcheon puts it, 'happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between . . . people and utterances' (13). Contesting Wayne Booth's study of 'stable' irony, which privileges author intentionality, Hutcheon argues that irony—as evinced in controversies around ironic 'events'—is contingent and uncertain, which is to say that irony hinges on interpretation. Such a theory of irony is important to this paper because, unlike authenticating or invalidating readings of magical realist literature, ironic interpretations have the potential to release, rather than reify, meanings. In addition, because irony can be ambiguous and uncomfortable, because irony requires that the reader put herself on the line and make a judgment about an utterance's meaning, 'there is an affective "charge" to irony that cannot be ignored and that cannot be separated from its politics of use' (15). It is this 'charge' that Hutcheon names irony's 'edge,' and it is a recognition of irony's edge, as this paper argues, that can bring about a reinvigorated engagement with magical realist literature.

Given the ways in which irony, as Hutcheon notes, has been understood as synonymous with elitism and the apolitical (47)—although in postmodern discourse it has also been, as Hutcheon acknowledges, attributed diametrically opposed characteristics—it is important to clarify that calling magical realist texts ironic is not another way of condemning them. Indeed, given irony's erstwhile association with insincerity and triviality, respect for the ex-centric worldviews that many magical realist writers claim to recover might be at the heart of the scholarly inattentiveness to irony. As Anne Hegerfeldt argues in her study of British magical realist fiction—despite being one of the few critics to argue for the ironic nature of her case studies, albeit notably with regard to Western literature—'people's multiple ways of perceiving and constructing their world must be acknowledged as real' (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 3). The neglect of irony in most theories of magical realism, particularly ones that

pertain to postcolonial texts, might therefore be seen as an understandable, even sympathetic, oversight, which is sensitive to identification and recuperation as real and urgent matters for negotiation in postcolonial cultures.

Nevertheless, this paper argues that the sidelining of irony's role has been problematic, not least because of magical realism's derided status as postcolonial exotica. The concept of the magical realist writer as a Spivakian 'native informant,' which is implicit in well-meaning interpretations of magical realism as expressive of marginalised mythological worldviews, needs to be surrendered. The magical realist novel needs to be permitted to be read in terms of its ironic and charged utterances. Irony's 'edge,' which highlights the importance of interpretation and brings about self-consciousness in interpreters, situates readers in their discursive communities and invites reflection on the ways in which those discursive structures might facilitate or encumber understanding of the world. This means that an ironic reading, rather than an ethnographic reading, is what might allow magical realist literature to dynamically bridge the gap between postcolonial 'text' and the postcolonial 'real.'

This paper will begin by surveying magical realist scholarship, identifying how magical realist texts tend to be un-intuitively defined in terms of a seamless model of epistemological blending, an interpretation typically justified in relation to an ex-centric hybrid worldview—or criticised for precisely this kind of ethnographic authentication. Such readings, as this paper argues, neutralise magical realism's ironic charge. Recognising the ironic incongruity at play in magical realism, by contrast, has the potential to revitalise the narrative mode. Irony's complication of meaning requires an uncomfortable engagement with what Hutcheon describes as the discursive 'scene' of interpretation (4), which is always 'a social and political scene.' The paper will conclude with a consideration of Kim Scott's *Benang*. While this novel is rarely considered an example of magical realism—undoubtedly because of its overt irony—the text highlights how irony is central to the magical realist narrative strategy of representing the magical in a realist context. This novel about a 'light' Aboriginal man who is preternaturally weightless, and who is the uprooted product of assimilationist policies, also demonstrates how irony's 'edge' can work to contextualise 'reality' in historical discourse, provoking reflection, as Hutcheon puts it, on 'the silent and the unsaid' (39).

### **Ironising Magical Realism**

Magical realism, in its alleged mimetic or metonymic identification with 'magically minded' cultures, has been reduced to a postcolonial cliché. This is the case whether it is justified in terms of its recuperation of ethnic worldviews—an enduring tradition that extends from Alejo Carpentier's 1949 manifesto of the Latin American 'marvelous real' through to Wendy Faris's 2013 work on magical realism's 'shamanic' vision—or censured for its exoticism and nostalgia—as in Martha Bayles's condemnation of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as 'antebellum nostalgia, updated as a Disney cartoon' (38) or the *McOndo* anthologist Alberto Fuguet's rejection of magical realism as a commercial self-exoticising strategy. Central to such reifying readings is the misleading definition of magical realist narrative as involving the seamless representation of the fantastical within a realist framework. This fundamental misreading of magical realist literature occludes the iconic and ironic incongruity of magical realism's narrative strategy—a problem that this paper will begin by addressing.

In the introduction to their influential 1995 anthology of magical realist scholarship, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris argue that in the magical realist novel 'the supernatural is . . . admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism'

(3). Writing prior to the consolidation of a skeptical tradition of reading magical realist texts in terms of cultural commodification, Parkinson Zamora's and Faris's definition is unambiguously linked with a postcolonial ethnographic agenda. Magical realist texts, Parkinson Zamora and Faris argue, 'draw upon cultural systems that are no less "real" than those upon which traditional literary realism draws,' and this enables magical realist texts to function as 'enabling catalysts for the development of new national and regional literatures' (2). Parkinson Zamora's and Faris's early authenticating definition—and, indubitably, the authenticating rhetoric of magical realist authors themselves (beginning with the widely criticised *Franco-Cuban* Carpentier, who claimed to faithfully represent *Afro-Cuban* experience)—continues to resonate in recent articulations of the narrative mode. This is despite the fact that most contemporary studies acknowledge the skeptical readings that have plagued magical realism in the last decade, as well as the ways in which magical realist narrative strategies have been mobilised outside of colonial contexts (by writers such as Günter Grass, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, and Tim O'Brien). As a result, recent studies of magical realism are often prone to contradiction and sophistry in their sympathetic commitment to magical realism's integral role in cultural recuperation and in their resistance to ironic readings.

For example, in their 2009 study of magical realism *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, Jesus Benito, Ana Manzananas and Begona Simal insist that 'the full effect of a magical realist text depends on the faithful representation of a reality that admits no doubt' (77). This is because magical realism's rejection of 'the artificial distinction between what is empirically verifiable and what is not' (44) emerges from societies where 'a manifestly magical and multidimensional reality does permeate the everyday experience' (112). In response to concerns about the exoticising nature of such visions of 'ethnic' cultures, Benito, Manzananas and Simal contend that it is important to distinguish between magical realist texts tailored 'for massive marketing and consumption, and texts that significantly influence, dialogue with, and reshape the cultural realities from which they emerge' (124). By creating this new subcategory of inauthentic magical realist texts, the authors are able to divert attention away from the fundamental problems of authenticating readings—which include, as noted by Hegerfeldt, the status of even Third World magical realist writers as 'privileged . . . intellectuals' (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 1) and their exploitation of 'post-Enlightenment constructions of the "Other" as non-rational and non-scientific' ('Contentious contributions' 71). However, Benito, Manzananas and Simal—whose case studies, after all, include the metafictional, intertextual and parodic *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz—also distinguish within magical realism a 'consciously experimental strand,' which is 'ironizing, relativising, and questioning' (113).

A similar argument for irreconcilable 'types' of magical realism is rehearsed in the earlier work of Jeanne Delbaere and William Spindler, as well as in other more recent studies, such as those of Maggie Ann Bowers and Christopher Warnes. Warnes's *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, for example, differentiates between 'faith-based' magical realism and an 'irreverent' form. Warnes argues that 'magical realist novels are deliberate, carefully contrived and manipulated works of art rather than unmediated conduits of cultural values and perspectives' (11), but he nevertheless maintains that 'faith-based approaches' to magical realist texts are legitimate (14). In addition, despite recognising the ironic signaling apparent in novels such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Warnes defines magical realism 'as a mode of narration that naturalizes or normalizes the supernatural' (3).

This paper argues that such naturalising or normalising definitions, which appear to be motivated by the desire to respect the cultural faith systems allegedly informing magical realist novels, are nothing short of counter-intuitive. The anomalous depiction of the ostentatiously unreal in a realist narrative—for instance, the deadpan depiction of the blood of the murdered José Arcadio finding its way home in García Márquez’s classic magical realist text *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—is what sparked interest in magical realist literature in the first place.

Some critics try to curtail such an argument by claiming that while Western readers may identify the magical element as incongruous or striking, the fantastical appears as natural and unexceptional to members of the culture represented by the particular magical realist novel in question. In an early essay on Australian magical realist literature, for example, Suzanne Baker argues that magical realism ‘renews and revitalizes a traditional and “real” Aboriginal heritage and cosmology’ (5) so that ‘the element of “unreality” woven into the tale only appears as “fantasy” or “magic” to the non-Aboriginal reader. For the Aboriginal reader, it is as “real” to them as the Christian mythology . . . is “real” to white Christians.’ There are many possible objections to this line of argument, covered in my earlier study *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground*. To focus on one, supernatural events in magical realist novels, as Liam Connell argues, ‘often do not have the status of systemic myths’ (107). This is evident in the example of the ‘homing’ blood in García Márquez’s novel. To evoke an Indigenous Australian textual example, the supernatural island of rubbish drifting in the sea in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* has little relation to traditional Aboriginal myth. Demelza Hall productively interprets the isle of refuse as an ironic metaphor in which ‘ideas about home, nation and identity can be boundlessly reconstituted’ (24).

Indeed, one cannot even argue that the realistic depiction of the fantastical is metonymic—if not strictly mimetic—of a worldview characterised by a belief in the magical. This is an argument put forward by Alison Ravenscroft in ‘Dreaming of Others: *Carpentaria* and its Critics,’ in which she argues that magical realism derives from alternative epistemologies. She takes seriously the claims of magical realist authors who argue that their novels represent the truly magical. Morrison, for example, claims that an African-American character’s flight in *Song of Solomon* is faithful to a unique African-American tradition. Ravenscroft, taking her cue from Morrison, interprets the fantastical episodes of magical realism as markers of the unassimilable alterity of the ‘other.’ Like Morrison, Ravenscroft even dismisses magical realism as an ‘imperialist’ category, the invention of a white reader who reads ‘her own bewilderment as the other’s magic’ (205).

García Márquez may have himself argued that magical realism comes from the ‘outsized reality’ of Latin America (‘Nobel Lecture’), but a closer look at his famous magical realist novel—famous in part because of a very strategic global marketing campaign outlined by Mariano Siskind—is instructive. The heavily ironic passage relating the ‘homing’ blood, for example, contests earnest anthropological readings, whether they are celebratory of or hostile towards magical realism:

a trickle of blood came out under the door, crossed the living room, went out into the street, continued in a straight line across the uneven footpaths, descended steps, climbed curbs, passed along the Street of the Turks, turned a corner to the right and another to the left, made a right angle in front of the Buendía house, went in under the closed door, crossed the sitting room, staying close to the walls so as not to stain the rugs, continued on to the other living

room, made a wide curve to avoid the dining room table, advanced along the porch with the begonias and passed without being seen under the chair of Amaranta, who was giving an arithmetic lesson to Aureliano José, and made its way through the pantry and appeared in the kitchen, where Úrsula was preparing to crack thirty-six eggs to make bread (232–33, my translation).

It is difficult to miss the irony in this passage—an irony that surely complicates ethnographic readings. While Hutcheon defines irony as contextual, as we have seen, she also acknowledges the importance of ironic signaling as part of the overall context of an ironic reading: ‘the attributing of irony to a text or utterance is a complex intentional act on the part of the interpreter, one that has both semantic and evaluative dimensions, in addition to the possible inferring of ironist intent’ (13). Hutcheon concedes that ‘nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized site of irony’ (15), given its need to be activated in discursive contexts that differ across time and cultures, but she nevertheless identifies five potential cues or markers that ‘frame the utterances as potentially ironic’ (154). These are: changes of register; exaggeration or understatement; contradiction or incongruity; literalisation or simplification; and repetition or echoic mention (156)—all of which, she recognises, are inevitably relative. Such cues or markers, however, can function to ‘signal and indeed to structure the more specific context in which the said can brush up against some unsaid in such a way that irony and its edge come into being’ (154).

Ironic signaling—if not downright leg pulling, as Hegerfeldt puts it (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 112)—is certainly identifiable in the quoted passage by García Márquez. Indeed, the extract fulfils all five of Hutcheon’s prompts for ironic readings. A change of register occurs as the terrible trickle of blood from the deceased begins its ridiculous journey; the supernatural path of the blood is clearly incongruous; the ‘homing’ bloodline is a literalisation of the ways in which a child’s death impacts upon a mother; and repetition is evident in the prolonged description of the blood’s trajectory. The passage, in its irony, therefore invites reflection upon what is being ‘unsaid.’ It is important to note that the cited passage encourages more than just a metaphorical or allegorical reading, which enacts a substitution of one meaning for another—although one might certainly and productively speculate on the motif of ‘return’ in this passage in the light of the novel’s interest in the recurring nature of imperialist trauma. More importantly, however, the magical realist episode engenders irony’s uncertainty; it brings about what Hutcheon describes as irony’s ‘edge.’

This paper argues that Hutcheon’s five markers of irony might be conceived of as definitive qualities of not only the passage analysed but of magical realism more generally, such that the narrative mode itself—in its trademark representation of the magical as real—might be viewed as a kind of “‘*meta-ironic*” function’ that ‘sets up a series of expectations that frame the utterances as potentially ironic’ (154). It is thus that magical realist narratives ‘operate as triggers to suggest that the interpreter should be open to other possible meanings’ (154), inviting recontextualisation, making the reader aware of her investment in the uncertainties of discourse as well as of the necessity of taking an active, risk-filled role in meaning-making. It is from this fundamentally ironic discursive ambivalence that magical realist texts not only derive their aesthetic effect but also their political ‘edge.’

### Reading Kim Scott’s *Benang* as Magical Realism

Kim Scott’s *Benang: From the Heart* has received significant critical attention, but it has rarely been read as a magical realist text. Nevertheless, *Benang* certainly qualifies as an

example of the narrative mode as I hereby propose to define it: *a magical realist novel features fantastical episodes that are incongruously and ironically represented in an otherwise historically grounded narrative*. Scott's heavily ironic novel may have been overlooked as a work of magical realism precisely because of its irony—not to mention its self-reflexive repudiation of stereotypes of indigeneity. However, reading *Benang* as a magical realist text is important to this paper because it enables us to re-envision magical realism in a way that recognises irony and its 'edge' as fundamental to the narrative mode. Magical realism's association with postcolonial exoticism then becomes a problem of misguided interpretation rather than of magical realist literature itself.

*Benang*'s magical realist credentials are apparent in its incongruous and ironic representation of fantastical events in a historical narrative, as well as in its revealing points of overlap with the paradigmatic magical realist text *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Benang*'s narrator, the 'light' Nyoongar man Harley Scat, ascends into the air or bumps up against ceilings as he describes how he became the 'first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line' (11). Such flights occur against the background of a historical narrative through which the protagonist seeks to ground himself in a multigenerational Nyoongar family history, which has been tragically 'whited out' by a colonial policy of 'breeding out the colour' and by the misrepresentations of colonial historiography. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which narrates the ironic ascension of Remedios the Beauty, similarly provides an intergenerational family history that is critical of the ahistorical condition of its characters, whose lives have been shaped by colonial history. While the events in *Benang* are set in the imaginary town of Gebalup, the narrative remains rooted in place and time. Harley's predicament, as a white Aboriginal man striving to reconnect with his Indigenous family, is explicitly linked to the eugenicist and assimilationist policies of A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1914 to 1940. Similarly, the fantastical dilemmas experienced in García Márquez's Macondo, such as an amnesia plague and a supernatural deluge, pivot around the colonial past and, specifically, the occluded massacre of striking workers on a banana plantation in Ciénega, Columbia, in 1928. As Pablo Armellino notes, Scott has admitted to being influenced by Octavio Paz's magical realist short story 'The wave' (25), and *Benang* is clearly indebted to a Latin American tradition of magical realist writing.

The resistance to reading *Benang* as a magical realist novel might be attributed to its obvious, indeed, self-reflexive ironic signaling. The novel's levitating narrator claims to be 'speaking from the heart' as he hovers above a campfire, but he also introduces his story in association with a 'bad smell . . . even if such an aroma suggests my words originate from some other part of my anatomy than the heart' (8). A reluctance to categorise the novel as magical realist might likewise be attributed to the novel's rejection of exoticised indigeneity. John Fielder notes that, in Scott's work generally, 'Aboriginal identity is not laid out in an accessible, trite or romanticised manner' (6). Indeed, Scott explicitly mocks Aboriginal stereotypes in *Benang*. The narrator, hovering before a mirror, sees himself wearing 'some sort of napkin around his loins' (12), before he morphs into a character 'slumped, grinning, furrow-browed, with a bottle in my hand.' Then he appears as 'Tonto to my grandfather's Lone Ranger. Guran to some Phantom'—highlighting the cultural nature of such constructions—before transforming into 'a footballer, boxer, country and western singer.'

However, self-reflexive irony of the kind found in *Benang* is also present in other magical realist novels, such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in which the narrator Saleem Sinai similarly calls attention to the outrageous nature of his Indian history, while swearing that his tale 'is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's head truth' (200).

Other contemporary magical realist texts also mock exotic stereotypes of the kind with which the magical realist label has become synonymous. Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*, which attempts to salvage the history of a massacre in the Philippines, ironically entertains, at different times, the Lonely Planet guidebook image of the Philippines as an erotically charged fantasy destination (20) and 'a coffee-and-World-Vision ad' (55).

Notably, Michael Griffiths, the sole critic to read Scott's novel in terms of magical realism, describes *Benang* as a 'magical realist reconstitution of Aboriginal identity' (158), although he also recognises that the work 'refuses a simplistic return to the precolonial essentialism offered through the colonial archive' (168). *Benang* does indeed enact a recuperative project vis-à-vis Nyoongar cultural identity. Published two years after *Bringing Them Home*, the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report detailing the separation of Indigenous children from their families, and frequently citing Neville's writings in support of that assimilationist project, Scott's novel is intent on exposing what it finally names as 'the genocide thing, you know. Destroy memory of a culture, destroy evidence of a distinctive people, bury memory deep in shame' (446). *Benang* is also interested in salvaging the buried memory of Nyoongar culture. However, the narrative's ironic and shifting configuration of Harley's identity retaliates against the racial fetishisation of the eugenicist project, and refuses to consign Aboriginality to the colonial status of anthropological relic. On the one hand, the novel's failure to embrace the possibility of a 'return' to a pre-colonial Nyoongar identity might be read as a tragedy. As Fielder writes, 'the uncertainty, the incompleteness, the frustration, the messiness . . . is all part of the process of dealing with the abhorrent destruction and scrambling of a culture that cultivated continuity and belonging' (6). However, it is also the case, as Griffiths argues, that Scott deliberately 'produces an Indigenous belonging that is not fixed within a colonialist reiteration . . . but rather professes a multiple and productive futurity' (171). Thus Harley floats above the story-telling campfire even at the end of his historical narrative, which acknowledges both his Indigenous and white ancestry, and his 'lightness' is effectively reconstituted as a symbol of vitality and mobility rather than rootlessness and death. The novel ends with the phrase, 'We are still here, Benang' (495), with the word 'Benang,' the reader is instructed, having roots in a Nyoongar word for 'tomorrow.'

It is important to stress that Harley's capacity for levitation is not simply a metaphor for which another meaning might be substituted. His ironically narrated 'flights' invite multiple readings. They represent, as Katrin Althans writes, how Aboriginal people have been 'literally up-rooted from the land of [their] ancestors' (111). Harley's heavenward levitation can also be read as symptomatic of death, so that his soul-like state recalls what Scott names as the 'genocide thing' (446). Alternatively, Harley can be viewed in satirical terms as the marvelously 'uplifted' Aboriginal man of colonial policy or, as Lisa Slater suggests, as metonymic of the fantasy structuring that program of Aboriginal advancement (152). At other times Scott suggests that Harley's levitation signifies the character's irresponsibility towards history: 'Unsettled, not belonging—the first white man born—I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted' (109). Alcohol, the reader is informed, exacerbates such drifting (167), while writing helps 'tie me down' (147). Therefore magic—and this is something that is true of many magical realist texts but rarely acknowledged in the critical literature—is far from being embraced in Scott's magical realist novel. Such recognition of magical realism's hostility towards the fantastical deters exoticist readings. Nevertheless, *Benang* self-consciously makes Harley's capacity for levitation resonate with what might be called the 'spirit' of Aboriginality. Slater argues that Harley transforms from 'a floating, disembodied, "first white man born" . . . to becoming Marban' (71).

While Scott might flirt with the possibility of a mythological reading of Harley's levitation, the fantastical episodes of flight in Scott's magical realist novel are ultimately resistant to comfortable interpretation. However, this is not because, as Ravenscroft argues of Wright's *Carpentaria*, the novel is 'unreadable to a white reader' (215). It is not the indigeneity of the text but rather its irony—its *levity*—that disturbs the interpretive process. As Claire Colebrook contends, 'it is the very notion of irony that allows us to think of competing and discontinuous contexts' (4) for understanding, and it is irony that complicates interpretation in Scott's magical realist text.

Mobilising what Hutcheon describes as irony's 'edge,' Harley's ironic and uncertain floating in the context of a historical narrative challenges readers to recognise how discourse provides a structuring principle for meaning, and how difficult it is to trust what something means. In fact, complicating Ravenscroft's claims regarding 'magical realist' texts, *Benang* self-consciously directs the narrative to a white audience—imagined as a captive and silent reader, and grimly associated with Harley's Scottish-Australian grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat (the significance of whose name will be attended to shortly). Inspired by Neville's policies, Scat was one of the 'hairy angels' (75) of white Australia who 'bred' the light-skinned Harley through 'animal husbandry' (74). He also exploited and sexually abused him. Having been debilitated and rendered mute by a stroke, Scat is propped up by the fireside and forced to endure his grandson's reclamation of Nyoongar history. As Paul Newman argues, 'Ern Scat as the unwilling witness' is 'an obvious metaphor for white Australia' as he is 'forced to listen to recounts of the misdeeds of himself and others' (92). Scott's strategy of positioning the reader as complicit with colonial power is as discomfiting as the narrative's irony, which engenders uncertainty but demands engagement—precisely so that the reader can escape her typecasting as the abhorrent and paralysed Scat. Scott's narrator effectively taunts the reader to assume an ethical and active role. 'I hope you are not falling asleep,' Harley enquires of the reader at one point. 'Sometimes, my grandfather's chin used to drop to his chest even as I spoke to him' (323). In this way the narrative challenges readers to move beyond the complicit and passive position of 'old Australia' and, in fact, join Harley in his inhabitation of a vital and revisionary realm of discourse that is directed towards the future.

Like other examples of magical realist literature, *Benang* not only ironises discourse through its narrative strategy of representing the unreal as real; it also thematises the ironies of colonial discourse and, especially, historiography. As Nadine Attewell notes in 'Reading Closely: Writing (and) Family History in Kim Scott's *Benang*,' the narrative 'draws to a striking degree on the colonial state archive' (2), Harley being 'a compulsive citer of texts.' *Benang* quotes from Neville's *Australia's Coloured Minority: Their Place in our Community* (1947), as well as from Neville's archived correspondence, speeches and letters. The novel also quotes from the archived records of Neville's contemporaries. Harley's reiteration of key phrases from Australia's past policies toward Indigenous peoples—most conspicuously, those involving ideological notions of 'uplift' and 'elevation'—unambiguously insists on the ironies of the colonial project and the historical record. That is, the narrative is intent on exposing how the colonial policy of Aboriginal 'protection' and 'advancement' meant *something else*.

According to the colonial 'doctrine of racial uplift,' as Graham Huggan writes in *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*, 'genocide ("breeding out")' is recast as 'generosity ("breeding up")' (99). Scott's novel brutally exposes such dissimulation. It reveals how genetic and cultural assimilation effectively functioned in the same way as



massacres to decimate an Aboriginal population. Assimilation was, as Harley's Uncle Jack states, 'another sort of murdering' (337), 'killing Nyoongars really, making 'em white, making 'em hate ourselves . . . keeping 'em apart' (338). Further exposing the ironies of historical discourse, the novel includes the report of a colonial visitor to an isolated settlement for removed children. Published in a church newsletter, the report extols the virtues of the reservation, concluding: 'What a blessing for the natives that they have got a sympathetic superintendent and self-sacrificing staff' (94). The citation of this member of 'The Ugly Men's Association' (93) is set against a portrait of the awful lives of those confined to the settlement, narrating the story of an Aboriginal boy who is hung in a bag from a tree as punishment for attempting to escape back to his family. As Althans puts it, Scott's novel 'skins' official history of 'euphemism . . . and thus intensifies . . . the horrid realities still echoing in contemporary Australia as well as of the very act of concealing them' (107).

In the novel's acknowledgements, Scott names Neville's *Australia's Coloured Minority* as a 'continual—albeit perverse—source of inspiration' (497). As with so many other magical realist texts, which likewise focus on the misrepresentations of history, the ironies of this magical realist novel are ultimately inspired by the ironies of the colonial past. In less polite terms, *Benang* is inspired by the proverbial shit of colonial history. It is the joke implicit in the name of Ernest Solomon *Scat*, who follows Neville's program and whose early job was as a night-soil collector. The 'shit' of the colonial past is also the source of the original stink that accompanies the beginning of the narrative and that licenses the 'shit' of Harley Scat's—Ernest's namesake's—fantastical story. However, the ironies of the colonial record also allow Harley—and Scott—to 'scat' in a different sense of the term: to improvise a performance that calls attention to the vagaries of discourse but that nevertheless seeks an urgent form of communication. It is a performance that epitomises the magical realist novel.

## Conclusion

While existing scholarship on magical realist literature suggests that irony and the postcolonial cannot meet comfortably on the same page, this paper argues that what is required is a redefinition of magical realist narrative that grants postcolonial writers the ability to write edgy ironic texts. Otherwise, magical realism will continue to be repudiated as 'overdetermined yet hollow' (Lopez 144), revealing only a 'history of colonial and neocolonial desire' (150). Irony, as Hutcheon acknowledges, makes people uncomfortable because it highlights and complicates interpretation, and because it asks people to make judgments about meaning in the uncertain environment of discourse. Irony becomes even more discomfoting in the charged political contexts from which magical realist texts often emerge and in which an ironic reading can be seen as undermining the efforts of cultures struggling to survive colonial histories. However, as Hutcheon reminds us, existing critical or theoretical views form part of the context from which ironic judgments about cultural artifacts are made. Readers need to be permitted to see, as Hegerfeldt argues that 'not the suspension, but the creation of disbelief is magic realism's hallmark, the constructed nature of knowledge its topic' (*Lies that Tell the Truth* 279). Kim Scott's magical realist novel *Benang*, with its ironic subversion of colonial 'knowledge,' provides us with a way to re-envision magical realist literature in precisely this way.

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