

Magical Realism and the Transcultural Politics of Irony: Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*

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Since its emergence from Latin America and its subsequent development into an international mode of narrative practice, magical realism has been repeatedly accounted for in terms of territorialised projects of myth-based cultural renewal, and in ways that rhetorically exceed its status as literature. The French-Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, whose *The Kingdom of This World* (*El reino de este mundo* 1949) is a seminal Latin American magical realist text, was the first to engage in this kind of ethnographic authentication. In the renowned preface to the novel, which has become a kind of manifesto for magical realism (despite not employing that actual label), Carpentier justifies his narrative in terms of the Latin American 'marvellous real' ('*lo real maravilloso*' 119), a phenomenon proceeding partly from the mythological beliefs of non-European Latin Americans. In fact, Carpentier claims that his culture's 'collective faith' ('*fe colectiva*' 119) in the marvellous distinguishes his fiction from the 'well-worn formulas' ('*fórmulas consabidas*' 117) of European surrealist or gothic traditions.¹ In his recent chapter on magical realism in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Mariano Siskind suggests that magical realist fiction 'belongs organically to non-Western, or rather marginal, cultures' (835). He also rejects the work of 'postmodern' practitioners confused with magical realism—the fiction of European authors such as Angela Carter and Patrick Süskind—insisting that magical realism is not simply a series of 'formalist . . . stunts' (849). Christopher Warnes likewise differentiates 'faith-based' magical realism (14) from 'irreverent' postmodern fiction, arguing that the latter 'treats discourse as discourse' while the former 'frequently translates it into being' (14).

Here we see how a perceived incongruity or incompatibility between the aesthetic (which is said to be about 'formulas,' 'formalist . . . stunts,' and 'discourse') and the postcolonial (which traffics in 'faith,' 'being,' and the 'organic') informs theorisations of magical realism. As Bill Ashcroft observes, postcolonial studies has long demonstrated a suspicion of the aesthetic, which historically functioned as a 'bourgeois imperialist technique of colonial marginalization' (412), most obviously through the canon, transcending the political through its appeal to a disingenuous humanism. The aesthetic is also associated with the decorative and the trivial in ways that conflict with the very genuine and urgent agendas of postcolonial literatures. Ashcroft, however, challenges what he sees as the continuing repudiation of the aesthetic in postcolonial theory—something implicit in the discourse of authenticity that often accompanies the creation and reception of postcolonial texts. He points out that postcolonial texts and artefacts, like all texts and artefacts, inevitably emerge in a 'transcultural' space (416) characterized by 'intercultural exchange and transcultural dialogue' (417). Aboriginal Walpari dot paintings, for example, emerge from synergies with other Australian-Aboriginal nations (such as the neighbouring Papunya), as well as from the intervention of Western frameworks of production and consumption. In such a context, as Ashcroft suggests, questions of cultural authenticity are 'rendered meaningless' (416). Ashcroft calls attention instead to aesthetic form and what he calls its 'material resonance' (418), or affect, which is where he locates the potential agency of the postcolonial artefact.

This paper argues that magical realist narrative must be similarly returned to a ‘transcultural’—which is to say aesthetic or literary—space. As Caroline Rody puts it in her essay on Jewish post-Holocaust fiction, magical realism is a ‘global, post-modern, literary mode . . . clearly enabled by García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and global company’ (57). This paper also argues that the prototypal magical realist technique of representing the magical as real is less a representation of ‘faith’ (as Carpentier first asserted) than a kind of ‘formalist . . . stunt’ (to redeploy Siskind’s terms), which mobilises the aesthetic strategy of irony and its hermeneutic frisson. Indeed, irony’s frisson lies behind the fundamental appeal of magical realism—is it asking us to read its representation of the magical literally or literarily?—even if that frisson has often been resolved through postcolonial polemic or exoticist marketing. Such reductionism has led to the critical dismissal of magical realism (see Fuguet or Valdez Moses) and to a general sense of the form’s staleness. However, recognition of irony’s centrality to magical realist fiction has the potential to restore vitality and cultural agency to an important form of postcolonial writing.

Irony, which opens up a dialogical space of uncertainty and calls for interpretation, is neither politically inert nor anathema to a postcolonial agenda. As Linda Hutcheon argues, irony is not just a ‘discursive practice or strategy’ (3)—just as, for Ashcroft, the aesthetic is not a passive quality of cultural artefacts—but a ‘social and political scene’ (4), where the ‘rubbing together of . . . the said and the . . . unsaid’ (19) can be materially unsettling in its hermeneutic ambiguity. As Hutcheon puts it, ‘irony has an evaluative edge’ (3) or an ‘affective “charge”’ (15), drawing attention to the ‘(many) different discursive communities’ from which we make sense of things (93) and the possibility that we, as readers or listeners, are not always in a position ‘to fix meaning securely’ (36). Gerald Vizenor, the prolific native American (*anishinaabe*) writer and scholar,² is an important figure for this paper, because of the ways in which he has explicitly embraced irony as a political strategy for Indigenous writing. Vizenor identifies a ‘vital irony’ (*Manifest Manners* 85) as essential to an aesthetic, called ‘survivance,’ that he celebrates in some native American texts. Survivance is Vizenor’s neologism for a dynamic sense of cultural survival or endurance, which is conveyed not through stories of ‘absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry’ (1) or ‘mere commerce and simulation of romance and nostalgia’ (6), but through ‘the pitch and turn of native mockery and irony’ (2). The literature of survivance that he describes (evinced in the fiction of Vizenor himself, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie), is typically classified as magical realist, though Vizenor prefers the term ‘mythic verism’ (‘Trickster Discourse’ 46). Vizenor’s avoidance of the magical realist label is significant, attesting to the ways in which the rubric has lost much of its aesthetic and political vitality. Magical realism has itself become one of those ‘terminal simulations’ or stultifying stereotypes that Vizenor repeatedly condemns (*Postindian Conversations* 81); it has become a literary category appropriated by ‘those who truly believe in *indians*’ (81) and in the possibility of their representation. However, it is the premise of this paper that Vizenor’s ‘postindian’ (21) theorisation of an ironic postcolonial magical realism can bring about a renewed transcultural engagement with the form.

This paper examines *Plains of Promise* (1997) by the Australian Aboriginal (Waanyi) writer Alexis Wright as a transcultural magical realist novel that uses irony in the kinds of aesthetically dynamic and politically charged ways described by Vizenor in his various books. Wright’s more recent magical realist novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), would make an easier case study. It shares with Vizenor’s magical realist novel *Bearheart* (1990) a post-apocalyptic setting, a penchant for satire, trickster figures, and even an identically named character, Belladonna, who peddles essentialist visions of Indigenous identity—described in *Bearheart* as ‘terminal creeds’ that function as ‘terminal diseases’ (189). However, this paper

deliberately returns to Wright's first novel, *Plains of Promise*, because of the ways in which it has been typically read in terms of ethnography and tragedy or, in Vizenor's terms, as a 'romance of an aesthetic absence or victimry' (*Fugitive Poses* 15). This paper explores how Wright's magical realist novel mobilises irony to underscore and undermine the double speak of colonialism, as well as to 'break out of the heavy burdens of tradition with a tease of action and a sense of chance' (Vizenor *Postindian Conversations* 60), in a way that announces a dynamic and authentic sovereignty.

Magical Realism and Irony in *Plains of Promise*

The Australian critic Alison Ravenscroft has disputed the appropriateness of reading *Plains of Promise* as magical realist fiction. Ravenscroft's objection is based on the magical realist category's embodiment of a 'positivism in . . . reading practices' ('Dreaming of Others' 72). Ravenscroft is primarily concerned at how such a conventional literary interpretation defuses the 'bewilderment' more appropriately occasioned by Wright's work ('What Falls from View' 205). For Ravenscroft, *Plains of Promise* is 'necessarily and radically unintelligible to me as a white woman' ('Dreaming of Others' 82), informed as it is by the 'foreign' epistemology of 'Indigenous law' (81). Thus Ravenscroft essentially upholds the distinction between the aesthetic (represented here by the category of magical realism) and the postcolonial artefact (notably marked by authenticity). Following a bicultural approach to magical realism more typical of scholarship in the field, Nicholas Jose reads *Plains of Promise* as both magical realist and ethnographically authentic, associating the realism of the novel with Western culture and the magic with Indigenous epistemology: 'The narrative exists in two domains: one temporal, epic and European, the other magical, poetic and linked to Aboriginal lore' (203). However, Jose also acknowledges that the novel 'flickers with the subversive energy and humour of Aboriginal speech' (206).

Plains of Promise, as I argue towards the end of this paper, does engage with notions of 'Indigenous law,' but in ways that are enlivened by the rhetorical strategies of magical realism, which are recognisable to western readers, contrary to Ravenscroft's assertion. Certainly, there are grounds to read *Plains of Promise* as a 'transcultural' artefact, as Ashcroft recommends, rather than as an ethnographic object signifying only cultural difference. Wright herself has referred to the influence of magical realist writers such as Keri Hulme, García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison on her work ('Politics of Writing' 11), and Wright's *Plains of Promise* is clearly part of that tradition. Like Hulme's *The Bone People* (1984) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Wright's novel revolves around the occluded story of a traumatised child whose suffering is contextualised in relation to colonial history. Ivy Koopundi, one of the Stolen Generation, is a mixed-heritage child who is removed from her Aboriginal mother and relocated to a mission in response to a culturally destructive—some would say genocidal—assimilationist policy in Australian history.³ As in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), a banana plantation features as the site of a trauma perpetrated by the colonial administration. Ivy is raped there by the mission's Reverend Erroll Jipp, who is ironically described as possessed 'with full powers for the *protection* of . . . eight hundred or so Aboriginal inmates under state laws' (Wright *Plains of Promise* 5; my emphasis). It is a crime that is never recognised by the perpetrator or the community. However, Ivy and her history endure—often in flagrantly unlikely and subversive ways, akin to a trickster—to haunt and provoke successive generations. Indeed, despite the weighty subject matter, Wright's novel demonstrates a strong sense of the Rushdie-esque absurd, as apparent in the belly-dancing classes offered to the damaged inmates of the Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution (which come to include Ivy) or the cartoon-like explosion that takes place in the outback shack Ivy inhabits prior to institutionalisation. That explosion catches an

attacking dog called Pal ‘in mid-air’ so that all that is left of him the next day is the ‘white tip of his tail’ (198).

In Wright’s literary practice, we consistently see evidence of the playful and pointed aesthetic that Vizenor associates with magical realism. The narrative is not resigned to literalism or to the tragedy of colonialism. Instead it demonstrates a subversive and dialogical energy, particularly in regards to colonial discourse. Wright’s novel evokes and revises Christian myths, in particular, as fundamentally implicated in the colonial project. This is evident in the scene in which an Aboriginal character named Elliot hangs a Chinese man called Pilot ‘amongst the thorns of a prickly pear tree’ (132). Deploying metaphorically loaded proper names throughout the novel, the name of Pilot—who had attempted to secretly return Ivy to her homeland—recalls that of Pontius Pilate, though here Pilot is the one who is ‘crucified,’ dying for the sins of others such as Elliot, who have prevented Ivy from returning home. The reference to Elliot and the prickly pear also evokes T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925), a poem that itself engages intertextually with Joseph Conrad’s parable about the hidden evils of colonialism, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)—again displaying the transcultural nature of this text.

Wright’s novel is also acutely aware of the ironies or double speak of colonial discourse, that is, the tendency for colonial discourse to mean one thing for the colonisers and something altogether different for the colonised. Reflecting on the title of *Plains of Promise* in an interview, for example, Wright describes it as a sardonic tribute to the first pastoralists in the Gulf of Carpentaria—the homeland of Wright’s family and the Waanyi people—who described the grasslands there as ‘plains of promise’ for their cattle. Wright comments: ‘it might have been “plains of promise” for them . . . but it wasn’t for us’ (Vernay 121). The narrative of *Plains of Promise* explicitly condemns the pastoral industry, which tends to be valorised for its role in nation-building, as in fact ‘forged by Aboriginal men and women who lived in slavery, bound to the most uncivilized and cruellest people their world had ever known’ (133). Thus the title alone exposes this novel’s fundamental concern with the rhetorical strategy of irony.⁴

Published in the same year as the 1997 Bringing Them Home Report, the result of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, *Plains of Promise* also illustrates the ironic disjunction between the allegedly protectionist practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families, in order to assimilate them into white Australian society, and the reality of its outcomes. In fact, Wright’s narrative explicitly reflects on the ways in which words such as ‘Protection’ and ‘Assimilation’ were simply ‘different words that amounted to annihilation’ (74).⁵ That destructiveness is played out in the book’s plot. Ivy’s mother, living in a camp outside the mission to which her daughter is confined, becomes suicidal when her daughter is removed from her care. Long separated from her homeland and family, Ivy’s mother is described as having ‘nothing left’ (13). She suffers from traumatic visions of ‘small and faceless’ men, who visit her in ‘the blackness of the night’ to torment her, ‘trying to rip her apart’ (14). Finally a ‘black bird . . . attacks in the darkness in the perfect moment—the moment of loss’ (14), pecking Ivy’s mother almost to death. Shortly after this episode, Ivy’s mother takes some kerosene and transforms herself into a ‘human fireball’ (15). This suicide triggers a spate of other suicides ‘by burning,’ in which the ‘victims suffered horrendous burns, long and agonising pain while death crawled its way through to them’ (22). The mission’s Reverend Jipp elicits ‘death certificates specifying natural causes’ (27) for the self-immolations, thereby ‘nullifying,’ as Katie Valenta argues, ‘the hardship and pain that drove

the women to suicide' (53)—and again illustrating the ironies or double speak of colonial discourse.

While I will return to the important motif of the crow shortly, the gothic tenor of Ivy's mother's supernatural encounter is worth noting, in part because it undermines an ethnographic reading of the text. The gothic is an aesthetic of terror, rather than evidence of a myth-based Aboriginal epistemology—and it is a transcultural one that is available, like magical realism, to Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers alike. Indeed, as is consistent with the genre of the gothic, the horrific vision of Ivy's mother can be readily interpreted as a psychological metaphor for her ordeal. Such a reading demonstrates how magical realist fiction can be understood, as Jenni Adams suggests in *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature*, as a form of trauma literature: 'a dramatization of' and 'a symbolic substitution for an unknowable and unnarratable historical extremity' (37). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Takolander 'Theorising Trauma and Irony in Magical Realism'), the experience of magic in the magical realist novel cannot be confined to the traumatised, just as it is cannot be limited to the Indigenous 'other.' In addition, to focus on the trauma represented by the text alone is to consign it to the terminal creeds of Indigenous victimry against which Vizenor protests and which Wright's novel works to transcend.

Certainly, a belief in the magical is not confined to the Indigenous characters in *Plains of Promise*. As Ravenscroft herself acknowledges, Wright's magical realist novels are 'populated with white men and women who are irrational and illogical' ('What Falls from View' 203) in ways that re-affirm Freud's 'idea of the "magical" and "reality" as subjective experiences that are available in any cultural location' (202)—and, perhaps more pertinently, in ways that parody the authority of colonialist and Christian fantasies. For instance, following the suicides of Ivy's mother and the other women, the Reverend Jipp and the other mission staff come to believe, according to the terms of their Christian faith, that Ivy is a 'bad apple' (Wright *Plains of Promise* 23). Indeed, she becomes an Eve-like scapegoat (as suggested by her name) who is blamed for introducing death to the mission, described by the missionaries as "'God's paradise on earth'" (37). This paradise even has a 'God's tree' (3), notably an imported Poinciana, which Jipp planted upon establishing the mission. The narrative, however, thoroughly ironises and undermines the Christian allegory in order to critique both the mythological scapegoating of the feminine and the mythical integrity of the colonial mission. While Jipp brands Ivy a 'She-devil' (32), he rapes her, as noted, in a banana plantation, sarcastically known by the Aboriginal people as 'Jipp's Paradise' (33). Indeed, Jipp's bananas make the mission children sick, and the plantation ends up doubling as a cemetery, suggesting that it is the colonist who is responsible for introducing the supernatural 'fruit' of sin—maternal suffering and death—to the Aboriginal world.

The complex ironic strategies apparent in Wright's novel are consistent with Vizenor's understanding of magical realism (or mythic verism) as a form of 'language game' ('Trickster Discourse' 188) through which 'the world is "deconstructed"' (196). However, it is not only the colonists' destructive fantasies that are deconstructed in Wright's text; the self-destructive supernatural beliefs of the Indigenous characters are also unsettled, recalling Vizenor's opposition to terminal creeds of any kind and his affirmation of 'the treat of trickster stories over monotheism' (*Native Liberty* 6). In *Plains of Promise*, the superstitious beliefs of the Aboriginal characters in relation to Ivy, whom they scapegoat as much as the Christians, are undermined through the dialogical play of the text. If scapegoats represent 'the symbol for the part of us that we most wish to remove' (Campbell 187), then Ivy arguably embodies the historical trauma that the Aboriginal people in Wright's narrative

unconsciously wish to disavow. They blame her, rather than colonialism, for their condition. They describe Ivy as a “disease carrier” from a “Sickness country” (Wright *Plains of Promise* 56), identifying her with the crow that haunts Jipp’s Poinciana tree. Indeed, the children of the mission call Ivy ‘the crow’s Time-keeper’ (22). However, such scapegoating is parodied later in the text when she appears—in an absurd and conspicuous scene—as ‘a wild woman who lived with the goats’ and is herself mistaken for a goat, complete with ‘white hair like a goat’s, down to the ground’ (200).

As Kate Hall argues, given that the first part of the novel is narrated from Ivy’s viewpoint, the reader understands that this unfortunate woman is hardly ‘the embodiment of . . . evil’ (210). The narrative also clearly locates the origin of the self-immolations, for which Ivy is blamed by the other Aborigines, in the violence of colonialism. We learn that when Ivy’s mother had lived on a sheep station, prior to Ivy’s removal to the mission, she had thrown hot cooking fat at a shearer who attempted to rape her daughter (Wright *Plains of Promise* 13). This event, which precipitates Ivy’s removal from her mother’s care, clearly foreshadows the nature of the violence that Ivy’s mother turns upon herself, thus exposing the psychological basis for the allegedly supernatural self-immolations. Further undermining the superstitious incrimination of Ivy and her mother, the narrative suggests that the third suicide of an Aboriginal woman was misreported, given that she was married to a ‘morose man who frequently beat his wife’ (21). Two Aboriginal women are also burned to death by a mysterious paramour compared to Jack the Ripper (69). The narrative thus attends to the occluded problem not only of colonial but also patriarchal violence, demonstrating how misogynistic scapegoating—the belief in ‘black witches,’ as it is described in the novel (71)—serves to excuse both the abusive actions of Jipp and the Aboriginal men of the camp.

Another example of the narrative’s destabilising of Aboriginal myth occurs when the Aboriginal elder Pugnose uses magical stories to oppress Ivy as ably as Jipp employs the threat of damnation. When she falls pregnant to Jipp, the teenager Ivy is cast out of the mission and married off to the Aboriginal man Elliot, who in turn abandons her to his father Pugnose. Accusing her of promiscuity, Pugnose hits Ivy ‘across the head or on her back with his walking stick’ (149) and frightens her with stories of pregnant women duly punished for their waywardness. He intimidates her with a myth about a “bad fella . . . disguised as a crocodile” (148) who lies in wait at the river, ready to rape pregnant women and to steal ‘the life and spirits of babies by ripping them from their mothers’ bodies’ (149).

Wright’s novel also resists cultural reification through its representation of the elderly Chinese man Pilot as a keeper of Indigenous Law. Further challenging the stereotypical connection between myth and Aboriginal identity that critics often make, it is Pilot who features in a key supernatural episode in the novel. After his murder and mock-crucifixion, the spirit of Pilot rises from his grave, with the important message: “*Draw no simple conclusions, my friend. All are implicated*” (140; emphasis in original). Apparitions are a common aesthetic device in magical realist texts. There is the ghost of the murdered slave-child Beloved in Morrison’s novel, and the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Such apparitions, as Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez argue in *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, often serve to signal a ‘repressed history or discursive formation . . . in a manner that is catalytic’ (1-2). This is certainly the case when it comes to Pilot’s ghost. Following his ascension, which is observed by a blind character called Noah—the unreliability of the witness ironising the entire vision—the Aboriginal elders of the camp reveal that they had been surreptitiously working with the Chinese man to return Ivy to her homeland according to a ‘Law’ described as carrying far greater weight than that of

the ‘Australian government’ (Wright *Plains of Promise* 144). Pilot’s ghost thus exposes a new history and a new way of understanding the poisonous Ivy, which resonates with the spectre’s advice against drawing ‘simple conclusions.’

That suggestion of a hidden history, of a different context for understanding Ivy and her significance, is consistent with the work of irony and metaphor, which involve a destabilising but also liberating shifting of context and meaning. Notably, in Wright’s novel, the work of transforming the meaning of Ivy’s story is achieved through the metaphor of the crow, which is associated not only with Ivy but also her descendants and ancestors. Functioning as a gothic symbol of ‘transgenerational haunting’ (Althans 118), the motif of the crow, much like that of a ghost, provides a conspicuous symbol through which the novel attempts to draw attention to the overwritten but unfinished business of the past. As we have seen, that past is bound up with repressed colonial trauma: the theft of children; the despair of successive generations of Aboriginal mothers. It is a trauma that endures beneath the dissimulations and misinformation of intersecting colonial and Indigenous discourses. However, the truth of the past also ultimately extends beyond the traumas of Australia’s colonial period to a 40,000-year-old system of Indigenous jurisprudence that unsettles nothing less than the whole project of colonial governance. Here we see how the dialogical aesthetic of irony in Wright’s magical realist novel ultimately clears the way for a powerful assertion of sovereignty.

The Metaphor of the Crow

Vizenor comments on the importance of metaphor, and of animal metaphors in particular, to Native American magical realist literature. Describing ravens and crows as ‘native tricksters, a union of pushy, avian mongrels, trust breakers, thieves, and astute healers’ (*Native Liberty* 13), he argues that animal metaphors are important in magical realist narratives because they often provide the ‘actual moment of an aesthetic conversion’ (14). Vizenor is explicit in linking the rhetorical operation of metaphor to that of irony, which can engender a transformation in context and meaning, whereby ‘one concept turns to another’ (90). This is certainly the case when it comes to the metaphor of the crow in Wright’s novel, because it is through this motif that Wright recasts the tragedy of colonial history into a vision of Indigenous sovereignty.

The crow is endowed with ominous powers in Wright’s novel in ways that resonate with transcultural mythological traditions, as well as with Robert Kroetsch’s Canadian magical realist novel *What the Crow Said* (1978), where crows similarly appear as scapegoats. *Plains of Promise*, as noted, subverts the crow’s reputation as a mythical scapegoat, just as it overturns Ivy’s parallel reputation. Ivy and the crow are connected throughout the narrative. As we have seen, a crow from Jipp’s Poinciana tree attacks Ivy’s mother just before her self-immolation. Ivy is subsequently viewed as a servant of the crow by the mission children, even though Ivy herself feels tormented by the bird. The crow even pursues Ivy to the Sycamore Heights Mental Health and Research Institution, where she is relocated from the mission camp after she suffers a breakdown of sorts. Unaccompanied by any historical records, Ivy is effectively a ‘missing person’ (Wright *Plains of Promise* 168) at the institution, where the traumatic history of colonialism, which has shaped her identity, is explained away in terms of a Darwinian view of degenerate Aboriginal ‘genetic material’ (172). However, crows appear outside Ivy’s dormitory window every year at the anniversary of her arrival, triggering ‘whispers of deaths’ (173) amongst the hospital staff. At this point, what the crows here actually seem to symbolise is the horrific colonial history that the hospital denies as the source for Ivy’s ‘madness.’

The crow also haunts Mary, the child conceived by Ivy following her rape by Reverend Jipp. In a repetition of family history, Mary (the new Eve—or Ivy—according to the Christian typology of the novel) is taken away from Ivy, whose grief is the cause of the ‘massive sulk’ that sees her institutionalised at Sycamore Heights (69). Mary is placed with a white family in the city. Knowing nothing about her Aboriginal ancestry—‘all traces of her past had been removed’ (209)—but eager to learn, Mary is watched by the crow as an adult. She invites the bird into her suburban kitchen. She even gives it a name—Norman—and begins feeding it, feeling ‘empathy . . . for the predicament of black crows’ (257), which like Aboriginal people are stereotyped as ‘negative’ (258). Here the crow, much like Ivy, is acknowledged as a scapegoat and is thus transformed from something supernaturally evil into a symbol of an historical evil. Notably, Mary’s engagement with the crow is matched by her activism in Aboriginal politics and attempts to find her Aboriginal mother.

However, Mary’s daughter Jessie, who represents the fourth generation of Koopundi women stalked by these particular birds, hates the crows, just as she hates the Aboriginal children in the country who tease her for being a middle-class ‘clean-skinned Murri girl’ (259). Again, the significance of the crows appears to intersect with the tensions of colonial history. The crow makes another appearance when Mary and Jessie return to the mission area of Ivy’s childhood, while remaining entirely ignorant of the history that they themselves have there. Arousing unwanted memories for the Aboriginal people who still reside around the now-defunct mission, Mary and Jessie are made scapegoats, much like their mother and grandmother Ivy. They are treated as if they ‘might be carrying some deadly infectious disease’ (283). The narrative explicitly frames Mary and Jessie as victims of the unwillingness of people there to confront history: ‘The memories were too sad, too bad’ (282). Elliot, however, now an Aboriginal elder making amends for the sins of his youth, takes Mary and Jessie to a solitary bush camp where, unbeknownst to them, Ivy now lives, following her release from Sycamore Heights. Notably, crows are ‘larking in the rivergums’ (288). When Mary accidentally sees her mother during a storm there, she feels only fear at the spectacle of this traumatised woman, believing her to be ‘evil’ (299). The traumas of colonial history thus continue to be represented as supernaturally overwhelming.

As Valenta points out, the metaphor of the crow is engaged with ‘prolifically and ambiguously’ (51) in Wright’s magical realist text, with the literary representation of the crow becoming more complicated in its final manifestation at the narrative’s end. Mary and Jessie are in a plane flying away from the mission area and over the camp where Ivy resides. While Mary and Jessie are unaware of the significance of their location, it becomes clear that they are flying over their matrilineal homeland. The pilot of the plane—recalling Pilot’s supernatural ascension and his quest to return Ivy to her people—points out a ‘Disappearing Lake’ on the ground below (Wright *Plains of Promise* 302). The lake is filling with water for the first time in thirty years, with ‘thousands of waterbirds returning . . . as if they had known’ (302). Upon seeing this ‘magic’ spectacle (302), Mary remembers a story that Elliot had passed onto her during her visit to the mission camp. The legend involves a beautiful and powerful waterbird, which becomes separated from its flock during the annual migration. Crows, described as ‘greedy and evil’ (303; emphasis in original), steal the waterbird away from the Disappearing Lake so that ‘*the secret of the lake went away with them*’ (304; emphasis in original).

This story extends beyond the four generations of Koopundi women—indeed, beyond the scope of colonial history in Australia—so that the crows take on new significance as a potential metaphor or totem for a group of Aboriginal people. Moreover, the Koopundi

women are recast in terms of the metaphor or totem of regenerative waterbirds. In fact, they are ‘*unsuspecting carriers*’ (304; emphasis in original) of Indigenous Law, that is, of the kind of wisdom about an ephemeral water source necessary to Aboriginal survival over 40,000 years of habitation. Thus, it becomes clear that there is much more to the original metaphor of the crow than representing the historical tragedy of colonialism. Here the unstable and polyvocal metaphor of the crow begins to resonate in a context that sets aside the determining significance of colonial history and, importantly, challenges Ivy’s status as tragic victim. Ivy here is configured as a powerful holder of Law and as the symbol of cultural continuance. This strategy, as Christine Faye Morris argues, ‘disempowers the invader’s law as being the “determinant” of the future of the people,’ repositioning it from the centre to ‘one at the perimeters of influence’ (202). It also epitomises the ironic and dialogic aesthetic of magical realism.

Susan Barrett observes that while *Plains of Promise* begins ‘with the arrival of the first white missionary . . . the book ends with an Aboriginal legend’ (10). Such an observation is potentially simplifying and misleading, suggestive of stereotypical and reifying readings of both ‘race’ and magical realism. Wright’s magical realist novel, as we have seen, is a work of what Vizenor would describe as survivance rather than terminal creeds. It mobilises Aboriginal and Western myths in ironic and shifting ways to expose the traumatic and occluded histories of colonial Australia—and, ultimately, to keep Indigenous culture dynamically alive. As we have seen, the text’s deployment of the trickster metaphor of the crow—one of the ‘tricky tropes’ of magical realism (Vizenor *Native Liberty 2*)—clears a discursive space for the transformation of an apparent portrait of colonial tragedy to a shimmering vision of Aboriginal sovereignty (epitomised by the lake). Aboriginal Law is an important concept here because it provides evidence of the ancient sovereignty of Aboriginal people—in a country where this continues to be denied—and of the significance of longstanding practices for land-management—in a country where the rights of Indigenous people to occupy the land continue to be contested. Wright’s novel is undoubtedly one with something materially important to say when it comes to postcolonial politics in Australia today. One might, like Ravenscroft, argue that this needs to be honoured by downplaying the recognisable rhetorical strategies through which this political standpoint is communicated. Alternatively, one might embrace, like Vizenor, the ‘humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage’ (*Native Liberty 2*) that we find in Wright’s novel and other magical realist texts around the world as they attend to Indigenous pasts and futures.

NOTES

1. I am quoting here from an extended version of the prologue, ‘De lo real maravilloso americano’ (On the American marvellous real), published in *Tientos y Diferencias* (Preludes and Variations) in 1967.
2. My presentation of the name ‘*anishinaabe*’ with minimal capitalisation and in italics follows Vizenor’s practice, as does my use of the term ‘native American.’ In *Fugitive Poses*, Vizenor argues that natives are ‘secured as the unnameable’ (38), as opposed to the *indian*, which is ‘a simulation and commodity’ (24) for ‘the fickle crystals setters in search of the authentic and overreal’ (39). Vizenor also uses the neologism ‘varionative’ (74) as an alternative for native, explaining that ‘varionative histories and identities are dialogic circles, not essential or sanguinary discoveries’ (74). For Vizenor, natives or varionatives are not defined by a colonial ‘scientism’ (76) of biology or anthropology, but are ‘fugitives’ (91), maintaining their ‘sovereignty of motion . . . the ability and the vision to move in imagination’ (182). This paper argues that Wright offers a similar vision of Aboriginality.
3. St Dominic’s mission in the novel is based on the historical Doomadgee mission in North Queensland. Magical realist texts typically reanimate places, historical events and cultural contexts in such ways, as

this paper details, but this is not inimical to recognising that magical realism is a fundamentally transcultural literary form.

4. The title of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994), another example of an ironic magical realist text, similarly parodies a phrase in the colonial history of the US—one used in various government treaties with First Nations people, promising them autonomy on their land 'as long as the grass is green and the water runs.' These treaties were invariably broken.
5. Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), as I have argued elsewhere (Takolander 'Magical Realism and Irony's "Edge"'), is another profoundly ironic Australian Aboriginal magical realist novel, which parodies and exposes the destructiveness of assimilationist policies. *Benang*'s floating narrator Harley has been rendered so 'light,' thanks to a program of 'breeding out the colour' (11), that he has trouble keeping his feet on the ground.

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